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Key Points

- ◆ China's antiaccess/area-denial capabilities resulted in the Pentagon writing an Air-Sea Battle concept as part of its Joint Operational Access Concept. Missing is a discussion of an appropriate strategy if the entirely undesirable Sino-American conflict occurs.
- ◆ Effective strategies include a coherent ends-ways-means formulation. Current budget issues place definite limits on U.S. means. China's nuclear arsenal restricts the choice of ways. Thus, to be achievable, the ends must be modest.
- ◆ This paper proposes Offshore Control as a military strategy. It recognizes that any conflict with China will be measured in years, not weeks or months. Offshore Control aligns U.S. strategic requirements with the resources available; takes advantage of Pacific geography to provide strategic, operational, and tactical advantages for U.S. forces; and provides a way for the conflict to end that is consistent with previous Communist Chinese behavior.
- ◆ By reducing reliance on space and cyber domains, Offshore Control is designed to slow a crisis down and reduce escalatory pressure in a crisis and potential ensuing conflict.

Offshore Control: A Proposed Strategy for an Unlikely Conflict

by T.X. Hammes

As America ends its military commitment to Iraq and continues its drawdown in Afghanistan, a lively discussion has emerged on what future challenges the Nation faces. High on every list is the requirement to deal with a rising China. In his remarks to the Australian Parliament on November 17, 2011, President Barack Obama stated, "As we end today's wars, I have directed my national security team to make our presence and mission in the Asia Pacific a top priority."¹ As part of this re-balancing to Asia, the administration has stated that it seeks "to identify and expand areas of common interest, to work with China to build mutual trust, and to encourage China's active efforts in global problem-solving."² Clearly, the United States seeks prudent and coordinated political, economic, and military actions to further integrate China into the international system.

The Pentagon's new strategic guidance, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, reinforces this approach and states that the United States and China "have a strong stake in peace and stability in East Asia and an interest in building a cooperative bilateral relationship."³ At the same time, the document acknowledges both China's military buildup and the U.S. commitment to maintaining regional access.

As expected, this strategic guidance has accelerated the ongoing discussion of how America will allocate resources among the military Services. An integral part of this discussion is the idea that the United States has focused on the Army and Marine Corps for the last decade of conflict and that now it is time to shift spending to the Navy and Air Force. Proponents of this approach note the rising power of China and the fact that the Pacific theater is primarily a naval and air theater. Reinforcing this perspective is the Air-Sea Battle concept recently revealed at the Pentagon. According to Chief of Staff of the Air Force General



Because it is a nation that relies on maritime trade to sustain its economic growth, China is at a disadvantage because the geography of the “first island chain” restricts its access to the region.

Norton Schwartz and Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Jonathan Greenert, Air-Sea Battle will help their Services organize, train, and equip to maintain operational access in sophisticated antiaccess/area-denial environments.⁴ Other proponents note that this concept will be of particular importance in the western Pacific Ocean, where China is building its own antiaccess/area-denial capabilities in an effort to deny the U.S. entry in its near-seas.⁵

While intentionally vague, the Pentagon’s statements about Air-Sea Battle lead analysts to conclude that the concept contemplates attacks that penetrate Chinese airspace to eliminate key elements of the Chinese antiaccess/area-denial networks. Unfortunately, rather than exploring potential strategies in the event of conflict with China, the discussion has focused on

the operational aspects of Air-Sea Battle outside any strategic context. What strategy might work in a war with China, however unlikely, is not being publicly discussed. Many media reports have confused the issue by suggesting that Air-Sea Battle is *the* strategy. Fortunately, the Pentagon’s own Joint Operational Access Concept states that “It is important to note that Air-Sea Battle is a limited operational concept that focuses on the development of integrated air and naval forces in the context of antiaccess/area-denial threats.”⁶

In fact, Air-Sea Battle is the antithesis of strategy. It focuses on the tactical employment of weapons systems with no theory of victory or concept linking the Air-Sea approach to favorable conflict resolution. To be fair, the absence of a stated strategy made it impossible for the drafters of the Air-Sea Battle concept to express

how they could support such a strategy. In the absence of such a strategy, it is impossible to determine if investment in Air-Sea Battle logically advances or retards America's strategic goals—or whether alternative approaches might be both more effective and more suitable.

While a major conflict is unlikely, and, of course, undesirable, the Nation requires a military strategy for a conflict with China for two reasons. First, an essential element of military planning is to consider all possible options—even ones with remote possibilities of occurring. Second, strategy should drive the force structure and supporting procurement plan that support the particular conflict. If we are going to structure a significant segment of the Armed Forces for a possible conflict with China, we need to develop a corresponding military strategy first.

Outline for a Strategy

There are a number of useful models to guide strategists. Professor Eliot Cohen stated that a strategy should include critical assumptions, ends-ways-means coherence, priorities, sequencing, and a theory of victory. Without listing, examining, and challenging assumptions, it is not possible to understand a strategy.⁷ With assumptions identified, coherence in ends-ways-means becomes possible. These elements should not be treated separately. If goals are selected that exceed available means, we do not have a strategy. Priorities are required because a nation will not have the resources to do everything at once. Sequencing flows from priorities. Finally, a strategy must have a theory of victory—an answer to the question “how does this end?” It must express how the strategy achieves war termination on favorable terms.

