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Balancing China

How to Check Chinese Military Expansion in East Asia

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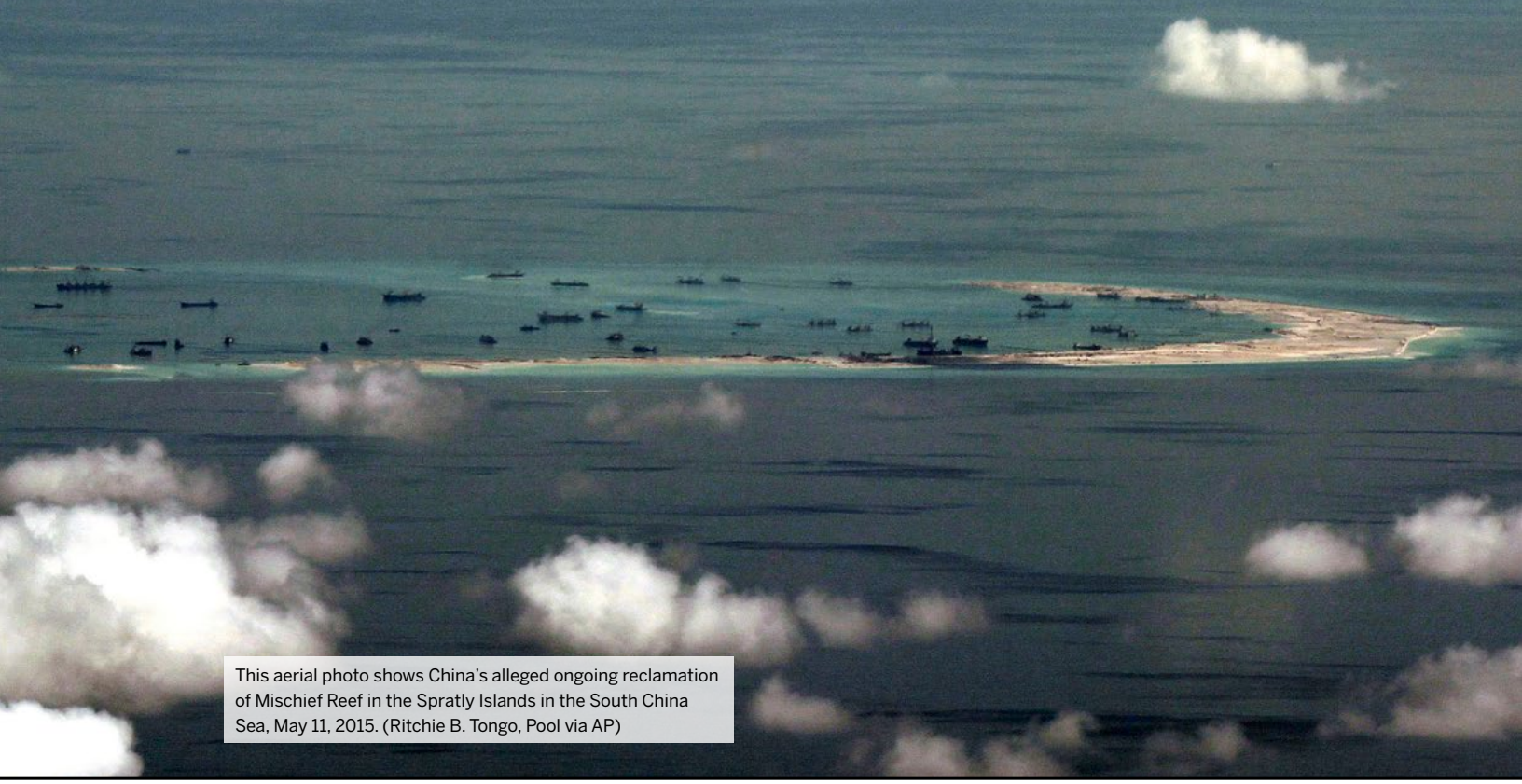
This policy brief is based on "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China's Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion," which appears in the fall 2017 issue of *International Security*.

