Time to Worry about China's Military Rise

<div style="background:#eee">

BOTTOM LINES

- **Local Challenges to Global Primacy:** Although the United States outspends other nations on defense and enjoys an unmatched ability to project power across the globe, these metrics obscure the challenges that China can pose.

- **Growing Threats to U.S. Expeditionary Warfare:** To support its antiaccess/area denial strategy, China is developing capabilities that can hold at risk the theater bases, aircraft carrier strike groups, and information systems that underpin the United States' ability to project power in East Asia.

- **Maximizing Effective Combat Power:** To defend its allies and preserve freedom of the commons in East Asia, the United States will need to emphasize more survivable air and undersea platforms, more resilient forward bases, and less vulnerable networks.

</div>

By Evan Braden Montgomery

This policy brief is based on "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China's Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection" which appears in the spring 2014 issue of International Security.

LOCAL CHALLENGES TO GLOBAL PRIMACY

What are the potential consequences of China's military modernization? This question is at the heart of recent debates over the durability of U.S. primacy, whether or not the United States can sustain its grand strategy of global engagement, and how it should adapt its armed forces. During the past two decades, China has been increasing its defense spending, developing new warfighting strategies, and fielding advanced weapons systems. Yet many scholars and policymakers still believe that U.S. dominance will remain uncontested.

Those skeptical of China's strength often make two observations. First, the United States overshadows all other nations when it comes to military spending.

According to the International Institute of Strategic Studies, the United States not only allocates more resources to defense than most other nations combined, but it also outspends China by a ratio of more than five to one. Second, the United States is in a class by itself when it comes to military reach. Simply put, it can deploy, operate, and sustain forces overseas on a scale that no other nation can match. These metrics can be misleading, however, because China would enjoy important advantages if a conflict occurred in East Asia.

As a global military power with extensive security commitments, the United States can concentrate only a portion of its available forces in any given place at any one time. Moreover, conducting a campaign in the Western Pacific would require overcoming significant logistical hurdles, including the need to dispatch reinforcements from thousands of miles away, support military units over lengthy air and sea lines of communication, and conduct operations from a small number of forward bases. By comparison, China is a regional military power that would be fighting in its own neighborhood. Not only could it devote more of

its forces to a conflict, but it could also mobilize them more rapidly, sustain them more easily, and operate them from dozens of bases on its territory. In sum, when geography enters the equation, the situation looks much less favorable for the United States than its advantages in military spending and military reach would seem to suggest.

GROWING THREATS TO U.S. EXPEDITIONARY WARFARE

A bigger concern for the United States is that its existing military capabilities and operational concepts have a number of potential vulnerabilities. To project power abroad, the U.S. military has become increasingly dependent on large theater bases to accommodate its forces, high signature platforms to generate combat power, and complex information networks to support nearly every aspect of a campaign. In fact, given the weakness of its post–Cold War adversaries, the United States has grown accustomed to fighting in relatively permissive environments where its bases are sanctuaries, its air and naval forces can operate with near impunity, and its access to space and cyberspace is unchallenged. These conditions would not hold in a conflict with China, however. Not only has China embraced an antiaccess/area denial strategy to impede the deployment of expeditionary forces into East Asia and limit their freedom of maneuver once they arrive, but it has also been investing in the military capabilities to back up that strategy.

Threats to Theater Bases: Although the United States would count on its land-based tactical aircraft during any conflict in East Asia, the close-in bases from which they operate are becoming more vulnerable. For instance, China could launch attacks on key bases with its ballistic and cruise missiles, many of which are extremely accurate, along with its increasingly modern air forces, which can be armed with a variety of precision-guided munitions. A coordinated Chinese offensive aerospace campaign could overwhelm U.S. base defenses, crater runways, damage aircraft parked in the open, and destroy infrastructure such as weapons depots and fuel storage facilities. Of course,

the United States might opt to conduct operations from more remote bases that are presently much less vulnerable. Doing so, however, would significantly reduce the amount of combat power it could project into the region with the short-range fighters that make up the bulk of U.S. airpower.

Threats to Surface Naval Forces: The United States would also depend on its aircraft carriers to project military power into East Asia during a crisis or conflict. Yet China is developing the ability to hold aircraft carriers at risk as well. For instance, it has a large inventory of antiship cruise missiles (ASCMs), including supersonic ASCMs that can be launched from hard-to-detect diesel-electric submarines. It has also fielded the DF-21D antiship ballistic missile (ASBM), which has an estimated range of more than 800 nautical miles, carries a maneuverable warhead to strike mobile targets while avoiding sea-based defenses, and has been dubbed a potential "carrier killer" by some observers. Although there is no guarantee an ASBM would work effectively, its potential threat could sideline carriers by forcing them to remain outside the effective range of their embarked air wings.

