

Countering China's Malign Influence in Southeast Asia

A Revised Strategy for the United States

LT COL JEFFREY S. LEHMKUHL, USAFR

Abstract

In reorienting its foreign policy to counter China, the United States must grasp China's ambitions deeply. Understanding the historical roots and driving forces behind Chinese actions is vital. Previous research analyzed the global ambitions of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its strategic means to realize them, with a focus on Southeast Asia. It highlighted the CCP's pursuit of hegemony and its use of malign influence, avoiding actions that might provoke a US military response. This second installment of research proposes a revised US strategy, emphasizing partnerships in Southeast Asia to limit China's ability to act against US interests. Relevant to foreign relations experts and military operations, this research advocates for shaping the regional environment to constrain China's power.

Drawing from the assessment of Chinese strategy in Southeast Asia within the context of a bid for global hegemony, this second installment of the research presents a course of action to address and deter Chinese Communist Party (CCP) actions in Southeast Asia that impede US strategic objectives. A phased strategy to address the threat is detailed, responding to the previously discussed challenge.

Concept of Response

The United States needs to refine its strategy vis-à-vis the CCP in Southeast Asia. President Joe Biden's approach to the CCP can be summarized in three words, "invest, align, compete." These objectives are then elaborated on in the US *Indo-Pacific Strategy*. The current strategy is not terminally flawed. Recent developments in Southeast Asia, such as the increased access to basing in the Philippines via the expansion of the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), indicate positive progress in the region. However, more must be done to fill the gaps that exist in the current US strategy. Significant areas that require attention are solidifying a US narrative backed by conviction, replacing a reactive approach to partners and allies with a proactive one, and increasing the effectiveness against

irregular warfare (IW) threats. Much of the recommended strategy adjustment resides in the “how” of the strategy and the causal logic generated by the “why.” In strategic planning terms, this strategy’s focus centers on better fusing ways and means to achieve the desired ends.

The desired end state is a Southeast Asia that is free and not dominated or coerced by CCP influence. This objective will enable the US to achieve its strategic goals in the region. These include regional stability, security, and the preservation of the rules-based international order. One major objective of this strategy is to ensure Taiwan is not coerced or forcefully compelled to reunify with mainland China. As noted in the strategic estimate, this act would destabilize the region and severely impede US strategic objectives. The CCP strategy for success in Taiwan’s reunification hinges on Southeast Asia, making the region pivotal to this objective.

The theory of success for the strategy can be summarized in the phrase, “containment through cooperation.” Unfortunately, the term containment has become synonymous with negative doctrine, but this does not need to be true. Here, containment will focus on limiting the CCP’s military and coercive options through collective opposition or resistance in the region. The goal is not to constrain military or economic growth but rather constrain CCP decision calculus on how they employ their instruments of national power in the region. This strategy will seek to do this primarily through deepening partnerships and alliances in the region, which is already a mainstay of the US Indo-Pacific policy. It seeks to elevate the roles of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Japan, and other regional actors to assume regional leadership roles, allowing the United States to take on an enabling role. This deemphasizes a direct clash between China and the US in the region and forces the CCP to account for regional actors with an emboldened voice. Regional relationships must be carefully cultivated and begin with a renewed US strategic message. Over the years, Washington has lost its voice and requires branding to accompany the new approach.

Examining the strategy further, it can be broken down into four interim objectives in the region: (1) attract partners while reducing CCP legitimacy; (2) shape, deter, or defeat CCP malign security encroachments; (3) improve regional resilience; and (4) empower regional actors to lead with US backing. These objectives will be met through the four lines of effort (LOE) of influence, security, diplomatic, and economic and outreach across three phases. The phases seek to rebrand the US strategy as “by, with, and through” partner nations coupled with a concerted effort to address US hypocrisy. It will then set conditions favorable to US interests in the region, and finally, it will deter or punish CCP transgressions. Figure 1 provides a graphic depiction of the strategy and its associated campaigns. It seeks to attack the CCP

critical vulnerabilities (CV) of inconsistent narrative and ideology to ultimately address the center of gravity (COG) of legitimacy as outlined in the strategic estimate. This specificity adds texture to the current US response and further defines the “how” of attracting partners for common goals.

