



INSTITUTE FOR DEFENSE ANALYSES

**United States-China Gray Zone Conflict
in the 2027 to 2032 Battlespace**

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Robert G. Angevine, PhD

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STRATEGIC TRENDS RESEARCH INITIATIVE

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Brian K. Chappell, PhD
Robert G. Angevine, PhD
Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA)

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DISCLAIMER: The views expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.



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INTRODUCTION

This unclassified study examines strategic competition and the potential for a gray zone-origin military conflict between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United States in the 2027 to 2032 timeframe. In support of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) developed four independent scenarios that detail potential pathways for future crises with China that begin in the gray zone and escalate to armed conflict. The scenarios' objectives are to:

1. Characterize areas of confrontation and provide insight into China's increasingly assertive national development and security strategy, and
2. Examine how the United States could employ integrated deterrence capabilities to respond to escalatory actions that threaten U.S. national interests, including preservation of its operational advantages.¹

The scenarios span a range of competitive behaviors across key DTRA-identified stress points (Taiwan, Senkaku Islands, South China Sea, and the Belt and Road Initiative [BRI]) that could plausibly trigger armed conflict, including the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNWs).² Each scenario includes a setting to provide background and context, the escalatory trigger that serves as the catalyst for confrontation, and concludes at the point of escalation to armed conflict.

The scenarios provide DTRA, in its role as a Combat Support Agency, with insight to assist U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) as it uses tabletop exercises (TTXs), wargames, and exercises to examine operations, plans, and investments and identifies potential vulnerabilities and areas of improvements to Department of Defense (DoD) capabilities and plans. The importance of this research aligns with assessments of China's nationalist ambitions as outlined in the U.S. Department of Defense's *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2022*; the *2022 Pacific Partnership Strategy of the United States*; the *2022 National Security Strategy*; the *2022 National Defense Strategy*; the PRC's white paper titled, "China's National Defense in the New Era"; and China's Global Security Initiative (GSI), which seeks to frame China as an alternative to U.S.- and Western-led international development and security frameworks.³

Research on this strategic challenge supports the FY 2022 National Defense Authorization Act's (NDAA) objective to strengthen U.S. national defense in the era of great power competition with increased defense funding that enables the U.S. military to better deter conflict with China.⁴

FINDINGS SUMMARY

We recommend DTRA expand the scope and depth of the scenarios it employs in its support to Combatant Commands. Assisting the Commands' programs of studies, TTXs, wargames, and exercises will provide Combatant Command staffs with valuable analytic and planning expertise focused on addressing the multitudinous challenges posed by China. As the PRC expands its global reach through initiatives such as BRI, the Global Development Initiative (GDI), and GSI, DTRA could also support the Joint Staff in its role as a global integrator for the Combatant Commands and assist in their use of TTXs and wargames to identify and develop coordinated responses to issues that reach across multiple Areas of Responsibility (AORs) and the broader U.S. Government.

Accordingly, we recommend that DTRA assist the Combatant Commands' staffs in selecting follow-on scenarios for deep dive examinations or senior-level TTXs. This will allow further examination of strategic competition and integrated deterrence in order to conceptualize fully the threat posed by China and ensure

these efforts are synchronized and integrated across all warfighting domains and the joint environment. In particular, IDA recommends the Taiwan scenario (Scenario 1) for additional development and senior-leader attention, as it is closely aligned with USINDOPACOM priority planning needs.

We further recommend that DTRA coordinate with USINDOPACOM to develop additional scenario-based analysis such as TTXs to assist U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) and U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ) in planning for potential conflict between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (ROK). We also recommend that DTRA use scenario-based analysis to conduct a series of internal TTXs to assess the efficacy of its role as a Combat Support Agency and examine how its five Core Functions support the Combatant Commands across all phases of conflict.

METHODOLOGY

This research effort employs scenario-based analysis. Scenario-based analysis enables stakeholders to manage the inherent uncertainty of strategic planning by examining a range of plausible futures and assessing the implications and consequences of each situation. Scenarios also provide a contextual framework to assess otherwise isolated events and examine difficult questions. The concrete details of the scenarios lead decision makers to consider implications that may not be apparent when topics are considered abstractly. Lastly, the scenarios provide a means to facilitate discussions among multiple stakeholders and provide coordinated responses to future regional challenges. The use of scenario-based analysis is nested within DTRA's Core Function 4, which is to provide strategic and operational support through subject matter expertise, technical reach-back, tailored analysis, and exercise support.⁵

The IDA research staff performed extensive research to develop scenarios spanning a range of Chinese gray zone activities across distinct geographic areas within the USINDOPACOM theater, as well as a scenario that migrated into the U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM) AOR. The vignettes examine China's possible efforts to compete with the United States by exploiting opportunities in the gray zone such as:

1. Conducting conventional military operations to test the resolve of the United States and its allies and partners and strain their resources;
2. Engaging in deliberately unsafe or dangerous behavior in order to intimidate the United States and its allies and partners or provoke crises from which it believes it will benefit;
3. Executing large-scale cyber intrusions and/or attacks against U.S. communication systems;
4. Using its economic power to gain influence throughout the theater;
5. Deploying private security companies and establishing military bases to protect its overseas interests;
6. Employing maritime paramilitary forces to disrupt freedom of navigation around Taiwan and the South China Sea;
7. Conducting gradual pressure campaigns against Taiwanese-held islands; and
8. Supporting actions by non-governmental organizations to exploit potential fissures in current U.S. partnerships, alliances, and international agreements, particularly as they pertain to the defense of Taiwan.

While set in the 2027 to 2032 timeframe, the scenarios are based on past Chinese actions as well as ongoing Chinese behavior. Each scenario includes a background section that discusses the historical conditions and events that inform it. Each scenario also includes a description section that outlines hypothetical Chinese actions and statements that parallel and sometimes replicate past Chinese actions and statements. Drawing

on past Chinese behavior to construct the scenarios ensures they are plausible and can serve as a means to explore China's strategy, operational constructs, and vulnerabilities.

The intent of gray zone activity is to attain one's objectives while thwarting the competitor's ability to respond militarily, but history is replete with examples of military conflicts resulting from miscalculation, misperception, and accident. Just because competition begins in the gray zone does not mean it will remain in the gray zone. Thus, all four scenarios incorporate a trigger or set of triggers that heighten tensions across multiple domains and lead to escalation to the conventional kinetic or nuclear levels. Escalation triggers derive from the complex interplay between and among a number of variables and trends that span China's instruments of national power. These include economic levers, information campaigns, nuclear weapons, cyber and space-based capabilities, and the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

The research team drafted the four scenarios describing the settings and the escalatory triggers, and then traveled to USINDOPACOM to conduct in-person discussions with J2, J3, and J5 subject matter experts (SMEs) to gain theater-level insight and feedback on their scenario design concept. The research team held three separate discussions with China SMEs, counter-weapons of mass destruction (CWMD) SMEs, military planners, and intelligence analysts from Headquarters USINDOPACOM, USINDOPACOM Joint Intelligence Operations Center (JIOC), and the Daniel K. Inouye Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS). The discussions explored key issues related to strategic competition, gray zone conflict, integrated deterrence, limited nuclear exchanges, and all-out war with China.

Presenting the scenarios provides insight into the contours of China's national security ambitions and emerging capabilities, highlights the possibility of escalation resulting from gray zone activities, illuminates potential pathways to a United States-China confrontation, and prompts consideration of the potential implications for U.S. foreign policy and defense strategy, and USINDOPACOM planning. After presenting the scenarios, the research team identified key findings and recommendations. The findings highlight key challenges Chinese gray zone activities could present. The recommendations identify actions DTRA could take to assist the U.S. military in preventing or mitigating the intended effects of those activities, and steps the Geographic Combatant Commands (GCCs) could take to better prepare for contingencies they may produce.

ANALYSIS

SCENARIO 1: CHINA'S CONTINUED VIOLATION OF TAIWAN'S AIR DEFENSE IDENTIFICATION ZONES

China continues its military pressure campaign on Taiwan by violating its Air Defense Identification Zones.⁶

Background

In anticipation of the expected victory of a populist leader from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) over a China-friendly Kuomintang (KMT) rival in Taiwan's upcoming presidential elections, the PRC holds live fire exercises and masses troops in Fujian Province as a show of force. In tandem, China's military air forces escalate their campaign of violating Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zones (ADIZ) to test the island's response times and stress its resources. Taiwan typically responds to these ADIZ violations by issuing radio warnings, scrambling aircraft, and deploying air defense missile systems. Over time, however, the number of People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) aircraft increases with each ADIZ intrusion, stressing Taiwan's military resources.

