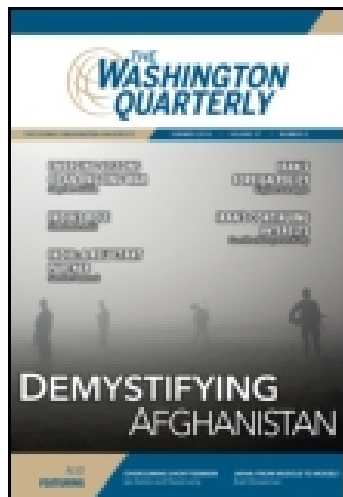


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Why Chinese Assertiveness is Here to Stay

As Chinese political, economic, and military power continues to grow at impressive rates, the impact of Chinese external behavior on the region has correspondingly increased. Since 2010, it has become commonplace for observers to refer to Chinese foreign policy behavior as abrasive, muscular, or assertive. However, China's heightened willingness to rely on coercive diplomacy—or the simultaneous use of diplomacy and limited use of force to accomplish one's objectives—began much earlier with the *Impeccable* incident in March 2009.¹ In this case, five Chinese vessels shadowed and aggressively maneuvered in dangerously close proximity to the U.S. Naval Ship *Impeccable*.² In the following months, commentators predicted that China would moderate its behavior in the face of regional backlash. Instead, instances of Chinese platforms maneuvering in a dangerous and unprofessional manner only became more frequent.

Whether Chinese foreign policy has become more assertiveness and the implications of such a shift are the source of great debate among China hands. Analysts Thomas Fingar and Fan Jishe argue that stability still characterizes U.S.–China bilateral relations because the ties between the two countries are more extensive, varied, prioritized, and interdependent than ever before.³ Harvard professor Alastair Iain Johnston argues that pundits overstate the change because they underestimate how assertive China has been in the past—demonstrating that Chinese official discourse on sovereignty and territorial issues has been relatively consistent over the past fifteen years.⁴ Others argue that the narrative does not go far enough. Australian analyst Jeffrey Reeves articulated that accusations of assertiveness too narrowly focus on China's

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expansive territorial claims, disruptive diplomacy in ASEAN, and growing use of economic sanctions, while ignoring other policies that contribute to regional instability—specifically Beijing’s reliance on economic ties to advance its relations with smaller developing countries in Asia.⁵

Commentators admittedly tend to ignore areas of cooperative Chinese actions such as convergence in U.S. and Chinese voting on the UN Security Council and

China has been credibly communicating its threats by increasing the risk of accident.

increasing U.S. exports to China.⁶ Former State Department official Thomas Christensen cautions that China’s counterproductive policies toward its neighbors and the United States are better understood as reactive and conservative, rather than assertive and innovative.⁷ Qin Yaqing, a professor at China Foreign Affairs University, postulates that China’s main strategic policies—emphasis on U.S.–China relations, rejecting

alliances, reliance on economic diplomacy—will continue even as some policies change. For instance, we could see an emphasis on core interests like sovereignty and territorial integrity, even over economic development.⁸ While true that Chinese diplomacy may not have, on the whole, become more assertive, most agree that in the area of maritime disputes, China has demonstrated an increased willingness to threaten and use limited force to promote its sovereignty claims. The dangerous Chinese interception of U.S. Navy planes conducting routine patrols above the South China Sea in late August 2014 is only the latest of countless instances of China credibly communicating its threats by increasing the risk of accident.⁹

Many U.S. strategists were hopeful that Beijing would moderate its behavior because, they argue, this more muscular approach to maritime disputes has obviously proved counterproductive and detrimental to China’s own interests. China’s muscle-flexing has driven allies such as Japan, the Philippines, and Australia into a closer alliance with the United States.¹⁰ A recent Pew poll demonstrated that 70 percent of respondents in the Philippines, Japan, Vietnam, South Korea, and India expressed concern over potential conflict with China.¹¹ “The Chinese,” said Rob Taylor, a close advisor to Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, “with their current foreign policy, as distinct from what they were doing over a decade ago—is [sic] genuinely counterproductive.”¹² Given the Western consensus that, as *The Economist* wrote, “it would be hard to construct a foreign policy better designed to undermine China’s long-term interests,”¹³ and that fundamentally China “has no wish to be branded an international outlaw,”¹⁴ as *Wall Street Journal* columnist Andrew Browne pointed out, many are waiting for a reversion to previous policies.