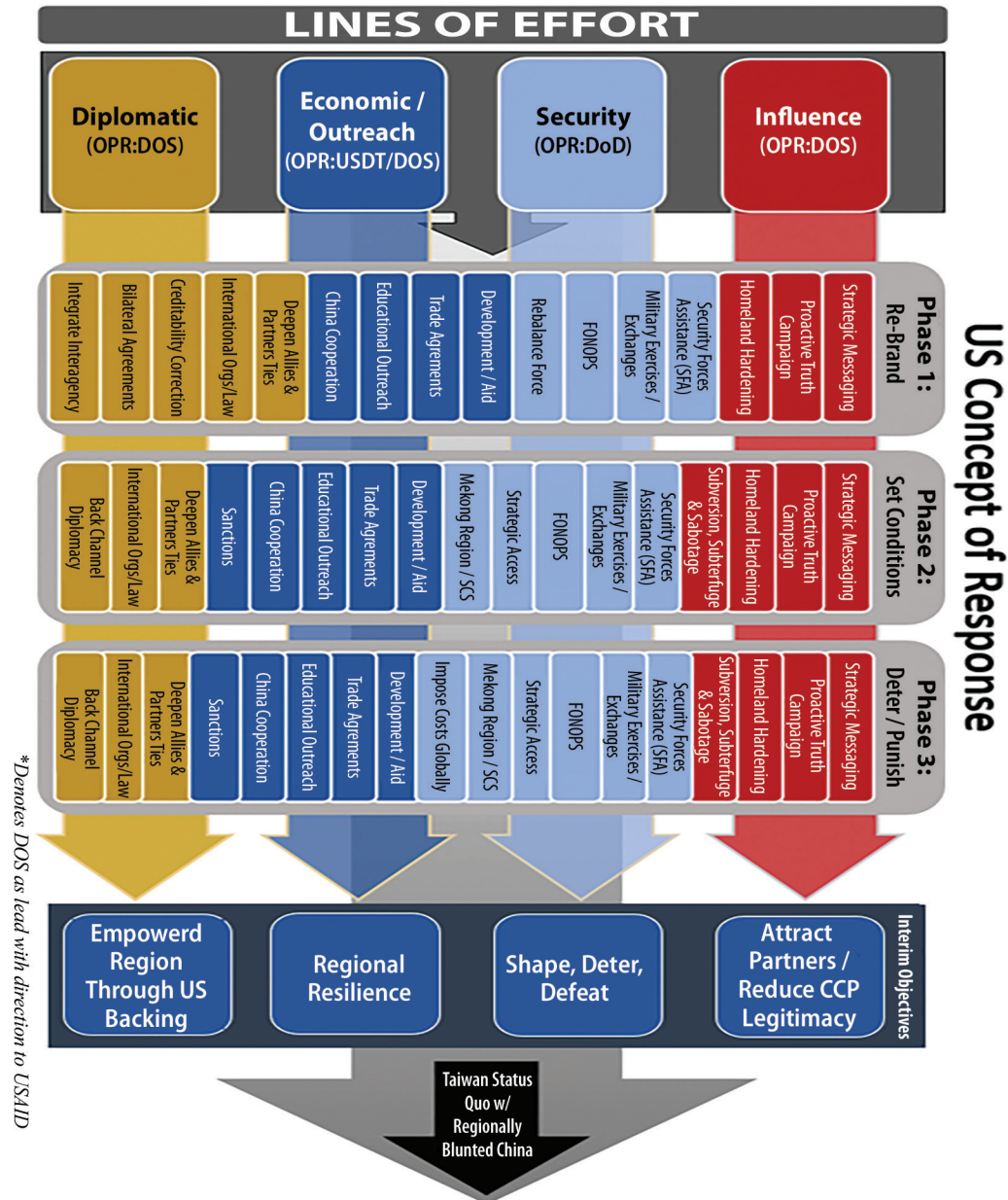


Figure 1. US concept of response

Authorities

Phase one of the strategy focuses on rebranding the US effort and reducing hypocrisy. For Washington to establish distinct differences between the CCP theory of victory and that of the United States, there must be a concerted effort to ensure legal justification exists. There is no easier way to undermine US strategic messaging as the ardent champion of a free and open Southeast Asia than to erode its legitimacy through a lack of legal justification. However, this does not indicate that transparency will be inherent in all US actions. Covert and clandestine operations can and should be considered but need to be carefully reviewed for legal justification and accompanied by a risk assessment to ensure the measures chosen further strategic objectives without undue risk to US legitimacy.

The United States possesses a robust legal framework to execute the strategy. By effectively leveraging existing authorities already granted to the US interagency, initiatives can be developed to maximize what is already bestowed via US Code (U.S.C.) Title 10, Title 22, Title 28, and Title 50, for example.¹ However, Title 10 U.S.C., Chapter 16, § 333–Foreign Security Forces: Authority to Build Partner Capacity, should be revised to include search-and-rescue (SAR) operations as a covered activity.² This will clarify guidance for the Department of Defense (DOD) on the legal authority and funding for building partner SAR force capacity. The Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) should submit the change in its annual draft legislative proposals.³ Although this change is not required for strategy implementation, it would streamline the funding and authorities for this particular campaign. Section 333 has a provision that allows the Secretary of Defense (SecDef) to conduct “. . . activities that contribute to an existing international coalition,” which can be leveraged now.⁴ Finally, Title 10 U.S.C., Chapter 20, § 404–Foreign Disaster Assistance, provides short-term authority to conduct SAR operations.⁵

Other legal considerations should be taken into account, such as the US ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)

¹ James Q. Roberts, “Need Authorities for the Gray Zone? Stop Whining. Instead, Help Yourself to Title 100. Hell, Take Some Title 200 While You’re At It,” *PRISM Security Studies Journal* 6, no. 3 (2016), 30, <https://apps.dtic.mil/>.

² “Foreign Security Forces: Authority to Build Partner Capacity,” Title 10 United States Code (U.S.C.), Chapter 16 § 333 (2016), <https://uscode.house.gov/>.

³ Chad A. Senior, “Search and Rescue: An Underutilized Tool for Security Cooperation” (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2021), 30.

⁴ “Foreign Security Forces.”

⁵ “Humanitarian and Other Assistance,” Title 10 United States Code (U.S.C.), Chapter 20 § 404 (1995), <https://uscode.house.gov/>.

agreement and the closing of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, to name a few. However, these legal actions are woven into the strategy implementation and phasing to garner legitimacy in the *rebrand* phase and thus will be covered in more depth later.

Assumptions

Crafting the regional strategy requires making certain planning assumptions. If proven false, their revision would necessitate reevaluating the strategy for adjustment or discarding it altogether, depending on the shifts observed in the international landscape. Several planning assumptions were made in crafting this strategy that influence the deployment of instruments of national power and phasing, as well as the means available for strategy implementation. Three criteria tested the assumptions—*validity, importance, and necessity*—to ensure they did not artificially support the strategy and neglect the most challenging problem sets.⁶

US Military Support of Taiwan

The United States has maintained an unofficial relationship with Taiwan since 1979 and has operated under “strategic ambiguity” regarding US actions if the CCP were to attack Taiwan.⁷ This strategy assumes that the United States would view CCP kinetic action against Taiwan as a red line spurring military action. President Biden has publicly stated four times since August 2021 that the United States will defend Taiwan, although the official policy remains unchanged.⁸ Furthermore, US strategic documents prioritize China as the pacing threat and thus direct defense resources to combat it. The DOD’s focus on the Taiwan scenario is clear due to its priority as a wargame scenario.⁹ For these reasons, it is prudent to include the need to prepare for open conflict against the CCP over the contested status of Taiwan. Southeast Asia thus becomes the major backdrop to any such action.

US Level of Commitment

For a strategy that heavily relies on integrating allies and partners, it *is necessary to assume that US commitment to the region will have staying power that transcends*

⁶ David H. Ucko and Thomas A. Marks, *Crafting Strategy for Irregular Warfare: A Framework for Analysis and Action*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2022), 76.

⁷ Susan V. Lawrence, “Taiwan: Political and Security Issues,” *In Focus*, 17 February 2023, 2, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/>.

⁸ Lawrence, “Taiwan,” 2.

⁹ Valerie Insinna, “A US Air Force War Game Shows What the Service Needs to Hold off—or Win against—China in 2030,” *Defense News*, 12 April 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/>.

presidential administrations. Although it is realistic to expect course corrections as administrations change, building integrated security and development relationships in the region requires an enduring commitment to cultivate the relationships and realize progress. Although the Trump administration championed an “America First” slogan, his *National Security Strategy* still prioritized cultivating partnerships in Southeast Asia. It stated, “we will redouble our commitment to establishing alliances and partnerships.”¹⁰ The significance of the threat posed by the CCP, coupled with the bipartisan support for recent National Defense Authorization Acts (NDAA), indicates that US commitment to the region is likely enduring.

While recent government spending increases are notable, it’s premature to assume they will persist. The federal government is projected to reach the USD 31.4 trillion debt ceiling by summer, prompting US House Republicans to advocate for spending cuts before raising it.¹¹ By 2035, the combined Social Security trust funds are set to become insolvent without program adjustments, and the nuclear triad essential for US strategic deterrence will necessitate substantial refurbishment.¹² This impending surge in costs, along with internal social pressures, *requires that a planning assumption be made that US budgets will remain flat or decrease.* Such constraints significantly affect available strategic resources.

Implementation

As per the theory of success, this strategy heavily relies on fostering and strengthening cooperation with the nations of Southeast Asia. Repeated wargames have demonstrated that engaging in military confrontation with the CCP in the region is ill-advised.¹³ The United States faces significant challenges in projecting sustained military power at the necessary scale to confront China. The vast expanse of the Pacific presents logistical hurdles, making it time-consuming to amass

¹⁰ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, December 2017), 46, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/>.

¹¹ David Morgan, “House Republicans to Highlight US Debt Ahead of Biden Budget Proposal,” *Reuters*, 8 March 2023, <https://www.msn.com/>.