Bottom Lines

Balance of Military Power in East Asia. China's neighbors have acquired antiaccess/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities that can deny China sea and air control throughout most of its near seas and prevent China from conquering Taiwan.

Constraints on Chinese Military Expansion. China cannot afford the power-projection capabilities it would need to overcome the A2/AD forces of its neighbors, because power-projection forces are fifty times more expensive, on average, than A2/AD forces; China's economy is losing steam and has racked up massive debt; and homeland security operations consume large shares of China's military resources.

"Active Denial" Strategy for the United States. Instead of trying to command maritime East Asia, the United States should focus on helping China's neighbors deny China sea and air control in the region. This "active denial" strategy would preserve the territorial status quo in Asia while saving the United States money and reducing the risk of a major U.S.-China war.



This aerial photo shows China's alleged ongoing reclamation of Mischief Reef in the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, May 11, 2015. (Ritchie B. Tongo, Pool via AP)

For seventy years, the U.S. military has dominated the seas and skies of East Asia. Many American analysts fear, however, that China could now use its antiaccess/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities to hold the U.S. military at bay while enforcing its expansive territorial claims, which include most of the East and South China Seas. Left unchecked, some analysts fear, China will eventually become the hegemon of East Asia.

The debate about how the U.S. military should respond to China's A2/AD capabilities has focused on two options. One option would be to prepare to wipe out China's A2/AD forces at the outset of a conflict. The other would be to withdraw U.S. forces from East Asia and grant China a sphere of influence. Both options have drawbacks. The first would be expensive and would increase the risk of war by encouraging the United States and China to shoot first in a crisis. The second would reduce U.S. influence in East Asia and might embolden China to try to conquer parts of the region.

The United States has a third option: adopting what some analysts call an "active denial" strategy. Under this strategy, the U.S. military would focus on bolstering and backstopping the A2/AD forces of China's neighbors rather than trying to command maritime East Asia outright.

Balance of Military Power in East Asia

China has a more powerful military than any of its neighbors, but they are closer than China to the contested waters that they claim. In a war, Chinese air and naval forces would need to cycle between the combat theater and bases on mainland China that in many cases are hundreds of miles away, a commute that would severely limit the amount of combat power China could sustain on the battlefield. China's neighbors, by contrast, could operate from home bases bordering the combat theater and thus would have their full arsenals at their disposal.

Many of these nations have developed A2/AD capabilities, including shore-based missile batteries, diesel-powered attack submarines, swarms of small surface combatants, and fighter aircraft armed with antiship missiles and mines. As a result, the East China Sea and the western and southern sections of the South China Sea are now bordered by forces capable of denying China sea and air command.

China could potentially establish sea and air control in the Taiwan Strait, but it still cannot conquer Taiwan (amphibious invasions are the toughest missions in warfare, and no blockade or strategic bombing campaign has ever coerced a state into giving up its sovereignty). Taiwan could likely defend itself against the People's Liberation Army, so the U.S. military would, at most, need only to tip the scales of the battle.

China could defeat local opposition and quickly establish sea and air control in the northeast corner of the South China Sea, near the Philippines. This area, however, is beyond the range of most of China's shore-based missiles and at the outer edge of the unrefueled combat radius of most of China's combat aircraft. The U.S. military could mass overwhelming air and sea power there and beat back Chinese forces without exposing U.S. ships and aircraft to China's most potent A2/AD forces.

China has sought to expand on the sly via what Chinese Gen. Zhang Zhaozhong has called a "cabbage strategy," in which China wraps disputed waters in layers of coast guard, maritime militia, and fishing vessels. This tactic, however, is unlikely to enable China to command maritime East Asia. One reason is that China's neighbors have bolstered their own coast guard fleets. China's fleet remains the largest in Asia, but it is spread thin defending China's expansive claims, which encompass nearly 2 million square miles. China's neighbors, by contrast, concentrate their fleets around their more limited claims. More important, China's neighbors have started using military force against China's civilian vessels, firing on them, chasing them down, and, in the case of Indonesia, blowing them up on national television.

In sum, China faces a formidable containment barrier and cannot command major portions of its near seas—at least for now.

