

The Assurance Imperative

Forward Presence in the Indo-Pacific

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In an era of great-power competition, maintaining a robust and effective presence in the Indo-Pacific theater to assure US allies and partners of America’s enduring commitment to the international rules-based order and thus enabling a free and open Indo-Pacific would seem to be an unnecessary topic. However, the allure of technological solutions, attraction of the physical safety assumed via long-range fires, and the appeal of returning forces to the home front to minimize costs and increase efficiencies is strong. The desire to place forces outside of any threat ring and to provide support from a distance is not an ideal method for maintaining an enduring foundation of trust and confidence among allies and partners—particularly as the threat continues to develop and the ever-expanding antiaccess/area-denial bubble potentially drives US forces further and further away to maintain a desired level of protection. To the contrary, such a withdrawal may be viewed as self-serving, unsupportive, and unreliable to US allies and partners that cannot change their geography or the geostrategic environment relative to China. As Beijing continues to assert itself through malign operations, activities, and investments in the economic, political, and military realms to undermine the international rules-based order—ironically the very rules-based order that has enabled China’s rise and which has rescued tens of millions from tyranny and lifted billions out of poverty—the United States must retain a robust, interoperable, and forward-present force that assures America’s vast array of allies and partners and deters China from undermining the free and open Indo-Pacific.

Great-power Competition

The recognition that we are in an era of great-power competition is not a novel realization. Dozens, if not hundreds, of thought pieces, articles, and books are dedicated to the very reality of a burgeoning great-power competition between the United States and China. The *National Security Strategy* (NSS) clearly delineates as much: “China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. They are determined to make economies less free and less fair, to grow their militaries, and to control information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence.”¹ To emphasize the great-power contest within the Indo-Pacific theater, the NSS further states “a geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of

world order is taking place in the Indo-Pacific region.”² The *National Defense Strategy (NDS)* reinforces this premise, stating, “the central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the *reemergence of long-term, strategic competition* by what the National Security Strategy classifies as revisionist powers. It is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model—gaining veto authority over other nations’ economic, diplomatic, and security decisions” (emphasis in original).³

How the United States will operate within the competitive realm needs to be examined frequently to be successful. Learning lessons from the past enables one to adjust strategy for the future. To that end, the *NSS* states that past strategies have not attained the desired results, “these competitions require the United States to rethink the policies of the past two decades—policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners.”⁴

The term *competition* to define the geostrategic interactions between the United States and China is an apt description; however, our Western style of thinking tends to view competition in the finite sense. In that I mean a competition typically has two opponents who work under a given rule set, operate within a set of defined boundaries, with a predetermined external characteristic that defines the endpoint of the contest (i.e., a game clock in many sporting events), and there is a clear “winner” and “loser.” While the term *competition* helps to describe the tug and pull of geopolitics, it can also lead to false perceptions and errant strategies.

The differences between our standard view of competition and the geopolitics of great-power competition are stark. Within this great-power competition, the divergences include the fact there are significantly more than two entities at play, as the United States has numerous allies and partners in the region and globally; likewise, there is no finite characteristic that defines the end of the competition. However, the greatest difference between our typical perception of competition and the geostrategic struggle in the Indo-Pacific would be the faulty belief that the two sides are operating under the same rule set or adhere to the same set of boundaries. Nothing could be further from the truth. While the United States and its constellation of allies and partners operate within the long-established boundaries and norms of the international rules-based order, China operates in a manner that seeks to alter and to undermine that very paradigm to its singular benefit. Therefore, the United States needs to adjust its mental picture to the competition at hand to plan and operate effectively in the unbalanced geostrategic struggle.

Competition as an Insurgency

Context, perception, and perspective—at the most basic level, all three are foundational to the development of effective strategy.

Context provides the undergirding facts, truths, and lessons generated throughout history up to the present day. Simply stated, context comprises the things that “are” and “have been.”

Perception is how the context is viewed and is driven by the lens from which we view it. Perception is our reality.

Perspective is the ability to alter the lens by which we view the contextual data. Perspective is the realization of another’s perception.

Often, our perception from a military planning standpoint is to think, plan, and prepare for a grand engagement between peers as the undesirable result of a great-power competition that has reached its zenith. It is emblematic of the standard Western binary approach to conflict in that we are either at war or at peace. However, the Chinese are actively operating in the realm between “peace” and “war” to alter the geopolitical paradigm. As an authoritarian regime, and due to the Chinese Communist Party’s organizational structure, Beijing “can draw upon and integrate a diverse array of political warfare tools... [and has] demonstrated the ability to leverage economic, financial, political, diplomatic, news media, social media, educational, civic, social, military, paramilitary, and other tools to achieve their aims.”⁵ Knowing the adversary is operating in a manner that does not align with US perceptions, we need to alter our perspective and realize that America is already “at war” and adjust our planning accordingly.