¹² The Board of Trustees, “The 2022 Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of the Federal Old-Age and Survivors Insurance and Federal Disability Insurance Trust Funds,” 82nd Annual Report (Washington, DC: Federal Old-Age and Survivors Insurance and Federal Disability Insurance Trust Funds, 2 June 2022), 5, <https://www.ssa.gov/>; and Rebecca K.C. Hersman and Joseph Rodgers, “Nuclear Modernization Under Competing Pressures,” *Transition 46* (Washington, DC: Project on Nuclear Issues, Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 2021), 5, <https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/>.

¹³ Mark F. Cancian, Matthew Cancian, and Eric Heginbotham, *The First Battle of the Next War—Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), January 2023), 3, <https://www.csis.org/>.

forces for any potential action.¹⁴ In scenarios like the Taiwan Straits, time is of the essence, with little room for delay. However, the potential for conventional conflict remains, as the CCP has not ruled out forcefully seizing Taiwan.¹⁵ President Biden has reiterated US willingness to support Taiwan in such a situation on multiple occasions.¹⁶

A *fait accompli* scenario thus presents the *most dangerous* course of action for which this strategy must prepare. By doing so, it confronts many of the CCP's LOEs outlined in the strategic estimate. The second phase, *set conditions*, aims to mobilize the partnerships reinforced during Phase I, *rebrand*, to ensure the region is adequately equipped to resist a CCP attempt at forcibly seizing Taiwan. Successfully deterring such an act thwarts CCP objectives of achieving hegemony through coercion or force and bolsters US objectives.

In contrast to a *fait accompli* in Taiwan, IW represents the *most likely* course of action and the one favored by the CCP. Through IW tactics like malign influence and subversion, the CCP seeks to compel Taiwan's reunification without resorting to overt conflict.¹⁷ This tactic aims to evade open conflict with the United States while advancing toward hegemony at minimal cost.¹⁸ It is these divisive tactics that this strategy aims to counter. The inability to effectively counter CCP IW campaigns is a significant gap in the current US strategy that this plan seeks to rectify.

Addressing both the *most dangerous* and *most likely* scenarios concurrently distinguishes this strategy from the current government response and clarifies its causal logic. The United States can exploit the actions necessary to establish conditions in the region for open conflict with the CCP to simultaneously thwart CCP IW activities, thereby depriving them of the capacity to mobilize for open conflict. This can be achieved by exploiting the CCP's critical vulnerabilities of inconsistent narrative and authoritarian ideology. Addressing these critical vulnerabilities enables the strategy to undermine the CCP's legitimacy (both internally and internationally), which is its COG, as previously discussed. Further discussion on this will be provided in subsequent sections covering the strategy's phases.

¹⁴ Cancian, Cancian, and Heginbotham, *The First Battle of the Next War*, 20.

¹⁵ Xi Jinping, "Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive in Unity to Build a Modern Socialist Country in All Respects," Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (Beijing: CCP, 16 October 2022), 42, <http://dm.china-embassy.gov.cn/>.

¹⁶ Lawrence, "Taiwan," 2.

¹⁷ Yimou Lee, David Lague, and Ben Blanchard, "China Launches 'Gray-Zone' Warfare to Subdue Taiwan," *Reuters*, 10 December 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

¹⁸ Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order, Bridging the Gap* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 5.

Leveraging regional partners serves as a force multiplier, curtailing the CCP's maneuverability and thus limiting China's capacity to wield its instruments of national power to execute its operational art for strategic gain. Furthermore, aligning partners toward common objectives diminishes the fiscal burden that Washington would otherwise shoulder if pursuing goals unilaterally. This cost reduction, achieved through dispersion, mitigates the risks associated with stagnant or decreasing US budgets as outlined in the assumptions.

Notable is the arrangement of arrows in the graphical representation of the strategy (refer to fig. 1). While linearly depicted through a familiar depiction of LOEs and phases, this portrayal oversimplifies strategy execution. The offset, overlapping, and embedded arrows illustrate the matrixed approach necessary for effective strategy execution. A regional strategy involves nuanced country-specific considerations that cannot be accurately captured in this depiction, complicating simplistic phasing. To enhance the graphical representation, it is more apt to envision the campaigns as books on a library shelf. One must remove the book from the shelf, open it to reveal its pages, and grasp the intricacies required at the local level to ensure unified efforts toward objectives. Consequently, the phases will comprehensively present the LOEs and embedded campaigns to emphasize critical themes. Some campaigns span multiple phases to build upon prior activities and will be reintroduced as necessary to underscore their evolving contributions to the strategy. Other components of the strategy, though essential, closely align with the current US approach and are thus omitted to avoid redundancy.

Phase I: Rebrand

The United States has faltered in its international leadership in recent years. The failed nation-building endeavors in Iraq and Afghanistan, followed by the abrupt withdrawal from Afghanistan, have undercut US global standing. Additionally, Pres. Donald Trump's America First rhetoric has further tarnished the perception of American leadership on the world stage. During the Cold War era, the United States projected itself as the "leader of the free world." However, it can be argued that Washington has since lost its influence and needs to reaffirm its position with a fresh message alongside a renewed dedication to the international rules-based order. This revamped message could prioritize "leading with values, collaborating for a free future." Such a rebranding would underscore the importance of partnerships and the necessity of cooperation for achieving success without compromising the core values of the United States. Introducing a new strategic message would serve as the initial step in demonstrating to the world the seriousness of the US commitment to the rules-based order and Southeast Asia.

Addressing US Hypocrisy

Simply adjusting US strategic messaging will not suffice to rebrand Washington's strategy. Sincerity can only be demonstrated through concrete actions. These actions can subsequently foster renewed trust and deepen cooperation. To achieve this, the United States should strive to rectify past mistakes that have undermined its legitimacy. The revamped strategic messaging campaign should be synchronized with tangible actions to provide a compelling example for the region to observe. Washington should synchronize its ratification of the UNCLOS agreement shortly after unveiling its new strategic message to offer a tangible demonstration of its commitment to reducing contradictions and adhering to international agreements.

Ratifying UNCLOS would enhance US legitimacy among Southeast Asian nations and the broader international community. Currently, 157 countries have signed UNCLOS, but the United States is not among them.¹⁹ While congressional resistance to the signing of UNCLOS is anticipated, it is manageable given the contemporary geopolitical environment and competition with the CCP. Multiple presidential administrations have endorsed UNCLOS, as have all Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) since 1982.²⁰ Proposing UNCLOS ratification to Congress should be linked to the competition with the CCP and Russia to enhance its appeal and make opposition a more challenging stance for those with traditionally hawkish national security constituencies.

The US frequently cites CCP violations of UNCLOS, particularly in the South China Sea (SCS). Incidents such as the 2012 Scarborough Shoal dispute with the Philippines led to the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling against China's nine-dash line claims and land reclamation activities.²¹ However, Washington's efforts to highlight CCP violations are severely hindered by the United States' non-membership in the treaty. Signing UNCLOS would bolster US legitimacy and provide a platform from which to condemn CCP actions more effectively.

Ironically, the United States has assumed the role of de facto guardian of UNCLOS. The treaty also serves as a cornerstone of legitimacy for many other US initiatives, with its signing offering significant advantages to US IW operations, particularly in relation to the CCP. Activities in this and subsequent phases, such

¹⁹ Will Schrepferman, "Hypocri-Sea: The United States' Failure to Join the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea," *Harvard International Review*, 31 October 2019, <https://hir.harvard.edu/>.