Constraints on Chinese Military Modernization

The local balance of military power in East Asia will remain stable for years to come, because the state of military technology heavily favors the defense, China's economic growth is slowing, and homeland security operations drain China's military resources.

First, defense is dominant, at least within maritime East Asia, because precision-guided munitions enable even relatively weak countries (such as China's neighbors) to sink surface ships and shoot down aircraft near their homelands. These precision-guided munitions rely on simple platforms that are fifty times cheaper, on average, than the power-projection forces that they could neutralize in a war.

Second, China's economy—the engine powering its military modernization—is losing steam. Since 2007, China's economic growth rates have fallen 50 percent and its debt has quadrupled and now exceeds 300

percent of gross domestic product. China has little hope of reversing these trends, because it is about to experience the most rapid aging crisis in human history, with the ratio of workers to retirees shrinking from 8 to 1 today to 2 to 1 by 2040. The low productivity of this massive geriatric population, plus the costs of caring for them, will constrain Chinese military spending.

Third, homeland security costs drain a substantial portion of China's military resources. China shares sea or land borders with nineteen countries, five of which fought wars against China within the last century; its northern and western borders are porous and populated by disaffected minority groups; and its government is bedeviled by domestic unrest to a greater extent than are those of most countries. To deal with these threats, China's military devotes more than 1 million troops (roughly 45 percent of its active-duty force) to internal security and border defense. The cost of maintaining these units drains at least 35 percent of China's military budget, a "domestic drag" that puts robust power-projection forces further out of reach.

"Active Denial" Strategy for the United States

The United States should exploit the existing East Asian military balance by adopting an active denial strategy consisting of three main elements.

First, the United States would bolster the A2/AD capabilities of China's neighbors by providing them with loans, arms, training, and intelligence. The goal would be to make China's neighbors capable of denying China territory but not of taking and holding territory themselves.

Second, the United States would create buffers between U.S. and Chinese forces by decreasing the number of U.S. forces near China's borders and stationing most U.S. forces in hardened bases scattered around the East Asian periphery. These forces could be called upon in the event of war but otherwise would remain beyond the reach of most of China's forces. This shift would reduce the likelihood of military incidents, help reassure

China that the United States does not intend to launch massive strikes on the Chinese mainland at the outset of a crisis, and increase the resilience of U.S. forces in the region by reducing their exposure to Chinese preemptive attacks.

Third, the United States would gradually backstop the local balance of power if war broke out between China and its neighbors. In minor conflicts, the United States would try to convince China to back down by using nonmilitary forms of coercion, including financial sanctions, embargoes, or cyber operations. If the conflict escalated to war, the United States could initially "lead from behind," supporting local forces with logistics, intelligence, and, if necessary, limited air and missile strikes on Chinese forces operating in the combat theater rather than those stationed on the Chinese mainland. If the United States needed to increase military pressure on China, it could escalate horizontally before doing so vertically—that is, by opening new geographic fronts (e.g., by blockading the Strait of Malacca) rather than pouring U.S. forces into the main combat theater.

This strategy obviously sacrifices military effectiveness for the sake of enhancing crisis stability. The U.S. military could gain a major advantage over China's military if it attacked China's mainland military bases at the outset of a conflict. Such an offensive posture, however, not only is expensive to maintain, but also risks turning minor disputes into major wars. China might be tempted to shoot first during a crisis, in a desperate attempt to stun the United States before the U.S. military wipes out China's offensive forces.

Conclusion

If China were poised to overrun East Asia, then it might make sense for the United States to risk major war to check Chinese expansion. China is incapable of doing so, however. Instead of rushing into a war with China, therefore, the United States should pick its battles, escalate gradually, and let local actors do most of the heavy lifting.

Further Reading

Eugene Gholz, "No Man's Sea: Implications for Strategy and Theory," paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Atlanta, Georgia, March 2016.

Eric Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2015).

Terrence K. Kelly, David C. Gompert, and Duncan Long, *Smart Power, Stronger Partners*, Vol. 1: *Exploiting U.S. Advantages to Prevent Aggression* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2016).

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