One perspective is to view great-power competition as analogous to fighting a whole-of-government counterinsurgency (COIN), with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as the adversary. In this case, in the simplest of terms, the United States is not only attempting to win “hearts and minds” but also seeking to retain international diplomatic, political, economic, and military legitimacy and influence to uphold the international rules-based order to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Joint Publication 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, defines an insurgency as “The organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region. Insurgency can also refer to the group itself.”⁶ However, if one views the Indo-Pacific as a whole, we can apply the insurgency analogy aptly to the strategic context and help us shed the typical Western concept of finite competition.

Applying the insurgency analogy, it is clear the malign actions of China seek to change the political control of the Indo-Pacific. While political, economic, and diplomatic subversion are Beijing’s primary tools, threats of violence have also

been employed. The recent altercation between India and China at the Line of Actual Control, the PRC's actions in the South China Sea against Vietnamese⁷ and Malaysian oil exploration,⁸ and the persistent intimidation tactics used to pressure regional nations regarding disputed claims in the South China Sea and East China Sea can certainly be considered bordering on violence—or the threat thereof—to achieve Beijing's goals. China's man-made militarized islands in the South China Sea, its assertiveness toward Japan in the East China Sea,⁹ and the continuing threats to invade Taiwan¹⁰—among a host of other menacing actions—lead one to conclude the characteristic of violence is present in China's quiver of malign activities.

Threatened by the liberties enjoyed by the United States and its allies and partners, this type of warfare used by Pres. Xi Jinping and the PRC seeks to rally domestic support, keep China's enemies off balance, and weaken and potentially overthrow democratic states and is accomplished at relatively low cost and low risk. President Xi appreciates “that by operating aggressively and in a nimble fashion in the gray zone between the Western conceptions of peace and war, [he is] exploiting a substantial advantage over the United States and its allies, who are more traditionally minded, conventionally structured, and bureaucratically sluggish.”¹¹ As well, China can “employ a much wider range of instruments, many of which involve highly intrusive intelligence operations and deeply subversive espionage, cyber, military, and other active measures to disorientate, distract, confuse, coerce, undermine, and potentially cause the collapse of targeted societies.”¹²

The term *great-power competition*, while useful, tends to lead our minds in the direction of events on a global and massive scale, including any potential armed conflict. However, if we view China's actions through the lens of an insurgency that seeks to “obtain regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future,”¹³ we can apply lessons learned and generate an appropriate and coherent framework to uphold the international rules-based order and ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Presence and Counterinsurgency

How to execute COIN has reemerged to the forefront of military thinking and writing for the past two decades for obvious reasons. Techniques and operational concepts to defeat an insurgency are numerous, as the context for each insurgency is different and, thus, requires different methods to be applied to be successful. Nevertheless, one recurring theme for successful counterinsurgencies over the past century is to focus on the population. Joint Publication 3-24 states the overall focus of COIN efforts is “to help the [host nation] government marginalize insurgents and win the support of the population.”¹⁴ In this case, the population

consists of the diverse nations of the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, counterinsurgencies require a long-term commitment: “The population should have confidence in the staying power of both the US counterinsurgents and the [host nation] government. Insurgents and the relevant population often believe a few casualties or a few years will cause the USG [US government] to abandon COIN. Constant reaffirmations of commitment, backed by deeds, can overcome that perception and bolster US credibility.”¹⁵

However, this is not an article to illuminate a wide-ranging whole-of-government strategy to confront the *NDS* priority adversary via a counterinsurgent strategy—although a whole-of-government strategy is needed. Rather, the focus of this article is on one particular recurring action to take when confronting an insurgency: the need to remain physically present in a robust and long-term manner to assure allies and deter the adversary.

While numerous quotes from various strategists could be used to further enlighten concepts for a great-power counterinsurgency, the most often quoted when discussing the PRC and its overall philosophy is Sun Tzu. Nearly everyone is intimately familiar with the quote, “For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.”¹⁶ While that particular ideal is prescient in this discussion when considering fighting via a whole-of-government counterinsurgency approach, the dictums from Sun Tzu that immediately follow are equally as important, “Thus, what is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy’s strategy,” followed by, “Next best is to disrupt his alliances.”¹⁷ It is only after attacking the strategy and disrupting the alliances that a discussion on attacking the army or cities is brought into play.¹⁸ Therefore, we must ensure our alliances and partnerships remain intact with a shared strategy to uphold the international rules-based order and oppose China’s malign intentions.