Unfortunately, such a shift back is unlikely. China's reliance on coercion, both in the form of deterrence and compellence, over maritime disputes is likely to persist for the foreseeable future for two reasons. First, Chinese assertiveness is the result of a deliberate strategic decision central to Beijing's overarching anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy. *The Economist* refers to anti-access as "the ability to prevent an opposing force from entering an area of operations." The objective of area denial, on the other hand, is not prevention but disruption—to compel the desired behavior by "impos[ing] severe costs on the enemy's freedom of action once it has [gained access]."¹⁵ While it seems counterintuitive, China is actually hoping to prevent balancing by being assertive, and operationally it is trying to create a domestic and international environment that will limit U.S. ability to intervene effectively in a given conflict.

Unfortunately, a shift back from Chinese coercion is unlikely for two reasons.

Second, there are influential and loud voices in China that believe such a strategy has been working, and is better than the alternatives. Such arguments are not without merit. While a few countries' view of China is worsening, a median of 49 percent of the world's publics surveyed in a 2014 poll still hold a positive view of China overall.¹⁶ Xi Jinping himself has articulated more hardline policies concerning territorial disputes, and Chinese assertiveness has noticeably increased under his watch. Additionally, the costs of any negative perceptions are unclear—even Australia has been hesitant to be drawn into the diplomatic fray given its close economic relationship with China.¹⁷ And even if countries are unhappy, it is hard to ignore the fact that China's tactic of "exploit[ing] perceived provocations in disputed areas by other countries...to change the status quo in its favour," as the International Crisis Group puts it, has been largely successful in strengthening China's claims.¹⁸

In short, Chinese assertiveness is here to stay, and U.S. strategy needs to adjust accordingly. Specifically, I lay out three areas of Cold War-era concepts that the United States needs to jettison if it hopes to protect regional interests and avoid conflict if possible.

Asia's Own Balancing

Most U.S. strategists and scholars argue that Chinese muscular behavior in its territorial disputes has been counterproductive in that China's relations with its neighbors, and therefore Beijing's security environment, have deteriorated as a result. Many concluded that Beijing was learning similar lessons and would adjust its foreign policy accordingly. China's relentless pursuit of its territorial

claims has hardened the position of its neighbors and hurt its international image.¹⁹ According to a 2014 Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) poll of strategic elites in eleven countries, 61 percent of respondents felt China had a negative impact on regional security.²⁰ More and more, regional actors' anxiety about Beijing's long-term intentions is encouraging them to conduct their own balancing. Such behavior includes external balancing, such as improving ties with the United States and other major players in the region, as well as internally strengthening and modernizing their own militaries.²¹

We can see this internal balancing in the defense spending of Asian countries, which spent a total of \$287.4 billion on defense in 2012. This total represents the first time that Asian defense spending exceeded total European defense spending, including both NATO and non-NATO countries.²² Further, from 2008–2012, Asia and Oceania accounted for 47 percent of global imports of major conventional weapons, with India, South Korea, and Singapore—first, fourth, and fifth, respectively—all in the top five of importers of major conventional weapons worldwide.²³ Real (inflation-adjusted) defense spending in India, Japan, and South Korea increased from 2000 to 2011 by 47, 46, and 67 percent, respectively, an increase too large to be explained by natural modernization trends.²⁴ Moreover, the reversal of downward spending trends in 2008 and subsequent accelerated increases, coupled with focus on investment in naval and air forces, suggest such spending trends are partly in response to China.²⁵

The Asia–Pacific will comprise 26 percent—nearly \$200 billion—of global maritime security builds in the next 20 years, represented largely by shipbuilding.²⁶ India has been the largest importer of weapons for the past five years and has more active duty military personnel than any other Asian country except China. India's defense budget rose to \$46.8 billion in 2012, and it is projected that by 2020 India will become the fourth-greatest defense spender in the world, overtaking Japan, France, and Britain.²⁷ Even South Korea, a much smaller country, boosted its defense budget by 67 percent from \$17.1 billion in 2000 to \$28.6 billion in 2011.²⁸