Requirements for a Strategy

While military strategy is often seen only as creating cohesion between ends, ways, and means in a military conflict, its role as a deterrent and alliance-builder prior to the conflict is also important. It is even more important against an enemy with thermonuclear

capability. Any U.S. military strategy for Asia must achieve five objectives:

- ◆ access for U.S. forces and allied commercial interests
- ◆ assurance to Asian nations that the United States is both willing and able to remain engaged in Asia
- ◆ deterrence of China from military action to resolve disputes
- ◆ victory with minimal risk of nuclear escalation in the event of conflict
- ◆ credibility in peacetime.

Looming budget cuts require that the United States also consider a strategy for the Asia-Pacific that significantly reduces the cost of maintaining U.S. influence in the region. The challenge is to achieve peacetime savings while leaving the United States well-postured in the region, and to defend its interests in the event of war.

It is essential also to understand that there is no “good” strategy for a conflict between the United States and China. As has been the case when the United States confronted other nuclear powers, the strategist is forced to look for a “least bad” strategy.

A Proposed Strategy

The strategy of Offshore Control works with willing Asia-Pacific nations to ensure that the United States can interdict China's energy and raw material imports and industrial exports, while protecting our partners.

Five Key Assumptions. The statement of clear assumptions is fundamental to good strategy planning. Offshore Control is predicated upon five explicit assumptions.

China starts the conflict. While it is possible to envision scenarios where the United States would initiate a major conflict with China, such scenarios lie at the extreme range of credibility. By initiating conflict, China seizes the initiative, maximizing political and military difficulties for the United States.

There is a high probability that a conflict with China would be a long war. For the last 200 years, wars between

major powers have generally run for years rather than months. Obviously, the big difference is that previous wars have not seen nuclear powers face each other except through proxies. Having no experience with large-scale armed conflict between nuclear powers, we cannot say whether this factor will shorten the war (as the case of the minor conflict between the Soviet Union and China) or lengthen the war because neither side can seek a decisive outcome with conventional forces. The United States would find a protracted conflict most challenging. Too often in the past, military planners have begun prosecuting a war assuming that it would be short. The obvious examples are the U.S. Civil War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Soviet and U.S. invasions of Afghanistan, and U.S. operations into Iraq.

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Any major conflict between the United States and China would result in massive damage to the global economy. The United States would cut Chinese trade simply because the American population would not accept continued trade with China while U.S. forces are suffering significant casualties. China would respond with military, fiscal, and economic actions.

The United States does not understand China's nuclear decision process. Therefore, it is critically important that the U.S. strategic approach minimize escalation. If escalation is required, deliberate and transparent escalation is better than a sudden surprise that could be misinterpreted. This approach certainly violates the generally accepted precept that escalation in war must be violent and sudden to achieve maximum effect. However, that maxim was developed before the advent of offsetting nuclear arsenals.

*In space or cyber domains, a first strike provides major advantages.*⁸ Thus, any operational approach that requires

the robust use of space and cyber capabilities is inherently destabilizing in a crisis. Each side knows that if it fails to strike first, it would be at a disadvantage in the war. Of even more importance, the United States should not initiate major actions in space or cyber domains because the Chinese might consider such actions to be attacks on strategic systems and thus escalatory. If the United States does not strike first, it must assume both space and cyber assets might be severely degraded in an initial Chinese strike.

Ends, Ways, and Means Coherence. The combination of decreasing defense budgets and rapid increases in procurement costs for new weapons suggests that a strategy for conflict with China should assume limited means, at least to start. In addition to limited means, the United States must accept that China's nuclear arsenal imposes restrictions on the way American forces might attack Chinese assets. The United States must select ways that minimize the probability of escalation to nuclear conflict simply because no one can win a major nuclear exchange. With limited means and restricted ways, the ends selected therefore also should be modest. They must attain U.S. strategic goals but not risk a major nuclear exchange.

This logic leads to the concept of Offshore Control. Operationally, Offshore Control uses currently available but limited means and restricted ways to enforce a distant blockade on China. It establishes a set of concentric rings that *denies* China the use of the sea inside the first island chain, *defends* the sea and air space of the first island chain, and *dominates* the air and maritime space outside the island chain. No operations would penetrate Chinese airspace. Prohibiting penetration is intended to reduce the possibility of nuclear escalation and to make war termination easier.

Denial as an element of the campaign plays to U.S. strengths by employing primarily attack submarines, mines, and a limited number of air assets inside the first island chain. This area would be declared a maritime exclusion zone with the warning that ships in the zone could be sunk. While the United States could not initially stop

all sea traffic in this zone, it could prevent the passage of large cargo ships and tankers. In doing so, it would cripple China's export trade, which is essential to China's economy.