²⁰ Lara Malaver, "It Is Time for the United States to Ratify UNCLOS," *Proceedings* 147, no. 6 (1 June 2021), <https://www.usni.org/>.

²¹ Nestor Herico, "China's Use of Influence in the Philippines and Southeast Asia," e-mail response to the author, 30 November 2022.

as freedom of navigation operations and exclusive economic zones (EEZ), derive their legitimacy from UNCLOS. Moreover, CCP actions, such as constructing land features to enhance military power projection and employing the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) to intimidate and encroach upon the economic rights of neighboring nations, flagrantly violate UNCLOS, thus positioning it as a crucial element of US "lawfare."²²

Continuing to operate the Guantanamo Bay (GTMO) detention camp is another misstep by the United States that demands correction. GTMO has become synonymous with "enhanced interrogation techniques" and human rights abuses. Its closure would represent a significant stride toward restoring US legitimacy and signaling to the world US commitment to rectifying past injustices. Confronting the GTMO dilemma directly would serve as a form of soul-searching for the United States, fostering humility that could pave the way for constructive dialogue with Southeast Asian countries, even those with questionable human rights records.

The closure of GTMO would undoubtedly stir controversy and should once again be linked to efforts aimed at countering CCP narratives to garner political backing. The US legal system has demonstrated its capacity to manage GTMO cases effectively.²³ Thomas Pevehouse's thesis, *The Strategic Case for a New Terrorist Detention Policy*, presents a comprehensive strategy for shutting down GTMO and enhancing US legitimacy.²⁴ His proposed approach would mitigate the risks associated with GTMO's closure through a phased process.

By shuttering GTMO, Washington can starkly contrast US values with those of the CCP. Acknowledging the GTMO debacle demonstrates humility and signals a departure from past practices. It also serves as a catalyst for renewed US condemnation of the CCP's actions. The CCP frequently deflects criticism of its treatment of Uyghurs and Tibetans by deflecting questions about its human rights record and redirecting blame toward the United States, citing GTMO and historical slavery.²⁵ By directly addressing past transgressions, the United States diminishes the CCP's ability to weaponize this historical narrative, compelling Beijing to confront the issue. Confronting past mistakes limits the CCP's maneu-

²² Jeff M. Smith, "UNCLOS: China, India, and the United States Navigate an Unsettled Regime," *Background*, Heritage Foundation, 30 April 2021, 4–12, <https://www.heritage.org/>.

²³ Thomas Pevehouse, "The Strategic Case for the New Terrorist Detention Policy" (thesis, Washington, DC, National Defense University, College of International Security Affairs, 2022), 24.

²⁴ Pevehouse, "The Strategic Case for the New Terrorist Detention Policy."

²⁵ Leyland Cecco, "China Issues Furious Response after Canada Condemns Human Rights Record," *The Guardian*, 22 June 2021, sec. Global development, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

verability and enables Washington to exploit cracks in Beijing's narrative to undermine CCP legitimacy.

Reorganize

The US interagency must streamline its organization to generate synchronized effects that are time-phased and responsive to the rapid flow of information in today's environment. With the *National Defense Strategy (NDS)* prioritizing integrated deterrence, coordination among interagency actors and host nations becomes vital for both unity of effort and unity of action.²⁶ Coordination becomes particularly complex when addressing the diverse needs of the various countries within Southeast Asia.

The Department of State (DOS) typically leads US engagement in foreign nations outside of conflict situations, with the role of interagency integration falling to the chief of mission (COM), typically the ambassador to the respective country.²⁷ This country-specific framework implies the potential for 11 distinct coordination efforts across Southeast Asian countries, complicating efforts to achieve unity of effort within a regional strategy. Under this framework, the role of integrator is unfortunately elevated to the secretary of state or even the president, highlighting the shortcomings of this approach and impeding regional unity of effort.

Accommodating county specific nuances to foster deeper partnerships, especially in dealing with IW activities is key to success. However, while local specificity is crucial, a level of integration is necessary at the regional level to coordinate strategies across COMs, ensuring coherence in both effort and action. Elevating this coordination to the National Security Council (NSC) or the president risks diluting speed, effectiveness, and unity of effort. While the Joint Task Force (JTF) concept could fulfill this need, it should be established as an enduring entity rather than being erected for a specific task and thus limited in duration. Figure 2 illustrates this concept and the associated challenge. Establishing a persistent JTF construct positioned between the whole-of-government approach and multilateral efforts would help fuse local specifics with regional direction, ensuring a cohesive approach.²⁸

²⁶ "Joint Guide for Interagency Doctrine," Supplement to Joint Publication 3-08: *Interorganizational Cooperation Appendices* (Washington, DC: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 4 November 2019), F-3.

²⁷ Joint Publication 3-08: *Interorganizational Cooperation* (Washington, DC: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 12 October 2016), III-1, <https://www.jcs.mil/>.

²⁸ "Joint Guide for Interagency Doctrine," C-1.

