Conventional Military Doctrines and U.S.-China Military Engagement in the West Pacific

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Abstract: This article explores how conventional military doctrines shape U.S.-China military engagement in the West Pacific under varying degrees of cooperation, competition and potential conflicts. Although military doctrines possess a certain level of influence on the ways and means of engaging each other in military terms, such engagement is not confined to using deadly force with a clear aim to destroy the other party. Instead, these doctrines can act as an instrument to forestall conflicts by maintaining credible deterrence. As rational actors that follow clear rules of military engagement, both the United States and China are fully aware of the defensive, offensive and deterrent value of their respective military doctrines, as well as the consequences of a potential conflict; and they

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have tried to expand cooperation on a number of non-traditional security issues. However, given their forward deployment-oriented military doctrines and the rising role of non-state actors, the United States and China are very likely to be engaged in an unintended escalation of conflicts if each holds a rigid view toward the other's military doctrine and fails to maintain stable military ties based on timely communication and constructive interaction.

Keywords: United States; China; conventional warfare; military doctrine; West Pacific.

The world order is transforming rapidly from unipolarity to multipolarity.¹ This systemic change, apart from many other impacts, is demanding a greater role from the militaries of great powers to counter threats emanating not only from states, but increasingly from non-state actors as well. Against this backdrop, states are arming their militaries with advanced weapons, superior technology, and unmatched capabilities of lethality. Nevertheless, anxiety about other states, especially one's peer competitors, always remains, whereas the uncertainty in the behavior of the latter augments the former. This security dilemma was perhaps best described by Leon Trotsky who argued that "you may not be interested in war, but war may be interested in you."²

¹A number of scholars have interpreted the "transformation in world order" from various standpoints. Francis Fukuyama presented the idea of a unipolar world order in his *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1992). Before that, Charles Krauthammer argued that "The center of world power is the unchallenged superpower, the United States" in "The Unipolar Moment," in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (1990/1991), p. 23. However, John J. Mearsheimer lamented the collapse of the bipolar world order and predicted the emergence of a multipolar international system in "Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 260, No. 2 (August 1990), pp. 35–50. Later on, he made similar argument in his articles including "A Realist Reply," *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Summer 1995), pp. 82–93; "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1995), pp. 5–49; and "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order," *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Spring 2019), pp. 7–50.

²Martin van Creveld, *More on War* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. vii.

Indeed, situations in international relations are not so bright as they appear to be. The misfortune in great power relations is such that John Mearsheimer argues that peace is wonderful, and "I like it as much as the next man, and have no wish to be willfully gloomy at a moment when optimism about the future shape of the world abounds."³ States can hardly be sure about the perceptions and intentions of other states, especially great powers, since they inherit some offensive military capabilities and are likely to use it. Although the chances of cooperation still exist, the potential of conflict is hiking considerably. In the West Pacific, a clear, vivid, intense and concentrated security competition can be observed between the United States and China, which is characterized by enhanced conventional military capabilities and vulnerabilities on both sides with bitter history and Clausewitzian "primordial violence," or the "blind natural force."⁴ Hence, the possibilities of a limited conflict between the two conventional militaries are gaining traction.

History shows that many wars and military conflicts were the products of deception and misperception, which sometimes resulted in inadvertent escalation. Alternatively, it is safe to argue that miscalculation remains at the forefront in generating conflict. In this sense, a state's military doctrine, as an instrument of its power, is of undeniable significance. Military doctrine retains latent impact in shaping the contours of a military conflict and is used as a referent object here to help us understand the increasingly complex relationship between the United States and China, especially in the West Pacific. The use of conventional military capabilities with the aim of projecting power, ensuring freedom of action and deterring potential enemies requires certain doctrines to maximize their effect. This is because, in the modern context, a military may need to perform different roles and tasks, including, among others, preserving a formidable fighting force capable of undertaking both defensive and offensive military operations, taking on military operations other than war, and being prepared to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) when needed.

This article first highlights the significance of military doctrines and provides an overview of the conventional military doctrines in the U.S. and

³Mearsheimer, "Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War."

⁴Carl von Clausewitz, edited by Beatrice Heuser and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, *On War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 89.