At the direction of President Xi Jinping and in line with the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee's vision for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, including unification with Taiwan, PLAAF aircraft routes become more threatening and their pilots' behavior becomes more aggressive.⁷ PLAAF aircraft increasingly conduct low passes over Taiwanese vessels in international waters or dangerously close to the Taiwanese fighter aircraft dispatched to escort them out of the ADIZ and away from the median line. The strain of responding to China's frequent intrusions is wearing on Taiwanese pilots and aircraft, and could ultimately affect the force's response options, while also raising the possibility of an accident or miscalculation.

In a sign of increased congressional support for Taiwanese autonomy and a pending \$3 billion foreign military sales package, a U.S. Congressional Delegation (CODEL) and several U.S. defense industry representatives make an unannounced visit to Taipei. The visit is made ahead of Taiwan's presidential elections to discuss regional security, defense article acquisitions, and United States-Taiwan bilateral relations. After their arrival, the CODEL visit is publicized on social media. A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson denounces the visit, stating the United States should abide by the three U.S.-China communiqués and reasserts the PRC's opposition to any official exchanges between the United States and Taiwan.⁸

Description

In response to the U.S. visit, and to reassert its nationalist claim to Taiwan, the PLAAF sends a large number of aircraft into the southwest edge of Taiwan's ADIZ. The Taiwanese Air Force scrambles fighters and Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) aircraft to intercept the intruding aircraft and escort them out of the ADIZ. The U.S. State Department condemns China's latest intrusion into Taiwan's ADIZ, stating that it risks escalating regional tensions, particularly with the presence of the U.S. CODEL and defense industry representatives on the island. Taiwan's DPP presidential candidate also condemns the ADIZ incursions and calls them a violation of Taiwan's sovereignty, while the KMT candidate issues a less confrontational statement perceived as conciliatory and promoting a dialogue with Beijing.

When a four-ship formation of PLAAF fighters ignores radio warnings, crosses the median line, and enters Taiwan's airspace in what appears to be a low-level attack run, Taiwanese air defenses engage and shoot down one of the fighters. The remaining three aircraft break off and exit Taiwan's airspace. In a follow-on statement, the PLA disputes its fighters entered Taiwanese airspace and condemns Taiwan's response as a "separatist" act of aggression. The PLA responds by using a combination of artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled drone swarms and cyberattacks to conduct electronic interference operations to spoof and degrade Taiwanese ground radar sites. Several air defense sites are then struck by PLAAF aircraft and armed drones.

In response, the Taiwanese government issues a Notice to Air Missions (NOTAM), closes its airspace to civilian air traffic, and issues a statement that Taiwan has the right to defend itself from Chinese attacks. The U.S. State Department urges restraint and notifies China that the CODEL military aircraft (MILAIR) will depart the island once Taiwanese airspace is reopened. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) discusses the situation with Commander, USINDOPACOM and then attempts a call to the PLA Chief of the Joint Staff (CoJS), but the call goes unanswered.

The U.S. President issues a statement urging restraint and affirms the United States reserves the right to respond militarily if the CODEL aircraft is attacked. The Secretaries of Defense and State, the U.S. Ambassador, and the Senior Defense Official (SDO)/Defense Attaché (DATT) also cannot reach their Chinese counterparts. A PLA spokesman later issues a statement announcing that any aircraft attempting to depart or enter Taiwan's airspace will be considered hostile and a threat to Chinese national sovereignty. The Secretary of Defense and the CJCS depart the Pentagon and travel to the White House to brief the President on his response options. The Secretary of State notifies both China and Taiwan that the President reiterated his previous statement that all options are on the table if the CODEL aircraft is harmed during its departure from Taiwan. Members

of the CODEL also urge Taiwan's DPP and KMT presidential candidates not to make any statements that could further incite Beijing. China does not respond to the U.S. statement.

Under pressure from the U.S. Department of State, Taiwan reopens its airspace to facilitate departure of the CODEL. The State Department notifies China that the CODEL's military aircraft will depart the island under the escort of two Taiwanese F-16Vs, which will then hand off the aircraft to U.S. Air Force F-22s, flying out of Kadena Air Base, Japan, once they exit Taiwanese airspace. As the CODEL departs Taiwan for Guam, PLAAF fighters engage and shoot down the Taiwanese F-16Vs and then shadow the CODEL aircraft until it nears its rendezvous point with the USAF F-22s. The PLAAF aircraft intentionally do not attack the CODEL aircraft to avoid provoking a direct conflict with the United States.

As the F-22s approach, the PLAAF aircraft break contact and return to PRC airspace. The Taiwanese Air Force and U.S. Navy vessels in the area launch Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR) aircraft to search for survivors; however, none are found. The U.S. Department of State condemns China's actions and issues a demarche protesting the downing of the Taiwanese F-16Vs. The CJCS again attempts to call the PLA CoJS, but the Chinese do not accept the call. The Secretaries of Defense and State are similarly rebuffed by their Chinese counterparts. The U.S. President holds a press conference on the crisis after the CODEL aircraft arrives safely in Guam.

After a series of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Military Commission and PLA meetings, the U.S. Intelligence Community (IC) detects increased mobilization of PLA coastal ground and maritime units around Fujian Province, in the Eastern Theater Command, and an increase of PLAAF aircraft and drones loitering off the coast of Taiwan. U.S. overhead collection assets detect PLA Rocket Forces (PLARF) moving Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs), H-20 stealth bombers, cruise missiles, and DF-17 Hypersonic Glide Vehicles (HGVs) out of garrison and into coastal areas within the Eastern Theater Command AOR. Taiwanese intelligence assets inside China and U.S. intelligence intercepts confirm the PLARF's mobilization efforts. Taiwanese drones begin conducting intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) overflights of coastal areas as a preventive measure against potential PLA special operations forces (SOF) infiltrations and saboteurs.

The U.S. President affirms the United States will defend democracies around the world and warns China against further attacks on Taiwan. The President states he is committed to supplying Taiwan militarily and will increase intelligence sharing if a Chinese attack is deemed imminent. The President also places calls to the UN Secretary General and members of the Indo-Pacific Quad and Australia, United Kingdom, United States (AUKUS) partnership. The CCP issues a statement that the United States is interfering in internal PRC matters and that the PLA will institute a naval blockade of Taiwan to prevent further intrusions on China's sovereignty.

The Department of Defense issues a statement that the United States is sending B-52Hs and B-21s to Guam and that Carrier Strike Group (CSG) 5, which has been operating in the South China Sea following the Valiant Shield 2030 exercise, will remain in place. The 18th Wing at Kadena Air Base, operating jointly with carrier-based F-23 aircraft, places a squadron of F-22s on combat air patrol off the eastern coast of Taiwan. Japan stipulates that U.S. aircraft based in Japan cannot be used to strike targets on mainland China due to fears of retaliation.

Commander 7th Fleet directs two guided missile cruisers and a guided missile destroyer to deploy to the South China Sea. The PLA issues a statement that the U.S. ships' actions violate China's sovereignty and security, and warns the United States against attempting to break the naval blockade of Taiwan. The DPP candidate holds a rally and urges her supporters to stage protests against China, with some rally attendees carrying signs calling for Taiwan's independence. Social media and political bloggers speculate that Taiwan may hold a referendum on quasi-independence.

As tensions increase, the U.S. guided missile cruisers shoot down two PLAAF J-11 aircraft that ignored repeated warnings and flew within feet of the ships. Concurrently, a PLA cyber espionage unit, Unit 61398, initiates a widespread cyberattack against Taiwan and HQ USINDOPACOM that degrades satellite communications on Taiwan and in the U.S. INDOPACOM AOR. The PLAAF then launches strikes against Taiwanese coastal air defense systems, aerial warfare nodes, and military district headquarters using aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and SOF. U.S. imagery and collection assets determine Chinese forces have departed Fujian Province seaports on flotillas of PLA Navy and civilian Roll On-Roll Off (RO-RO) vessels, as part of an invasion force, and shares this intelligence with Taiwan.