The defensive component would bring the full range of U.S. assets to defend allied soil and encourage allies to contribute to that defense. It would take advantage of geography to force China to fight at longer ranges while allowing U.S. and allied forces to fight as part of an integrated air-sea defense over their own territories. Numerous small islands from Japan to Taiwan and on to Luzon would provide dispersed land-basing options for air and sea defense of the gaps in the first island chain. Since Offshore Control relies heavily on land-based air defense and short-range sea defense to include mine and countermine capability, we can encourage potential partners to invest in these capabilities and exercise together regularly in peacetime. In keeping with the concept that the strategy must be feasible in peacetime, the United States would not request of any nations the use of their bases to attack China. The strategy would only ask nations to allow the presence of U.S. defensive systems to defend that nation's land, sea, and air space. The U.S. commitment would include assisting with convoy operations to maintain the flow of essential imports and exports in the face of Chinese interdiction attempts.

The dominate phase of the campaign would be fought outside the range of most Chinese assets and use a combination of ground, naval, air, and rented commercial platforms to intercept and divert the supertankers and post-Panamax container ships essential to China's economy.⁹ Eighty percent of China's imported oil transits the Strait of Malacca. If Malacca, Lombok, Sunda, and the routes north and south of Australia were controlled, these shipments could be cut off. The United States must recognize, however, that the dramatic reduction in China's trade would significantly reduce its energy demands. Thus, energy interdiction would not be a winning strategy. Exports are of much greater importance to the Chinese economy. Those exports rely on large container ships for competitive cost advantage.

These ships also are the easiest to track and divert. Naturally, China would respond by rerouting, but the only possibilities are the Panama Canal and the Strait of Magellan—or, if polar ice melt continues, the northern route. U.S. assets could control all these routes. While such a concentric campaign would require a layered effort from the straits to China's coast, it would largely be fought at a great distance from China—effectively out of range of most of China's military power. Furthermore, this phase can employ surface search radars and high frequency radio if U.S. space and cyber capabilities are severely degraded.

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That leads us to modest ends. Offshore Control is predicated on the idea that the presence of nuclear weapons makes seeking the collapse of the Chinese Communist Party (or its surrender) too dangerous to contemplate. The United States does not understand the Communist Party decisionmaking process for the employment of nuclear weapons, but it does know the party is adamant that it must remain in control. Thus, rather than seeking a decisive victory against the Chinese, Offshore Control seeks to use a war of economic attrition to bring about a stalemate and cessation of conflict with a return to a modified version of the status quo.

Priorities and Sequencing. The priority in execution would go to establishing defenses for those nations that choose to ally themselves with the United States. Then

U.S. forces would establish a distant blockade. Next, U.S. forces would establish the maritime exclusion zone inside the first island chain and finally dominate the area outside the first island chain to ensure the continued flow of trade to our allies while tightening the blockade against China.

Sequencing would follow priorities. However, it should be noted that due to the different forces required for each of the steps, further study might find that multiple steps could be initiated simultaneously.

Offshore Control seeks termination of the conflict on U.S. terms through China's economic exhaustion without damage to mainland China's infrastructure

Of particular importance is the peacetime preparation necessary for the strategy to succeed. Any strategy must be both feasible and credible in peacetime and in war. In peacetime, both enemies and potential allies must be able to see that the United States is providing sufficient training and forces to execute its strategy in time of war. A number of relatively inexpensive and highly visible steps could commence immediately that reinforce Offshore Control. Maritime prepositioning of defensive assets in theater adds both a rapid reinforcement capability and a reason to conduct exercises with friendly nations. The United States could also encourage Japan's current reinforcement of its defensive capabilities in the Ryukyu Islands as well as assist the Philippines in establishing defenses in the islands between Luzon and Taiwan.

Theory of Victory. Offshore Control seeks termination of the conflict on U.S. terms through China's economic exhaustion without damage to mainland China's infrastructure or the rapid escalation of the conflict. It seeks to allow the Chinese Communist Party to end the conflict in the same way that China ended its conflicts with India, the United Nations in

Korea, the Soviet Union, and Vietnam. It allows China to declare that it "taught the enemy a lesson" and thus end the conflict. By forgoing strikes that destroy Chinese facilities or economic infrastructure on the mainland, Offshore Control reduces the probability of escalation and makes it easier for the Chinese to declare that they did not lose politically. Offshore Control does not seek decisive victory in the traditional military sense but secures U.S. objectives effectively. It recognizes the fact that the concept of decisive victory against a nation with a major nuclear arsenal is fraught with risks, if not entirely obsolete.

Inherently Offensive. While this strategy seems to focus on defense, it is inherently offensive. The real source of a nation's strength—particularly in a long war—is its economy. This strategy strikes at that Chinese foundation by cutting off raw material imports and the wealth created by exports. The geography of the region lets Offshore Control capitalize on the advantages of an integrated defense versus the limited inventory of long-range Chinese strike assets. In periods where the defense gained a tactical advantage in warfare, successful commanders often sought to be on the strategic and operational offensive while fighting defensive tactical actions.

