

# America Is Not Ready for a War With China

## How to Get the Pentagon to Focus on the Real Threats

By Michael Beckley

The United States has spent \$19 trillion on its military since the end of the Cold War. That is \$16 trillion more than China spent and nearly as much as the rest of the world combined spent during the same period. Yet many experts think that the United States is about to lose a devastating war. In March, Admiral Philip Davidson, then the commander of U.S. forces in the Indo-Pacific, warned that within the next six years, China's military will "overmatch" that of the United States and will "forcibly change the status quo" in East Asia. Back in 2019, a former Pentagon official claimed that the U.S. military routinely "gets its ass handed to it" in war games simulating combat with China. Meanwhile, many analysts and researchers have concluded that if China chose to conquer Taiwan, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) could cripple whatever U.S. forces tried to stand in its way.

It has become conventional wisdom that this gathering storm represents the inevitable result of Beijing's rise and Washington's decline. In fact, it is nothing of the sort. The United States has vast resources and a viable strategy to counter China's military expansion. Yet the U.S. defense establishment has been slow to adopt this strategy and instead wastes resources on obsolete forces and nonvital missions. Washington's current defense posture doesn't make military sense, but it does make political sense—and it could very well endure. Historically, the United States has revamped its military only after enemies have exposed its weaknesses on the battlefield. The country may once again be headed for such a disaster.

To change course, the Biden administration must explicitly and repeatedly order the military to focus on deterring China and downsize its other missions. These orders need to be fleshed out and codified in the administration's defense budget requests and in its National Defense Strategy. In addition, the administration should support the Pacific Deterrence Initiative, a program that would plug holes in the U.S. defense perimeter in Asia. If the United States does not seize this chance to secure its military advantage over China, it may not get another.

### THINK SMALL

Contrary to popular belief, the United States has the means to check China's naval expansion. China's defense expenditures have risen for decades, but the United States still spends almost as much on its navy and Marine Corps alone as China does on its entire military, excluding its internal security forces. American combat units bear many burdens besides preparing for a U.S.-Chinese war—but so do China's. China shares sea or land borders with 19 countries, ten of which have ongoing territorial disputes with Beijing. Patrolling these borders bogs down hundreds of thousands of Chinese troops and drains at least a quarter of China's military budget. Although China would have home-field advantage in a war in East Asia, it would also face a more daunting set of tasks. Consider a conflict over Taiwan in which China would need to seize and control territory in order to win, whereas the United States would just need to deny China that control—a far easier mission.

Given these enduring U.S. advantages, a consensus has emerged among defense experts about how to deter China. Instead of waiting for a war to begin and then surging vulnerable aircraft carriers into East Asia, the United States could install a high-tech “minefield” in the area by prepositioning missile launchers, armed drones, and sensors at sea and on allied territory near China’s coastline. These diffuse networks of munitions would be tough for China to neutralize and would not require large bases or fancy platforms. Instead, they could be installed on almost anything that floats or flies, including converted merchant ships, barges, and aircraft.

Defense analysts have touted this approach for more than a decade. Yet the U.S. military still relies overwhelmingly on small numbers of large warships and short-range fighter aircraft operating from exposed bases—exactly the kinds of forces that China could destroy in a preemptive air and missile attack. To make matters worse, Washington has been exporting this flawed system to its allies. Taiwan’s purchases of U.S.-made F-16 fighter jets and Abrams tanks, for example, have depleted funds from the island’s army and ground-based missile forces, its primary defense against a Chinese amphibious assault.

In the opinion of many military experts, U.S. leaders face what should be an easy choice. They can rapidly shore up the military balance in East Asia by flooding the region with low-cost shooters and sensors, or they can continue to fritter away resources on extraneous missions and expensive weapons systems that are sitting ducks for China’s missiles. The question is: Why doesn’t the U.S. defense establishment see things the same way?

## **MISSION CREEP**

The problem starts at the very top and flows down through the ranks. Since the end of the Cold War, U.S. presidents have allowed (and often encouraged) the Department of Defense to morph into the Department of Everything. The U.S. military now performs dozens of missions besides preparing for great-power war, including development assistance, disaster relief, counternarcotics operations, diplomatic outreach, environmental conservation, and election security. American military personnel operate in nearly every country on earth and perform almost every conceivable job.

This broad mandate has turned U.S. combatant commanders into what The Washington Post reporter Dana Priest has described as “the modern-day equivalent of the Roman Empire’s proconsuls—well-funded, semi-autonomous, unconventional centers of U.S. foreign policy.”

They oversee sprawling mini-Pentagons, travel the world like heads of state, and handle a wide array of issues. Instead of advocating the relatively cheap and easy deployment of cruise missiles that would be crucial in a war with China, they instead push for big military units and massive military platforms (such as aircraft carriers and destroyers) that can handle a variety of peacetime missions.

