

Why China Cannot Challenge the US Military Primacy

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Since 1945, US global leadership has defended international law and protected the democratic order.¹ US primacy prevented the emergence of global and regional hegemons. The 1992 Defense Planning Guidance, which stated that Washington would prevent emerging threats and protect the global order, remains valid 30 years later. The Biden administration, in consonance with the 2017 *National Security Strategy*, is prioritizing its military strategy, weapons systems, and defense acquisition planning toward the Indo-Pacific region. The Indo-Pacific Command's (INDOPACOM) area of responsibility is the focus of the US military in the twenty-first century.

US military power is based on the deterrence policy of punishment and denial. *Punishment*, according to John Mearsheimer, involves threatening to destroy an adversary's infrastructure, while *denial* convinces an opponent that military objectives will not be achieved.² Deterrence by punishment, thus works with an adversary's fear of massive retaliation, whereas, deterrence by denial focuses on showing how an adversary's endgame will not be achieved through strengthened integrated weapon systems, joint warfare, and precision offensive firepower. Deterrence transfers higher risk and imposes costs on China, while lowering risks to the United States. According to Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, the US engagement has brought stability in strategic theaters.³

The United States enjoys overwhelming advantages over China. The United States outweighs China in terms of gross domestic product (GDP), technology, and military spending. China's GDP is 15 percent of global GDP, compared to 24 percent of the United States.⁴ The United States retains a technological edge in key areas like command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) and air, surface, and undersea weapon systems. The United States has spent \$19 trillion on its military since the end of the Cold War. This spending is \$16 trillion more than China spent and nearly as much as the rest of the world's combined expenditure during the same period.⁵

The United States has been fighting conventional and unconventional wars on every continent. The United States has war-fighting experience in World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, Panama, Grenada, the First Gulf War, Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The US military can be deployed at short notice anywhere

on Earth. The United States maintains strategic peace through military bases and defense alliances in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia.⁶ In the post–Cold War world, the United States achieved dominance thorough AirLand Battle. Now the United States is shifting its military assets to the Indo-Pacific as it prepares for a SeaAir Battle.

The US Navy (USN) has established maritime supremacy. It operates 11 carrier groups. The United States is in a familiar terrain in the Indo-Pacific, having fought during World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. INDOPACOM accounts for 60 percent of USN, 55 percent of the US Army, and 40 percent of US Marine Corps.⁷

Iraq's fourth-largest military in the world was decimated by the United States during the First Gulf War. Airpower played a major role, while there was diminutive fighting between the US and Iraqi armies. Then what? China studied the First Gulf War to understand modern warfare. In a full-scale war, China would be decimated by the nuclear and conventionally superior US military. China has not dealt with any external crisis, nor has fought full-scale wars in modern history. A technological gap exists between the United States and China. They definitely are not in the same league.

An Overwhelming US Military Superiority

Navy

The USN's merging of weapon systems and C4ISR systems with multi-domain network and integrated ship defenses is more lethal than the numbers of People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) submarines and warships. The PLAN consists of 63 warships over 3,000 tons with a total tonnage of 447,000 tons, while the USN has 120 warships with a total of 2 million tons.⁸ PLAN warships are armed with 1,900 missiles, whereas the USN has 9,500 missiles deployed on its warships.⁹

The course and outcome of modern wars is determined by C4ISR capabilities and not the quantity of weapon systems. The United States is far ahead in tracking and prioritizing PLAN targets. The USN is equipped with 426 C4ISR aircraft, while the PLAN has only 22 such aircraft. The PLAN has 441 fixed-wing aircraft and 118 helicopters, while the USN¹⁰ and the Marines¹¹ collectively have 2,448 fixed-wing aircraft and 1,249 helicopters. The PLAN's two aircraft carriers (ACs) can carry 70 aircraft, while the USN's 11 ACs collectively have more than 800 aircraft. The Ronald Reagan Carrier Strike Group (CSG) includes the USN's only forward deployed AC, the USS *Ronald Reagan*, which is operating along with the Nimitz CSG 11 and Theodore Roosevelt CSG for anti-China operations in the Pacific.¹²

The USN and PLAN have an equal number of submarines. However, the USN's technologically advanced fleet weighs 730,000 tons, which is three times that of the PLAN.¹³ The Block V, a *Virginia*-class ballistic missile submarine, has a contract that includes 11 submarines and will triple the class's Tomahawk cruise missile capacity to 40 missiles per submarine.¹⁴

The USN is inducting 10 high-tech DDG 51 Flight III destroyers, equipped with new technologies such as more power for laser weapons, newer engines, improved electronics and the advanced SPY-6 radar. A total of 20 DDG 51 class ships are under contract at US shipyards.¹⁵ The United States is constructing the new Flight IIA DDG 51s, which will be equipped with the next-generation radar technology, Aegis Baseline 9 Combat System, BMD, and antiship cruise missiles capabilities. The Flight IIA and III have 96 missile tubes equipped with SM-2, SM-6, and the Tomahawk cruise missile.