In terms of external balancing, many countries are strengthening their ties with the United States. In 2013, the United States and Vietnam established a comprehensive partnership, and subsequently have frequently worked together, for example to mobilize a multinational response in 2010 to China's perceived attempts to promote its maritime claims in the South China Sea.²⁹ In April 2014, the Philippines and the United States signed an Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement that, among other things, allows the United States to base troops there on a rotational basis for the first time in 20 years.³⁰ Later in 2014, Australia and the United States signed a 25-year agreement allowing 2500 U.S. Marines and USAF personnel to train there and inter-operate with Australian forces.³¹

Japan has perhaps made the greatest changes by incrementally raising its defense budget, extending its security perimeter, improving its armaments, and considering boosting the status of the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) by extending its operational range. Japanese defense spending in 2013 increased for the first time in eleven years by 40 billion yen from the previous fiscal year to 4.7358 trillion yen.³² Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced in July 2014 a reinterpretation of the Peace Constitution to allow, for the first time in sixty years, collective self-defense. This means that Japan's military may engage in hostilities to come to the aid of friendly countries, such as the United States, even when Japan itself has not been attacked.³³

In addition to strengthening relations with the United States, Asian countries are also expanding their ties with one another. To cite just a few examples, South Korea and Japan are gradually moving from security dialogue toward closer intelligence and defense cooperation. While a painful history limits the level of trust between the two countries, officials in Seoul and Tokyo are quietly moving ahead with strengthening both bilateral relations and trilateral cooperation with the United States. Korea is also becoming a major economic partner, arms provider, and trainer for select Southeast Asian states including Indonesia and Vietnam. Japan and India have also upgraded bilateral defense ties and have pledged to enhance cooperation, especially in the realm of maritime security; to that end, the two countries held the first purely bilateral joint naval exercise off the Bay of Tokyo in June 2012. Japan and Australia have signed an accord to cross-service logistics for military platforms. Japan has also moved to improve defense relations with Vietnam and the Philippines. Due to China's sensitivities, Australia tends to downplay its cooperation with Japan, but it is far more vocal about strengthening ties with India, Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam, and Thailand. Japan, Australia, and ASEAN members increasingly seek after India, with its "Look East" policy, recast in November 2014 by Prime Minister Modi as its "Act East" policy, and blue-water naval power. India provides arms and professional military training, especially of junior officers, to Vietnam, and Hanoi has granted India berthing rights at its Nha Trang port.³⁴

A Deliberate Strategy

Chinese assertive behavior is here to stay because it is the manifestation of a deliberate long-term strategy. Many scholars are more comfortable arguing that a rogue military, a need to cater to Chinese nationalism, or individual leadership traits explain Chinese assertiveness because those explanations suggest China's dangerous and

China's assertive behavior is the manifestation of a deliberate long-term strategy.

provocative behavior is a temporary paroxysm.³⁵ But the speeches of Chinese President Xi Jinping, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi highlight the belief that unfriendly, and even hostile, powers are besieging China, especially in the maritime sphere. Wang Yi has emphasized that China periodically exercises restraint, but must stand its ground when provoked in territorial disputes.³⁶ In a May 2013 speech in Germany, Li Keqiang suggested that Chinese assertiveness is even in defense of the post-World War II international system. Though a tenuous connection, Li basically insinuates that China's active pursuit of its East China Sea claims supports the world order laid out in the Potsdam Declaration of 1945.³⁷ And in recent months, Xi himself has publicly stressed the critical importance of a strong military to a successful foreign policy and dismissed the option of passivity.³⁸ Remaining firm is the preferred official Chinese approach.

