INTRODUCTION

Defining Pacing Threats and Challenges to Homeland Defense and Security

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Abstract

The article, which sets the stage for the present thematic issue of the journal, examines the evolving use of the terms *pacing threat* and *pacing challenge* in the context of US defense strategy, particularly in relation to China. It traces the origins of these phrases, noting that they have been used interchangeably and without a clear, codified definition. The authors provide working definitions for these terms, suggesting that a *pacing challenge* refers to an adversary that poses a long-term risk to US influence and power, while a *pacing threat* denotes a more immediate and consequential military threat. The article also discusses the concept of an *acute threat*, which is applied to more urgent and severe threats, such as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The article argues that clearly defining these terms is crucial for informing defense planning and policy. It concludes by highlighting the need for the United States to address China’s growing military, political, and economic capabilities, which constitute a significant pacing challenge, while also being prepared to counter any acute threats that may arise.

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In a July 2020 speech, then–Secretary of Defense Mark Esper referred to China as the “pacing threat” for the Department of Defense (DOD).¹ This appears to be the first public use of the term. Subsequently, in August, Esper reiterated this stance in another speech, tasking the “Military Departments and Services to make China the pacing threat in all of our schools, programs, and training.”²

By March 2021 the *Interim National Security Strategy* elevated China as a *pre-eminent threat* to the national security interests of the United States. Such a designation recognized that China had become increasingly more assertive as the “only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military,

and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system.”

Further, the 2022 fact sheet accompanying the classified version of the DOD’s National Defense Strategy (NDS), designated the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as “our most consequential strategic competitor . . . and the pacing challenge for the Department.” Echoing this sentiment, the 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS) also identified the PRC as the nation’s pacing challenge, requiring urgency in sustaining and strengthening deterrence capabilities.

Despite these and other subsequent references to pacing threat and pacing challenge in relation to the PRC, there remains a conspicuous absence of officially endorsed definitions for these terms within the DOD. In the absence of any discernible definitions, perhaps lurking in the shadows of a classified document somewhere in the Pentagon, this represents the latest example of hollow, Pentagon-designed phraseology lacking theoretical or conceptual grounding and clarity.

Words matter. For strategic planners, policy analysts, and decision makers to develop capabilities and promulgate policies addressing the nation’s long-term operational needs, the term pacing—as a challenge or threat—must demand precise delineation. Moreover, within public discourse, a more concise definition of pacing challenge and pacing threat, along with elucidation on how “acute” modifies both terms, must be established for consistent and standardized usage. Presently, there is a dearth of literature or doctrine to facilitate the application of a coherent understanding or definition of pacing within the endless bureaucratic mechanisms reliant upon such clarity and authorities. Therefore, this article will provide a working definition for the use of pacing threat and challenge, elucidating the role of acute as a modifier within this lexicon.

Background

DOD leaders formally designated China as the pacing threat to US national security, emphasizing that the PRC represents the only country that could pose a systemic challenge to the United States economically, technologically, politically,
and militarily. Yet, the 2022 National Military Strategy characterizes the PRC as a pacing challenge, while also categorizing Russia as an “acute threat with aggressive intent.” This begs the question, is a threat the same as a challenge? Further, what constitutes a threat being acute, beyond its inherent menace?

According to the NDS, the term pacing may indicate a temporal quality, highlighting that the United States’ first defense priority is “defending the homeland, paced to the ever-increasing multi-domain threat posed by the PRC” [emphasis added] The phrase pacing threat has evolved into commonplace defense parlance when referencing China—akin to other high-level jargon. Nonetheless, using these phrases without context invites ambiguity and injects uncertainty.

Buzzwords serve as a prevalent mechanism for leaders to shape organizational dynamics and guide bureaucratic efforts. In this case though, the nation is undergoing extensive whole-of-government shaping operations, a necessity given the formidable challenge posed by China. The learning curve to navigate the competitive dilemma posed by China, let alone potential crises and conflicts, will be daunting. While the term pacing may intuitively seem adequate for operationalization, it remains essential to strive for clarity and precision, recognizing that the vertical and horizontal ramifications of a single word can significantly influence a nation’s trajectory.

A comprehensive review of available literature and defense publications suggests that the term pacing challenge has a long but amorphous history in the defense lexicon. A survey of open-source material helps with understanding the term’s evolution, contextual significance, and implications for defense strategy. This exploration serves as an important starting point for several reasons. First, it elucidates the murky origins of the term, affording scholars and policy makers the opportunity to trace its influence on military strategy and doctrine. Second, such scrutiny illuminates shifts and trends in defense strategies, revealing how the term may have adapted in response to significant changes in challenges and threats. Additionally, this endeavor identifies potential areas for policy reform, ensuring that security and defense strategies remain attuned to the changing nature of global threats and security imperatives.

