

Weekly Commentary 50 – Last Commentary for 2023

The Thinkable War – A Critique

In Foreign Affairs magazine, one of the three big geopolitical journals which policy wonks in the west reads, there is this article which has just been published. It argues that a war between the US and China is no longer “unthinkable”. I think it is a lot of hogwash, and this commentary is my critique of it. My comments are written in red, peppered throughout the article.

The Big One

Preparing for a Long War With China

By [*Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr.*](#)

[January/February 2024](#) **Published on December 12, 2023**

Over the past decade, the prospect of Chinese military aggression in the Indo-Pacific has moved from the realm of the hypothetical to the war rooms of U.S. defense planners. Chinese leader Xi Jinping has significantly accelerated his country’s military buildup, now in its third decade. At the same time, China has become increasingly assertive across a wide swath of the Pacific, advancing its expansionist maritime claims and encroaching on the waters of key U.S. allies and important security partners, including Japan, the Philippines, and Taiwan. Xi has asserted, with growing frequency, that Taiwan must be reunited with China, and he has refused to renounce the use of force to achieve that end. With the United States distracted by major wars in Europe and the Middle East, some in Washington fear that Beijing may see an opportunity to realize some of these revisionist ambitions by launching a military operation before the West can react.

The problem with America is that it has been hegemon for far too long. China, the country that has not invaded another country in centuries and its last war was in 1979, is perceived in the same way that America would behave if it were in China’s shoes – when it has the might, it will exercise it to invade other countries. A perception of war is therefore a problem, not with China, but with Uncle Sam reading sinister motives in China’s actions when those perceived actions would be what it does if the US were in the same circumstances.

The reunification with Taiwan is what will happen, because all countries have acknowledged a one China policy since Potsdam in 1945. And to the extent that there are people in Taiwan who disagree that they should be taken over by China, it is a 70 year old civil war that has still not ended in the minds of its principal protagonists. Both sides will have to figure out how to resolve their differences without going to war again. But to yell that China must not invade Taiwan is about the same as shouting that the CCP and the KMT should not go to war in 1927, 1947 or at any time in between and since then. It is not productive. At this time in history, the KMT is no longer interested in fighting the CCP, and is gingerly walking on tip-

toes forward on its way to a peaceful reconciliation, probably in line with the wishes of most Taiwanese living on the island. The only people pushing for Taiwanese independence is the DPP, because that is the only rationale for its existence. It is likely that the KMT will regain leadership of the presidency in Jan 2024, and that should lead to policies that China and Taiwan were adopting prior to Tsai Ing wen coming to power – a slow reconciliation as was demonstrated in diplomatic overtures demonstrated between Xi Jinping and the last KMT president, Ma Yingjeou as recently as 2015. If KMT takes the presidency, there will be no war for another decade since the Taiwanese presidency last 8 years.

With Taiwan as the assumed flash point (nah...) U.S. strategists have offered several theories about how such an attack might play out. First is a “fait accompli” conquest of Taiwan by China, in which the People’s Liberation Army employs missiles and airstrikes against Taiwanese and nearby U.S. forces while jamming signals and communications and using cyberattacks to fracture their ability to coordinate the island’s defenses. If successful, these and other supporting actions could enable Chinese forces to quickly seize control. A second path envisions a U.S.-led coalition beating back China’s initial assault on the island. This rosy scenario finds the coalition employing mines, antiship cruise missiles, submarines, and underwater drones to deny the PLA control of the surrounding waters, which China would need in order to mount a successful invasion. Meanwhile, coalition air and missile defense forces would prevent China from providing the air cover needed to support the PLA’s assault, and electronic warfare and cyber-forces would frustrate the PLA’s efforts to control communications in and around the battlefield. In a best-case outcome, these strong defenses would cause China to cease its attack and seek peace.

When people try to predict the future course of a war, it is always inaccurate. Why would China follow the script imagined at the Hudson Institute or for that matter at the Pentagon? Just look at how the war in Ukraine evolved. At the start of that war, every western military expert expected a repeat of what the American military did in Desert Storm – shock and awe tactics and “Big Arrow” offensives. Even ex-generals like David Petraeus, were so sure how the Russians would behave. That did not happen. The Russians settled into an attrition war, which has since Feb 2022, destroyed three Ukrainian armies trained and supplied by NATO.