Potential Chinese Responses

In evaluating any strategy, we must consider a wide range of potential enemy responses. Every conflict brings surprises as each side seeks enemy weaknesses to exploit and makes its own mistakes. When comparing the effectiveness of two different strategies, we must consider not only the potential effectiveness of an enemy response but also the likelihood of such a response against the specific strategy. If alternative strategies are likely to provoke the same response, then the effectiveness comes down to a question of which strategy best prepares the United States to deal with that attack. To date, America has not proposed a military strategy for a conflict with China. Thus, we can only evaluate possible Chinese actions against

the proposed Offshore Control strategy. However, an analyst can also consider how Chinese actions might work against a strategy that uses Air-Sea Battle as its operational approach.

This paper divides Chinese reactions into conventional and unconventional responses. Chinese writings indicate that China will use a range of options simultaneously in any major conflict. Thus, planners should consider how China might use any combination of or all of the possibilities noted herein. Nor should planners assume that China could select only from this menu.

Conventional Responses. China could select from a number of conventional responses.

China conducts a peacetime intimidation campaign. Traditional Chinese wisdom recommends attacking an enemy's strategy and alliances. If China believed that regional bases are essential to U.S. strategy, it would seek to defeat the U.S. strategy by intimidating regional states. Nations would be subjected to Chinese efforts to prevent any agreements that would allow U.S. basing. China would also pressure South Korea, Japan, and Australia to reduce their cooperation with U.S. forces and perhaps even ban the use of their bases in a conflict with China. China would gain little in separating these nations from the United States in the event it confronted a strategy of Offshore Control. Since Offshore Control does not require allied basing rights except in Australia, China would risk alienating regional nations without gaining much strategic benefit.

China conducts direct air and missile strikes against U.S. allies. In this case, Offshore Control presents China with a strategic dilemma. The only bases that the United States requires to sustain the operation are either on U.S. territory or in Australia. China nonetheless might seek to pressure the United States by striking at U.S. bases in South Korea and Japan as well as the port and fuel facilities that support them. Such attacks risk bringing those countries into the conflict. As a hedge, the United States could conduct peacetime combined, integrated defensive operations with South Korea and Japan specifically to address air, mis-

sile, submarine, and mine threats. Furthermore, the allies could participate without a commitment to fight on America's side. Offshore Control uses U.S. forces in South Korea and Japan only to defend those nations from attack. While assisting in the defense of South Korea and Japan would require U.S. resources, the highly capable South Korean and Japanese forces would add great capability to the allied side. China would then have to decide whether adding the military, economic, and political power of South Korea and Japan to the U.S. side is worth the gains of attacking U.S. facilities in those nations. Peacetime combined, integrated defensive exercises should provide China with vivid demonstrations of the additional challenge they would face. This level of challenge, combined with the fact that U.S. forces stationed in these nations are *not* attacking China, could convince the Chinese that the benefits are not worth the complications of bringing South Korea and Japan into the war.

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China imposes a blockade on allied states. If China were to do so, an obvious question is how the allies would sustain South Korea and Japan during a long conflict. While the maritime exclusion zone inside the first island chain means that all of South Korea and the west coast ports of Japan are in the exclusion zone, this fact does not mean they cannot be sustained. If China conducted an antishipping campaign, convoy operations would be required. Here again, geography favors the United States. Both South Korea and Japan have east coast ports that could be destinations for convoys. To attack convoys bound for Japan, Chinese air and missile attacks would have to fly over defended

Japanese air space or take a long detour around it. For South Korea, convoys could enter the Sea of Japan (East Sea in South Korea) from the north and approach South Korea's east coast ports. Air or missile attacks would have to fly over the Korean Peninsula. They would either fly into the range of allied air defenses or detour north to fly over North Korea. Fortunately, Korea's major east coast ports are in the south—Pusan and Pohang. Geography also provides the allies an advantage in antisubmarine warfare. To reach the convoy routes, any Chinese submarines must transit relatively confined waters and operate outside the Chinese land-based anti-aircraft umbrellas. Therefore, allied antisubmarine aircraft should be able to operate safely. The geographic advantage combined with superior allied antisubmarine assets should provide enough protection for convoys to reach South Korean and Japanese ports.

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Unconventional Responses. China could also select from a number of unconventional responses.

Global sea-denial campaign. While China currently lacks the resources to conduct a sea-control campaign outside the range of shore-based air support, it could attempt a sea-denial campaign using a combination of submarines and surface raiders (armed merchant ships). Surface raiders have been used repeatedly in history and, while a nuisance, have never been particularly effective. In contrast, Chinese submarines would be a challenge. However, as noted, a number of factors favor allied forces in an antisubmarine campaign.

Mining U.S. and allied ports. Admiral Greenert has acknowledged the U.S. Navy's deficiency in mine-

clearing.¹⁰ Thus, an obvious Chinese response to a U.S. blockade would be to use commercial shipping to mine South Korean, Japanese, and even U.S. ports. While this would cause a disruption of trade, it would be a manageable problem. It would also present a difficult challenge for China. Lacking sea superiority, China would have to risk laying most of the mines prior to the commencement of hostilities. Although sophisticated modern mines greatly reduce the probability of an unintentional, premature attack, it is always a possibility. Thus, China would risk tipping its hand for the dubious benefit of mining a foreign port.