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The closest tendering of an actual definition came from Colin Kahl, the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, wherein during a 2021 Pentagon policy meeting, he characterized China as a *pacing threat*. Of significance, during the speech, while Secretary Kahl indicates that conflict with China is not inevitable, he does underscore that “we will have a more competitive and, at times, . . . adversarial relationship with Beijing.”¹⁰ In the context of Secretary Kahl’s discourse, in noting the state of competition and potential for conflict, it appears that he employs *threat* synonymously with *military challenge*, without discernibly distinguishing between the two, thus exacerbating the challenge of anchoring these terms with precision.

The lack of a codified definition for the use of *pacing challenge* is further evident in Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Ely Ratner’s 2023 remarks to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. In his observations, he stresses that “China remains the pacing challenge for the US government” as “it seeks to become the world’s most influential power.”¹¹ Similarly, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said during a November 2021 news conference, “Although China is developing capabilities that could potentially threaten the security and stability of neighboring nations in the region and globally, the department views that nation as a pacing challenge, not a pacing threat.”¹²

**Pacing Threat Yesterday and Today**

Contributing to the ambiguous usage of the term *pacing*, the 2012 edition of the *Joint Officer Handbook Staffing and Action Guide* used “outpacing a threat” to describe the imperative of maintaining a military establishment capable of meeting and overcoming advancing and complex challenges.¹³ Similarly, US Northern Command’s (USNORTHCOM) 2012 vision statement articulated the command’s commitment to “defend North America by outpacing all threats.”¹⁴

A 2019 report from Canada’s Queen’s University noted the temporal aspect by designating China as an emerging pacing threat, while positing that the likelihood

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of conflict was, at that time, higher with Russia or North Korea.\textsuperscript{15} The term extended into the legislative realm as well, with the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act requiring the services to furnish reports on their respective pacing threat assessments and how such threats influence future planning—again capturing the temporal nature of the term.\textsuperscript{16}

The incorporation of the term \textit{acute} into the lexicon serves to emphasize not only the severity but also the immediacy of a challenge or threat. During a Brookings Institute discussion on defense strategy, Kahl remarked that while China remains a pacing challenge for the United States, “the most acute challenge at the moment is obviously Russia.”\textsuperscript{17} In contrast, Kathleen Hicks, Deputy Secretary of Defense, noted in the aftermath of Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine that “Russia poses an acute threat to the world order,” while also reaffirming that the PRC is “our most consequential strategic competitor and pacing challenge.”\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{Defining Pacing Challenge and Pacing Threat}

With the aim of fostering clarity amid ambiguity and uncertainty, the authors propose the following working definitions for consideration and recommend their inclusion in a future edition of the \textit{DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms}. A \textit{pacing challenge} is an adversary that poses a meaningful risk to US influence, position, and power but does not constitute an immediate military threat. This definition encapsulates the temporal aspect of enduring challenges while emphasizing peacetime competition across the diplomatic, information, military, and economic (DIME) spectrum. It underscores the importance of measured responses to evolving global power dynamics, enabling the United States to strategically allocate its resources, devise effective strategies, forge partnerships, and foster innovations to adeptly confront future challenges and safeguard the homeland during the competitive phase of operations.

A \textit{pacing threat} is defined as a direct, consequential, and near-term, often military, peril to US security interests and core values. The term is applied when adversary actions across the spectrum of national power constitute a more immediate and consequential threat to US interests. To effectively counter such threats, the nation

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item “Deputy Secretary of Defense Dr. Kathleen Hicks Remarks on President Biden's Fiscal 2023 Defense Budget” (transcript, Department of Defense, 28 March 2022), https://www.defense.gov/.
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must prioritize and leverage the full spectrum of capabilities and resources through integrated deterrence, employing a whole-of-government approach to mitigate potential hazards to homeland security.