Is there a version of attrition warfare that would apply to Taiwan? The assumption of American planners is that the PLA would cross the Taiwan Straits and perhaps they may, but the only thing predictable is how unpredictable such a naval war would be.

Given that both China and the United States possess nuclear arsenals, however, many strategists are concerned about a third, more catastrophic outcome. They see a direct war between the two great powers leading to uncontrolled escalation. In this version of events, following an initial attack or outbreak of armed conflict, one or both belligerents would seek to gain a decisive advantage or prevent a severe setback by using major or overwhelming force. Even if this move were conventional, it could provoke the adversary to employ nuclear weapons, thereby triggering Armageddon. Each of these scenarios is plausible and should be taken seriously by U.S. policymakers.

Yet there is also a very different possibility, one that is not merely plausible but perhaps likely: a protracted conventional war between China and a U.S.-led coalition. Although such a conflict would be less devastating than nuclear war, it could exact enormous costs on both

sides. It also could play out over a very wide geographic expanse and involve kinds of warfare with which the belligerents have little experience. For the United States and its democratic allies and partners, a long war with China would likely pose the decisive military test of our time.

BATTLES WITHOUT BOMBS

A military confrontation between China and the United States would be the first great-power war since World War II and the first ever between two great nuclear powers. Given the concentration of economic might and cutting-edge technological prowess in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan—all three advanced democracies that are either close allies or partners of the United States—such a war would be fought for very high stakes. Once the fighting had started, it would likely be very difficult for either side to back down. Yet it is far from clear that the conflict would lead to nuclear escalation.

As was the case with the Soviet Union and the United States in the late twentieth century, both China and the United States possess the ability to destroy the other as a functioning society in a matter of hours. But they can do so only by running a high risk of incurring their own destruction by provoking a nuclear counterattack, or second strike. This condition is known as “mutually assured destruction,” or MAD. During the Cold War, the fear of setting off a general nuclear exchange provided Moscow and Washington with a strong incentive to avoid any direct military confrontation.

Of course, Beijing’s nuclear balance of power with Washington is significantly different from that of Moscow during the Cold War, when the United States and the Soviet Union achieved a rough parity in forces. China’s nuclear arsenal is a fraction of the size of the United States’, although Beijing is pursuing a dramatic expansion with the goal of matching the U.S. strategic arsenal within the next decade. Nevertheless, even now the Chinese arsenal is large enough that if China were attacked, it would have sufficient nuclear forces left to execute a retaliatory strike on the United States—thus bringing about MAD.

A U.S.-Chinese war would be the first between great nuclear powers.

Yet there is strong ground for thinking that a U.S.-Chinese war would not go nuclear. In more than seven decades of conflicts since World War II, including many involving at least one nuclear power, nuclear weapons have been notable chiefly for their absence. During the Cold War, for example, the two nuclear superpowers engaged in proxy wars in Africa, Asia, and Latin America that remained conventional—despite incurring high human and military costs on both sides. Even in wars in which only one side possessed nuclear weapons, that side refrained from exploiting its advantage. The United States fought bloody and protracted wars in Korea and Vietnam and yet abstained from playing its nuclear trump card. Similarly, Israel refrained from employing nuclear weapons against Egypt or Syria, even in the darkest hours of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The same has been true thus far of Russia in its war with Ukraine, even though that conflict is now approaching the end of a second year of fierce fighting and has already exacted from Russia an enormous price in blood and treasure.