Xi Jinping has also emphasized the importance of prioritizing the economic interests of countries that support Chinese core interests, even if it comes at a relative cost economically.³⁹ Past economic goals solely prioritized making money, with little consideration to strategic factors—but today, Chinese leaders are starting to think about how they can use the immense economic benefit of doing business with China in order to gain political influence. The political priority seems to be defending maritime sovereignty above all else. Historically, upholding maritime sovereignty has been critical to a nation's success, and therefore China should follow a similar trajectory of building a powerful navy that can protect its commercial interests.⁴⁰ Researchers at Peking University pulled together extensive statistics to demonstrate how important maritime territory is for Chinese economic, and therefore national, interests. They argue that China must utilize available resources to defend vital sea lanes, which include military, diplomatic, and economic wherewithal.⁴¹ Meanwhile, China's top leadership stresses that in spite of China's assertiveness in maritime disputes, other countries need not worry about China's rise because it does not seek hegemony or promote imperialism. An anonymous analysis published in the *Hong Kong Economic Times* of Xi Jinping's November speech concludes that his foreign policy approach is tough and unyielding, though not unnecessarily aggressive.⁴²

China is unlikely to shift strategies away from relying on coercion and manipulating risk to achieve its territorial objectives not only because the top leadership publicly promotes them, but also because they correspond well with China's overarching strategy of active defense (*jiji fangyu*). Active defense is the operational component of Jiang Zemin's National Military Strategic Guidelines for the New Period (*xin shiqi guojia junshi zhanlue fangzhen*), which serves as "the highest level of strategic guidance for all PLA military operations during war and preparation for war during peacetime."⁴³ Specifically, the guidelines

necessitate developing capabilities to deter, deny, disrupt, and delay the deployment of U.S. forces into the Chinese theater—hence the Western nomenclature A2/AD. These can be leveraged to accomplish Chinese goals in its maritime disputes through four distinct but interrelated pathways:

1. *geographic*: increasing the distance and time required for U.S. forces to arrive in theater from areas of safety before China achieves its political objectives;
2. *kinetic*: degrading the U.S. military's ability to penetrate anti-access environments with an enhanced conventional precision strike system, consisting mainly of cruise and ballistic missiles as well as attacks on key enabling capabilities such as space-based networks that enable C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) missions;
3. *political*: exploiting perceived weaknesses in political support and resolve of U.S. allies and friends, thereby keeping the United States out because countries will not allow it to base there; and
4. *deterrent*: making involvement so costly that the United States opts out of responding, or responds minimally, in a given contingency.⁴⁴

Assertiveness is therefore, in many ways, the logical extension of this Chinese strategy as it grows more confident in the capabilities it has been developing over the last twenty years as part of this active defense strategy. While the strategic objective is the same for each of the pillars, the theory of victory of the first two pillars is significantly different from that of the latter two. Kinetic and geographic aspects rely largely on brute force in that China could theoretically accomplish its goals by force alone, without any collaboration from the United States.⁴⁵ Take this hypothetical example—if in the early stages of a conflict, China attacks U.S. bases in Japan, cratering runways and burying aircraft, no amount of U.S. resolve will make those planes fly. In this case, the United States may want to support a Taiwan contingency but be unable to do so.

Coercive strategies, meanwhile, rely on the collaboration of the opponent; one can only succeed if the other side concedes. If China instead lobbs missiles at U.S. bases every other day until the United States agrees to halt surveillance operations in the South China Sea, this is coercion. The political and deterrent (third and fourth) pillars are thus harder to grasp because their theory of victory relies on compliance. They are premised on the belief that China can convince countries not to put up a fight by manipulating risk and imposing costs. Chinese

Assertiveness is the logical extension of China's active defense strategy.

assertiveness in maritime disputes since 2009 is largely coercive in nature, and therefore tends to fall under these last two pillars.

While the kinetic and geographic components of China's active defense approach have received the most attention in Washington policy circles, the more elusive political and deterrent A2/AD pillars can be just as effective, if not more so, in undermining U.S. ability to project power in the region to intervene in a maritime dispute. The political pillar refers to the idea that, in a conflict, China will pressure countries with military threats or economic inducements to limit or deny the U.S. use of facilities necessary for power projection into the East China Sea, South China Sea, or Taiwan Strait. As Congressional Research Service naval expert Ronald O'Rourke convincingly argues, "To threaten regional bases and logistics points, China could employ SRBM/MRBMs [short-range and medium-range ballistic missiles], land-attack cruise missiles, special operations forces, and computer network attack (CNA). Strike aircraft, when enabled by aerial refueling, could simultaneously engage distant targets using air-launched cruise missiles equipped with a variety of terminal-homing warheads."⁴⁶ Even during peacetime, though most countries want the United States to remain in the region, the priority on stability above all else may translate to nations throughout the region pressuring the United States to accept a greater degree of parity with China, thereby displacing U.S. influence, and perhaps eventually presence, in the region to a certain degree.