Taiwan launches a cyberattack that jams the PLA's space-based Position, Navigation, and Timing (PNT) system, Beidou, and disrupts communications between the flotilla and Eastern Theater Command, thereby isolating the invasion force. Taiwanese defenses repel the initial waves of the PRC invasion force, sinking dozens of RO-RO vessels using U.S.-supplied anti-ship missiles, strike aircraft, and armed drones. The PLA forces that make it ashore are largely contained, killed, or captured. China pauses the second wave of the invasion. The repulse of the initial PRC invasion leads to a landslide victory for the DPP presidential candidate. Taiwan's president-elect launches a massive public relations and social media campaign touting the successful defense of Taiwan and the need for increased U.S. military assistance to Taiwan to protect its democracy, while also calling for increased sanctions against China.

The failed invasion also leads to large-scale domestic political chaos for Xi Jinping and the CCP, which promised to restore China's sovereignty, former glory, and territorial integrity after the century of humiliation.⁹ Despite PRC efforts to stifle dissent by shutting down Chinese social media platforms, student groups begin limited protests voicing dissatisfaction with President Xi and the CCP for the handling of the Taiwan Crisis. This mounting domestic pressure leads Xi to initiate a punishment campaign against Taiwan by conducting an extensive weeks-long Joint Firepower Strike Campaign against Taiwanese military facilities. The joint fires campaign fails to force Taiwan's capitulation to China and inadvertently strengthens international support for Taipei.

Taiwan's president launches a publicity campaign to build support for Taiwan's democracy. Consequently, Xi threatens the use of nuclear weapons against Taipei, with the hope that Taiwan's leadership will capitulate and unify with China. Taiwan's president refuses to back down, and Commander, USINDOPACOM subsequently changes the defense condition (DEFCON) for all U.S. nuclear forces in the region. The U.S. President states there will be "severe consequences" if China uses nuclear weapons against U.S. forces or its allies and partners in the region. The United States convenes meetings with AUKUS and Quad members to address the crisis. Fearing the possibility of the "Zelensky effect" of Taiwan's charismatic president garnering international support, as well as heightened concern over an increase in U.S. military assets flowing into the region, President Xi orders a decapitating tactical nuclear strike against Taipei.

Taipei's Presidential Palace and the DPP party headquarters are destroyed, killing thousands, including Taiwan's president, president-elect, and the majority of the cabinet. A PLA spokesman states the nuclear attack on Taiwan was an internal matter carried out on Chinese sovereign territory and that outside powers should not attempt to interfere in Chinese territorial issues because any further actions by outside powers will be considered an existential threat to China. U.S. Cyber Command (USCYBERCOM) conducts a cyber campaign to eliminate Chinese social media restrictions so that Chinese citizens can see the devastation caused by President Xi's nuclear strikes against Taiwan. The United Nations Security Council convenes an emergency session and the U.S. president is faced with a decision about how to respond to China's nuclear strike on Taiwan.

SCENARIO 2: CHINA ESTABLISHES AN OVER-THE-HORIZON CAPABILITY IN DJIBOUTI

China increases its overseas military presence and establishes an over-the-horizon (OTH) capability under the guise of providing security for its BRI projects after a series of terrorist attacks on BRI facilities kill Chinese nationals. The increased Chinese military presence near U.S. military facilities heightens the risk of miscalculation between Chinese and American military personnel in several countries as the PLA expands its counterterrorism (CT) and intelligence collection capacity as part of its OTH strategy.

Background

In 2013, President Xi Jinping announced the launch of the estimated \$1 trillion Belt and Road Initiative. The BRI is a two-pronged global collection of overland and maritime infrastructure development projects and energy and investment initiatives stretching from Asia to Europe that could expand China's global power projection through economic and political influence.¹⁰ Critics argued the BRI projects are classic rising power behaviors and could serve as Trojan Horses for China-led regional development and military expansion.¹¹ The October 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy decried China's ambitions to create an enhanced sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific region by using its economic power to coerce nations.¹² The U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) also warned that China's deepening engagement and influence with the Pacific Islands is designed to enhance power projection in the Indo-Pacific region through:

1. Gaining access to ports and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs);
2. Constraining Taiwan's international space;
3. Promoting the Chinese model of political and economic development;
4. Advancing the BRI and protecting Chinese workers and assets in the region;
5. Frustrating U.S. and allied military power projection in the Western Pacific; and
6. Increasing China's regional intelligence gathering and surveillance capabilities.¹³

Increased access to some Pacific Islands could also allow China to constrain Australia and impede the flow of U.S. forces from intervening in large numbers during an attack on Taiwan, Guam, or allies and partners such as the Philippines and Japan.¹⁴

China's expanding influence has not been without cost. There has been a global increase in unfavorable views of China that can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, human rights concerns, economic practices, perceptions of China's growing military power and economic influence, and negative views of Xi Jinping.¹⁵ A combination of xenophobia, nationalism, population displacement, social media influence, and anger over corruption, debt traps, and environmental impacts also fuels anti-Chinese sentiment in Africa and Central Asia.¹⁶

In Africa, state leaders herald warm bilateral relations with China, while their citizens tend to hold negative views of China and have social conflicts with local Chinese nationals that have resulted in violent attacks on Chinese workers and properties.¹⁷ In Central Asia, many ethnic groups espouse anti-China sentiments, or Sinophobia, as they resist China's soft expansion in the region. Broad public resistance to Chinese development projects has taken root due to wariness about Chinese workers, fears of economic exploitation, and Beijing's brutal treatment of two million Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang Province.¹⁸ China's treatment of its Uyghur population underscores perceptions, based on Soviet-era clichés, that portray it as an enemy of Islam and Turkic peoples. Though there are efforts to maintain cooperative agreements against violent extremist organizations at the state level, anti-China sentiment is on the rise at the individual level.¹⁹

To safeguard their BRI investments, Chinese companies rely on a combination of host country government security, local security firms, and Western and Chinese firms for security needs.²⁰ Despite these force protection measures, BRI projects and Chinese nationals are frequently targeted by terrorist organizations, including the Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA), Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), al Qaeda, al Shabab, and the Islamic State.²¹ The Islamic State's propaganda now features anti-China themes, portraying China as an oppressor of Muslims.²² As China expands its economic footprint in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa, regional terrorist groups will likely increase the targeting of Chinese infrastructure projects and nationals.²³

Description

In 2027, coordinated simultaneous attacks against BRI projects and Chinese housing units in Pakistan's Baluchistan Province kill dozens of Chinese nationals. Due to a lack of counterterrorism experience and in-theater signals and human intelligence assets, the PRC cannot respond directly to the attacks and is forced to rely on Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) for intelligence sharing. The Pakistanis, fearing the loss of Chinese investments because of an uptick in attacks on Chinese nationals, falsely blame India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) intelligence operatives for the attacks, until the BLA claims credit.

Facing growing domestic criticism of its perceived weakness due to the lack of an immediate response to the terrorist attacks, President Xi directs the PLA to create an expeditionary capability to provide force protection for Chinese citizens and BRI projects. Drawing on the expeditionary experience it gained while participating in United Nations peacekeeping operations and multinational law enforcement efforts, the PLA increases its presence in select BRI-host countries and establishes over-the-horizon capabilities—a euphemism for drone and SOF strike capabilities—in Djibouti, Pakistan, and the Solomon Islands, which will serve as regional quick reaction force (QRF) hubs to protect Chinese interests.²⁴

On the diplomatic front, Chinese diplomats employing “wolf warrior” style diplomacy and increased security assistance bribe and compel BRI countries to accept the increased PLA presence. The PLA issues a statement that China is providing security, under a 2015 anti-terrorism law, to protect its economic investments in BRI countries by allowing the military to conduct operations overseas. Beijing also directs its private security companies (PSCs), particularly those in Africa, to aid in securing Chinese nationals and state-owned enterprises, thereby allowing China to widen its regional intelligence collection efforts.

The United States issues a statement condemning the terrorist attacks, while also criticizing China's attempt to militarize its BRI projects under the guise of protecting Chinese citizens. Consequently, the United States launches a diplomatic push, combined with an information operations campaign and an expansion of the National Guard Bureau's (NGB) State Partnership Program (SPP) and security assistance, to undercut China's ambitions across the GCCs. China responds by implementing a pressure campaign against U.S. interests across the three GCCs—USAFRICOM, U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM), and USINDOPACOM—in Djibouti, Pakistan, and the Solomon Islands. This raises the risk of miscalculation while also straining U.S. joint integration and coordination among the GCCs.