This nuclear restraint should not be surprising. During the Cold War, the possibility of a nonnuclear conflict played a significant part in strategic planning on both sides. Thus, U.S. and Soviet thinking addressed not only the threat of nuclear escalation but also the prospect of a prolonged conventional war. To prepare for that kind of war—and thus dissuade the

other side from believing it could win such a conflict—each superpower stockpiled large quantities of surplus military equipment as well as key raw materials. The United States maintained an aircraft “boneyard” and maritime “mothball fleet”—large reserves of retired planes and ships that could be mobilized and brought into service as needed. For their part, the Soviets amassed enormous quantities of spare munitions, along with thousands of tanks, planes, air defense systems, and other weapons to support extended combat operations. A working assumption of these preparations on both sides was that a war could unfold over an extended period without necessarily triggering Armageddon.

In the event of armed conflict between China and a U.S.-led coalition, a similar dynamic could play out again: both sides would have a strong interest in avoiding uncontrolled escalation and could seek ways to fight by other means. Simply put, the logic of mutually assured destruction would not end at the onset of hostilities but could deter the use of nuclear weapons during the war. Given this reality, it is crucial to understand what a twenty-first-century great-power conflict might look like and how it might evolve.

REASONS TO FIGHT

There are many ways that a war between China and the United States could start. Given China’s ambition to dominate the Indo-Pacific, such a war would very likely involve the so-called first island chain, the long arc of Pacific archipelagoes extending from the Kuril Islands north of Japan, down the Ryukyu Islands, through Taiwan, the Philippines, and parts of Indonesia. As many in Washington have argued, Taiwan is the most obvious target, given the island’s strategic location between Japan and the Philippines, its key role in the global economy, and its status as the principal object of Beijing’s expansionist aims. China’s military has been increasingly active in the Taiwan Strait, and the PLA has massed its greatest concentration of forces across from the island. In the event of a Chinese attack on Taiwan, the United States would be compelled to defend the island or risk having key neutral countries and even allies drift toward an accommodation with Beijing.

It is not at all clear that the US will defend Taiwan. Firstly, it depends on who is in power in Washington. If Donald Trump becomes president again, and there is a 60% chance of that happening, why would he send boots to a place which he would not consider American vital interests to be at stake. Compared to Biden, Trump is far more sensible. From his track record, Trump is likely he will avoid war. A Trump presidency will take us up to 2028. After that, it depends on how the political scene in American will evolve. By then the rise of China would be so inexorable that it would be difficult for America, located one ocean away, roughly 8000 km, to want to take on a powerful military that sits next to Taiwan, no more than 180 km away. The logistical odds are against a conventional war. Doesn’t need the 44 4 star generals in America to tell us that. The industrial might of China, the factory of the world, will make Washington think twice about fighting a war off the coast of China. Look at how Ukraine today cannot be supplied by the US when it runs out of shells.

Then there is the problem of the declining finances of the US government. By 2030, the US federal deficit will be more than 45-50 trillion dollars and the interest of that debt will be greater than its entire military budget (900 billion USD). That is a sure sign of a decline of the superpower status of the US of A. Fight a war with China on that side of the Pacific with no money? Really???

Yet the Taiwan Strait is not the only place a war could begin. China has continued its incursions into Japan's airspace and its provocative actions in the exclusive economic zones of the Philippines and Vietnam, raising the possibility of a war-provoking incident. Moreover, tensions between North Korea and South Korea remain high. If fighting broke out on the Korean Peninsula, the United States might dispatch reinforcements there, causing Beijing to see an opportunity to settle scores at other points along the first island chain.

Or a war with China could start in South Asia. Over the past decade, China has clashed with India along their shared border on several occasions. Despite lacking a formal alliance with the United States, India is a member of the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), the security grouping that also includes Australia, Japan, and the United States and that has stepped up joint military cooperation over the past few years. If India were to become the victim of more significant Chinese aggression, Washington would have a strong interest in defending a major military power and partner that is also the world's largest democracy.

The Indians are too smart to want to participate in a war against China on the side of the US.

In short, if war breaks out in any of these places, it could draw China and the United States into direct armed conflict. And if that happens, it would be unlikely to end quickly. Take the case of Taiwan. Although it is possible that China could either achieve a rapid conquest before the United States could respond or be stopped cold by a U.S.-led coalition, these outcomes are hardly assured. As Russia discovered in Ukraine in 2022, rapid subjugation, even of an ostensibly weaker power, can be harder than it looks.