On the other hand, an *acute threat* refers to immediate and severe dangers that demand urgent attention and response. These threats pose critical risks to homeland security, with the potential to swiftly escalate into direct conflict or cause substantial harm to US interests or its allies and partners. In the present context, the term *acute threat* has been specifically attributed to Russia due to its invasion of Ukraine, gray-zone activities along NATO’s eastern flank, and aggressive utilization of proxy forces across Africa.\(^\text{19}\)

**Pacing Challenge and Threat Tomorrow**

If a *pacing threat* is defined as a state actor presenting a systemic challenge to the United States across economic, military, technological, and political domains, then China undeniably emerges as the foremost pacing threat in today’s security environment. China’s ascension to this pivotal role stems from its technological sophistication and economic influence, which Beijing adeptly leverages to assert the PRC’s global influence. As previously highlighted by defense officials, the term *pacing threat* implies a potential adversary capable of matching or outpacing US capabilities in critical domains.\(^\text{20}\)

In this context, China’s advancements in military technology, cyber capabilities, and space exploration pose significant challenges. Additionally, China possesses one of the world’s two nuclear arsenals capable of posing an existential threat to the United States.\(^\text{21}\) Recognizing these multifaceted challenges, the DOD underscores the imperative of integrated deterrence, advocating for a multidimensional approach to address the diverse dimensions of the challenge posed by China.\(^\text{22}\)

The PRC has continually bolstered its military, political, and economic capabilities, positioning itself as a formidable and enduring pacing challenge to US homeland defense and security. Notably, the PRC has embarked on a robust military modernization campaign, exemplified by the development of hypersonic weapons aimed at surpassing existing ballistic missiles. This enhancement enhances


\(^{\text{22}}\) Garamone, “Official Talks DOD Policy Role.”
strike precision and evades missile defense systems, significantly amplifying its offensive capabilities.23

In a striking display of nuclear proliferation, China has amassed more than 400 operational warheads, surpassing earlier projections for the decade. Moreover, the construction of new silo fields for intercontinental ballistic missiles signals a significant expansion of its offensive nuclear capacity.24 Concurrently, the PRC has purportedly bolstered its missile defense capabilities through the development of indigenous systems like the HQ-19, capable of targeting ballistic missile warheads or satellites.25 These advancements align with the Chinese Communist Party’s ambitious goal of achieving a modern and formidable military force by 2049, underscoring a deliberate and enduring military strategy.26

Politically, the PRC’s support for Russia amid its conflict with Ukraine has garnered widespread international attention. Reports suggest Beijing’s provision of essential technology and support to Moscow, aiding Russia in circumventing Western sanctions following its invasion of Ukraine.27 This technological assistance is deemed crucial for sustaining Russia’s military operations and underscores the intricate geopolitical alliances shaping the conflict’s dynamics. Notably, the European Union has responded by imposing additional sanctions on Chinese entities allegedly facilitating Russia’s evasion of international sanctions, reflecting a concerted European effort to counter the indirect support extended to Russia by Chinese companies.28 Furthermore, US apprehensions regarding the PRC’s military expansion into Africa underscore broader geopolitical rivalries, prompting considerations of expanding efforts to counter Chinese military presence in strategic regions like West Africa.29

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From an economic standpoint, the PRC has been labeled as a “grave threat to the economic well-being and democratic values of the United States.” This characterization echoes concerns raised by the FBI regarding the PRC’s endeavors to influence lawmakers and public opinion, alongside simultaneous attempts to pilfer intellectual property. Moreover, the practice of forced technology transfer compels foreign companies operating in China to divulge their cutting-edge technologies to local partners, eroding their competitive advantages and stifling innovation. These unjust practices foster an unequal playing field, exposing US businesses to heightened risks and diminishing incentives for investment, thereby adversely affecting the broader US economy.

Conclusion

The United States must proactively enhance its military and diplomatic capabilities to counteract PRC activities that detrimentally impact both itself, its allies, and partners. This objective can be achieved through various means, including but not limited to, bolstering alliances, integrating deterrence measures by aligning interagency policies and harnessing public-private sector capabilities, and reducing economic reliance on China. A steadfast commitment to promoting democratic values, coupled with efforts to strengthen the US relationship with India—the world’s largest democratic nation—will ensure mutual benefits in terms of security, economic prosperity, and technological advancement. These are pivotal elements in programming strategies to address the PRC’s enduring political, economic, and military challenges, while simultaneously preparing for the eventuality of the PRC emerging as a pacing threat, and effectively countering acute threats posed by Russia to the peace and security of NATO and US partners in the region.

Going forward, the United States must establish clear definitions that accurately differentiate between pacing and acute threats and challenges. Once these definitions are disseminated, military and civilian defense officials will benefit from enhanced clarity and precision as they spearhead research, develop strategies and plans, and formulate policies to counter the malign activities jeopardizing homeland defense. While this article aims to raise awareness regarding ambiguous yet frequently used terms, substantial efforts are required to establish a comprehensive understanding of these terms and their diverse applications across various national security sectors. Given the significant impact of words, finalized definitions will facilitate a clearer

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understanding of the nature of pacing challenges and threats, thus enabling effective responses to homeland defense and security requirements.

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