The PLA establishes its OTH capability at the existing PLA logistical support base in Djibouti, just a few miles from the U.S. base at Camp Lemonnier and adjacent to Bab al-Mandab Strait, the major chokepoint between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. The PLA base, which contains a pier that is large enough to berth an aircraft carrier, opened in 2017 and is China's sole overseas military base.²⁵ Prior to the Pakistan attacks, relations between PLA and U.S. forces had been cordial. However, after the attacks, the PLA became more confrontational in interactions with U.S. personnel, while also increasing its collection of intelligence directed at al Shabab affiliates in neighboring Somalia, Kenya, and Tanzania. The PLA also targets sensitive U.S. facilities, with multiple instances of PLA ISR UAVs straying into restricted airspace above Camp Lemonnier. After repeated warnings, a U.S. Air Force base area defense crew (BADC) jams a PLA UAV's signal, causing it to

crash inside a restricted U.S. area of the base. The PLA demands the return of the UAV; however, USAFRICOM declines to return it immediately to buy time for representatives from the U.S. intelligence community, USAFRICOM, and USINDOPACOM to conduct technology exploitation of the UAV to determine its capabilities.

After a month of examination, representatives from USAFRICOM return the disassembled UAV to PLA officials at the nearby base. In response, the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs lodges a complaint with the U.S. State Department. Possibly in retaliation for the UAV episode, a U.S. Navy vessel's request to conduct a port call to refuel at a logistics base in the Solomon Islands is refused. The United States responds to the denied port call request by increasing the visibility of its technical security teams in Pakistan, which provide 24/7 end-use-monitoring of U.S. technology on the Pakistan Air Force's F-16s and advanced medium-range air-to-air (AMRAAM) missiles. The Pakistan Embassy notifies the U.S. Department of State and Department of Defense that No Objection Certificates (NOCs) and Visa approvals for U.S. government officials traveling to Pakistan will be delayed until further notice.

Weeks later, a delegation of Chinese citizens from the Foreign Ministry is kidnapped by a splinter faction of al Shabab fighters while on an official visit to Somalia. The delegation was there visiting a BRI project designed to expand the roadway infrastructure in Somalia. The delegation had just left a signing ceremony, which was the scene of a major protest, when they were ambushed and abducted on the return to their hotel. In the process, al Shabab fighters killed several Somali federal government troops and injured two members of a Chinese private security company that had been protecting the Chinese citizens. The Chinese were split up and taken further inland to separate areas. The al Shabab members issued ransom demands and provided proof-of-life videos; however, the Chinese refused to pay the ransom. Consequently, a member of the delegation was murdered and the video was released online.

The U.S. Secretary of State and Commander, USINDOPACOM offer condolences to their Chinese counterparts. In coordination with USAFRICOM and USINDOPACOM, the U.S. commander at Camp Lemonnier offers his assistance to his PLA counterpart because U.S. SOF and other paramilitary forces are inside Somalia on search and kill missions against al Shabab, but his offer is rebuffed. Several days later, multiple cargo planes begin landing at the PLA base. U.S. overhead assets detect the aircraft are offloading personnel, ammunition, tactical vehicles, and crates that likely contain UAVs. USCENTCOM reports two PLA Navy frigates that were carrying out anti-piracy patrols off the coast of Yemen have departed Yemeni waters and are now anchored off the coast of Somalia. The Joint Staff stands up a Crisis Management Team (CMT), and USAFRICOM, USCENTCOM, and USINDOPACOM convene three separate Crisis Action Teams (CATs) to coordinate the cross-regional issue.

The CJCS conducts a call with the PRC CoJS, and the Commanders of USAFRICOM and USINDOPACOM coordinate a call with their PLA counterparts to inform them that U.S. forces are operating inside Somalia. They recommend establishing a U.S. military-PLA operations deconfliction and common operating picture agreement, similar to the United States-Russia agreement in Syria, before conducting counterterrorism operations to ensure deconfliction of forces. The PLA representatives do not concur with establishing an agreement and instead insist PLA Navy Marine Corps will ensure the safety of the Chinese hostages.

Inside Somalia, an operational detachment of Delta Force operators and Rangers from a Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) Task Force are conducting CT operations alongside Somali government forces in a small village outside Saylac, near the Djibouti border, when they come under sustained small arms fire. The Americans, believing they are under attack by al Shabab fighters, return fire and call in their positions to the Tactical Operations Center (TOC) at Camp Lemonnier, which then relays the information to HQ USAFRICOM. The Delta operators call in a drone strike on the attacking forces, which stops the firing. As the U.S. team moves toward the enemy position to conduct battle damage assessment, they discover the opposing force was a platoon of PLA Navy Marines. The Americans triage the injured survivors and update the Camp Lemonnier TOC and JSOC.

The U.S. camp commander contacts his PLA counterpart, who accuses the Americans of launching an unprovoked attack against the PLA Navy Marines. The TOC relays a situation report to HQ USAFRICOM, which then coordinates the situation with Joint Staff, USINDOPACOM, and USCENTCOM. A PLA QRF arrives and fires on the U.S. Task Force members. U.S. forces return fire and rout the Chinese QRF, taking several prisoners. The PLA Navy frigates threaten to fire on the U.S. Task Force members in retaliation for the strikes against the PLA Navy Marines. The Task Force members contact the Camp Lemonnier TOC for further guidance.

SCENARIO 3: CHINA'S MARITIME MILITIA HARASSES TAIWANESE SHIPS AROUND ITU ABA

China uses Maritime Militia vessels to harass ships supplying Taiwan's South China Sea outpost, Itu ABA.

Background

In 2029, the 80th anniversary of the founding of the PRC, the PRC intensifies its pressure campaign against Taiwan. Taiwan's leaders grow increasingly concerned about the security of their offshore islands, particularly their most distant possession, the island of Itu ABA (called Taiping by Taiwan) in the South China Sea. Located 1,500 km from Taiwan and 853 km from the Philippines, the island has been occupied by Taiwan since 1946.

Although it is only 46 hectares (110 acres) in area, Itu ABA is the largest natural feature in the Spratly Islands. The Spratly Islands, comprising more than 100 islands, reefs, and shoals with no indigenous populations, lie amid strategically important fisheries and shipping lanes—and possibly oil and gas reserves. They are claimed in their entirety by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam, and in part by the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei.²⁶ Since 2013, China has engaged in a large-scale dredging and artificial island-building effort in the Spratlys, creating 3,200 acres of new land, to support its claims in the area.²⁷

Description

Following the Chinese example, Taiwan uses dredges to expand the size of Itu ABA. In particular, it lengthens the runway to accommodate fighters and maritime patrol aircraft, and installs air defenses and anti-ship cruise missile batteries.²⁸ Taiwan also deploys elements of its Marine Corps to supplement Coast Guard personnel stationed on the island and announces its intent to conduct a series of live-fire drills on the island and its surrounding waters.

A spokesperson for the PRC's Taiwan Affairs Office responds to Taiwan's actions by stating, "The Nansha Islands (Spratly Islands), including Taiping Island, are China's inherent territory, and China has indisputable sovereignty over the Nansha Islands and its adjacent waters," and warns that the Taiwanese government is "playing with fire." Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs rejects China's assertion of sovereignty, saying the island belongs to the Republic of China (ROC or Taiwan), and "the Taiwanese government's determination to defend the sovereignty of the islands in the South China Sea has never wavered."²⁹ The Taiwanese spokesperson also reiterates the country's "right to conduct routine exercises at Taiping and its surrounding waters."³⁰

While public and private rhetoric continues to intensify, the Chinese People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) begins a harassment campaign against the Taiwanese forces on the island and ships resupplying the island. The PAFMM is a key component of the PRC's efforts to control peacetime activity throughout the South China Sea. Roughly 300 militia vessels operate in the Spratly Islands on any given day.³¹ Although ostensibly civilian mariners, the PAFMM units are often composed of ex-PLA personnel who train regularly and conduct missions at the behest of PLA leadership.