Chinese contexts. It then explains the multi-vectored relationship between the United States and China while considering their intense security competition, potential conflicts and the opportunities of cooperation. It concludes by discussing the implications of such doctrinal orientations on the background of Clausewitz's theory on Trinity.

Military Doctrines in the U.S. and Chinese Contexts

In the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, one of the many meanings of the word "doctrine" is "a military principle or set of strategies."⁵ The interpretation of "doctrine" makes it clear that it is not just a word, but rather a term that refers to a complex phenomenon involving armed forces and their respective methods in achieving envisaged aims and objectives. Furthermore, the *Merriam-Webster* cited the Truman Doctrine that illustrated the position and policy of governments in international relations.⁶ Therefore, a doctrine may not only be military, but it can also be political or the combination of both while employing other sectors as well, in order to achieve a state's objectives. Quite succinctly, Aaron P. Jackson argued that "military doctrine is a product of its environment."⁷ British maritime strategist Sir Julian Corbett was quoted by Geoffrey Sloan that a military doctrine is the "soul of warfare."⁸ Douglas W. Skinner noted that "(military) doctrine is a level of abstraction and generality higher than strategy. Doctrine is a guide to thought on how to employ strategy and tactics. Commanders formulate their strategy, employ tactics, then appeal to doctrine for how to combine these elements effectively in battle."⁹ Clearly, both of the arguments from

⁵"Definition of Doctrine," *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/doctrine>.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Aaron P. Jackson, *The Roots of Military Doctrine: Change and Continuity in Understanding the Practice of Warfare* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute Press, US Army Combined Arms Center, 2013), p. 99.

⁸Geoffrey Sloan, "Military Doctrine, Command Philosophy and the Generation of Fighting Power: Genesis and Theory," *International Affairs*, Vol. 88, No. 2 (March 2012), pp. 243–263.

⁹Douglas W. Skinner, "Airland Battle Doctrine," Professional Paper 463 (Alexandria, Virginia: Center for Naval Analyses, September 1988), p. 29.

Corbett and Skinner point out that a military doctrine is a basic framework that guides commanders in executing operations.

A military doctrine is a guiding framework for employing strategies and tactics.

Realists, as positionalists,¹⁰ assume military power to be an instrument in preserving the sovereign status of the state as well as an important aspect in maintaining deterrence and the sustenance of the status quo. Although nuclear weapons have diminished the chances of war in great power politics,

conventional weapons — due to their flexibility, maneuverability and adaptability — are still relevant. As John Mearsheimer asserts, “there is no question that great-power war is less likely in a nuclear world, but great powers still compete for security even under the nuclear shadow, sometimes intensely. . . and war between them remains a real possibility.”¹¹ Both the United States and China possess significant conventional military capabilities which are employed, time and again, to achieve their policy objectives. Thus, it is worth looking into their respective conventional military doctrines that retain the potential in shaping their cooperation, competition and conflicts within a geographically contained theater, most likely the West Pacific.

During the Obama era, the Pivot to Asia or Rebalance to Asia by the United States was operationalized by the Air-Sea Battle¹² Doctrine, or its

¹⁰Kenneth Waltz argued that Realists are positionalists who tend to preserve their acquired position in the international system with a special attention on climbing up the ladder of relative power or at least try to maintain the status quo in their favor. For more detail, see Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979), pp. 91–92, pp. 127–128; Likewise, John Mearsheimer quoted Grieco and regarded positionalists to be “defensive positionalists.” See Joseph M. Grieco, “Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism,” *International Organization*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Summer 1988), p. 500; and John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), p. 21. For more on positionalists, see Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 19–49.

¹¹Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 84.

¹²U.S. Department of Defense, “Air-Sea Battle: Service Collaboration to Address Anti-Access & Area Denial Challenges,” Washington, D.C., May 2013.

alternate names as the Joint Concept of Operational Access (JCOA) and Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JAM-GC).¹³ Conceivably, the Air-Sea Battle is pivoted upon close cooperation between the U.S. Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard in conducting operations and draws its soul from Air-Land Battle of the Cold War that stressed unprecedented collaboration between ground and air assets. In comparison, China envisaged the Active Defense Doctrine¹⁴ and clearly stated that “we will not attack unless we are attacked, but we will surely counterattack if attacked.”¹⁵ Chinese anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategies comprising nearly all the domains of war serve as the basis of Active Defense.¹⁶ Mainly due to the geography of the West Pacific, the PLA Navy and Air Force are armed with various guided weapons, including 22 types of cruise missiles,¹⁷ and are being equipped with unmanned platforms for gathering Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR).