Drone attacks. The massive growth in drone capability, decrease in cost, use of additive/desktop manufacturing, and dramatic increase in drone autonomous capabilities presage the emergence of large numbers of cheap, autonomous drone aircraft.¹¹ Using Global Positioning System-aided navigation and improved explosives, even small drones can damage key components in power and transportation systems. Besides attacking fixed infrastructure, small drones with limited intelligence can seek out the radars of combatants to degrade allied air defenses. The long-range, long-endurance subsurface oceanographic research drones in use around the world could be modified for use in naval warfare.

Space and cyber attacks. Chinese strategists are aware of the advantage of the offense in each domain and the massive impact successful attacks could have on U.S. capabilities. However, a blockade could be conducted using surface search radar and high frequency radio communications. Since a blockade does not depend on space or cyber domains for operational success, Offshore Control reduces the Chinese incentive to conduct attacks in those domains.

Financial actions. Another area of lively debate is the ability of China to use its fiscal reserves, in particular its ownership of U.S. debt, to attack the United States or even the global economy. From this author's reading, there is no consensus among economists of whether China could use these tools without causing massive

damage to its own economy. In any case, the decision to do so is unlikely to be driven by what strategy the United States chooses.

“*Three warfares.*” China has suggested that it would use legal, media, and psychological warfare in conjunction to defeat opponents. To these efforts we should add diplomatic. China could engage in both legal and diplomatic maneuvering in any conflict with the United States. If the United States employs Offshore Control, a key question would be the legality of the blockade and in particular the legality of placing U.S. troops aboard merchant ships to ensure that they do not trade with China. We can assume China would also attempt a diplomatic offensive to bring European nations to pressure the United States to cease interfering with trade and separate Asian allies from the United States. Media and psychological efforts would augment China’s efforts to neutralize U.S. military power. However, if China engaged in military attacks on other Asian nations, it would complicate those efforts. Conversely, if the United States conducted repeated strikes on the Chinese mainland, it would simplify China’s efforts in this area.

Advantages of Offshore Control

No strategy for fighting China can promise a good outcome. We are simply seeking to achieve our strategic goals while minimizing the damage incurred in such a conflict.

Increases Deterrence and Assurance Due to Feasibility and Transparency of the Concept. In peacetime, it is easier to convince another nation we have a viable strategy if we regularly exercise the necessary forces and operational techniques. To date, the only U.S. approach being discussed openly for a potential U.S.-China conflict seems to be based on Air-Sea Battle. Unfortunately, the idea that a conventional strike campaign can defeat a continental-size power in a short war is dubious at best and certainly ahistorical. Furthermore, many of the necessary Air-Sea Battle technologies are classified. They can neither be

openly discussed nor exercised. If critical capabilities lie within Special Access Programs, the United States will not even be able to suggest it has that capability. This fact creates a dilemma since both deterrence and assurance are rooted in a confidence that the stated strategy can be executed.

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In contrast to Air-Sea Battle, the United States can demonstrate Offshore Control’s feasibility in peacetime exercises. Partner states will only be asked to participate in the protection of their own sea and air space. Any nation is free to declare neutrality. Offshore Control focuses resources on air and sea defense of allies rather than investing heavily in defeating China’s increasingly capable antiaccess/area-denial network.

Such an approach has two benefits. First, it is politically more acceptable to most nations if they train to defend only their own territory. Second, by making it clear that their participation is *not* a requirement for a successful U.S. strategy, it takes away the Chinese option of “attacking the enemy’s strategy” by pressuring regional states to refuse U.S. basing rights.

Lowers Probability of Rapid Escalation. Current strategic discussions in the United States highlight two possible ways to deter China. The first way is to convince China that the United States can overcome China’s antiaccess/area-denial capabilities to place China at risk. Unfortunately, this operational approach depends heavily on U.S. space and cyber capabilities. This creates the unintended consequence of raising the value of a first strike. To reduce the perceived value of a first strike, the United States must create redundant systems that can immediately restore lost systems. This redundancy is expensive and, since much

of the U.S. command network depends on commercial cyber and space assets, may not even be possible. Thus, U.S. space and cyber systems remain a vulnerable and high-payoff target.

Offshore Control does not require extensive use of space or cyber systems. While these systems are useful, the United States and its allies can develop relatively inexpensive backup systems to create tactical networks using a mix of older technologies and air-breathing platforms. With limited investments in alternative systems and a training program, Offshore Control could be executed even if China conducted a highly successful first strike in the space and/or cyber domains. Because of its transparency, this capability could be demonstrated in peacetime exercises. By devaluing the first strike, such an approach could increase the deterrence value through reducing the incentive to start a war. This is particularly important in a crisis. The premium attached to a strategic first strike creates a great deal of escalatory tension. Each side's military leaders would be obligated to inform their civilian leaders that failure to strike first would place them at a significant military disadvantage.¹²

Offshore Control matches the capabilities required for its execution to reduced U.S. defense resources while increasing the cost to China to respond effectively

Expands Decision Space and Timelines. While a distant blockade is an escalation, its execution and impact would take hold only over a period of weeks. This would give diplomats time to seek a solution free from the demand for sudden escalation in space or cyber. The idea of slowing escalation and making it transparent seems to defy military wisdom and the history of conflict. But if we examine those confrontations where nuclear powers faced each other—for example, the Cuban Missile Crisis,

the China–Soviet Union Zhenbao Island incident, and India–Pakistan Kargil crisis—in each case escalation was done slowly and openly. Each crisis ended without triggering a wider conflict.