Consistent with China's military system reforms, the PAFMM operates in concert with the PLA Navy and China Coast Guard (CCG) under a unified command and control system.³² PLA commanders and officers, however, openly question who commands the militia ships, under what circumstances, and with what authorization. Some Chinese officials have expressed concern that the militia's inadequate "political awareness" makes it "unfit for the complex situation surrounding the South China Sea rights and interests struggle."³³

The PAFMM harassment campaign includes the deployment of dozens of militia vessels to the waters surrounding Itu Aba. Approximately 200 vessels drop anchor between .5 and 5 nautical miles from Itu Aba, and none show signs of fishing activity.³⁴ When foreign vessels approach, the large PAFMM vessels, with mast-mounted water cannons for spraying and reinforced hulls for ramming, operate aggressively to block access to Itu Aba and prevent resupply. They frequently conduct unsafe maneuvers that create a risk of collision to impede the operations of approaching ships.

Despite several unsafe encounters, the Chinese vessels refuse to back down. In one incident, a Taiwanese sailor on a resupply ship is knocked overboard by a PAFMM water cannon and drowns. In an effort to ensure freedom of navigation, the U.S. Navy (USN) sends a surface action group (SAG) into the South China Sea to uphold the right of innocent passage and to deter further escalation.

As the USN ships approach Itu Aba, one destroyer is surrounded by fishing boats while a CCG cutter looks on. The destroyer radios them to clear a path. Instead, several trawlers maneuver in front of the lead U.S. guided-missile destroyer (DDG), cut their engines, and drop flotsam in its path. The DDG orders an emergency all-stop to avoid a collision. When it resumes moving, the militia vessels repeat their maneuvers but this time, one of them is struck by the U.S. ship and heavily damaged. When the U.S. SAG aids the stricken vessel, the CCG cutter intervenes and warns the SAG to leave the area or "suffer the consequences."³⁵ In the aftermath of the collision, a Taiwanese resupply vessel reaches the island and offloads supplies. The following day, the Taiwanese ship follows the USN SAG as it proceeds north toward Taiwan.

Meanwhile, Chinese state media announces officials in Hainan province have reported that a U.S. destroyer intentionally rammed a Chinese fishing boat, killing 10 civilian fishermen, while the U.S. vessel was "escorting" a Taiwanese vessel through Chinese territorial waters. Anti-American mass protests break out in several cities in China. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs accuses the United States of "engaging in activities in China's exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea without China's permission" and warns that U.S. aggression will result in "serious consequences."

At sea, a mixed fleet of People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), CCG, and PAFMM vessels approaches the U.S. SAG on an intercept course. As the PLAN and CCG ships look on, the PAFMM vessels once again maneuver dangerously close to the U.S. ships. After several near misses between the fishing boats and the SAG, a PLAN DDG fires a warning shot and demands the SAG's commanding officer order his vessels to full stop and take responsibility for the incident at Itu Aba.

SCENARIO 4: CHINA CLASHES WITH JAPAN OVER THE SENKAKU ISLANDS

Clashes between Chinese and Japanese nationalist non-governmental organizations over their respective countries' claims to the Senkaku Islands lead to a military clash between the PRC and Japan that prompts Japan to invoke its mutual defense treaty with the United States.

Background

In 2029, the 80th anniversary of the founding of the PRC, rising nationalist sentiment results in a series of demonstrations across more than 100 cities in China protesting the continued Japanese administration of the Senkaku (Diaoyu in China) Islands.

The Senkaku Islands consist of eight small, uninhabited islets and rocks in the East China Sea, approximately 200 nautical miles east of the Chinese mainland, 200 nautical miles southwest of Okinawa in Japan, and 120 nautical miles northeast of Taiwan. The largest feature in the Senkakus, Uotsurijima (Diaoyudao), is roughly 1.5 square miles in area. Although the islands have been controlled by Japan since 1895, except for a brief period of U.S. military rule after World War II, they are also claimed by the PRC and authorities on Taiwan. None of the claimants paid much attention to the islands until a 1969 UN report noted the possible existence of significant oil reserves in the area. All three claimants soon declared their jurisdiction over the islands and the seabed in the region. Over the next 60 years, tensions over control of the Senkakus waxed and waned with occasional crises erupting.³⁶

Among the key actors inflaming the tensions over the Senkakus have been Chinese nationalist non-governmental organizations. The *Baodiao* (literally “Defend the Diaoyu Islands”) movement was founded by Taiwanese and Hong Kong students in the early 1970s but has since spread to mainland China. Members of the Baodiao movement have repeatedly tried to land on the islands to reinforce Chinese claims. In 1996, one of the leaders of the movement drowned while trying to reach the islands, prompting tens of thousands of Chinese citizens to join anti-Japanese demonstrations.³⁷ In 2004, the Japanese Coast Guard briefly arrested Chinese nationalist activists trying to land on one of the islands. After the incident, China and Japan reportedly reached a non-public agreement in which China pledged to restrain its citizens from traveling to the Senkakus and Japan promised not to arrest them there.³⁸

Japanese nationalist groups have also contributed to the dispute. Nihon Seinensha (Japanese Youth Federation), a nationalist organization affiliated with the major yakuza group Sumiyoshi-kai, built a lighthouse on Uotsurijima Island in 1978 and rebuilt it in 1988. The Taiwanese army planned a secret operation to land troops on the island and destroy the lighthouse in 1990, but it was canceled by then-Taiwan President Lee Tenghui.³⁹ Nihon Seinensha built a second lighthouse on Kitakojima Island in 1996.⁴⁰ In 2000, it built a Shinto shrine on Uotsurijima. After Chinese activists damaged the shrine in 2004, Seinensha rebuilt it. In 2012, the Japanese government purchased three of the islands from their private owner in order to pre-empt a leading Japanese nationalist from buying the islands. The move sparked large-scale, anti-Japanese protests, some of them violent, throughout China.⁴¹ Taiwan recalled its representative to Japan in protest against the deal.⁴²

Since the Japanese government purchase of the islands in 2012, Sino-Japanese relations have deteriorated and both countries have begun to use paramilitary and military assets to reinforce their claims within the disputed area.⁴³ China has increased its deployments of Coast Guard and PLA Navy ships near the islands and increased military patrol flights in the area. Chinese Coast Guard vessels are spending longer periods inside Japanese-claimed waters and have harassed Japanese fishing vessels.⁴⁴ In 2021, China implemented a law explicitly allowing the Chinese Coast Guard to use weapons against foreign ships it considers to have illegally entered China’s waters. The Japanese Coast Guard and Air Self Defense Force have responded in kind, increasing their presence in the area.⁴⁵

Complicating the dispute over the Senkakus is the United States’ view of the claims of the disputants and the responsibilities according to the 1960 United States-Japan Security Treaty.⁴⁶ The United States long sought to maintain neutrality on the competing claims regarding the Senkakus, although it acknowledged that the Senkakus were covered by the United States’ commitment to “meet the common danger” of an armed attack on “the territories under the Administration of Japan” stipulated in the mutual defense treaty.⁴⁷

After the spike in tensions following the Japanese purchase of three islands in 2012, the U.S. Congress and the President issued a series of resolutions and statements making it clear that it recognized Japan’s administration of the islands and opposed any unilateral actions that would seek to change that status. Successive Presidents also made it clear that the United States’ commitment to the defense of Japan included the Senkakus.⁴⁸

Description

The burst of Chinese nationalism in 2029 prompts activists to renew their efforts to strengthen Chinese claims to the islands. Chinese nationalist groups attempt a series of landings in the Senkakus. Although the Japanese Coast Guard thwarts the first few efforts, each successive attempt includes more boats. Meanwhile, Chinese Coast Guard vessels do nothing to interfere with the activists' vessels and often maneuver to impede the Japanese Coast Guard's movements. Finally, several boats make it to Uotsurijima, where Chinese activists destroy the Shinto shrine and damage the lighthouse.

Enraged by the Chinese nationalist group's actions, Japanese nationalists take to the sea, vowing to ram and sink any Chinese boats attempting to land on the islands. Both the PLA Navy and the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) send warships to the area in an attempt to impose order. When over 100 Chinese non-military vessels approach the islands, Japanese Coast Guard, MSDF, and nationalist boats try to head them off. When a Japanese nationalist boat rams a Chinese activist vessel and sinks it, the PLAN warships open fire, destroying several small Japanese boats, sinking a Japanese Coast Guard Tsurugi-class patrol vessel, and severely damaging an Abukuma-class JMSDF frigate. Japanese aircraft from Okinawa respond to the incident attack and severely damage a PLAN Jiangwei II frigate.