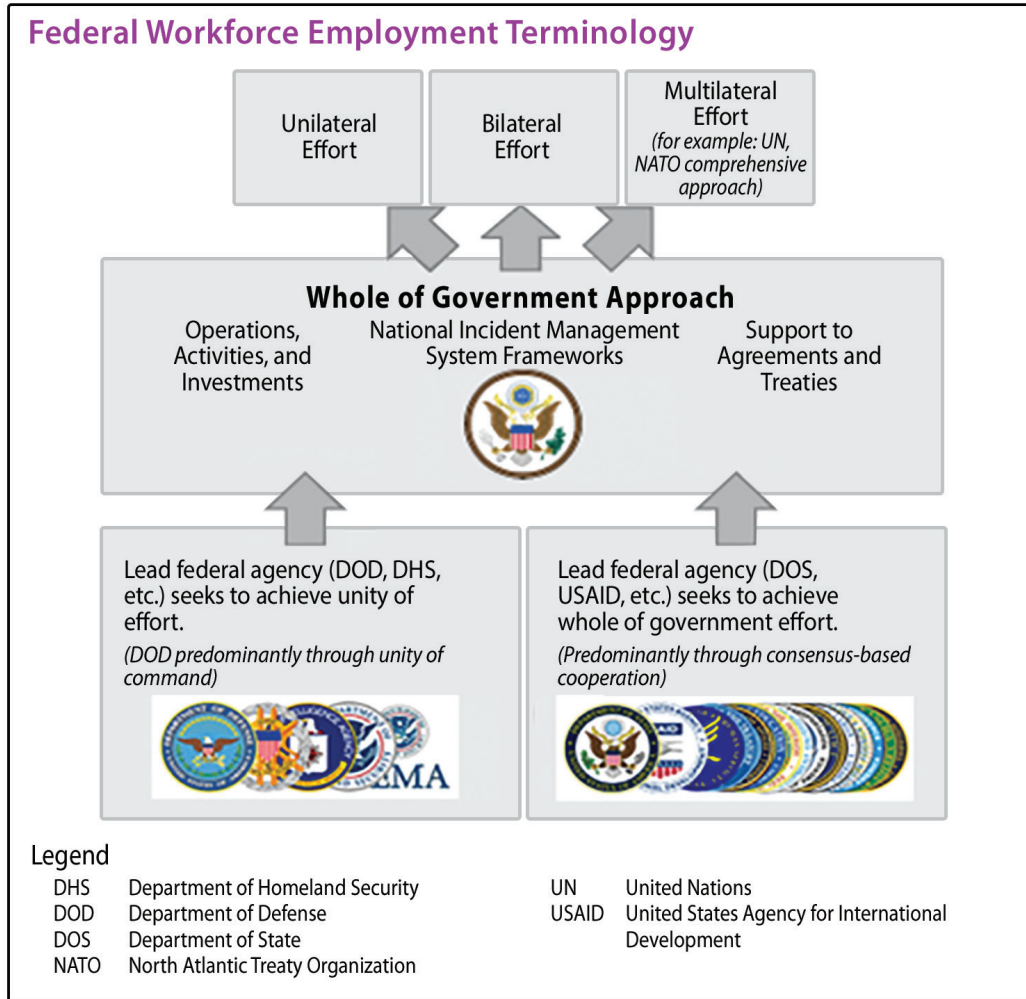


Figure 2. Proposed enduring JTF construct

Trade

Joining what is now known as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) would constitute a significant step by the US on the trade front, signaling commitment and openness to the region. President Trump's withdrawal of the United States from the then-called Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in January 2017 came despite substantial negotiations conducted by both the Bush and Obama administrations. The primary concern with the TPP revolved around its potential "to accelerate US decline in manufacturing, lower

wages, and increase inequity.”²⁹ However, the TPP also boasted significant upside, with one think tank “projecting an added \$130 billion to US Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2030, or an increase of about 0.5 percent.”³⁰

The CPTPP also holds strategic significance pertinent to this strategy, particularly in ensuring the US maintains leadership in establishing global trade rules. Economically, the CPTPP would unite 40 percent of the global GDP and approximately a third of world trade, according to former US Trade Representative (USTR) Ambassador Michael Froman. Moreover, many analysts regard the TPP as a litmus test for US credibility in the region. By fostering trade ties among nations, the TPP promotes cooperation, thereby advancing US influence in the region, where strategic success hinges on partnerships.³¹ While President Biden currently opposes rejoining the TPP, he has expressed willingness “to renegotiate it to include stronger labor and environmental provisions.”³² Nonetheless, the United Kingdom’s accession as the twelfth member of the CPTPP in July 2023 underscores the pressure for the United States to reconsider its stance.³³

President Biden has subsequently introduced the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), a welcomed initiative to reintegrate US engagement in regional trade agreements. However, it lacks the binding nature and specificity of the CPTPP, which represents a more substantive step forward. The IPEF represents a positive stride for the United States in initiating regional influence and norm-setting. Nevertheless, a binding trade agreement like the CPTPP would validate US commitment, a factor continuously assessed by regional actors.

Phase II: Set Conditions

This phase is dedicated to strengthening ties with our regional partners to address common objectives. To achieve this, Washington must prioritize US efforts, recognizing that not all partnerships hold equal significance. Prioritization of partners would be an internal process, not publicly disclosed, aimed at directing resources toward the most critical needs. Table 1 proposes an initial ranking of partnerships, offering detailed insights into their utility to the United States in a scenario involving a Taiwan invasion. However, this prioritization is merely a start-

²⁹ James McBride, Andrew Chatzky, and Anshu Siripurapu, “What’s Next for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)?,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 20 September 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/>.

³⁰ McBride, Chatzky, and Siripurapu, “What’s Next for the Trans-Pacific Partnership?”

³¹ Ian F. Fergusson and Brock R. Williams, *The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP): Key Provisions and Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 14 June 2016), 4–5, <https://sgp.fas.org/>.

³² McBride, Chatzky, and Siripurapu, “What’s Next for the Trans-Pacific Partnership?”

³³ Phillip Inman, “UK Joins Asia-Pacific CPTPP Trade Bloc That Includes Japan and Australia,” *The Guardian*, 31 March 2023, sec. Business, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

ing point. It must then be supplemented with an assessment of each partner's objectives and constraints to identify areas of alignment and chart focused country-specific strategies. Prioritization, coupled with clearly defined goals, lays the groundwork for nurturing relationships based on mutual respect and shared interests.³⁴ For Washington, this often involves engaging in active listening rather than dominating conversations.

Subsequently, Washington should actively prepare regional leaders, such as Japan, and international bodies, such as ASEAN, to assume greater regional leadership responsibilities. While this shift may entail relinquishing direct control over the region, it offers gains in regional legitimacy and presents the United States as a committed partner rather than a dictatorial authority. However, this transition in regional leadership should be gradual and deliberate. It necessitates careful steps to ensure that partners are adequately equipped for their enhanced roles and prepared to serve as primary voices against the CCP, supported by US strength and resources. Throughout this endeavor, the Influence LOE will encompass an information campaign to ensure that the initiative is not perceived as a tactical withdrawal by the United States. Messaging must be synchronized with that of ASEAN and our partner nations to lend it legitimacy.

Table 1. Proposed US prioritization of partnerships

Country	Relationship Vector	US Interests during Conflict w/CCP
Brunei	Maintain	Development
Cambodia	Strengthen	Resilience (China Reliance)
Indonesia	Deepen	Naval Choke Points, Access
Laos	Maintain	Resilience (China Reliance)
Malaysia	Deepen	Naval Choke Points
Myanmar (Burma)	Maintain	Naval Choke Points
Philippines	Deepen	Treaty Partner, SCS Disputes, Access
Singapore	Deepen	Treaty Partner, Access
Thailand	Deepen	Treaty Partner, Hedging Alley, Access
Timor-Leste	Maintain	Development
Vietnam	Deepen	SCS Disputes, Access

³⁴ Anonymous, "The Perspective of Middle Power Countries" (Chancellor's Lecture Series (CLS), National Defense University, College of International Security Affairs, Marshall Hall 155, 15 March 2023).

The Power of Truth and Red Lines

The current US strategy concerning Taiwan has been labeled as *strategic ambiguity*, a tactic that effectively introduces uncertainty into the CCP's decision-making process regarding Taiwan, as Beijing cannot ascertain the US stance on potential intervention. While this ambiguity may prove effective in certain scenarios, it deviates from conventional deterrence theory, where clarity is preferred. Effective deterrence comprises three key components: capability, credibility, and communication.³⁵ Clear communication, often delineated by red lines, is crucial to ensuring that the CCP comprehends the deterrence measures in place, particularly in the context of CCP gray-zone activities.

Realistic red lines established by the United States must be enforced to maintain credibility. Two examples include restricting further construction of land features or additional militarization of existing features in the SCS by the CCP, and ensuring compliance with UNCLOS in the SCS, with robust enforcement of violations.³⁶ Given the inherently realist nature of the CCP's strategy, Beijing respects strength and seeks to exploit weaknesses.³⁷ Communicating these red lines serves to complicate CCP gray-zone activities and lays the groundwork for US and partner responses in Phase III if these lines are disregarded. These communications can be conveyed discreetly through backdoor diplomacy or overtly broadcasted, depending on the situation at hand.