But even if Washington and its partners are able to prevent the PLA from seizing Taiwan through a *fait accompli*, Beijing still might be unwilling to accept defeat. And like the United States, it would possess the means to continue fighting. Given the high stakes, neither side can be counted on to throw in the towel, even if it suffers severe initial reverses. And at that point, the course of events would be determined not only by the intentions of the two great powers themselves but also by the responses of other countries in the region.

In contrast to the Cold War, in which the two superpowers were each supported by rigid alliances—the U.S.-led NATO and the Soviet Union's Warsaw Pact—the current situation in the Indo-Pacific is a geopolitical jumble. China has no formal alliances, although it enjoys close relationships with North Korea, Pakistan, and Russia. For its part, the United States has a set of bilateral alliances and partnerships in the region based on hub-and-spoke relationships, with Washington as the hub and Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand forming the spokes. Yet unlike the members of NATO, which are obligated to view an attack on one as an attack on all, these Asian allies have no shared defense commitment.

In the event of Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific, then, the responses of U.S. partners in the region are less than certain. It is reasonable to assume that Australia and Japan would join the United States in coming to the victim's defense, given their close alliance with the United States, their ability to project significant military power abroad, and strong interest in preserving a free and open Indo-Pacific community of nations. But other powerful countries could influence the war's character—arguably, the two most important being India (on the side of the United States) and Russia (on the side of China). Just as the local Asian and

European wars in the late 1930s expanded to become a global war, so might a war with China overlap with the war in Ukraine or a conflict in South Asia or fighting in the Middle East.

What happens in the early stages of the war could also determine the constellation of powers on each side. The party that is judged to be the aggressor could alienate fence sitters that view the war from a moral perspective. States with more of a realpolitik view, on the other hand, might ally themselves with whichever side achieves early success (as Italy did in World War II), or they may decide against joining their natural partners should those partners suffer significant setbacks. Following Ukraine's successful initial defense against Russia's invasion in the spring of 2022, many countries in the West, including historically neutral countries such as Finland and Sweden, rallied to Kyiv's support. Similarly, if China were unable to quickly secure its objectives, traditionally neutral countries such as Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam might join efforts to resist Beijing's aggression.

It is when I read the last sentence above that I know that these think tank types don't know what they are writing about. Singapore? Joining a war against China? We are smaller than a small city in China and just simple modesty about our own status will enable us to stay out of such a fray. Indonesia, by 2028-30, would have grown substantially in terms of its economy and I think that this would be partly because of contribution by China's BRI. So let's count Indonesia out. Vietnam? They are just in the news all week last week for forming a new economic partnership with China. They too like Chinese high-speed rail. The Vietnamese will be unlikely to join American adventures against their neighbour to the north.

The writer of this Hudson Institute article, being western, has no idea of how Asians think. They are wrong about China and whether there is fear in the rest of Asia about a "Chinese threat". The Americans are afraid that China will overtake it. But Asians don't have that concern. We would be happy that there is another leader in the world – besides the Americans – who can lead the world, particularly in science, technology and political organization.

Yes, indeed in Asia-Pacific, there are nations who may join an American fight against China. The Philippines is one such idiot. But they are devoid of capability. They are now using a rusted out WW2 vessel in a face-off against a modern Chinese coast guard ship. Really?

Then there is AUKUS. The Australians are all of 26m people, not even the size of the four largest cities in China. China is their biggest trade partner. Therefore, the Aussies have no capabilities nor will to take on China when it comes to the crunch. AUKUS is a fool's game that only Australians would buy from the Americans.

RESTRAINING ORDERS

Once a war has broken out, both China and the United States would have to confront the dangers posed by their nuclear arsenals. As in peacetime, the two sides would retain a strong interest in avoiding catastrophic escalation. Even so, in the heat of war, such a possibility cannot be eliminated. Both would confront the challenge of finding the sweet spot in which they could employ force to gain an advantage without causing total war. Consequently, leaders of both great powers would need to exercise a high degree of self-control.