Understandably, both the United States and China are historic great powers and their respective doctrines are the reflections of exceptional strategic histories. On one hand, the United States fought an eight-year-long

¹³Joachim Krause and Sebastian Bruns, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Naval Strategy and Security* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), pp. 182–187.

¹⁴The changing character of warfare has profound effect on the doctrinal evolution. The PLA is no exception. The PLA transformed itself from Mao Zedong’s People’s War Doctrine towards Deng Xiaoping’s People’s War under Modern Conditions and later unofficially adopted Unrestricted Warfare. However, currently, the PLA employs the Active Defense doctrine. For more detail, see Richard Bitzinger, “Modernising China’s Military, 1997–2012,” *China Perspectives*, No. 4 (2011), pp. 7–15; and Larry M. Wortzel, *Dictionary of Contemporary Chinese Military History* (Westport, Connecticut, United States of America: Greenwood Press, 1999).

¹⁵“China’s Military Strategy,” The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, May 2015, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/index.htm>.

¹⁶Fravel’s latest book is a remarkable piece in understanding China’s doctrinal thinking. See M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China’s Military Strategy Since 1949* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019).

¹⁷Dennis M. Gormley, Andrew S. Erickson, and Yuan Jingdong, *A Low-Visibility Force Multiplier: Assessing China’s Cruise Missile Ambitions* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2014), pp. 16–18, pp. 25–26, p. 60 and pp. 113–116; and Kelvin Wong, “China’s Hongda Details HD-1 Supersonic Cruise Missile Family,” *Jane’s 360*, November 15, 2018, <https://www.janes.com/article/84638/china-s-hongda-details-hd-1-supersonic-cruise-missile-family>.

War of Independence from 1775 to 1783. The geography of America enabled it to focus both on continental and naval power. Notably during the war, the first submarine, known as "Turtle," was used in an unsuccessful attempt to destroy the British 64-gun naval vessel *HMS Eagle* in September 1776 at the Hudson River.¹⁸ Later, the American Civil War and Union General Winfield Scott's "Anaconda Strategy" cemented the U.S. belief in using naval power in streams and rivers, which was referred to by General Clark as "floating artillery."¹⁹ The Barbary Wars lasting from 1801 to 1815 and the Philippine-American War of 1898 also saw the remarkable employment of naval power. It is worth mentioning that U.S. naval commander Alfred Thayer Mahan's seminal work on maritime power greatly influenced the U.S.' motivation in focusing on the naval dimension of power, following the argument of President John Adams that "naval power... is the natural defense of the United States."²⁰

China was a strong naval power in much of its ancient history.

On the other hand, however, it is a flawed concept that China had never been an effective maritime power, as Zheng He of the Ming Dynasty led his fleet with overwhelming fighting force to the South Pacific and the Strait of Malacca during the years

from 1405 to 1433.²¹ This awesome fleet left an indelible mark on the strategic thinking of the PLA. Likewise, Chairman Mao's decision to launch amphibious attacks on the Kuomintang (KMT)-occupied islands, such as Hainan in April 1950, manifested the belief in the efficacy of naval power,²²

¹⁸Antony Preston, *Submarine Warfare: An Illustrated History* (London: Brown Books, 1998), p. 8.

¹⁹General Wesley K. Clark (Ret.), *American Military History: From Colonials to Counter-insurgents* (The Great Courses: Audio Book, 2018).

²⁰Nathan Miller, *The U.S. Navy: A History*, Third Edition (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1997), p. 9.

²¹Lo Jung-pang, edited by Bruce A. Elleman, *China as a Sea Power 1127–1368: A Preliminary Survey of the Maritime Expansion and Naval Exploits of the Chinese People During the Southern Song and Yuan Periods* (Aberdeen, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), p. 334.