The truth campaign serves as a complement to the establishment of red lines, bolstering US responses to CCP rhetoric in the information domain by countering CCP narratives with irrefutable facts. The focus here lies in disseminating or magnifying inconsistencies in CCP messaging to undermine their legitimacy. A notable example is the CCP's assertion of supporting state sovereignty while actively undermining it, particularly in areas like the SCS. Swift and widespread rebuttals are necessary, and employing ridicule may be deemed appropriate. Leveraging the potency of truth has the potential to sow discord and prompt the CCP to reassess its approach to engaging in the information domain.

³⁵ Robert P. Haffa, Jr., "The Future of Conventional Deterrence: Strategies for Great Power Competition," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (Winter 2018), 96–97, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

³⁶ Anonymous, *The Longer Telegram: Toward A New American China Strategy*, Strategy Papers (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2021), 71, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>.

³⁷ Anonymous, *The Longer Telegram*, 66.

Building Partner Capacity by Vignette

Building partner capacity (BPC) is essential to bolster partners' resilience against CCP coercion, enhance military resistance, and facilitate integration with US forces. While BPC activities are already underway in the region, a deliberate approach is necessary to achieve multiple objectives. While not every type of force can fulfill these objectives, they are nonetheless attainable. Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities will be vital across the region, although their deployment may be viewed as escalatory by the CCP. Therefore, the development of such forces may be more suitable for Phase III BPC activities. In Phase II, less provocative forms of activity may be preferable.

SAR forces and humanitarian response and disaster relief (HA/DR) capabilities are highly sought after in the region and are consistently requested on an annual basis, indicating alignment between partner nations and US needs.³⁸ SAR forces currently benefit from extensive basing options in the region and are not perceived as escalatory due to their focus on life-saving operations. However, the requisite command-and-control structures and associated skill sets can provide dual-use capabilities during a conflict, thereby positioning critical capacity within the first island chain to enhance battlefield awareness. Additionally, SAR forces can assuage concerns of countries hesitant to engage in US security relationships due to fears of CCP reprisal. The nonthreatening nature of SAR operations can deepen relationships and pave the way for more conventional security partnerships in the future. Finally, forces such as SAR units facilitate access and placement in the region and offer the potential for basing and equipment storage in the event of a conflict.

Phase III: Deter or Punish

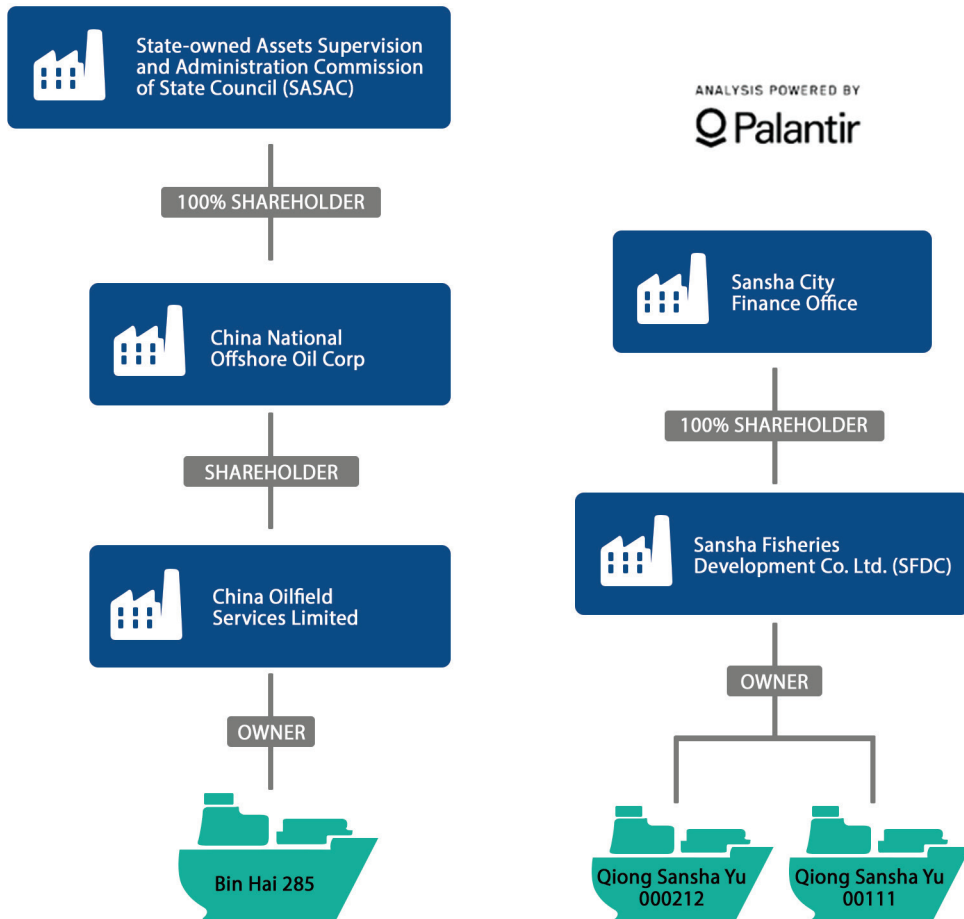
The deterrence posture established in Phase II lays the groundwork for deployment in Phase III, as needed. Phase III encompasses three primary areas of action short of conventional conflict: (1) IW efforts in the SCS, (2) undermining CCP objectives in the region and mainland China through subversive measures, and (3) imposing global costs on the CCP if competition escalates to conflict.

IW Efforts

If UNCLOS violations persist, sanctions should be imposed on the PAFMM and associated fishing vessels. It is unequivocal that the militia is organized, funded,

³⁸ *ASEAN Regional Forum Annual Security Outlook 2022* (Phnom Penh: ASEAN, 2022), 35, <https://asean.regionalforum.asean.org/>.

and directed by the Chinese government.³⁹ Sanctions will target militia funding and ownership networks, as depicted in figure 3.⁴⁰ In the event of CCP denial of ownership of these assets, prosecution under existing legal frameworks should proceed with minimal concern of escalation.



Corporate networks revealing links between maritime militia vessels and Chinese government entities

Figure 3. CCP Maritime Militia government links

Partners and the United States must be prepared to employ force when faced with offensive actions by CCP-controlled vessels, such as ramming or other hostile

³⁹ Gregory B. Poling et al., "Pulling Back the Curtain on China's Maritime Militia," *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), November 2021), 14, <https://www.csis.org/>.

⁴⁰ Poling et al., "Pulling Back the Curtain on China's Maritime Militia," 28.

activities.⁴¹ Partners can collaborate with US advisors to execute the sinking of an aggressive vessel as a deterrent through punitive measures. Such an operation should be preceded by the release of ISR footage documenting unsafe and illegal CCP activities. The CCP's refusal to claim responsibility for such vessels further solidifies US and partner legitimacy when gray-zone activities escalate to vessel sinkings.

On 10 November 2023, the United States achieved significant progress in this area by reaffirming that "Article IV of the 1951 U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty extends to armed attacks on Philippine armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft—including those of its Coast Guard—anywhere in the South China Sea." This announcement is a compelling testament to the bolstering of US resolve in the region and serves as a tangible example of advancements in establishing clear red lines, as previously discussed.⁴² This announcement closely followed the enhancement of the EDCA with the Philippines, indicating a clearly positive trajectory with a key ally in the region.