The preeminent means by which to counter a great-power insurgent strategy is to maintain forward presence within the theater that complements the respective host-nation security capabilities and capacity in such a manner as to add to the collective security of the region as a whole and protects the population that lies therein. This is manifested through a robust and committed long-term presence that meets each individual ally’s or partner’s security and defense needs in a manner that shares their burdens, understands their requirements, and experiences mutual sacrifices. With this approach, the United States can marginalize China’s malign influence, enhance security for the region, and provide a visible and powerful manifestation of US resolve, commitment, and trust to America’s allies and partners.

Forward Presence Primer

The geopolitical dynamics of the theater make being forward present in the Indo-Pacific more difficult. Within the Indo-Pacific, the United States has multiple bilateral treaty allies and dozens of willing and able partners, but there is not a NATO-like structure with which to holistically build a theater-wide interoperable defense force. The nations of the theater are exceptionally diverse, have dynamic and complex histories, and have varying and unique security dilemmas that makes the development of a similar cohesive, interoperable, and focused alliance unlikely in the near-term. However, the United States must strive continually to advance our current alliances and to expand our partnerships with all the nations to maintain the collective benefits of a free and open Indo-Pacific.

US forward presence must be reflective of the requirements of America's respective allies and partners. Geography, history, and geopolitics are such that each ally or partner will have different defense and security needs, and therefore each is able to provide unique and synergistic capabilities to strengthen the security foundation. As the *NDS* states, "Our allies and partners provide complementary capabilities and forces along with unique perspectives, regional relationships, and information that improve our understanding of the environment and expand our options."¹⁹ However, as the strategic context changes, many US allies and partners in the region do not have the capacity to fend off the PRC without additional support.

While we often speak of the "tyranny of distance" in the Indo-Pacific, it is more accurate to state there is an issue of the "physics of distance." Most everything can be broken down to a time-distance problem—the greater the distance, the greater the time required to respond. The PRC's military advancements and capabilities seek to take away the precious resource of time and generate quick victories. The Indo-Pacific is an expansive theater that requires herculean logistical movements for the United States to act, while the PRC can execute on internal lines of operation. US allies and partners "provide access to critical regions, supporting a widespread basing and logistics system that underpins the Department's global reach."²⁰ The PRC has learned from past US military actions and will not provide America time to build up forces within the theater. It is through robust forward presence that US forces provide senior leaders the requisite time and resulting political and military maneuvering space to solve theater issues peacefully.

Forward presence can neither be piecemeal—as the US commitment will be viewed as half-hearted—nor can it be focused solely on US strategic requirements, as it will be deemed to be purely self-serving. At its optimum, forward presence enhances interoperability, nurtures positive relationships, generates confidence, accepts shared risk, and assures the respective nation of US commitment to

their defense while upholding the international rules-based order. Having the right forces and capabilities in the right locations in full cooperation and coordination with America's constellation of allies and partners creates stability and predictability in the region and is the preeminent means to assure US allies and partners and deter the PRC to ensure an enduring free and open Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

A singular truism that underpins the need for robust forces forward is that *virtual presence is actual absence*. The economic and military power of the PRC dwarves many of the respective nations within the Indo-Pacific, and without a present and reliable partner who understands their needs and shares their risk, the urge to acquiesce to PRC demands and malign intentions exponentially increases. The allure and promise of technology can drive strategists and policy makers to look inward and retreat to safer pastures. Long-range fires and defending from afar is alluring but may appear as withdrawal, retreat, and strategically indecisive to US allies and partners. Increased distance tends to decrease trust, and reduced trust inherently provides inroads to an adversary, resulting in lost ground in the great-power insurgency.

In the era of COVID-19, engagements between leaders, execution of business, and cooperation among allies have been comprehensively altered to accommodate virtual meetings in lieu of actual, physical presence. While each actor will adjust to accomplish as much as possible virtually, nothing is as meaningful or as powerful as when you are physically present. The same is true for US allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific. The United States can impress them with technology and attempt to convince them with promises to respond rapidly in a crisis, but nothing is as reassuring as being physically present with one's allies and partners, sharing their risk, and defending the rules-based order that enables their sovereignty and assures a free and open Indo-Pacific. ✪

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Notes

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