²²Li Xiaobing, *A History of the Modern Chinese Army* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), pp. 133–134.

despite the fact that the PLA eventually failed in conquering the Dengbu and Kinmen islands.²³

Table 1. Quantitative Balance of the U.S. and Chinese Naval Forces.²⁴

	U.S. Navy	PLA Navy
Budget	\$180 billion	\$57 billion ²⁵
Active Personnel	323,950	240,000
Aircraft Carriers	11	2+
Submarines	68	62+
Major Surface Vessels	107	83+
Logistics and Support	14	186
Combat Aircraft	987	374+
Helicopters for Anti-Subma- rine Warfare (ASW) and Rescue	670	113
Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs)	91	Unknown number of BZK-005 and BZK-007
Unmanned Surface and Un- derwater Vehicles	Several units of EdgeTech 2200 and Sea Hunter	Several units of Sea-Fly, C-1500, and A-1150
AWACS	80	17+
ASW Aircraft	120	7+

Source: Compiled by the author.

In this regard, Svechin believes that “doctrine is the daughter of history”²⁶ and John Mearsheimer further amplifies this argument by averring that “great powers inherently possess some offensive military capability.”²⁷ However, this offensive military power is refined, honed and executed to meet the policy objectives by means of a doctrine for defensive

²³Laurie Burkitt, Andrew Scobell, and Larry M. Wortzel, eds., *The Lessons of History: The Chinese People’s Liberation Army at 75* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2003), p. 166.

²⁴Most of the data were taken from the year 2018. However, acquisition of equipment is fast-paced. Please see: *Ibid.*, pp. 46–61 and pp. 249–259.

²⁵David Lague and Benjamin Kang Lim, “Special Report: China’s Vast Fleet Is Tipping the Balance in the Pacific,” *Reuters*, April 30, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-army-navy-specialreport-idUSKCN1S612W>.

²⁶John Gooch, ed., *The Origins of Contemporary Doctrine*, The Occasional Papers 30 (Camberley, UK: Strategic and Combat Studies Institute, 1997), p. 7.

²⁷Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 30.

and offensive purposes, as well as to maintain credible deterrence. In the contemporary era, both the U.S.' and Chinese naval forces are attracting attention from their respective administrations who are investing heavily in surface, underwater and naval air power with a special focus on naval intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms to enhance strike capabilities (see Table 1). For instance, the Chinese PL-XX air-to-air missile is powered by ramjet engine with "possible mid-course updates" using the Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS). Fighter aircraft along with the Active Electronically Scanned Array (AESA) radar could enhance the PL-20's striking range to more than 400 kilometers.²⁸ These missiles are likely to arm the PLA Navy's current and future strike aircraft including the J-15 and J-11B. Similarly, both the U.S.' and PLA navies have armed their vessels with electromagnetic rail-guns and point defense systems such as close-in weapon systems (CIWS). Also, guided missile destroyers, nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines such as the U.S. Navy's Virginia-class and the PLA Navy's Jin-class submarines, and advanced aircraft carriers are the latest additions in the arsenal of both navies.

U.S.-China Military Competition in the West Pacific

Great powers are structurally and inherently embroiled in a constant state of competition. The prospects for competition increase with the deployment of their respective armed forces, especially in such a contested theater as the West Pacific. The competition is further exacerbated in the presence of conventional military doctrines. Here, the importance of buck-catchers rises which somehow take the shape of regional allies; and the doctrines provide space for such endeavors. For instance, the military presence in South Korea greatly helps the United States in practicing its Air-Sea Battle doctrine. Likewise, the considerable U.S. military presence in Japan, the Philippines and Guam, along with deployment in other East Asian countries, critically support and enhance the operational capabilities of the U.S. Armed Forces.

As discussed above, a doctrine shapes and shakes the contours of warfare and acts as an enabling instrument in overcoming Clausewitzian

²⁸The International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2018: The Annual Assessment of Global Military Capabilities and Defence Economics* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 25.