To keep the war limited, both Washington and Beijing would need to recognize each other's redlines—specific actions viewed as escalatory and that could trigger counterescalations. Efforts toward this end can be enhanced if both sides can clearly and credibly communicate what their redlines are and the consequences that would be incurred for crossing them. Even here, problems will arise, as the dynamics of war may alter these thresholds. For example, if the PLA proves effective at using conventionally armed ballistic missiles to attack U.S. air bases in the region, Washington could decide to strike Chinese missile sites, even at the risk of hitting nuclear-armed PLA missiles kept at the same location. Moreover, individual coalition members will likely have their own, unique redlines. Consider a situation in which PLA air and sea attacks on major Japanese ports threaten to collapse Japan's economy or cut off its food supplies. Under these circumstances, Tokyo may be far more willing to escalate the war than its coalition partners. If Japan has the means to escalate, it could do so unilaterally. If it lacks them and Washington refuses to escalate on its behalf, Tokyo might decide to seek a separate peace with Beijing. To avoid this predicament, the coalition could pre-position air and missile defenses, as well as countermine forces, at Japanese ports, and Japan could stockpile crucial imported goods, such as food and fuel.

My reading of the above claim that Japan fears China enough to participate in an escalation to be started by the US does not take into account the memories of WW2 in which China still remembers the Japanese invasion of 1937 and the atrocities it has committed. I don't think Tokyo will ever want to be accused of starting another war against China. Besides, Japan is terrified of Russia, now an ally of China and there is no chance they will risk a Russian invasion from the north.

Nevertheless, previous wars suggest that belligerents have often been able to limit their warfighting methods to prevent unnecessary escalation. Following China's intervention in the Korean War, for example, U.S. forces had the capability to conduct airstrikes across the border in Manchuria, which served as a staging ground for Chinese forces threatening to overwhelm U.S. troops on the peninsula. But U.S. President Harry Truman turned down requests to attack these targets in order to avoid triggering a wider war with the Soviet Union. Similarly, in Vietnam, U.S. leaders declared North Vietnam's main port of Haiphong off-limits to U.S. forces, despite its strategic importance. As was the case with Korea, it was feared such attacks could spark a wider conflict with China or the Soviet Union. In both cases, this restraint was maintained even amid wars that cost tens of thousands of American lives.

Given the potential for uncontrollable nuclear escalation, it is not unreasonable to assume that both China and the United States would err on the side of caution when considering how and where to intensify military operations. But the imperative on both sides to avoid nuclear escalation would not only create parameters for the objectives sought and the means employed to achieve them. It would also set the stage for a conflict that could likely be prolonged since both sides would have very significant resources to draw on to keep fighting. In this way, the war's containment in one respect would also facilitate its broadening in others.

A WAR OF WILLS

What strategy might a U.S.-led coalition pursue in a limited but extended war with China? Broadly speaking, there are three general strategies of war: annihilation, attrition, and exhaustion. They can be pursued individually or in combination. An annihilation strategy emphasizes using a single event or a rapid series of actions to collapse an enemy's ability or

will to fight, such as occurred with Germany's six-week blitzkrieg campaign against France in 1940. By contrast, an attrition strategy seeks to reduce an enemy's war-making potential by wearing down its military forces over an extended period to the point that they can no longer mount an effective resistance. This was the primary strategy the Allies employed against the Axis powers in World War II. An exhaustion strategy, finally, seeks to deplete the enemy's forces indirectly, such as by denying it access to vital resources through blockades, degrading key transportation infrastructure, or destroying key industrial facilities. A classic example of this was the U.S. Civil War.

Early in that conflict, both the Union North and the Confederate South hoped that a strategy of annihilation would succeed, such as by winning a decisive battle or seizing the enemy's capital. These hopes proved ill founded, and over time the Confederacy adopted an exhaustion strategy, hoping to extend the war to the point that its adversary's will to persevere would run out, despite the Union's far greater military power. In turn, relying on its advantages in manpower, industrial might, and military capabilities, the North combined an attrition strategy with an exhaustion one. It sought to reduce the Confederacy's armies directly through attrition by persistent military battles and indirectly by blockading Confederate ports and destroying the South's arsenals and transportation infrastructure. In this way, the Union deprived the Confederacy of the resources and recruits needed to offset its combat losses while convincing Southerners that they could not achieve their goal of secession.