In contrast, space and particularly cyber escalation take place in seconds and thus would drive decisionmakers in unpredictable ways.¹³ Offshore Control is inherently de-escalating since the strategy cannot be defeated by a first strike on space and cyber assets. Furthermore, the allies would only need to rebuild cyber and surveillance assets over and outside the first island chain. Geography would make establishing and defending such a network much easier, further reducing the value of a first strike.

Lowers Peacetime Cost to Maintain U.S. Capabilities to Fight Such a Campaign, thus Increasing Its Deterrent Effect. Credibility and feasibility require that a strategy be economically sustainable in the current and projected peacetime U.S. political environment. Due to lack of transparency, it is impossible to say for certain, but it seems the Air-Sea Battle concept requires major new procurement programs. In contrast, Offshore Control could be executed based on current capabilities while guiding future investments away from large numbers of expensive penetrating platforms. For instance, instead of another aircraft carrier, the United States may choose to purchase six more *Virginia*-class submarines for roughly the same investment. Rather than building a system that could provide rapid replacement of surveillance and connectivity over China, the United States would only have to build systems that provide coverage and networks over friendly territory.

Reverses the Cost Imposition Formula. To penetrate Chinese airspace the United States must spend a great deal on advanced platforms. By shifting the onus of penetrating integrated air defenses to the Chinese, Offshore Control reverses the cost imposition. It would cost the Chinese much more to create sufficient long-range assets to achieve sea control than it would cost the United States to achieve sea denial inside the first island chain. As part of his confirmation process, Admiral Samuel Locklear III, commander of U.S.

Pacific Command, spoke before the Senate Armed Services Committee in February 2012 and assessed China's goals as "building the capability to fight and win short duration, high-intensity conflicts along its periphery."¹⁴ Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta made the same statement in his confirmation hearing.¹⁵ A U.S. approach that envisions an extended conflict at a distance from China could neutralize much of the Chinese investment in this capability. In short, Offshore Control matches the capabilities required for its execution to reduced U.S. defense resources while increasing the cost to China to respond effectively.

Reverses the Geographic Advantage. Rather than engaging the Chinese over their home territory where almost all Chinese assets can participate and concentrate their effects, Offshore Control forces the Chinese to send their limited number of long-range assets into U.S. and allied integrated land, sea, and air defenses.

Allows Higher Probability for China to Declare Victory (Saving Face) and End the Conflict in much the same way it ended its intervention in Korea, invasion of Vietnam, and border conflicts with Russia and India. If the United States has conducted numerous strikes into mainland China, it would be much more difficult for Chinese leadership to decide to end the conflict. Historically, passion often became the driving forces once the war started, and direct attack on a homeland has been most likely to stir that passion.

Plays to U.S. Strengths. Offshore Control does not focus on the few systems necessary to destroy China's antiaccess/area-denial systems and achieve sea control inside the first island chain. Instead, it is built on U.S. superiority in submarines and, with proper investment, sea mines to achieve sea denial inside the first island chain. It then adds highly capable U.S. ground- and sea-based air/missile defense to the battle for air superiority over key battlespaces above allied nations. It also moves the allied antisubmarine campaign to the restricted gaps in the first island chain and outside the first island chain, where U.S. air assets could participate in the antisubmarine warfare effort. Finally, it allows U.S. ground forces to contribute

to the fight by intercepting and controlling major commercial ships. By mid-decade, roughly 869 new ships will make up over one-third of the global merchant fleet capacity when delivery is complete.¹⁶ While the total cargo capacity is growing steadily, the total number of ships is decreasing as older container ships that hold 5,000 TEU (twenty-foot equivalent unit) or less are being replaced by ships holding up to 18,000 TEU.¹⁷ Clearly, the U.S. Navy has insufficient ships to control the almost 1,500 very large commercial ships projected to be in use by 2015. However, these numbers can be controlled by U.S. amphibious shipping projecting Army and Marine boarding parties that will travel with the ships to ensure they do not enter the maritime exclusion zone. Commercial shipping and helicopters could be contracted to support the distant efforts, thus reducing the stress on the amphibious fleet.

any war between the United States and China would devastate the global economy

Minimizes Economic Losses. As noted in the assumptions, any war between the United States and China would devastate the global economy. Thus, a key consideration for any strategy must be how to shorten the war and minimize economic damage. Given the continental size and wealth of both the United States and China, the only path to a short war is for one side to terminate the conflict by deciding it is not worth the potential gain. This author believes a distant blockade that does not strike the Chinese mainland offers China's leaders the best opportunity to choose to terminate the conflict. Furthermore, the maritime geography would allow the rest of the world to rebuild trading networks without China. Thus, China would be faced with a deteriorating economic situation and accumulating erosion of trade relations. The longer the war, the longer it would take China to rebuild the trust essential to trading networks. Furthermore, avoiding passion-inducing

direct attacks on China, while presenting Chinese leaders with an ever worsening economic outlook, might provide a path to a shorter war.