“friction.” It helps in setting and determining the trajectory of power projection; at the same time, it maintains deterrence. Nonetheless, in case of deterrence failure, it provides guidelines on responding to the situation in defensive or offensive manners. In the same vein, it reflects as well as demands the cognitive and intuitive approach of the organization, especially operational level commanders and forward deployed forces. Furthermore, a doctrine usually has great significance in generating competition, as it adds value to the fighting forces in psychological, cognitive and intuitive dimensions.

Both the U.S.’ and Chinese doctrines tend to generate competition, which significantly enhances the need of forward bases. The United States has established military bases in Japan, Republic of Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, Marshall Islands, Singapore, Australia, Hawaii and the British Indian Ocean Territory — Diego Garcia (Figure 1).²⁹ These installations are of great strategic value and

Both the U.S. and Chinese military doctrines tend to generate competition.

Fig. 1. U.S. Military Bases in the Indo-Pacific.

Source: “The invisible empire: Why the United States is not seen as a ‘foreign’ threat,” Class Conscious, May 5, 2018, <https://classconscious.org/2018/05/05/the-invisible-empire-why-the-united-states-is-not-seen-as-a-foreign-threat/>.

²⁹James Hackett, ed., *The Military Balance 2017: The Annual Assessment of Global Military Capabilities and Defence Economics* (London, England: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2017), p. 238.

retain the latent impact in turning the course of a military conflict. Even when conflicts are absent, these installations already momentarily place intense security competition in the foreground.

China has responded to U.S. dispositions by adopting the Active Defense Doctrine while building the reefs in the South China Sea into islands potentially for military purposes. These islands referred to as “giant aircraft carriers” by John Mearsheimer are perceived as serious threats by the virtue of versatile firepower along with ISR capabilities. Moreover, these power-projecting platforms provide the PLA with a variety of operational capabilities, as they can be utilized by Vertical Take-Off Landing (VTOL) and Short Take-Off Landing (STOVL) aircraft for rapid operations. Likewise, Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) helicopters and underwater surveillance instruments have the potential to reduce the operational capabilities of the U.S. Navy. Consequently, these platforms act as the constituent elements in the PLA’s A2/AD strategies.

At present, there are roughly 22 different types of cruise missiles in service with a considerable choice of launching platforms. The indigenously developed ramjet-powered CX-1, with a top speed of nearly Mach 3 as well as 280 kilometers’ range, and the air-launched YJ-100 with a range of nearly 2,000 kilometers are among those cruise missiles regarded as the lynchpin of Chinese A2/AD strategies.³⁰ These missiles can readily change the operational environment in the West Pacific. Meanwhile, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) — in particular its “21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR)” — can also be interpreted as a “soft” A2/AD strategy, which is intended to provide an alternative and avoid the growing competition in the West Pacific.

Potentiality of U.S.-China Conflicts

At the very heart of the Offensive Realism theory, “international politics is ineluctably conflictive — a harsh, unrelenting competition — because there are no offsetting factors tempering the great powers’ struggle for

³⁰Zachary Keck, “For Sale: China’s Mach 3 Anti-Ship Missile,” *The National Interest*, December 2, 2014, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/sale-china%E2%80%99s-mach-3-anti-ship-missile-11763>.

power and security.”³¹ The school of thought declares anarchy to be the primary driving force behind this relentless struggle for power which creates bitter competition and generates conflict, for cooperation is hard to achieve and maintain. Historically, after the devastating American Civil War (1861–1865), U.S. Army Major General Sherman discouraged the path of war and reasoned that “war is hell.”³² However, with the modernization, advancement, and subsequent expansion in the domains of war, characterized by the changing feature of war and warfare, the modern battlefield is complex, dynamic and dangerous. This has serious effects on the trajectory of great-power relationships, which are manifested in the Chinese and American conventional military doctrines that retain potential to generate and escalate conflicts.