Logistics

The United States has a separate military air lift command and a host of agreements with private logistics transport firms. The US military has 516 installations in 41 countries and bases in more than 80 countries.¹⁶ The United States spends \$156 billion on 800 bases in foreign countries, while China's defense budget is US\$180 billion/year.¹⁷ The US military has bases in Italy, Diego Garcia, South Korea, Australia, Japan, Kuwait, and Qatar. Collectively they store a million pieces of weapon systems. US military personnel are stationed in 160 countries and has operational ground troops in more than 15 countries.¹⁸ The USN has 31 fast combat supply ships with a total tonnage of 1.29 million tons, while the PLAN has only 12 supply ships totaling 330,000 tons.¹⁹

Nuclear

The number of Chinese warheads is roughly 200 and is expected to double over the next decade.²⁰ By comparison, the United States has close to 4,000 superior nuclear warheads with 1,600 strategic weapons. The United States continues to modernize its nuclear arsenal, and it vastly exceeds the minimum requirement for nuclear retaliatory strikes on China.²¹

USAF

The USAF has deployed F-15, F-16, and F-22 fighter aircraft; B-1 and B-2 bombers; and air-refueling aircraft at Guam.²² The USAF Rapid Raptor program can globally deploy F-22s anywhere in the world within 24 hours.²³ The USAF has 44 missile interceptors in concrete silos in Alaska and California. The United

States is also constructing the next-generation stealth B-21 bomber, which will complete its maiden flight in 2022. The B-21 will be equipped with the next-generation long-range standoff stealth nuclear cruise missile and the JASSM-ER conventional cruise missile.

Global Partners

The network of US international partnerships has fostered security, promoted stability and prevented conflicts. In the Indo-Pacific region, the US forward military presence and cooperation with its regional partners is a deterrence for China.²⁴

The United States leads NATO and simultaneously provides a defense umbrella to Japan and South Korea. The United States has 29,500 troops deployed in South Korea and another 45,000 troops in Japan.²⁵ The Quad exercises bring together Indo-Pacific democracies committed to a rules-based order against the China threat. The United States also has bilateral military cooperation with Australia, Philippines, Thailand, India, Singapore, Indonesia, and Vietnam. The US Third Fleet commander told reporters that the United States has 10 nations participating in military exercise while the number of nations participating in China's exercises is probably less than two.²⁶ A Chinese attack on the United States will result in direct intervention of NATO under Article V as seen during the 2001 Afghanistan War.

Why China Cannot Challenge the United States

People's Liberation Army (PLA) Major General Zhang Shaozhong ranked Chinese military power in 2020 in the fifth place behind the United States, Russia, Britain, and France, while PLAN surface power was ranked in the eighth place behind Japan and India. The Peoples Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) was ranked seventh in the world, due to its lack of fourth-generation fighter planes and high-end drones. In General Shaozhong's view, China will become the second-largest military power in the world only in 2049, when it celebrates its centennial anniversary.²⁷

The US Military as an Economic Deterrent

The US military plays the central role of economic deterrence. The Communist Party of China (CCP) gains its legitimacy from economic development. It is possible that China could target Guam with its small fleet of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM). However, the use of ICBMs will lead to massive retaliatory strikes by the United States leading to total annihilation of China's military and economic centers of gravity.²⁸ The USN Maritime Strike Tomahawk Cruise Mis-

sile Block V will destroy coastal cities like Shanghai, obliterating China's hi-tech industries in a matter of hours.

The CCP leadership is inexperienced in nuclear matters as it lacks exposure to a nuclear warfare strategy as practiced by the United States and Russia. China's nuclear policy is based on low-level deterrence, "minimum deterrence," and its nuclear arsenal remains small and vulnerable.²⁹ Threatening the United States with 200 nuclear weapons is not an option. Geographically, the United States and China are similar in size. However, China's economy will be decimated by a few US nuclear weapons, as its critical infrastructure is concentrated on the coastlines and not dispersed like the US infrastructure.