Allows for the Rebuilding of the World Trade System During the Conflict. Sustainability in a long war would largely be based on rebuilding trade networks during the conflict. The U.S. geographic position and maritime nature of global trade means the rest of the world economy could rebuild around the perimeter. In contrast, China has little prospect of rebuilding via a new Silk Road. The U.S. control of the sea lanes clearly favors the United States in an extended conflict.

strategists should be cautious about building a concept that requires political decisionmakers to move quickly or make more than minor surreptitious deployments

Previous Conflicts Between Nuclear Powers

An essential part of developing a strategy is to think through how the conflict might develop. Historical precedence would not provide a formula for success but would illuminate issues to consider. Fortunately, to date there have only been two conflicts between nuclear-armed states. The 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict and 1999 Kargil conflict between Pakistan and India each saw nuclear-armed states actually fighting. Rather than escalating, the leadership on each side responded to the original crisis cautiously. Military moves were announced and essentially transparent. While two examples represent an extremely limited field, they are the only examples of military action overshadowed by nuclear arsenals.

In addition to these two active conflicts, we have decades of history showing how the United States, Soviet Union, China, Pakistan, and India have dealt with crises between and among themselves.

The Cuban Missile Crisis highlights the pattern of cautious and relatively transparent actions taken when nuclear-armed powers found themselves in a growing crisis. Leaders on each side avoided sudden escalatory moves or offensive actions that could have been misinterpreted as a major attack.

Given this historical record, strategists should be cautious about building a concept that requires political decisionmakers to move quickly or make more than minor surreptitious deployments. The timeline required to execute Offshore Control allows decisionmakers to be deliberate and transparent.

Taiwan-China Conflict?

The most discussed, researched, and wargamed conflict between the United States and China is a Chinese attack on Taiwan. While highly unlikely, it is militarily feasible and requires continued research. An obvious question is “How does Offshore Control work in that case?” More pointedly, one might ask, “If the United States adopted Offshore Control, could China present a *fait accompli* by a sudden invasion of Taiwan?” Moreover, “Would the United States be willing to employ such a long war strategy to drive Chinese forces out of Taiwan?”

China has the capability to conduct a short-notice, overwhelming missile campaign against Taiwan. Since U.S. forces are not allowed either to exercise with Taiwanese forces or be stationed in Taiwan, there is little the United States can do to stop or even mitigate a sudden offensive. Even if U.S. airpower is present in the region, the historical experience of air forces trying to detect and attack mobile launchers is not encouraging. Simply put, Taiwan must be prepared to absorb the thousands of missiles that China has placed within range of the island as well as a simultaneous sustained Chinese air campaign. The good news is that despite Douhet’s predictions, it is difficult to bomb a nation into submission.

Thus, if Taiwan, with the assistance of the United States, could prevent a Chinese amphibious landing, it could retain its independence. To achieve this, Taiwan

would need to invest in hardening its own society as well as developing its own antiaccess/area-denial capability focused on defeating an amphibious operation. Mines, mobile antiship missiles, submarines, and air defense systems could create the same barriers for China that China's antiaccess/area-denial creates for the United States. These systems could deny China the possibility of a quick victory as long as Taiwan's government refuses to capitulate. This defense combined with efforts to keep supplies flowing to allied nations provides Taiwan's most feasible course of action for maintaining its sovereignty.

The alternative is for the United States to make the large investments necessary to develop Air-Sea Battle to the point that it could defend Taiwan on short notice. This approach requires major forces continuously deployed well forward in theater. It is difficult to see Congress approving large expenditures to provide a limited capability to respond to this low probability contingency. It also requires a change of policy to allow U.S. forces both to train with the Taiwanese and to be based in Taiwan. And, of course, it would require going down the escalatory path of Air-Sea Battle.

Critical Continuing Research

The fiscal situation resulting from a Sino-American conflict and its longer term economic impact need much deeper research. Both areas lie well outside the expertise of this author and scope of this paper. However, in examining the viability of any strategy in a China conflict, the Pentagon must examine the range of possible fiscal outcomes with particular emphasis on the impact of a long conflict on the global fiscal situation as well as the ability of each nation to sustain the conflict fiscally.

The integration of the global economy means that economic issues must be closely examined when developing a viable strategy for conflict with China. Obviously, any serious study must examine global supply chain interdependencies. The wide-ranging impact of the recent Japanese tsunami is pointed evidence

that such a conflict would trigger surprises. In particular, we must examine the impact on critical commodities such as medicines, food, and energy. The initial economic focus would be on U.S. and Chinese abilities to sustain a long conflict, but it must also examine the potential responses of other nations whose economies are affected. Of particular importance for the Offshore Control concept is the speed with which the global economy could reestablish itself around the blockade in the absence of Chinese financing and production.