In a war between China and the United States, the strategy of annihilation carries unsustainable risks. Because both sides have nuclear weapons, an annihilation strategy based on an overwhelming military attack to destroy the enemy's ability to resist could easily become a mutual suicide pact. That risk would also hobble efforts by either side to pursue an attrition strategy, which could similarly lead to nuclear escalation. Both belligerents would thus have an incentive to pursue strategies of exhaustion, supported when possible by attrition, to erode the enemy's means and, perhaps more important, its will to continue fighting. Such an approach would seek to inflict maximum pressure and damage on the enemy without risking escalation to total war.

The United States must convince China that it can prevail in a long war.

In shaping these strategies, China and the United States would need to consider carefully where they choose to fight. For example, to avoid crossing redlines, the two sides might accord each other's homelands (including their respective airspaces) limited sanctuary status. Instead, they might seek horizontal, or geographic, escalation. Thus, the conflict could spread to areas beyond the first island chain or South Asia to locations where both China and the United States could project military power, such as in the Horn of Africa and the South Pacific. The war would also likely migrate to those domains that are less likely to pose immediate escalation risks. Warfighting in domains associated with the global commons, for example, might be considered fair game by both sides. These could include maritime operations (including on the sea's surface, under the sea, and on the seabed), as well as war in space and cyberspace. Both sides might also wage war more aggressively on and above the territories of minor powers allied with China or the United States, such as the Philippines and Taiwan.

There would be no part of the world in which the countries of the Global South will allow the Americans to stir up trouble against China, whom they generally consider to be a better friend than America represents. Look at the UN General Assembly's vote on Israel's war in Gaza last week. The vast majority of countries did not vote with the US. That says a lot about where sentiments and loyalties lie. The loss of the war in Ukraine by the collective west and the serious degradation of American prestige over the Hamas war is a new reality for the US. Nobody feels intimidated by American power any more and the days when Washington asks countries to jump and they would ask "how high?" are over.

In the war's early phases, military targets might well have priority for both sides as the PLA attempts to win a quick victory while the U.S. coalition focuses on mounting a successful defense. If so, economic targets like commercial ports, cargo ships, and undersea oil and gas infrastructure would initially be accorded lower priority. As the war becomes protracted, however, each side would increasingly seek to exhaust the other's war-making potential through economic and information warfare. Actions toward this end might involve blockades of enemy ports and commerce-raiding operations against an enemy's cargo ships and undersea infrastructure. One side could impose information blockades on the other by cutting undersea data cables and interrupting satellite communications, or it could use cyberattacks to destroy or corrupt data central to the effective operation of the adversary's critical infrastructure.

Another way the belligerents could keep the war limited would be to restrict the means of attack used. Attacks whose effects are relatively easy to reverse may be less escalatory than those that inflict permanent damage. For example, employing high-powered jammers that can block and unblock satellite signals as desired could be preferable to a missile strike that destroys a satellite ground control station located on the territory of a major belligerent power. By offering the prospect of a relatively rapid restoration of lost service, such attacks might prove effective at undermining the enemy's will to continue the war. The same might be said of seabed operations that shut down offshore oil and gas pumping stations rather than physically destroying them or naval operations that seize and intern enemy cargo ships rather than sinking them. To the extent such actions are feasible, they can preserve key enemy assets as hostages that can be used as bargaining chips in negotiating a favorable end to the war.

Bringing the conflict to a close would be an important challenge in its own right. With the prospect of a decisive military victory out of reach for either side, such a war could last several years or more, winding down only when both sides choose the path of negotiation over the risk of annihilation, an uncomfortable peace over what would have become a prohibitively costly and seemingly endless war.