Japan declares itself under attack by China. Citing past U.S. policy statements that the Senkakus are covered by the United States-Japan Security Treaty, Japan invokes the treaty to ask for U.S. assistance in the burgeoning conflict with the PRC. Meanwhile, Taiwan warns that it claims the islands and objects to any United States action in support of Japanese claims.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Scenario 1: China's Continued Violations of Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zones

Finding: Many wargames anticipate a Normandy-style beach invasion of Taiwan or an incremental escalation; however, if China chooses to accelerate its timeline to take Taiwan, it may select a more decisive and immediate course of action. The PLA could choose to implement a naval blockade of Taiwan and conduct an extensive Joint Firepower Strike Campaign to coerce the Taiwanese into submission. The PRC may also jump the escalation ladder and conduct a tactical nuclear decapitation strike against Taiwan before the United States can flow adequate forces and materiel into theater in anticipation of a conflict. The Commander, U.S. Strategic Command recently informed Congress that while China's active inventory of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and nuclear warheads on those missiles does not exceed the U.S. active inventory, China has surpassed the United States in the number of land-based fixed and mobile ICBM launchers.⁴⁹ This could serve as a deterrent to the United States escalating the crisis due to the inherent difficulty in being able to find, fix, track, target, engage, and assess (F2T2EA) mobile ICBM launchers.

Recommendation: In its role as a Combat Support Agency, DTRA should propose to the Joint Staff and USINDOPACOM that they use this scenario or one like it in their TTXs and wargames to help identify, develop, and field campaign plan solutions to counter China's potential use of NSNWs against Taiwan. DTRA should also work with USINDOPACOM to further emphasize training and exercising for conventional-nuclear integration (CNI) and the possible use of NSNWs during a U.S.-PRC crisis. DTRA should also work with USINDOPACOM to develop and accelerate offensive F2T2EA capabilities to track and destroy mobile ballistic missile launchers and naval transport ships as an additional deterrent against a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.

Finding: The PRC will likely analyze Russia's invasion of Ukraine and incorporate lessons learned from the West's support of Kyiv. Russian threats of NSNW use and the cutoff of natural gas had an effect on the type of weapons the West was willing to supply to Ukraine, as well as the level of support from key NATO allies. The PRC may conclude that it has a shorter window of opportunity to take Taiwan, because of the perception

that the time from the initiation of hostilities against Taiwan to U.S. military intervention has shortened. Russia's haphazard planning, execution, logistics, and sustainment of the invasion, along with providing Ukrainian President Zelensky the space and time to galvanize Western support, provides the PRC an important lesson that may alter its calculus and planned timeline.

Recommendation: DTRA should work with the Joint Staff and USINDOPACOM to use a scenario like this to provide subject matter expertise, and exercise support for integrated deterrence training activities with U.S. allies and partners. This support includes providing subject matter expertise for developing AUKUS and partner wargames and senior-leader TTXs. DTRA should also work with the Joint Staff and USINDOPACOM to assist the Joint Force, using scenarios such as these, to help develop and integrate campaign plans to address the operational and strategic risks of supporting the defense of Taiwan.

Scenario 2: China Establishes An Over-the-Horizon Capability in Djibouti

Finding: China has been labeled an "all-weather friend" to nations such as Pakistan because it is perceived to be a strategic partner, a reliable source of trade, and a military ally. Furthermore, the Chinese typically invest in places Western investors do not risk.⁵⁰ It is critical to counter China's BRI investments because, in addition to providing access and influence, the BRI also allows China to export its economic growth model and system of governance, including the public-private partnership (PPP) that leverages capital from the business sector to help fund large infrastructure projects. The United States does not have an investment model comparable to China's BRI and, as a result, it may struggle to counter Chinese influence with poorer nations.

Recommendation: DTRA should work with the Joint Staff and USINDOPACOM, using a scenario such as this one, to motivate and leverage whole-of-government efforts to initiate information operations and military outreach campaigns to counter growing Chinese global influence. DTRA should use scenarios such as this one to support USINDOPACOM campaigning and empower the NGB's SPP and other partner-building initiatives to promote and expand enduring relationships between the United States and partner nations by providing subject matter expertise to counter Chinese military outreach. DTRA should also support GCC campaigning with subject matter expertise that highlights the unsustainability of BRI and the repercussions of Chinese influence on the target nation's sovereignty, while providing a viable alternative through enhanced military engagement and joint exercises with the United States.⁵¹

Finding: The United States may face a crisis with China that crosses multiple geographic Combatant Commands, as China expands its global reach through military partnerships and security assistance programs. It would be advantageous for the United States to determine roles and responsibilities, supporting-supported relationships, lines of communication, and command and control prior to an anticipated conflict.

Recommendation: DTRA should support the Joint Staff, using a scenario such as this one, in its role as a global integrator for the Combatant Commands and assist in identifying and developing coordinated responses to anticipated future threats that reach across multiple AORs. As the United States strengthens its integrated deterrence approach, it should discuss building partner capacity with additional nations to create new partnerships to counter China, while also employing the AUKUS relationships similarly to how it galvanized NATO to support Ukraine against Russia. DTRA could support this effort by developing senior-level TTXs using a scenario like this one to examine how it and the Joint Staff would support a cross-AOR conflict.

Scenario 3: China's Maritime Militia Harasses Taiwanese Ships Around Itu Aba

Finding: China's PAFMM gives it an asymmetric advantage in gray zone maritime competition. China can use the PAFMM to pursue its objectives because they are non-gray hull vessels that remain below the military threshold. China can also portray encounters between supposedly civilian fishing vessels and U.S. warships in ways that will help it win any contest for public opinion. The United States may find itself in a situation where it has to respond to PAFMM provocations while trying to avoid actions that generate negative publicity

or lead to unwanted escalation. The United States is unlikely to develop a paramilitary commercial fishing fleet to match the PAFMM.

Recommendation: USINDOPACOM J2 representatives indicated that significantly more attention has been paid to PAFMM activities in recent years, but observed that even greater efforts to publicly characterize the PAFMM and document its actions would be useful. Using a scenario like this one, DTRA should consider ways that it could help USINDOPACOM plan and prepare to counter and deter PAFMM provocative actions. Clarifying the command and control links between the PAFMM and Chinese senior political and military leadership, for example, could thwart Chinese efforts to plausibly deny responsibility for PAFMM actions. Exploring the use of options such as adding non-lethal weaponry and video recording capabilities to U.S. warships in a scenario-based workshop could help USINDOPACOM plan and prepare to reduce the potential for escalatory encounters.

Finding: Although Itu Aba is Taiwan's most distant occupied island, Taiwan claims a number of small islands that are highly vulnerable to gray zone actions that seek to make their continued occupation untenable. Rather than initiating a large-scale invasion of Taiwan, China may seek to slowly force what it considers its renegade province to abandon its island possessions. Members of the USINDOPACOM commander's staff indicated that a Chinese gray zone campaign against Taiwanese islands was one of the most likely crisis scenarios in the region and noted that establishing crisis communications would be a significant challenge.

Recommendation: DTRA should help USINDOPACOM respond to the possibility of gradual Chinese pressure campaigns by sponsoring research efforts and conducting workshops or tabletop exercises using this scenario or one like it to identify options to establish crisis communications and respond to such campaigns that do not provoke the large-scale conflict with China it seeks to deter.

Scenario 4: China Clashes With Japan Over The Senkaku Islands

Finding: Typical U.S. military scenario planning focuses on the United States coming to the aid of an ally that is attacked by the uniformed military of an adversary. Future scenarios are possible, however, where an adversary uses non-governmental organizations to provoke a violent reaction from a U.S. ally in order to force the United States to choose between supporting an ally who may have employed excessive force or denying that support and weakening the alliance.

Recommendation: USINDOPACOM should include, as part of its planning, this scenario or one like it to fully explore how the actions of non-governmental organizations from both allied and adversary nations may provoke conflict and then identify appropriate rules of engagement and response options. Using this scenario, DTRA could sponsor a workshop with non-governmental organizations in the region to examine this topic.

Finding: China could plausibly use the Senkaku dispute to drive a wedge between the United States and Japan and to win over public opinion in Taiwan. Both China and Taiwan claim the islands and object to the Japanese presence there. The leading Chinese nationalist organization focused on the islands traces its origins to Taiwan. Representatives from USINDOPACOM J3 and J5 noted that China recognizes the importance of access, basing, and overflight in Japan for U.S. military plans in the Western Pacific and will likely seek to divide the United States and Japan whenever possible.