Offshore Control is designed to slow a crisis down to allow weeks, not seconds, for decisions concerning escalation

An important issue is the impact of Offshore Control on other nations in the region. China is currently the single largest trading partner for Australia, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam.¹⁸ Any conflict would cause major damage to these economies. The key question for them becomes what strategic approach is likely to cause the least direct damage and bring the most rapid conclusion of the conflict and resumption of trade.

Summary

This paper is just the start of what should be a deep, wide-ranging discussion of potential strategies for a conflict with China. The debate should examine the credibility of the proposed strategies both in peace and in war. While conflict with China is highly unlikely, it is in fact driving many of the Pentagon's investment decisions today. This paper seeks to test whether or not those decisions are consistent with U.S. strategic interests in a period of austerity and to examine if they are tied to a coherent strategy.

One of the central criteria of any strategy for a potential conflict with China is the presence of China's

nuclear arsenal. It cannot be ignored or idly wished away. Concepts and strategies should not compress the decision timeline. In particular, any approach must examine the degree to which the strategy fuels escalation in a prewar crisis or in a war. Furthermore, the strategy must be affordable in peacetime and executable in wartime—even if China should strike first. It should shape the operational/tactical fight to provide geographic and temporal advantages to U.S. forces. And it must provide a theory of victory.

By reducing reliance on space and cyber and maintaining transparency in peace, crisis, and war, Offshore Control reduces the escalatory pressure on decisionmakers while meeting the other criteria. It is designed to slow a crisis down to allow weeks, not seconds, for decisions concerning escalation. Moreover, Offshore Control is designed to better align strategic requirements with available resources as well as place U.S. and allied forces in favorable tactical positions if it comes to a fight. Finally, it provides for conflict resolution that does not require an unobtainable “decisive” victory.

Notes

¹ “Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament,” Parliament House, Canberra, Australia, November 17, 2011, available at <www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>.

² Department of Defense (DOD), *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, DC: DOD, January 5, 2012), 2, available at <www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf>.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴ Norton A. Schwartz and Jonathan W. Greenert, “Air-Sea Battle: Promoting Stability in a Period of Uncertainty,” *The American Interest*, February 20, 2012, available at <www.the-american-interest.com/article.cfm?piece=1212>.

⁵ J. Randy Forbes, “America’s Pacific Air-Sea Battle Vision,” *The Diplomat*, March 8, 2012, available at <<http://the-diplomat.com/2012/03/08/americas-pacific-air-sea-battle-vision>>.

⁶ DOD, *Joint Operational Access Concept, Version 1.0*, January 17, 2012, 4, available at <www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/JOAC_Jan%202012_Signed.pdf>.

⁷ For a discussion on why assumptions are critical, see T.X. Hammes, “Assumptions: A Fatal Oversight,” *Infinity* 1, no. 1, available at <www.infinityjournal.com/article/1/Assumptions__A_Fatal_Oversight>.

⁸ David C. Gompert and Phillip C. Saunders, *Sino-American Strategic Restraint in an Age of Vulnerability*, INSS Strategic Forum 273 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, January 2012), 3.

⁹ *Post-Panamax* is the designation for ships that were too large to transit the Panama Canal before it was expanded.

¹⁰ Sydney J. Freedberg, Jr., “Iran Mine Threat Scares Navy: CNO Scrambles to Fix Decades of Neglect,” *AOL Defense*, May 4, 2012, available at <<http://defense.aol.com/2012/05/04/iran-mine-threat-scaries-navy-cno-scrambles-to-fix-decades-of-ne/>>.

¹¹ Additive manufacturing uses three-dimensional printing from digital files to produce parts of entire systems.

¹² For a deeper discussion of Chinese thinking on escalation, see Forrest E. Morgan et al., *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008), available at <www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG614.pdf>.

¹³ For a thorough discussion of the implications of cyber and space capabilities on the Sino-American relationship, see David C. Gompert and Phillip C. Saunders, *The Paradox of Power: Sino-American Strategic Restraint in an Age of Vulnerability* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2011), available at <www.ndu.edu/press/paradox-of-power.html>.

¹⁴ Richard Halloran, “The Rising East: U.S. Admiral Identifies China’s Capabilities and Objectives,” *Honolulu Civil Beat*, February 13, 2012, available at <www.civilbeat.com/articles/2012/02/13/14874-the-rising-east-us-admiral-identifies-chinas-objectives>.

¹⁵ U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, “Hearing to consider the nomination of: Honorable Leon E. Panetta to be Secretary of Defense,” June 9, 2011, available at <http://hongkong.usconsulate.gov/uscn_dod_2011060901.html>.

¹⁶ “Global Merchant Shipping Fleet Continues to Grow,” *Shippingplatform.com*, August 3, 2011, available at <www.shippingplatform.com/News_Details.aspx?id=1269&head=Global%20merchant%20shipping%20fleet%20continues%20to%20grow>.

¹⁷ One TEU represents the cargo capacity of a standard intermodal container: 20 feet (6.1 meters) long and 8 feet (2.44 meters) wide.

¹⁸ *The Economist, Pocket World in Figures 2012*, comp. Burgess, Andrea et al. (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2011), 115, 171, 217, 241.

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