For instance, conflicts may arise from the execution of dangerous maneuvers resulting in collision of aircraft and naval vessels, as both doctrines of China’s Active Defense and the U.S. Air-Sea Battle have a dominating and demanding role from air and naval assets. Similarly, the possibilities of a conflict originating from space, cyber, electronic and electromagnetic spectra cannot be overruled. The epicenter of cyber and electronic attack is hard to determine, yet they hold significant power in breaking down and paralyzing radars and command-and-control platforms. Despite a breakthrough in military technology, the employment of laser weapons remains invisible, which critically generates chances of its use for provocation. The Clausewitzian axiom of “escalation” can be the result of such an intentional or unintentional provocation.³³ Dean Cheng noted that the PLA “does not seem to exhibit nearly the same degree of concern with inadvertent wars or the lessons from World War I as is

³¹Jim Rolfe, ed., *The Asia-Pacific: A Region in Transition* (Honolulu, Hawaii: Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2004), p. 57.

³²Spencer C. Tucker, ed., *The European Powers in the First World War: An Encyclopedia* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), p. 172; and Cathal J. Nolan, *Wars of the Age of Louis XIV, 1650–1715: An Encyclopedia of Global Warfare and Civilization*, Greenwood Encyclopedias of the Modern World Wars (Westport, Connecticut, United States of America: Greenwood Press, 2008), p. xx.

³³Clausewitz, *On War*, p. xxx.

common among American decision-makers.”³⁴ However, it does not necessarily make the PLA an irrational fighting force.

**The U.S.’ and China’s
military doctrines
both highlight a
demanding role from
their strategic assets.**

The geography and terrain which play a vital role in maneuver and conduct of both defensive and offensive operations are significant for maintaining deterrence where a single miscalculation can lead to military conflicts. The Asia-Pacific region, in particular the West Pacific, where the fate of the Imperial Japan was decided during World War II, has a diverse geography. Air and

naval power played a decisive role while paving the way for amphibious attacks for the occupation of territories and islands.

Likewise, navigational errors arising primarily from individual errors or faulty equipment can also lead to destructive results. For example, at the height of the Cold War on September 26, 1983, Soviet Lieutenant Colonel Stanislav Petrov correctly judged the Soviet early-warning radar report of a missile launch from Montana of the United States, followed by a full-scale attack towards Moscow, to be false; his remarkably correct judgement prevented a nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the United States.³⁵ In retrospect, Petrov had realized the vast distance between the Soviet Union and the United States and was able to take such a risk. Petrov was fortunate enough, but not everyone is. What if Petrov had been wrong? Surely, the Soviets might have faced a devastating blow which they would have detected in time but did not take corresponding actions to. In the case of the West Pacific where conventional military forces maintain considerable combat readiness, there will be little or no time for taking such risks; and the doctrine does not provide such guidelines if a likely scenario arises. Although the early-warning platforms have not only increased but are more capable and versatile as well, missiles with higher speed have less time to travel. Here, the third level of a doctrine — that is, cognition and intuition — can assist the war-fighters.

³⁴Dean Cheng, “Chinese Views on Deterrence,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, No. 60 (March 2011), p. 92.

³⁵Jeremy Black, *The Cold War: A Military History* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), p. 171.

In 1992, U.S. naval warships blocked Chinese civilian vessel *Yinhe* in the Persian Gulf in suspicion of it carrying chemical weapons for Iran. In 1994, the U.S. Navy conducted surveillance and tracking of Chinese nuclear submarines in the Yellow Sea. Similarly, during the third Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995–1996, the U.S. Navy maintained an offensive posture and encroached dangerously close to Chinese waters.³⁶ On April 1, 2001, an American EP-3 Airborne Reconnaissance Integrated Electronic System II (Aries II) was intercepted and forced to land at Hainan Island, an incident in which China lost a pilot along with a J-8 fighter aircraft.³⁷ Arguably, the J-8's interception of the EP-3 was done under the guidance of Active Defense. In August 2014, a Chinese J-11 aircraft reportedly conducted dangerous maneuvers forcing a U.S. Navy P-8 maritime patrol and anti-submarine warfare aircraft to withdraw.³⁸ Again, on December 15, 2016, a PLA Naval vessel seized an unmanned underwater vehicle (UUV) — later found to belong to the U.S. Navy — in international waters near the Subic Bay of the Philippines.³⁹ This incident, on one hand, revealed the aims and ambitions of the PLA Navy to operate in the high seas; on the other hand, it also highlighted underwater surveillance capabilities of the PLA Navy. It is understandable that UUVs do not produce much sonar signature due to less weight and near silent propulsion. Nevertheless, the PLA Navy still managed somehow not only to detect it but also to capture it. It is possible that the seizure was greatly carried out due to cyber and electronic warfare capabilities of the PLA Navy.