A war will lead to a loss of China's exports to the United States worth USD 310 billion. The war will result in a decline in industrial production, unemployment, and inflation, causing an economic crash and a people's revolution. As seen from World War II, the United States will experience reverse economic gains and benefit from the war, resulting in high employment and industrial growth.

It is expensive to be a superpower. Sun Tzu wrote in *The Art of War* two and a half millennia ago, "first count the cost."³⁰ China's defense budget cannot compete with the combined power of United States, India, Japan, and Australia. The United States alone spends more on national defense than China, India, Russia, Saudi Arabia, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Japan, South Korea, and Brazil combined.³¹ Can China afford it? An arms race will lead to an increase in China's military spending, affecting its development goals.

The Absence of War-fighting Experience

The United States has an analytical learning process in place—China does not.³² Lessons learned have been well documented by the US military in the form of doctrines, tactics, techniques, and procedures. The US military has been documenting lessons learned since as early as the Boxer Revolution during the China campaign.³³ The US military has been led by outstanding military generals like George Marshall, Dwight Eisenhower, George Patton, and David Petraeus, while China always lacked great generals. The world sends its military officers to US military institutions and not China's military colleges.

The PLA strategy is based on Mao's theory of the weak contender fighting a stronger adversary through deceit and deception. China's only option is an asymmetric strategy due to its incapability to fight symmetric wars. Chinese scholars have authored books like *Science of Military Campaigns*, *Science of Military Strategy*, and *Unrestricted Warfare*.³⁴ However, China is unable to convert the strategies and tactics mentioned in these books into an executable doctrine.

The Lack of Power Projection

Power projection capabilities set a superpower apart. From its Charm Offensive to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has been wielding its economic power to compel US allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region to align with China, which has not been greatly successful.³⁵ China lacks global reach, as it does not have foreign defense treaties or logistical bases abroad equipped with military stockpiles.³⁶ During a war with the United States, soliciting Pakistan's military support looks difficult, as China's all-weather friend has been hesitant to cut its military ties with the United States.

China is constrained to operate beyond the unrefueled range of its aircraft, warships, and submarines. US nuclear-powered carriers can rule the seas for four years before being refueled. China's nonnuclear-powered AC can barely operate beyond its green waters. The Type 903 replenishment ship can only support two to three ships for approximately two weeks.³⁷ The USN's 68 nuclear-powered submarines have been prowling the world's oceans displaying naval power, while the PLAN's nuclear-powered submarines are unable to do so.

Fighter aircraft operating without a package of air-refueling tankers, Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft, or a network of expeditionary airfields cannot travel very far. The PLAAF's capability to target US bases in the Pacific is hindered by a lack of air-refueling capacity. A flight group of eight J-11B Flankers will have to be simultaneously refueled twice by two air-refueling tankers for a seven-hour flight.³⁸ The PLAAF will have to deploy 20 percent of its tanker fleet to refuel the Flankers. The PLAAF has 10 tankers for more than a thousand fighter aircraft, while the USAF has 625 tankers for 1,956 fighter aircraft.³⁹ The tankers will be the prime targets for the USN potentially putting the Flankers at risk.

China's only existing bomber, the H-6K, is reverse engineered from the 1950s Soviet-designed Tu-16 bomber. The bomber is incapable of attacking Hawaii—even when equipped with CJ-10 cruise missiles. The H-6K has a range of 3,800 miles, while Hawaii is 5,157 miles from the closest H-6K base. The H-6K cannot attack nearby US bases, as the bomber will be detected on open seas by the US C4ISR systems. PLAAF fighters are unable to escort the bombers, as they cannot match its range.⁴⁰

An Archaic Military

Less than 30 percent of China's surface forces, air force, and air defense forces and 55 percent of its submarine fleet were modern in 2011.⁴¹ Subsequently, nothing much has changed, as a substantial percentage of China's military remains obsolete.⁴²

China's military faces institutional shortcomings arising from obsolete command structures, low quality of personnel, and corruption.⁴³ The military has weaknesses centering on supporting capabilities such as logistics, inadequate air-lift, and deficient air defense and antisubmarine warfare.⁴⁴