Recommendation: DTRA should sponsor Track 1.5 dialogues with a mix of government officials, participating in an unofficial capacity, and non-governmental experts from the United States, Japan, and Taiwan to understand more clearly the issues regarding the Senkakus and identify options for mitigating possible Chinese efforts to foster divisions. This scenario can serve as the context for these dialogues.

Recommendation: USINDOPACOM should work closely with the Japanese military to consider this scenario and others like it that might lead to either country acting in ways that potentially weaken the alliance, and

then identify possible response options. DTRA could assist this effort by using this scenario or further development of it to sponsor tabletop exercises to explore those potential responses.

APPENDIX

CHINA'S ASCENDANCE UNDER XI JINPING

Over the past four decades, the PRC has risen from a poverty-stricken nation under Mao Zedong to a global economic powerhouse under Xi Jinping.⁵² The United States still has the largest economy in the world with a gross domestic product (GDP) of \$22.9 trillion, but China is second (GDP of \$17.7 trillion)⁵³ and is central to the international system as it is home to the world's largest population. China is also the world's largest trading partner and global lender.⁵⁴ Xi's vision is to have a unified and resurgent China that will be on par with or surpass the United States on the global stage.⁵⁵

In addition to its economic prowess, Beijing is modernizing its military and nuclear weapons programs to pursue a national strategy of power expansion in support of its long-term goals of global prominence and a reformed global governance system that aligns more closely with its norms and values. In 2020, the CCP announced a plan for the PLA to modernize its capabilities by networking them into a system of systems for "intelligitized" warfare.⁵⁶ Under President Xi Jinping, Beijing champions an all-of-nation strategy to accelerate the integrated development of mechanization and information and boost the speed of modernization by 2027. The goal is to achieve "basically complete" modernization of national defense and the military by 2035, transforming it into a world-class force by 2049, which is the 100th anniversary of the CCP's founding.⁵⁷

These ambitions present a direct challenge to the United States and its national security interests over which nation will dominate the international order and serve as the world's political and economic model—the authoritarianism and state capitalism of China or the liberal democracy and market economy of the United States.⁵⁸ There is a looming threat of military conflict due to what Washington perceives as a strategic competition with a challenger that layers authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy.⁵⁹

The United States-China strategic competition is highlighted by tensions over the state of Washington's ties with Taiwan and its 23 million citizens. While Washington has adhered to the One-China policy for over four decades, Beijing has often accused the United States of reneging on its 1972 commitment to maintain a strictly unofficial relationship with Taiwan, which China's leaders argue is led by "separatists."⁶⁰ China sees the United States as supporting a sovereign Taiwan, which conflicts with its view of the island as being part of the mainland and its intentions to "reunify" with Taiwan.

Most recently, at the 20th National Congress, Xi promoted "national rejuvenation" and opposition to Taiwan's independence.⁶¹ Despite China's stated intent to reunify with Taiwan, Taiwanese leaders have vowed to defend the island. Questions of when and how China would attempt to seize Taiwan have been the subject of speculation. In the face of continued speculation of an inevitable Chinese invasion of Taiwan, President Biden has said there is no change to the historic U.S. policy of "strategic ambiguity" toward Taiwan; however, he has reiterated his commitment to send U.S. troops to defend Taiwan if China invades.⁶²

In addition to tensions with the United States over the future of Taiwan, China also finds its ties with its neighbors strained, largely over territorial and maritime disputes. Japan and China jointly assert claims over the Senkaku Islands, which Japan claimed in 1895. The islands, located northeast of Taiwan, may have significant oil and natural gas reserves, and are near prominent shipping routes and fishing areas.⁶³ In 2022, China signed a controversial bilateral security agreement with the Solomon Islands, which is seen as a

component of its long-term strategy of displacing the United States as the dominant power in the Western Pacific.⁶⁴

China has been successful economically, but less successful in positioning itself as the region's preeminent security partner. It has therefore sought to leverage its economic power to gain footholds throughout the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. Xi launched the BRI project to invest in infrastructure, digital, and health projects to build financial, cultural, technological, physical, and political influence throughout Central Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.⁶⁵ Chinese private security companies often accompany Chinese BRI investments to protect Chinese nationals and material assets.⁶⁶

China's increasingly aggressive behavior and willingness to militarily test the United States and its Asian partners in the Indo-Pacific region increases the likelihood of spiraling escalation between the region's powers. China built and militarized several artificial islands in the South China Sea. It seeks to intimidate smaller states into abandoning maritime claims in the region by establishing air defense identification zones over the islands and using the islands as hubs to target and harass commercial ships, including a Vietnamese fishing boat that sunk in a 2020 confrontation.⁶⁷ In 2022, Chinese fighter aircraft conducted an unsafe intercept of a Canadian military aircraft. In a separate encounter, a Chinese fighter released chaff after unsafely flying in the path of an Australian surveillance aircraft over international waters in the South China Sea, escalating a dangerous situation, as the chaff was sucked into the Australian aircraft's engines.⁶⁸

China has intensified incursions into Taiwanese and Japanese airspace, and its coast guard and maritime militias routinely harass Philippine, Malaysian, and Indonesian vessels.⁶⁹ In summer 2022, China fired five ballistic missiles into Japan's exclusive economic zone during a military exercise, demonstrating that it can strike Japan and U.S. military bases in the region.⁷⁰

As China pursues an all-of-nation strategy to achieve "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" by 2049, it is expected to continue its military and nuclear weapon modernization programs, while pursuing Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near term and revising the international order to support its nationalist ambitions in the long term.⁷¹ In the decades before it achieves its goal of "restoring" its global prominence by mid-century, China will continue to challenge the United States and its allies along gray zone flashpoints in ways that could spiral into multi-domain and all-out kinetic conflict between the two nuclear powers. Japan's Defense Ministry has warned that Beijing's rapid military expansion threatens to upset the balance of power between the United States and China and undermine regional peace, particularly in relation to Taiwan.⁷²

GRAY ZONE CONCEPT

Gray zone conflict is defined as competitive interaction among and within state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality. It is characterized by ambiguity about the nature of the conflict, opacity of the parties involved, or uncertainty about the relevant policy and legal frameworks.⁷³ The concept of gray zone is not new; it is the latest iteration of labels applied to this form of conflict. Gray zone conflict has been described previously as irregular warfare, low-intensity conflict, asymmetric warfare, military operations other than war (MOOTW), and small wars.⁷⁴

For this study, gray zone conflict comprises Chinese actions that challenge U.S. national security interests but are difficult to respond to immediately with military force because of ambiguity concerning the nature of the conflict, the parties involved, and/or the relevant policy and legal frameworks. In addition, these actions seek to achieve Beijing's objectives more quickly, more efficiently, less noticeably, and with fewer losses.

The PRC has long sought to integrate non-traditional security measures that limit the potential for military conflict into the broader pursuit of traditional national security interests, to include protecting China's sovereignty, security, economic development, and domestic stability. Prioritization of these efforts created

the conditions for the PLA to incorporate non-war military activities (NWMA) across the spectrum of conflict as an important element of China's military doctrine.⁷⁵ President Xi codified the emphasis on non-traditional measures when he recently signed an order providing specific "legal underpinning for non-war military operations" designed to prevent and neutralize challenges to China's national interests, to maintain national sovereignty and regional stability, and to standardize the PLA's planning and conduct of non-military operations.⁷⁶

Accordingly, Beijing has employed a range of non-traditional measures to influence and intimidate its smaller neighbors, including Taiwan and Vietnam, over territorial disputes and sovereignty claims in the East and South China Seas.⁷⁷ Despite the increase in its nuclear deterrent and military capabilities, China has thus far sought to avoid escalatory actions that could spiral into direct, armed conflict with the United States and instead demonstrated a preference for gray zone tactics.

The goal of gray zone conflict is to subdue an enemy through exhaustion rather than force.⁷⁸ The use of these micro-aggressions seems logical because China's official position is that disputes should be solved by peaceful negotiations.⁷⁹ More specifically, the PLA seeks to "manage and control crises" to prevent war in the face of increasing tensions by using low-intensity force in peacetime to warn "relevant parties not to cross [China's] redlines."⁸⁰ In November 2022, President Xi reiterated Taiwan's independence as a redline that cannot be crossed in the United States-China relationship.⁸¹ Under the rubric of this grand strategy, China identifies national sovereignty, security, and development interests as its main issues.⁸² Beijing pursues these goals through various means, including the use of gray zone tactics in the quest to demonstrate capabilities, deter adversaries, and secure its goals without firing a shot.