CCP Subversion

CCP subversion campaigns represent the next phase of the truth campaign and are executed as a component of the Influence LOE. They are deferred until Phase III because their aim is to undermine CCP legitimacy and target the COG by exploiting CVs. Both inconsistencies in CCP narratives and ideology can be exploited for this purpose. However, in this phase, subversion within China itself becomes a potential option but must be carefully evaluated against the associated risks. Substantial success in CCP subversion that destabilizes the Party could lead to significant escalation, particularly if the actions become attributable to the United States or its partners.

This strategy will utilize the information domain to reach the population in mainland China and target audiences in partner nations. In the latter case, the partner in question must take the lead role, operating within the bounds of their legal frameworks. The objective is to instill resistance in the local population based on truth rather than disinformation. The method of dissemination could involve various social media platforms, including Zhihu (the Chinese equivalent of Quora), Douban (similar to IMDB or Flixster), Youku (comparable to YouTube), Weibo (China's Facebook), QQ (similar to MSN Messenger), and WeChat (which com-

⁴¹ Poling et al., "Pulling Back the Curtain on China's Maritime Militia," 27.

⁴² "U.S. Support for the Philippines in the South China Sea" (press release, US Department of State, 10 November 2023), <https://www.state.gov/>.

bines WhatsApp and PayPal functionalities.)”⁴³ The targeted message may focus on the contrast between the CCP elite and the “proletariat,” conveyed through images, memes, or commentary. Themes could highlight the wealth accumulated by Xi Jinping or create division within the CCP by targeting former members of the Politburo who have been marginalized in favor of Xi’s inner circle.⁴⁴

Subversion tradecraft, such as fellow travelers or fifth columns, presents alternative attack vectors beyond the information domain that warrant exploration.⁴⁵ In this realm, the United States should assess potential networks for support based on three key criteria: consonance, capability, and resilience. This approach ensures that essential resources and personnel are allocated to the most viable actors. The objective of subversion is to escalate costs by compelling the CCP to contend with internal divisions, diverting attention from their desired objectives. When executed with skill, subversive activities remain undetected by the enemy and are not attributable even if discovered.⁴⁶

Imposing Costs Globally

In the punitive phase of Phase III, the United States must be ready to escalate any conflict into a global imposition of costs. This can be achieved through conventional military capabilities or covert operations. CCP foreign interests in locations such as Djibouti or South America are vulnerable targets and are susceptible to attack. Holding global CCP interests hostage adds another layer of complexity to CCP decision making, as they lack the international power-projection capabilities of the United States. Signaling is crucial for the deterrence posture. The CCP does not need to be informed of the specific targets that will be held hostage, but rather that initiating conflict will result in repercussions for global CCP interests.

Means

To effectively implement the tasks outlined in this strategy, the US must prioritize reallocating executive branch budgets, with a substantial increase directed toward the DOS to oversee the diplomatic mission in Southeast Asia as the primary coordinating office during competition. Adequate funding and staffing for DOS are essential to ensure robust diplomatic initiatives aimed at strengthening US

⁴³ Holmes Liao, “An Asymmetric Information Operations Strategy to Defeat the Chinese Communist Party,” *Global Taiwan Brief* 6, no. 20 (20 October 2021), <https://globaltaiwan.org/>.

⁴⁴ Anonymous, *The Longer Telegram*, 64–65.

⁴⁵ Anonymous, *The Longer Telegram*, 47.

⁴⁶ Howard Gambrell Clark, “Subversion, Subterfuge, Sabotage” (NDU/CIC Course, College of Information and Cyberspace, 2023).

relationships with regional partners. As former Secretary of Defense James Mattis once stated, “if you don’t fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition ultimately.”⁴⁷ His reasoning aligns with the core of this strategy, emphasizing the need for DOS to lead in partner building to effectively counter CCP influence warfare efforts.

To accomplish this, DOS requires a budget increase. The 2022 NDAA raised the DOS budget to USD 58.5 billion, a 10-percent increase from 2021.⁴⁸ This strategy proposes a cost-neutral realignment of USD 9 billion from the DOD budget to the DOS.⁴⁹ This reallocation can be achieved through modest adjustments to force structure across the services, as suggested by former Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF) General David Goldfein, along with targeted reductions in the Army’s heavy machinery, such as tanks.⁵⁰ The realignment represents approximately five percent of the Army’s 2023 budget request. Except for security force assistance activities and BPC, anticipated war fighting in the Indo-Pacific region emphasizes greater reliance on air and naval capabilities than those provided by a standing army.⁵¹

Metrics

Metrics need to be crafted at the local level to ensure they accurately gauge progress, referred to as *measures of performance* (MOP), which ultimately contribute to achieving objectives, known as *measures of effectiveness* (MOE).⁵² Given the expansive nature of a regional strategy, metrics will concentrate on overarching and generalized phase transition criteria. However, it is crucial to recognize that individual country plans may advance independently along the transition criteria and phases.

⁴⁷ Alex Lockie, “Mattis Once Said If State Department Funding Gets Cut ‘Then I Need to Buy More Ammunition,’” *Business Insider*, 27 February 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com/>.

⁴⁸ Antony J. Blinken, “The President’s Fiscal Year 2022 Budget,” (press release, US Department of State, 28 May 2021), <https://www.state.gov/>.

⁴⁹ “Defense Budget Overview—United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Request” (overview, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense [Comptroller]/Chief Financial Officer, March 2022), 2, <https://comptroller.defense.gov/>.

⁵⁰ Michael E. O’Hanlon, “How to Cut (and Not Cut) the Defense Budget,” *Order from Chaos* (blog), 9 July 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.

⁵¹ Cancian, Cancian, and Heginbotham, *The First Battle of the Next War*.

⁵² *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington DC: The Joint Staff, January 2024), 120, <https://jdeis.js.mil/>.

Phase II - Transition Metrics

The United States must unveil its fortified strategy initially through a strategic messaging campaign that aligns with an example showcasing its renewed commitment to Southeast Asia. Concurrently, it should establish the organizational structure necessary to execute the strategy. This results in the following MOEs that can be readily assessed: (1) an increased DOS budget of approximately USD 9 billion, (2) dissemination of the new US strategic message, (3) implementation of a revised enduring interagency regional organizational plan, and (4) addressing one area of US hypocrisy. While achieving these objectives would be optimal, it should not impede strategy implementation, as some nations may be willing to cooperate even without fulfilling these interim objectives.

Phase III – Transition Metrics

To transition from Phase II to Phase III, the focus shifts toward evaluating the status of US relationships in the region, the capacity of partner nations to withstand CCP coercion, and their willingness to bolster security partnerships to deter CCP adventurism contrary to US and regional objectives. The corresponding MOEs are outlined as follows:

1. The efficacy of ASEAN and Japan in spearheading the region and confronting CCP aggression,
2. The effectiveness of partner resilience and resistance efforts, and
3. The CCP's response to US and partner IW initiatives.