³⁶Ravinder Pal Singh, ed., *Arms Procurement Decision Making: China, India, Israel, Japan, South Korea and Thailand*, Vol. I (Stockholm, Sweden/New York, USA: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 36–37.

³⁷Zhang Hang, "Culture and Apology: The Hainan Island Incident," *World Englishes*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (November 2001), pp. 383–391.

³⁸"Chinese PLANAF J-11BH Conducted Dangerous Intercept on U.S. Navy P-8A Poseidon MPA," *Navy Recognition*, August 23, 2014, <http://www.navyrecognition.com/index.php/news/defence-news/year-2014-news/august-2014-navy-naval-forces-maritime-industry-technology-security-global-news/1960-chinese-planaf-j-11bh-conducted-dangerous-intercept-on-us-navy-p-8a-poseidon-mpa.html>.

³⁹M.S. Prathibha, ed., *East Asia Strategic Review: China's Rising Strategic Ambitions in Asia* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2018), pp. 90–91.

As some observers note, these incidents may fuel China's great power aspirations and negatively contribute to its satisfaction level.⁴⁰ These incidents also indicate the capabilities and vulnerabilities of conventional forces of both powers augmenting the potential of a military conflict and the chances of conflict escalation. China is in serious stages of developing and deploying 3.2-kilometer Very Long Floating Structures (VLFS). These structures can be interpreted as small islands, as they can significantly serve as airstrips and dockyards for small maneuverable naval vessels. The VLFS has the potential to give China a huge tactical advantage in terms of logistics and taking-off and landing of future VTOL aircraft and helicopters.⁴¹ Arguably, the VLFS occupies a unique position in China's Active Defense and is an integral part of its overall A2/AD strategies.

The possibility of non-state actors is also a matter of great concern. The heated environment is a perfect opportunity for non-state actors to reap the fullest advantage. When opposing military forces are navigating in contested territories and regions armed with considerable firepower and the ability to maneuver, a single act of violence can provoke either side to the use of deadly force. Though the United States and China established the *Military Maritime Consultative Agreement* (MMCA) in May 2017 and mutually signed the *Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Rules of Behavior for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters* (RBSAME) in November of that year,⁴² the Clausewitzian "fog of war" dictates the course of action, which is further fueled by the uncertainty prevailing on the battlefield. Apart from the actions of non-state actors, false flag operations have historically served rational actors as a useful instrument in paving the way for a full-scale military operation. For instance, on August 31, 1939, German Schutzstaffel (SS) Colonel Alfred Naujocks led a raid in Gleiwitz, Poland, on a Polish

⁴⁰Rolfe, ed., *The Asia-Pacific: A Region in Transition*, pp. 52–53. The authors stressed America's ability for minimizing China's level of dissatisfaction, which does not seem to be happening, at least in the military realm.

⁴¹Ronald O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities — Background and Issues for Congress," Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, November 1, 2017, p. 46.

⁴²U.S. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to the Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2018* (Arlington, Virginia: Office of the Secretary of Defense, May 2018), p. 109.

radio station and disseminated messages for a war against Germany. Poland was invaded on the next day.⁴³ Therefore, this kind of operation in an inventive yet adaptive manner holds the probability of turning the potential of conflict into an escalating military operation.

An innovative study analyzed the potential of conflicts between the United States and China, citing Taiwan to be the bone of contention in souring the great power relations. It also assessed and predicted future relations between the two great powers, while stressing acceptable terms for China regarding Taiwan for the prevalence of stability and peace. However, the author's assumption over cooperation leading to integration with China can be flawed and faulty. As a matter of fact, in the hypothetical presence of the faulty and flawed assumption of integration, there are considerable prospects for conflicts leading to war (Figure 2).⁴⁴

From the U.S. perspective, China has greatly turned the contested territories including the reefs and islands into military checkpoints by deploying troops, radars and surveillance equipment. Also, the construction of airstrips and dockyards has tremendously enhanced the strategic advantage of the PLA in conducting operations. The A2/AD strategies, as part of the Active Defense doctrine, are poised to "impede free navigation in the East and South China Seas." For the PLA, the A2/AD strategies, as well as the Active Defense doctrine which calls for forward deployment of troops and equipment, can increase the chances of contacting with the perceived opponent primarily due to Clausewitzian "primordial violence." As a result, the potential for a U.S-China conflict increases. The forward deployed troops are also likely to face "fog of war" that clouds judgement of commanders, resulting in military actions that are neither intended nor planned.