CHINA'S THREAT PERCEPTIONS AND MILITARY MODERNIZATION

The traditional tenets of China's foreign policy rest on *Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence* that have guided its foreign policy since 1954 when China was attempting outreach to the non-Communist nations of Asia: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity; mutual nonaggression; noninterference in internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence.⁸³ Research demonstrates the psychological trauma derived from a historical tragedy often affects a nation's self-image and influences the way its leaders may perceive and respond to threats.⁸⁴ Xi Jinping's new security concept and global ambitions uproot China's traditional tenets, as he seeks to displace U.S. influence and establish China's dominance in the region.

Beijing's national security approach is driven by the CCP's threat perception that China faces unprecedented security risks, which are primarily associated with sovereignty and domestic security issues the CCP believes could undermine communist rule and its socialist system. These perceived risk areas include Taiwan's independence, Uyghur and Tibetan separatism, Korean peninsula instability, territorial disputes with India, and challenges to control disputed areas in the East and South China Seas.

In addition to these close-border issues, China believes the U.S. military presence and the U.S.-led security architecture in Asia seek to constrain its rise and interfere with its sovereignty.⁸⁵ In 2021, China protested the launch of the AUKUS security partnership, which includes enhanced information and technology sharing and a commitment to deeper integration of security and defense-related industrial bases and supply chains, particularly in the areas of cyber, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and cruise missiles. The United States' and United Kingdom's plan to share nuclear-powered attack submarines with Australia further incited the Chinese, who believe the AUKUS partnership is part of a United States-led "West" coalition with Japan designed to contain China and preempt its rise.

In response to a joint statement by the AUKUS countries that highlighted a commitment to freedom, rule of law, and respect for sovereignty, Chinese Foreign Minister and State Councilor Wang Yi listed “five harms to the region” caused by AUKUS, cautioning it may:

1. Trigger the risk of nuclear proliferation;
2. Induce a new round of arms race;
3. Undermine regional prosperity and stability;
4. Sabotage the building of a nuclear-free zone in Southeast Asia; and
5. Lead to the resurgence of the Cold War mentality.⁸⁶

In response to these perceived threats and President Xi’s own global power ambitions, the Defense Intelligence Agency assessed China has focused on strengthening the PLA as a force and expanding the scope of the PLA modernization effort, affirming its overseas role and providing the institutional framework for PLA military growth beyond traditional security threats.⁸⁷ For example, the PLA Navy is now larger than the U.S. Navy and China’s “carrier-killer” missiles threaten U.S. carrier-based power projection in the Indo-Pacific region. As part of its modernization efforts, the PLA has also undergone reforms to focus on “jointness,” which is the process of cultivating a culture, to include training and exercises, establishing joint theater commands and a Joint Staff Department, and integrating each military service branch into a cohesive fighting force.⁸⁸

In its 2019 white paper, *China’s National Defense in the New Era*, the PRC outlines the rationale for its national defense policy. The PRC’s efforts are designed to build a stronger military as the “realignment of international powers accelerates” and the “configuration of strategic power is becoming more balanced,” the paper says. The paper argues this is necessary because the international system and order are undermined by hegemonism, power politics, unilateralism, and constant regional conflicts and wars.⁸⁹ China argues the United States is engaged in technological and institutional innovation and seeks absolute superiority by adopting unilateral policies, increasing defense spending, and pushing for additional cyber, missile defense, and nuclear capability – all of which China believes is designed to undermine global strategic stability.⁹⁰

CHINA’S NUCLEAR PROGRAM

China became a nuclear weapons state on October 16, 1964, making it the fifth state to cross the nuclear threshold. The majority of China’s current nuclear arsenal is land-based ICBMs (silo and mobile), along with a smaller number of submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) deployed on four ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), and a limited number of strategic bombers, thus giving China’s nuclear triad a credible second-strike capability. China declares a no first use (NFU) policy and its nuclear doctrine is a “self-defensive nuclear strategy” designed to deter attacks under the deterrence strategy of “assured retaliation,” with a “lean and efficient” arsenal capable of surviving an initial attack and retaliating with nuclear strikes that inflict unacceptable damage on the attacking nation.⁹¹

This defense-based nuclear dynamic changed drastically under President Xi’s modernization efforts and provided China the capability to hold the United States, its forces, and regional allies at risk. In written testimony to the House Defense Appropriations subcommittee, former Commander, U.S. USSTRATCOM, Admiral Charles Richard, testified that China is undergoing “breathtaking expansion” of its strategic and nuclear arsenals. Admiral Richard noted a Chinese HGV flew 25,000 miles for more than 100 minutes, making its flight “the greatest distance and longest flight time of any land attack weapon system of any nation to date.” He also argued the PRC is investing in hypersonic and directed energy weapons technology for global strike and defeat of missile defense systems, anti-missile, anti-satellite, and anti-drone capabilities. Richard highlighted that China increased construction of ICBM fields in western China, with each containing

approximately 120 missile silos.⁹² The Department of Defense estimates the PRC's accelerated nuclear expansion may enable it to field 700 deliverable nuclear warheads by 2027, with the likelihood that China intends to have at least 1,000 nuclear warheads by 2030.⁹³

UNITED STATES NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGIES

Despite warnings of the potential gains for China, the United States has struggled historically to offer a competing alternative to China's Indo-Pacific investment and diplomatic outreach models. Recognizing this vulnerability, the United States released its *Pacific Partnership Strategy of the United States* in 2022, with the objective of ensuring geopolitical competition with China does not undermine the sovereignty and security of the Pacific Islands, the United States, or its allies and partners.⁹⁴

The 2022 *National Security Strategy* (NSS) recognizes the United States is in a strategic competition to shape the future of the international order. The strategy also affirms that Russia and China pose the most pressing strategic challenges to international peace and stability by waging or preparing for wars of aggression, actively undermining democracy, and leveraging technology and supply chains for coercion and repression. The NSS specifically notes China is the most consequential geopolitical challenge and that it is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to meet that objective.⁹⁵

The 2022 NSS declares that to counter China's goal of reshaping the international order, the United States seeks to secure a world that is free from aggression, coercion, and intimidation by investing in the sources and tools of American power and influence, building a coalition of nations to solve shared challenges, and modernizing and strengthening our military.⁹⁶ The NSS outlines the U.S. strategy towards the PRC in three lines of effort (LOEs):

1. Invest in the foundations of our strength at home;
2. Align our efforts with our network of allies and partners; and
3. Compete responsibly with the PRC to defend our interests and build our vision for the future.

The first two LOEs—invest and align—are aimed at outcompeting China in the Indo-Pacific and global spheres, and in the technological, economic, political, military, intelligence, and global governance domains. The NSS recognizes the next 10 years will be the decisive decade in the United States-China competition and that the choices and priorities we pursue today will determine our competitive position into the future.⁹⁷ These 10 years fall within the scope of this study.

THE GREAT REJUVENATION AND CHINA'S AMBITIONS

Xi Jinping's directive to modernize and expand China's military and nuclear forces will likely increase his desire to contest the U.S. military presence in the Indo-Pacific region.⁹⁸ In March 2022, the USINDOPACOM Commander echoed this sentiment in his statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee: "The PRC is in execution of a dedicated campaign utilizing all forms of national power to uproot the rules-based international order in ways that benefit themselves at the expense of all others. Their will and their resources to contest long standing international norms are evident across every regional and functional domain."⁹⁹

Despite Washington's continued acknowledgment of the "One-China" policy, the future of Taiwan remains the issue most likely to push United States-China relations into a crisis. Taiwan dominated the discussion during talks between President Joe Biden and President Xi Jinping in November 2022. President Biden assured his counterpart that the United States' One-China policy has not changed, while also chiding Xi about Beijing's "coercive and increasingly aggressive actions toward Taiwan."

President Xi responded that he sees the United States as causing trouble over Taiwan and stated, “Taiwan independence is as incompatible to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait as fire and water.” Xi further argued that Taiwan is “the core of China’s core interests, the foundation of political foundations in the China-United States relationship, a red line that cannot be crossed in the China-United States relationship.”¹⁰⁰ President Biden reinforced that United States-China competition should not veer into conflict and that both powers must manage conflict responsibly. Both powers agreed that a nuclear war should never be fought and can never be won.

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