As the defense expert Mackenzie Eaglen has shown, combatant commanders constantly request the use of such platforms, and the services run their forces ragged trying to meet those demands. As a result, the U.S. military has maintained a wartime tempo of operations throughout the past two decades, even after drawing down from wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, with some units currently being sent on deployments at nearly three times the Pentagon-recommended rate. Not surprisingly, accidents and mechanical failures have surged. From 2006 to early 2021, the number of U.S. service members killed in accidents—5,913—was more than double the number killed in combat. In 1986, operations and maintenance costs consumed 28 percent of the

Pentagon's budget; they now drain a whopping 41 percent, which is more than twice the budget share available to buy new weapons systems. These trends have set off a vicious cycle in which the Pentagon spends more and more to maintain fewer, older, and increasingly obsolete forces.

## **A BETTER APPROACH**

The problem starts at the top and, therefore, so must the solution. President Joe Biden and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin must order the Pentagon to focus on high-intensity combat with China, especially in the Taiwan Strait, where the threat of war is greatest, and to downsize or eliminate other missions. Those directives should be laid down in the Biden administration's defense budget proposals and in a revised National Defense Strategy. The 2018 National Defense Strategy usefully prioritized great-power competition but did not significantly change U.S. force structure in Asia because it piled on new missions without shedding less vital ones. The Biden administration now needs to do the dirty work of identifying and axing nonessential tasks to free up military resources and focus attention on deterring China.

The first step in that process would involve reducing the number and scope of "presence missions," which currently keep hundreds of thousands of military personnel navigating, flying, training, and exercising around the world each day. The torrid pace of these activities ties up and wears down the military's combat units and incentivizes the procurement of large platforms unsuited for a war with China. Reassuring allies and "showing the flag" are important missions, but they could be handled by lighter units, such as Security Force Assistance Brigades, or by the State Department rather than by carrier battle groups.

**Second, the Biden team should redeploy as many air and naval forces as possible to Asia.**

The United States announced a "pivot" to the region nearly a decade ago, but many of its big guns remain elsewhere. In the Middle East, for example, the United States routinely uses advanced fighters to attack lightly armed terrorists and deploys aircraft carriers and heavy bombers to send coercive signals to Iran. Such overkill saps military readiness and deprives the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command of the forces it needs to compete with China. A more sustainable approach would handle smaller threats with smaller forces, hunting terrorists with drones and special operations units, providing close-air support with light-attack aircraft, and hedging against Iranian aggression by maintaining a skeletal base structure in the region ready to support a surge of forces if a major conflict broke out.

Finally, the Biden administration should transfer nonmilitary missions to civilian agencies. For example, drug interdiction should be handled by the Drug Enforcement Administration, border security by Customs and Border Protection, election security by the Department of Homeland Security, development assistance by the U.S. Agency for International Development, and so on. Reassigning such missions and beefing up civilian agencies to handle them would boost American military might while simultaneously demilitarizing U.S. foreign policy.

## **WOLF AT THE DOOR**

Reforming the country's biggest bureaucracy will be hard, but not impossible. The military is a hierarchical organization with clear lines of formal authority. The president and the secretary of defense can issue orders to combatant commanders and enforce them through their control over the budget and personnel. Combatant commanders and service chiefs, in turn, have substantial influence over procurement. They are on the frontlines, so when they make an equipment request, members of Congress can only do so much to resist—defense contractors

usually have to fall in line, too. The president and the secretary of defense can also use their bully pulpits to shift the political incentives facing the most important players. For example, if the president and the secretary of defense clearly prioritized China, it would provide members of Congress with political cover to support the cancellation or downsizing of other missions.

Reform is possible in theory, but putting it into practice will require clear and sustained top-level leadership. Biden and Austin have said that deterring China is their top military priority, but Biden also wants the Pentagon to handle a range of unconventional security threats, and Austin hardly seems likely to be an “Asia First” advocate given that he is the former commander of U.S. Central Command, which oversees American forces in the Middle East.

However, there are reasons to be cautiously optimistic about the prospects for reform. One is that a growing number of powerful political players support a renewed focus on China. Last year, Congress passed the Pacific Deterrence Initiative. If fully funded, this program would allocate \$27 billion over five years to disperse and harden the U.S. base structure in Asia and equip the Indo-Pacific Command with plenty of long-range munitions and sensors. In April, lawmakers on the House Armed Services Committee wrote a letter to the Pentagon calling for a reduction in nonessential peacetime operations to free up resources to prepare for great-power war. The Marine Corps and the army, the two branches of the military most inclined to resist a focus on naval warfare in Asia, have drafted plans to pivot from fighting insurgents in the Middle East to sinking ships in the western Pacific. And defense experts across the political spectrum now broadly agree on how the United States should go about deterring Chinese naval expansion.

Meanwhile, anti-China sentiment, both within the United States and around the world, has surged to its highest level since the Chinese government carried out the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. Getting tough with China is one of the few bipartisan initiatives in the United States, and China seems to be doing everything it can to fan these flames with “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy.

There now exists bipartisan political support in Washington for a true rebalance to Asia and a strategic consensus among defense planners about how to proceed. The main ingredient that is lacking is concerted top-level leadership to harness that support and put those strategies into action.

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