An example of such efforts came from Chinese defense strategist and retired senior military officer Song Xiaojun. In a May 2012 opinion piece, Song warned Australia that it could not reconcile its close economic relationship with China with the fact that it relies on the United States for security, and would have to, at some point, choose which country to prioritize in its foreign-policy decision making. He argued that "Australia has to find a godfather sooner or later," and whom Canberra chooses "depends on who is more powerful based on the strategic environment."⁴⁷ An editorial in a nationalist Chinese state-run newspaper also responded to the news that the United States will station 2500 Marines in Darwin with the warning that Canberra is risking getting itself "caught in the cross fire" between China and the United States.⁴⁸

The deterrent A2/AD pillar—perhaps the most important and most difficult to counter—posits that Washington may opt out of responding in a number of contingencies, for example maritime disputes, given that China's active defense initiatives exceed the political costs for the United States. This could involve deterring a U.S. intervention decision altogether, or involve a Beijing-directed preemptive strike on U.S. forces attempting to deploy to the region, in the hopes of delivering the necessary psychological shock to the United States, its allies, and friends in the region.

China's public response to the 2012 U.S. declaration that it will rebalance toward Asia reflects China's beliefs underpinning the deterrent pillar. The main theme found throughout Chinese media sources has been that the United States is too weak-willed to carry through its policies, which are in any case ill-advised. The Chinese media further claims that the past ten years of U.S. war in Southwest Asia has eroded the U.S. sphere of influence and has seriously affected the state of U.S. regional hegemony in the western Pacific.⁴⁹ Chinese writers also note that, while the United States may want, theoretically, to return to being the main force in the Asia-Pacific, its economic dependence on China and its relative depletion of resources imply that it will fail to fulfill its proclamations and promises.⁵⁰

In short, so the argument goes, while the United States wants to protect vital regional interests in East Asia, its desire to do so at an acceptable cost trumps all other considerations. Concordant with this view, China believes it can increase the real and perceived costs of intervention and successfully convince the United States to restrain itself in maritime disputes and other regional contingencies. The ultimate aim of China's assertiveness, therefore, is effectively to convince the United States to self-impose an anti-access doctrine in any conflict involving Chinese territorial interests.

China's Positive Assessment of Assertiveness

The positive internal assessment of China's assertiveness strategy is the second reason why Beijing is unlikely to change course. In part because of all this evident reaction to Chinese behavior, Chinese scholars and strategists themselves are debating the relative merits and risks associated with Chinese assertiveness, a strategy that Xi Jinping himself articulated in an October 2013 speech at the foreign affairs conference of the Chinese Communist Party as striving for achievement (*fenfayouwei*).⁵¹ Since 1990, China had adhered to Deng Xiaoping's maxim of keeping a low profile while still getting things done (*taoguangyouhui*, *yousuozuowei*). Many Chinese scholars warn against jettisoning this strategy.⁵² But domestic support for a more assertive, confident, proactive foreign policy is growing. Even scholars that prefer to stay loyal to Deng's maxim say it's time to stress the second part, "actively getting something done" (*yousuozuowei*).

Even scholars loyal to Deng's maxim say it's time to stress "actively getting something done".

Chinese proponents rely on two main rationales supporting the shift in foreign policy approach that provide insight into what lies ahead. First, the previous policy of *taoguangyouhui* was insufficient to protect national interests because it did not persuade others to respect

China's interests in the region. Second, while some admit that the United States and neighboring countries are uncomfortable with the new approach, they argue it is more practical and effective than reverting to a China that suffers disgraces and insults in order to "bide time."