The PLA's loyalty to the CCP has hampered its competence.⁴⁵ China's military training and operational capabilities and competences do not match US standards.⁴⁶ PLAAF pilots fall short on the requirement of executing sophisticated aerial maneuvers during unplanned operations.⁴⁷

China's military structure presents significant cultural challenges,⁴⁸ as it emphasizes control above command.⁴⁹ A culture of risk aversion and low levels of trust in subordinates impacts the PLA effectiveness.⁵⁰ A highly centralized structure does not allow the PLAN to operate autonomously during a war. Therefore, a political commissar is positioned on PLAN warships and submarines.⁵¹ The USN values autonomy from the individual to the institution, which reflects its emphasis on commanding at sea.⁵² Nation states cannot project power globally through a rigid command-and-control system.⁵³

PLAN submarines have the worst safety record in the world.⁵⁴ The PLAN's rudimentary nuclear missile submarine fleet carries a limited number of missiles.⁵⁵ The PLAN cannot threaten the US mainland, as its submarines will have to sail through chokepoints such as the Kuriles and the Ryukyus islands, Luzon Strait, Taiwan Strait, and the Philippine archipelago—all of which are controlled by the USN.⁵⁶ These chokepoints, forming a crescent-shaped chain, are also a defensive line for US containment policy; and the United States is involved in monitoring them. The PLAN submarine power is outdated, compared to the overwhelming USN undersea warfare capabilities. The US submarine arm brings strategic deterrence to the Indo-Pacific through a wide array of capabilities such as antisubmarine warfare, antisurface warfare, precision land strike; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; and special warfare capabilities.

Soviet weapon systems were much sought after by the United States to learn their strengths and weaknesses. Numerous Soviet-made fighter aircraft defected during the Cold War. An Iraqi MiG 21 defected to Israel, while a Soviet MiG 25 landed in Japan. The aircraft were later handed over to the United States to decipher the technical details. However, US intelligence is not similarly orchestrating any defections of PLAAF fighter aircraft, as the United States is not interested in obsolete Chinese technology. Instead, China is stealing weapon data or reverse engineering US weapon systems.⁵⁷ The CCP-controlled military press described the Shenyang J-15 Flying Shark fighter aircraft as a "flopping fish" and criticized it for lacking the stealth capabilities of the F-35 Lightning.⁵⁸

The US F-117 Nighthawk stealth fighter entered service in 1983 and saw combat during the First Gulf War, while the fifth-generation F-22 Raptor and F-35 Lightning fighter aircraft have been deployed in conflict zones. However, the PLAAF has not operationally inducted the J-31 fighter aircraft while the J-20 fighter aircraft has not yet proven its capabilities in any bilateral or multilateral military exercise. The much-hyped Chengdu J-20 is a heavy fighter aircraft comparable to the MiG 31, which is essentially an interceptor and not a multirole or an air superiority aircraft.

China's Vulnerable A2/AD Zones

A study of modern wars suggests that the United States will decimate China's military without entering the A2/AD zone. This is how the United States devastated Iraqi defenses in 1990. US strategic depth in Asia will allow military planners to concentrate the military at different locations.

The United States has a devastating array of lethal weapon systems, such as submarines, for countering China's A2/AD strategies. During the First Gulf War, the United States launched 297 Tomahawks, which destroyed the Iraqi military.⁵⁹ *Ohio*-class submarines can operate unhindered in the adversary's A2/AD zone closer to the shore; thus, striking targets far inland. Collectively, four *Ohio*-class submarines installed with 616 BGM-109 Tomahawk cruise missiles would obliterate China's military. The inexperienced PLAN AC group will be destroyed by long-range antiship missiles (LRASM), Tomahawks, and Mark 48-Mod 7 torpedoes launched from USS *Key West*, USS *Oklahoma City*, USS *Topeka*, and USS *Asheville* submarines based in Guam.

The USN and USAF have signed a USD 414 million contract for autonomously guided with onboard sensors, jam-resistant, and difficult to detect antiship LRASM.⁶⁰ The stealthy *Zumwalt*-class warship—equipped with emerging technologies—can sail undetected in littoral waters and contested territories to launch LRASM and Tomahawk cruise missiles.