TORTOISES, NOT HARES

To prevail in a war with China, then, the United States and its coalition partners will need to have a strategy not only for denying Beijing a quick victory but also for sustaining their own defenses in a long war. At present, the first goal remains a formidable task. The United States and its allies—let alone **prospective partners such as India, Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam (dream on, Mr Krepinevich, none of these will be on the side of the United States in a war against China)**—appear to lack a coherent approach to deterring or defeating a Chinese attack. If China seizes key islands along the first island chain, it would be exceedingly difficult for the United States and its partners to retake them at anything approaching an

acceptable cost. And if China is successful, it may propose an immediate cease-fire as a means of consolidating its gains. To some members of a U.S.-led coalition, such an offer might appear an attractive alternative to a costly fight that carries the risk of catastrophic escalation.

Still, Washington and its potential partners have the means and, at least for now, the time to improve their readiness. The United States should give priority to negotiating agreements to position more U.S. forces and war stocks along the first island chain, while allies and partners along the chain enhance their defenses. In the interim, U.S. capabilities that can be employed quickly, such as space-based systems, long-range bombers, and cyber weapons, can help fill the gap.

But U.S. strategists will also need to plan for what happens next, since preventing a Chinese *fait accompli* may serve only as the entry fee to a far more protracted great-power war. And unlike the initial aggression, that confrontation could broaden across a wide area and spill over into many other spheres, including the global economy, space, and cyberspace. Although there is no model for how such a war might play out, Cold War strategic thinking shows that it is possible to address the general question of a great-power conflict that extends horizontally and involves a variety of warfighting domains.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, the U.S. military developed an integrated set of operational concepts, or war plans, to respond to a conventional Soviet invasion of Western Europe. One, called AirLand Battle, envisioned the army and air force defeating successive “waves” of enemy forces advancing out of the Soviet Union through Eastern Europe. In this scenario, the U.S. Army would seek to block the Soviet frontline forces while a combination of U.S. air and ground-based forces—combat aircraft, missiles, and rocket artillery—would attack the second and third waves advancing toward NATO’s borders. Simultaneously, the U.S. Navy would employ attack submarines to advance beyond the Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom maritime gaps to protect allied shipping moving across the Atlantic from Soviet submarines. And U.S. aircraft carriers would deploy to the North Atlantic with their combat air wings to defeat Soviet strike aircraft. To preclude the Soviets from using Norway as a forward staging ground, the U.S. Marine Corps also prepared to deploy quickly to that country and secure its airfields.

These concepts were based on a careful and systematic study of Soviet capabilities and strategy, including war plans, force dispositions, operational concepts, and expected rate of mobilization. Not only did these concepts guide U.S. and allied military thinking and planning; they also helped establish a clear defense program and budget priorities. The principal purpose of these efforts, however, was to convince Moscow that there was no attractive path it could pursue to wage a successful war of aggression against the Western democracies. Yet nothing like these plans exists today with respect to China.

To develop a comparable set of war concepts for a great-power conflict with China, the United States should start by examining a range of plausible scenarios for Chinese aggression. These scenarios—which should include various flash points on the first island chain and beyond, not just those pertaining to Taiwan—could form the basis for evaluating and refining promising defense plans through war games, simulations, and field exercises. But U.S. strategists will also need to account for the enormous resources that will be needed to sustain the war if it extends over many months. As Russia’s war in Ukraine has revealed, the United

States and its allies lack the capacity to surge the production of munitions. The same holds true regarding the production capacity for major military systems, such as tanks, planes, ships, and artillery. To address this critical vulnerability, Washington and its prospective coalition partners must revitalize their industrial bases to be able to provide the systems and munitions needed to sustain a war as long as necessary.