Threats to Information Networks: To exploit the United States' dependence on space and cyberspace, China is developing kinetic and nonkinetic weapons to blind, jam, and destroy satellites, as well as computer network attack capabilities that could disrupt the mobilization, deployment, operation, and sustainment of U.S. forces.

MAXIMIZING EFFECTIVE COMBAT POWER

What should the United States do in response to these threats? At the broadest level, it can take steps to increase the amount of effective and sustainable combat power it can bring to bear in East Asia. Doing so would bolster deterrence (by demonstrating that the United States has the capabilities and resolve to uphold the status quo) and enhance crisis stability (by reducing the likelihood that China could deliver a knock-out blow against U.S. theater bases, forward-deployed forces, and information networks).

To achieve this goal, the United States should strengthen three key aspects of its military. First, it should invest in surveillance and strike capabilities that are less dependent on forward bases and better able to survive within air and maritime denial zones. This would mean rebalancing its inventory of fixed-wing combat aircraft to emphasize platforms with longer ranges and lower signatures. Examples would include a new penetrating bomber (which the air force currently plans to procure) and a stealthy carrier-based unmanned aerial vehicle (which the navy appears likely to forgo in favor of a less capable and less expensive alternative). The Pentagon should also remain committed to building nuclear-powered attack submarines with additional payload capacity to help offset their limited magazines.

Second, the United States should implement a more resilient basing posture in the Western Pacific. To some extent this could be accomplished through passive measures, such as gaining access to dispersal airfields and building hardened structures to shelter valuable platforms, infrastructure, equipment, and supplies. It will also require new investments in active defenses, including promising but underfunded technologies such as directed-energy systems.

To mitigate the vulnerability of satellites and computer systems, the United States will need to take a number of near-term steps, from identifying potential threats by monitoring space and mapping networks to developing credible offensive countermeasures. Over the longterm, however, the United States should also pursue more enduring solutions, such as putting military payloads on satellite buses operated by partner nations or commercial entities. Not only would this increase redundancy, but it would also make attacking space a much riskier proposition for any rival.

CONCLUSION

For the first time in more than two decades, the United States faces a competitor that has the ability to inflict heavy costs on its air and naval forces. Maintaining stability in East Asia will therefore require significant changes in U.S. military capabilities and posture—changes that are likely to prove difficult while defense resources are scarce. Many of these changes will take years to implement, however, and China's military modernization shows no signs of slowing. The United States cannot afford to delay.

• • •

Statements and views expressed in this policy brief are solely those of the author and do not imply endorsement by Harvard University, the Harvard Kennedy School, or the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs.

RELATED RESOURCES

Krepinevich Jr., Andrew F. "The Pentagon's Wasting Assets," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 88, No. 4 (July/August 2009), pp. 18–33.

Brooks, Stephen G., G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth. "Don't Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment," *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Winter 2012/13), pp. 7–51.

Office of the Secretary of Defense. *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2014* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2014).

ABOUT THE BELFER CENTER

The Belfer Center is the hub of the Harvard Kennedy School's research, teaching, and training in international security affairs, environmental and resource issues, and science and technology policy.

The Center has a dual mission: (1) to provide leadership in advancing policy-relevant knowledge about the most important challenges of international security and other critical issues where science, technology, environmental policy, and international affairs intersect; and (2) to prepare future generations of leaders for these arenas. Center researchers not only conduct scholarly research, but also develop prescriptions for policy reform. Faculty and fellows analyze global challenges from nuclear proliferation and terrorism to climate change and energy policy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Evan Braden Montgomery is Senior Fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments.

ABOUT *INTERNATIONAL SECURITY*

International Security is America's leading peer-reviewed journal of security affairs. It provides sophisticated analyses of contemporary, theoretical, and historical security issues. International Security is edited at Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and is published by The MIT Press.

For more information about this publication, please contact the *International Security* editorial assistant at 617-495-1914.

FOR ACADEMIC CITATION:

**Belfer Center
for Science and
International Affairs**

Harvard Kennedy School
79 JFK St.
Cambridge, MA 02138

TEL: 617-495-1400
FAX: 617-495-8963
http://www.belfercenter.org