As China's power grows, its leaders are prioritizing strategies that they think command respect and will persuade others to increasingly accommodate Chinese preferences. Many Chinese thinkers complain that the potential benefits of keeping a low profile—a positive international image or greater support and friendship from neighboring countries—have failed to come to fruition.⁵³ Neighboring powers were suspicious of China's rise long before the foreign policy shift, and the behavior of other South China Sea claimants during that period suggest that an "unprincipled" strategy like biding time does not command respect.⁵⁴ According to Fudan University researcher Zhao Huasheng, while China will promote policies that resolve disputes in a reasonable way, core interests cannot "be shelved" to be dealt with at a later date, regardless of how much turmoil they cause now.⁵⁵ Other voices add that placating others did not keep Vietnam and the Philippines from violating China's sovereignty, or Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe from visiting the Yasukuni shrine.⁵⁶ One prominent scholar from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) commented in a recent interview that China had tensions with its neighbors even when its strategy was pliant, flexible, and gentle, because contemporary security issues result from China's rise.⁵⁷ As one Chinese major general argued, principles of harmonious co-existence and peaceful development do not resonate with many countries, and China's promotion of these ideas was like "playing the zither to a cow"—ineffective.⁵⁸

While Chinese strategists recognize that other regional actors are unhappy with the shift, they also argue that both China domestically and other countries internationally are still in the process of acclimating to China's new foreign policy approach. These strategists argue that the palpable anxiety of the United States and some neighboring countries is completely understandable, but does not suggest the strategy is ineffective. The argument goes something like this: countries are used to a weak and accommodating (*renru fuzhong*) China, so they are understandably startled by China's recent tendency to push back.⁵⁹ In other words, they will adjust, but the strategy should not change. According to an article in the Chinese nationalistic newspaper *The Global Times*, China's comprehensive national power has reached a point where it is time "to actively get something done," the latter part of Deng's biding time maxim.⁶⁰ Many pair their support for this more proactive foreign policy approach with words of caution—China needs to learn how to use its power so as to command respect without being unnecessarily quarrelsome or prideful. This is a critical period for China's rise, and the last thing the country needs is to provoke robust balancing designed to thwart China's rise.⁶¹

One of the greatest proponents of the “striving for achievement” strategy, Tsinghua University professor Yan Xuetong, argues that the strategy has actually contributed greatly to improvements in China’s international situation.⁶² When China was laying low, focusing on economic development and attempting to expand its soft power, countries were still anxious about Chinese intentions and increasingly saw China as a threat. But, Yan argues, countries like the United States and Japan will inevitably see China as a threat, because China will likely replace them as the region’s strongest and richest country, respectively. Contrary to Western arguments, Yan believes that major competitors have been accommodating China’s preferences more and more, largely due to China’s increased assertiveness. He cites U.S. acceptance of the November 2013 announcement of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ); Washington’s moderate reaction to the December 2013 *Cowpens* incident, in which a PLAN Amphibious Dock Ship maneuvered dangerously close to the U.S. ship; and President Obama’s downgrading of his February 2014 visit with the Dalai Lama to the Map Room instead of the Oval office as examples of the strategy’s success.⁶³ He also argues that bilateral relations are more stable with the United States because both Beijing and Washington now admit to a structural conflict, and therefore preclude unreasonable expectations for favorable actions that then lead to overreaction and disappointment.⁶⁴ The key for continued success, he argues, is to seek strategic partnerships with countries not based on where China can make the most money, but on which countries have the most clout strategically.

There are differing opinions on the relative merits of various strategies, but as one Chinese scholar warned, China must show a united front so as not to send the wrong message of confusion or lack of consensus to the outside world.⁶⁵ As an opinion piece in China’s nationalist newspaper *The Global Times* argues, the international community wants China to be a responsible stakeholder and proactive in some areas, but “swallow its anger” in others. It goes on to say that even if China tried to adhere to these expectations, this would only convince the international community that China is weak and can be bullied, the wrong message to send and the wrong strategy to implement if the goal is protecting Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁶⁶ This suggests that even if some Chinese thinkers disagreed with this interpretation of assertiveness leading to great foreign policy achievements, Chinese leaders may bury this dissent and double down on its preferred methods of promoting foreign policy interests regardless.