A protracted war would also likely incur high costs in global trade, transportation and energy infrastructure, and communications networks, and put extraordinary strain on human populations in many parts of the world. Even if the two sides avoided nuclear catastrophe, and even if the homelands of the United States and its major coalition partners were left partially untouched, the scale and scope of destruction would likely far exceed anything the American people and those of its allies have experienced. Moreover, the Chinese might hold significant advantages in this respect: with China's very large population, authoritarian leadership, and historic tolerance for enduring hardship and suffering enormous casualties—the capacity to “eat bitterness,” as they call it—its population might be better equipped to persevere through a long war. Under these circumstances, the coalition's ability to sustain popular support for the war effort, along with a willingness to sacrifice, would be crucial to its success. Leaders in Washington and allied capitals will need to convince their publics of the need to augment their defenses and to sustain them in peace and war until China abandons its hegemonic agenda.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF DETERRENCE

To paraphrase German Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, wars can take one of three paths and usually elect to take the fourth. In the case of China, it is difficult to predict with any precision how, when, and where a war might begin or the path it will take once it does. Yet there are many reasons to think that such a conflict could remain limited and last much longer than has been generally assumed.

If that is the case, then the United States and its allies must begin to think through the implications of a great-power war that, while remaining below the threshold of nuclear escalation, could last for many months or years, incurring far-reaching costs on their economies, infrastructure, and citizens' well-being. And they must convince Beijing that they have the resources and the staying power to prevail in this long war. If they do not, China may conclude that the opportunities afforded by using military force to pursue its interests in the Asia-Pacific outweigh the risks.

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All in all, the time has passed when the US can fight a war against China, successfully, on the western side of the Pacific ocean. Here are my thoughts why:

- 1) America's greatest weakness is its own receding economy. Once it was champion of the world. No country can fight a prolonged war

when its country is in bad economic health and the US is now so badly depreciated under Biden that the man who said that he will not preside over the decline of America has indeed just done that three years into his term. Biden's achievements are truly Churchillian, in the sense that Winston also brought the greatest empire into disrepair, just as Biden has. The numbers on the budget deficit, on the debt burden and the size of the national debt are now so bad that they will not recover in time to see an America that will be able to win against China. Fight a war over Taiwan? There will be such serious inflation in America that China will win in months.

- 2) The talk about restarting industrialization by two presidents has come to nought. America today is not the country that it was in 1990 when it beat the old Soviet Union in a massive arms race. Now it cannot even make enough dumb weapons like 155 mm shells to supply to Ukraine. What more smart weapons like guided missiles which experts say will run out in a week when fighting a war with China. Its wonder-weapons systems are blown up on the battlefield, like all other ordinary weapons can be similarly destroyed. There is no edge against an industrial power like China, as already proven even in the case of Russia.
- 3) China already has the largest navy in the world, and if that is a deterrent to the US Navy, a naval war in the Taiwan Straits is not feasible. In every area of modern military technology, whether in fifth generation fighters or hypersonic missiles, the PLA can match, if not exceed, the Americans. The time when the American military dominates the globe is over.
- 4) In terms of friends, China has far more friends than the US. This is a huge diplomatic resource. There was a time when most countries in the world admired and thought to follow the American model in economic management and other political and social norms. Not any more. That America exceptionalism has been squandered by its behavior in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, Ukraine and most recently in Palestine. When it weaponized its greatest edge – the US dollar – it is brashness that knows no bounds. On the other hand, China has built bridges with the rest of the global south through the BRI, and BRICS now account for 32% of global GDP, while G7 has 30%. America cannot even get a Biden Build Back Better program going after three years.
- 5) Therefore, there won't be a war over Taiwan. At this stage of the Biden presidency, there will not be a will to take on China. Just look at the Ukraine situation. They wanted to provide support to Kyiv "as long as it takes". Now it cannot even do enough to support Ukraine "as long as it can". And when Trump takes over again, as he will, there will be nobody who will trust America's promises again.
- 6) Fight a war with the PRC? – this fella who wrote the article, Mr Kreprinevich has forgotten that both the mainlanders and Taiwanese are both Chinese and they will not need a "laowai" to interfere with their domestic affairs. Does anybody think that Taiwanese will trust the Americans after seeing what happened in Ukraine?

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Un-Influencer in a World full of Hubris

We have closed the Boulevard deal and at the shareholders' meeting last night, some were interested to know if there will be another such deal. Let me say that nothing has been scheduled and since this is a good deal, I would suggest that interested shareholders should take another look. I can extend the deal for another week if there is interest.