The first MOE can be assessed through both back-channel communications and public démarches highlighting coercive CCP activities by regional international bodies. A noticeable upward trend in willingness to confront the CCP serves as the desired transition indicator. The second MOE will be evaluated through the presence of embedded US special operations forces, who are likely to contribute to resilience and resistance efforts until regional partners develop their own assessment capabilities. Lastly, the third MOE involves analyzing trends in CCP IW activities to ascertain whether US and partner initiatives are mitigating their frequency. Data analytics will be utilized to identify any decrease in CCP IW activities and attribute causation to US and partner IW countermeasures aimed at deterring such actions.

Risk Assessment and Mitigation

The proposed strategy hinges heavily on cultivating relationships with regional partners to align with shared objectives. If the United States fails to attract partners, the risk associated with this strategy escalates. Nonetheless, wargaming reveals significant costs to the United States if competition escalates into conflict with the CCP.⁵³ This scenario is also unfavorable for Southeast Asia, as the region prefers a hedging strategy. The collapse of a superpower's influence in the region exposes Southeast Asian nations to the dominance of the remaining regional superpower, undermining their ability to hedge effectively. Given the coercive tactics employed by the CCP in the region, it is reasonable to assume that their unimpeded ascendancy would undermine the region's objectives. While this reality inherently mitigates some risks, Washington must ensure consistency in US messaging and reliability in its commitments to foster enduring partnerships with its allies.

US support for and engagement in IW activities, such as subversion and actions against the CCP's PAFMM, carries inherent risks. Each initiative must undergo thorough assessment to ensure its legal validity and to prevent undue erosion of US legitimacy. Moreover, the desired impact of the initiative must be carefully weighed against the potential for adverse consequences to determine the risk-reward relationship. However, some risks can be mitigated by collaborating with partner nations, allowing them to assume a leading role and reducing direct attribution to the United States.

It is important to acknowledge that any direct association with US state-sponsored efforts to disrupt or destabilize the CCP regime, particularly within mainland China, carries the risk of escalation. Preserving Party control and integrity constitutes a fundamental objective of the CCP. Additionally, the complete removal of the CCP could potentially result in regional instability and secondary consequences, akin to the challenges the United States encountered following regime change endeavors in Iraq and Afghanistan. Therefore, activities like subversion must be non-attributable and offer plausible deniability. The CCP routinely employs such tactics in various domains, including information, cyberspace, academia, and media, as highlighted in Part 1 of this series. Hence, there's precedent for the United States, its allies and partner nations to leverage truth as a weapon in unconventional or subversive ways, all while minimizing the risk of measurable escalation.

⁵³ Cancian, Cancian, and Heginbotham, *The First Battle of the Next War*, 3.

Furthermore, the US strategy of empowering regional entities like ASEAN and Japan to assume leadership roles in the region carries inherent risks. By voluntarily relinquishing power to other nations and international organizations, Washington effectively diminishes US leverage. However, this risk is somewhat mitigated by the stark realities demonstrated in Taiwan Strait wargames, which underscore the challenges associated with conventional conflict. The potential repercussions of projecting US military might within a condensed timeframe and possibly over an extended period underscore the importance of sharing regional power to prevent overextension of US military resources in the area.

This initiative is likely to be depicted by the CCP as a tactical retreat by the United States from the region, potentially heralded as a victory for the CCP. Consequently, strategic messaging must be carefully synchronized with regional partners to promptly lend support and counter any CCP narratives. To mitigate this risk, tactics involving social media, such as “first-and-flood” strategies, can be employed to rapidly disseminate the US strategic message en masse, effectively saturating and countering any CCP counternarratives. Once again, interagency and partner collaboration will be paramount to ensuring the strategy’s success and preventing significant harm during its early implementation stages.⁵⁴

It is crucial to recognize that all strategies carry inherent risks. However, this approach aims to mitigate risk through its pragmatic focus on addressing the most dangerous scenario to mitigate the risk of the *most likely* and *dangerous* scenarios simultaneously. Its incremental approach provides opportunities to de-escalate unintended tensions and normalize relations once deterrence measures are firmly established.

Conclusion

The United States must intensify its efforts to counter the detrimental effects of the CCP’s malign influence. Beijing adeptly employs this tactic as a gray-zone strategy to advance its strategic goals. There has been a misconception within the Pentagon that the *NDS* focuses on China as a shift away from IW strategies toward a conventional military buildup aimed at deterring CCP military aggression. This research contends otherwise. While conventional military deterrence is essential for shaping CCP decision making, it is imperative to develop and implement a robust IW strategy to outmaneuver the CCP in its preferred arena, the gray zone.

⁵⁴ Howard Gambrell Clark, *Influence Warfare Volume III: Case Studies*, draft (Washington DC: Narrative Strategies Ink, 2022).

To effectively counter the CCP, the United States must strive to comprehend the Party's motivations and strategic drivers. Analyzing the CCP's strategic estimate offers insight into these drivers, facilitating the construction of a counterstrategy. Unlike Western governments, the CCP does not strictly adhere to a peace-and-war dichotomy; instead, it operates along a continuum of conflict, employing tactics of unrestricted warfare. Understanding the CCP's worldview will inform more targeted strategies to achieve US objectives.

It is in the best interest of all parties, including the CCP, the United States, and the global community, to prevent superpower conflict. This underscores the critical role that IW should play in US strategies against the CCP, rather than diminishing its significance. The recommended strategy prominently features US partners and allies to limit CCP decision making while providing opportunities for Beijing to conform to global norms. Although this approach acknowledges that relying on partners and adhering to international law entails risks to US sovereignty, it recognizes that unilateral action by the United States alone may no longer suffice to address the challenges posed by the CCP.

China has been designated as the pacing challenge in the *NDS*, and the emphasis on *pacing* should not be dismissed as mere rhetoric, as numerous metrics indicate China's growing parity with or even surpassing of the United States. These metrics encompass areas such as missile defense, economic indicators, and technological advancement. Therefore, partners and allies offer the United States the asymmetric advantage necessary to bolster its capacity and capability to constrain CCP decision making without provoking escalation.

A free and open Indo-Pacific region is beneficial for the world at large. A forcible seizure of Taiwan would grant the CCP undue influence within the first island chain and encroach upon the EEZs of ASEAN nations. Consequently, the United States and like-minded nations present ASEAN members with the sole viable option to strengthen their security and safeguard their territorial integrity against CCP expansionist actions, particularly evident in the SCS. Many of these nations rightly opt for a hedging strategy to achieve their strategic goals, seeking reassurance from the United States in the region. Recognizing and capitalizing on this reality, Washington can significantly enhance strategic alignment with ASEAN nations. By reducing US inconsistencies and demonstrating unwavering commitment to the region through tangible actions that reinforce the US narrative, Washington will maintain its position as the preferred partner in the region. This strategic advantage is likely to prove decisive in the ongoing competition between the United States and the CCP. ✪

Lt Col Jeffrey S. Lehmkuhl, US Air Force Reserve

Lieutenant Colonel Lehmkuhl is the commander of the 908th Operations Support Squadron, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. He is a career helicopter pilot currently charged with providing MH-139A formal flying training in support of nuclear security, contingency response, and continuity of operations. He holds a Master of Arts in Strategic Security Studies from the National Defense University's College of International Security Affairs (CISA), a Master of Public Administration (MPA) from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and a Bachelor of Arts in Business Administration from California State University, San Bernardino. His area of focus is irregular warfare and influence warfare.