U.S. Strategic Response: What More Can Be Done?

If China’s tendency to rely on coercive diplomacy to promote its territorial claims indeed persists, as I have argued, what does that mean for U.S. policy? Many

officials are hoping that balancing within Asia and positive trends in other aspects of the bilateral relationship will prove sufficient to manage China's abrasive behavior in territorial disputes. Secretary of State John Kerry argued that creating sustainable growth, enhancing economic ties, and empowering the individual to improve their communities will ensure peace and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific.⁶⁷ The idea that engagement and partnership will shape China's choices and change how the leadership defines its national interests and the best way to promote them is also a strong theme among U.S. officials. The current ambassador to China, Max Baucus, put forth his plan to "partner with China as it emerges as a global power and encourage it to act responsibly in resolving international disputes, respecting human rights, and protecting the environment."⁶⁸

Everyone agrees that engagement should not be abandoned. Former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Michèle Flournoy argued, "abandoning efforts to engage with China would likely accelerate Beijing's assertiveness and run counter to a wide range of U.S. economic and security interests."⁶⁹ Thomas Christensen posits that the United States can empower moderate elites in China by "consistently offer[ing] China an active role in multilateral cooperative efforts."⁷⁰ George Washington University professor Robert Sutter argues, "through constructive engagement with their Chinese counterparts, U.S. leaders can demonstrate the long-term benefits Beijing would enjoy from a Chinese regional posture that eschews egregious pressure, intimidation, and zero-sum competition and embraces existing world norms that hold promise for uninterrupted Chinese development."⁷¹ Scholars, policymakers, and officials stress that containment, defined as "attempting to suppress [China's] growth by isolating Beijing from its neighbors and the world" is not the answer.⁷²

But containment is not the only Cold War paradigm that deserves casting off given the contemporary challenges of a rising China. Many scholars have offered specific recommendations on how to address these challenges, with most designed to impose costs to compel a change in Chinese assertive behavior. But such measures are unlikely to be implemented effectively, or at all, until policymakers and strategists abandon two different elements of a Cold War mentality: overly relying on a strong forward military presence for a credible deterrent and fixating on de-escalation in crises. In its place, U.S. officials must accept risk without being reckless, and it must permit the possibility of escalation while maintaining stability.

The U.S. mindset needs to shift to accept greater risk without being reckless. Military power alone does not guarantee a credible deterrent. U.S. efforts to bolster its military presence in the Asia-Pacific—a central pillar of the rebalancing strategy—counter the geographic, kinetic and political pillars of China's A2/AD strategy. For example, the United States is forward-deploying more assets in the region, such as the Marine Air Ground Task Force

Detachment already deployed to Australia as well as the stated goal of positioning 60 percent of all U.S. warships to the Asia–Pacific by 2020. This addresses the geographic pillar. Attempts to address the kinetic pillar include new operational concepts such as Air-Sea Battle, which “relies on highly integrated and tightly coordinated operations across war-fighting domains” in order “to disrupt and destroy enemy A2-AD networks and their defensive and offensive guided weapons systems in order to enable US freedom of action to conduct concurrent and follow-on operations.”⁷³ Bolstering U.S. alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand, as well as partnerships with Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Singapore, Vietnam, and New Zealand are critical components to U.S. efforts to ensure political access and support in the region.

These efforts are commendable—the United States rightly works to preserve its military superiority and retain its ability to project power in the region. During the Cold War, when the greatest pacing threats were land conflicts, forward deploying U.S. forces in Europe and Asia were sufficient to demonstrate the credibility of the U.S. commitment to peace in those regions. But China is currently testing the waters not because its leaders are uncertain about the balance of power, but because they are probing the balance of *resolve*. This means that staying ahead in terms of military might is insufficient in contemporary East Asia.

China’s strategists are betting that the side with the strongest military does not necessarily win the war—the foundation of the deterrent pillar of its A2/AD strategy. Indeed, China’s experience in fighting the Korean War proves that a country willing to sacrifice blood and treasure can overcome a technologically superior opponent. The belief that balance of resolve drives outcomes more so than the balance of power is the foundation of China’s new, more assertive strategy; but U.S. responses to date have failed to account for it. Canned demonstrations of U.S. power fail to address the fundamental uncertainty concerning U.S. willingness, not ability, to fight.