China is constructing military bases on islands in the South China Sea; however, this military infrastructure is vulnerable to US weapon systems, as the islands lack natural defenses and camouflage.⁶¹ During a war, the bases will be annihilated by the USN as the PLA cannot hide behind hills and forests. Once destroyed, these facilities cannot be supported from the mainland, as the logistical supplies will be demolished by the USN. China's military modernization may enhance A2/AD zones, but it does not contribute to a blue-water, sea-control capability.⁶²

China's Hyped DF-21 Missile

The antiship DF-21 missile, carried by colossal transporter erector launchers, has a range of 1,400 miles. The missile regiments are based in the barren Gobi Desert, which makes it an easy target for the US military. The DF-21 has been tested on a stationary ship, but it has not yet been successfully tested against a moving target.⁶³ A system of systems is required to track the AC,⁶⁴ acquire the precise location, keep the missile locked on the target, penetrate the carrier's multilayered defenses, and provide mid-course updates as within one hour the ship will have moved 30 miles. China does not know about the DF-21 performance against the US CSG countermeasures.⁶⁵

The United States and Russia have not yet developed a missile equivalent to the DF-21. However, China lacks the C4ISR systems to strike targets at that range. China does not release the missile testing data, leading to many questions, including whether it can hit moving targets. Does it have precision targeting technologies?⁶⁶ Until proven otherwise, the functionality of the missile is based on nothing but circumstantial inference and speculation.

Opium War: Then and Now—Nothing Much Has Changed

One can draw some historical parallels. For example, similarities exist between the unprepared Qing military during the Opium Wars and the contemporary PLA, which underestimates the US military.⁶⁷ The Opium Wars were fought between the obsolete Qing military and an industrializing and a technologically advanced Britain, which possessed the world's most-powerful navy.⁶⁸ The British consisted of 20,000 troops and three dozen modern Royal Navy warships. While China maintained an 800,000 strong military force, only 35 percent of these forces were equipped with firearms.⁶⁹ China had several A2/AD advantages, including strategic depth, numerical advantage, familiarity with battle terrain, and excellent coastal defenses.⁷⁰ But, much like today's PLA, the Qing troops lacked combat experience. In contrast, the British troops were battle hardened and highly disciplined because of their involvement in various wars in the Middle East and Asia.⁷¹ The Qing's archaic military system made it difficult to deploy troops to counter the mobile British forces.⁷² China's generals, such as Yi Shan and Yang Fang, were incompetent in the pivotal Battle of Canton in 1841, resulting in a defeat for China.⁷³

The Opium Wars have military parallels for the PLA. The wars led to the collapse of the Qing dynasty and the decimation of China's military. The outcome of a contemporary war with the United States will be nearly identical to the political dimensions of the Opium Wars. The Tianjin Treaty of 1858, imposed by foreign powers, devastated China. Russia did not intervene but pressured China to cede a large part

of its northeastern territory, including Vladivostok.⁷⁴ The consequences of the Opium Wars led to the Boxer Rebellion in 1899. About 80 years later, the Japanese invasion of 1937 demonstrated how vulnerable and weak China was to external naval powers.

Conclusion

The US military dominates the strategic, tactical, and operational levels of warfare across the spectrum. The Pentagon is implementing sophisticated network warfare programs such as the Advanced Battle Management System, Project Convergence, and Joint All Domain Command and Control. China is concerned about the lethal and distributed US military, equipped with a potent combination of quantity and quality of weapon systems. The USN surpasses the PLAN in rapid deployment, maneuverability, and expeditionary warfare capabilities. The overwhelming display of US military power since 1945 is a credible deterrent for Beijing. Since the First Gulf War, the United States has demonstrated its capability of destroying the adversary through preemptive strikes consisting of long-range weapon systems such as cruise missiles in the first few days of the war, giving no time for the adversary to retaliate.⁷⁵

According to Taylor Fravel, China is not a military superpower.⁷⁶ There is not much evidence about China's plans for global military capabilities on par with the United States. China's military power is miniscule as compared to United States' former adversary the Soviet Union. China's military will be thinly stretched defending the third-largest country in the world. The top echelons of the CCP and PLA acknowledge US military advantages. Chinese scholars like Xu Ruike and Sun Degang admit that China is an economic heavyweight but is a military featherweight and will remain so for the coming decades.⁷⁷ US primacy in the post-Cold War world has prevented World War III. The two most likely contenders for expansion, North Korea and China, have restricted their militaries within their borders. The United States retains unrivaled military power, and China is not in a position to challenge it. ✪

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