The U.S. focus on de-escalation in all situations only exacerbates this issue. The Cold War experience solidified the Western narrative stemming from World War I that inadvertent escalation causes major war, and therefore crisis management is the key to maintaining peace.⁷⁴ This has created a situation in which the main U.S. goal has been de-escalation in each crisis or incident with

The U.S. mindset needs to shift to accept greater risk without being reckless.

China is testing the balance of resolve, not power. This means that military might is insufficient.

Beijing. But Chinese leaders do not share this mindset—they believe leaders deliberately control the escalation process and therefore wars happen because leaders decide at a given juncture that the best option is to fight.⁷⁵ China is masterful at chipping away at U.S. credibility through advancing militarization and coercive diplomacy. It often uses limited military action to credibly signal its willingness to escalate if its demands are not met. Strategist Thomas Schelling theoretically captured this approach when he wrote it is “the sheer inability to predict the consequences of our actions and to keep things under control ... that can intimidate the enemy.”⁷⁶

Because China introduces risk for exactly this reason, the U.S. focus on de-escalation through crisis management is unlikely to produce any change in

The U.S. focus on de-escalation will, if anything, only encourage greater Chinese provocations.

Chinese behavior—if anything it will only encourage greater provocations. Beijing has identified the U.S. fear of inadvertent escalation, and is exploiting it to compel the United States to give in to its demands and preferences. In this way, the U.S. focus on de-escalation may actually be the source of instability by rewarding and encouraging further Chinese provocations. To signal to China that the United States will not opt out of a conflict, Washington must signal willingness to escalate to higher levels of conflict

when China is directly and purposely testing U.S. resolve. This may include reducing channels of communication during a conflict, or involving additional regional actors, to credibly demonstrate that China will not be able to use asymmetry of resolve to its advantage.

The current mindset—that crisis management is the answer in all scenarios—will be difficult to dislodge, given the tendency among U.S. military ranks to focus on worst-case “great battle” scenarios. While realistic in Cold War operational planning, decision makers should consider instead the less violent and prolonged engagements that characterize Chinese coercive diplomacy when evaluating risk and reward, such as the 1962 Sino–Indian War or the 1974 Battle of the Paracel Islands. The idea that any conflict with China would escalate to a major war, destroy the global economy, and perhaps even escalate to a nuclear exchange has no foundation in Chinese thinking, and causes the United States to concede in even the smallest encounters. While the Chinese leadership has proven to be more risk-acceptant than the United States (or perhaps more accurately, to assess the risks to be less than those perceived by U.S. strategists), Xi still wants to avoid an armed conflict at this stage. In his November 2014 keynote address at the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference, he noted that China remains in a period of strategic opportunity

in which efforts should be made to maintain the benign strategic environment so as to focus on internal development.⁷⁷

Ultimately, the U.S. regional objective must be peace and stability at an acceptable cost. Given this, it is critical to understand the four components of China's A2/AD strategy, the strategic foundation for China's recent assertiveness, and how best to maintain the U.S. position as a Pacific power. In addition to regularly attending meetings in the region and developing new technology, new platforms, and new operational concepts designed to defeat China's A2/AD strategy, the United States needs to break free of its Cold War-based paradigm paralysis and rethink conceptions of limited war, escalation, and risk.

Scolding China and imposing symbolic costs for each maritime incident is unlikely to inspire the corrective change U.S. thinkers are hoping for. The United States needs to fundamentally change its approach by accepting higher risk and allowing for the possibility of escalation—both vertically in force as well as horizontally to include other countries. This admittedly is a difficult balance, especially given the need to avoid emboldening U.S. allies to take actions that run contrary to U.S. interests. But only by mastering these two balancing acts—focusing on balancing resolve, rather than forces, and prioritizing stability over crisis management—will the United States be able to maintain peace and stability in East Asia without sacrificing U.S. or allied interests.

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