Forward deployment
strategies and
strategic uncertainty
may trigger acute
conflicts between
China and the U.S.

⁴³Roderick Stackelberg, *The Routledge Companion to Nazi Germany*, Routledge Companions to History (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), p. 274.

⁴⁴Rolfe, ed., *The Asia-Pacific: A Region in Transition*, pp. 33–53.

Fig. 2. 3D Forecast of U.S.-China Strategic Relations (1996–2050).

Source: Jim Rolfe, ed., *The Asia-Pacific: A Region in Transition*, p. 50.

Limits of U.S.-China Military Cooperation

As David Shambaugh noted, the U.S.-proposed 'New World Order' in the post-Cold War era was negatively perceived by China. For Beijing, "unipolarity was a far worse state of affairs than bipolarity."⁴⁵ As to the ascent of China to the status of a great power, Christopher Layne argued that "China, too, has reacted adversely to America's post-Cold War pre-eminence."⁴⁶ Nevertheless, great powers cooperate with each other on a number of issues and pursue a combination of strategies to project their image as powerful yet benign — although a benign image does not necessarily mean benign intentions. For "no state can afford to base its security on trust in others' good intentions. Intentions are ephemeral; today's peaceful intentions may turn malevolent tomorrow."⁴⁷

Likewise, John Mearsheimer advocated that great powers can cooperate, but it is hard to attain and in most cases short-lived, since "two

⁴⁵David Shambaugh, "China's Security Policy in the Post-Cold War Era," *Survival*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Summer 1992), p. 92.

⁴⁶Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise," *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Spring 1993), p. 36.

⁴⁷Christopher Layne, "Rethinking American Grand Strategy: Hegemony or Balance of Power in the Twenty-First Century," *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Summer 1998), p. 13.

factors inhibit cooperation: considerations about relative gains and concern about cheating."⁴⁸ Putting John Mearsheimer's assertions into the doctrinal context of both the United States and China reveals that the chances of cheating and deception are inherently high. Sun Tzu even averred that "all warfare is based on deception."⁴⁹ Arguably, deception and the concealment of true intentions by willfully camouflaging the aspirations act as catalysts and are sometimes augmented by Clausewitzian axiom of "fog of war."⁵⁰ This fog is flanked by Clausewitzian "friction" which furthers uncertainty and undermines cooperation, while magnifying ambiguous perceptions and intentions on both sides. That is why Barry Watts asserted that "friction is unlikely to be eliminated from future war regardless of technological advances."⁵¹

If James Dobbins is correct, after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, China emerged to be America's "default adversary" — before the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, the Bush Administration had officially categorized China as a threat. Later, with the global war on terror, Beijing became a strategic partner of Washington. However, after the U.S. withdrawal of troops from Iraq and the degradation of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in 2012, under the new Pivot-to-Asia strategy,⁵² Washington started to shift troops towards the strategically important East Asia to pursue its "Pacific Century."⁵³ Thus, when the Islamic State emerged, China appeared much less willing to cooperate with the United States this time, such as on the Syrian issue; instead, it began to criticize Washington sharply.⁵⁴ These continuous

⁴⁸Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 51–52.

⁴⁹Sun Tzu, *Sun Tzu on the Art of War: The Oldest Military Treatise in the World*, translated by Lionel Giles (Leicester, England: Allandale Online Publishing, 2000), p. 3.

⁵⁰Donald Stoker, *Clausewitz: His Life and Work* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 268–269.

⁵¹Barry D. Watts, *Clausewitzian Friction and Future War*, Revised Edition, McNair Paper 68 (Washington, D.C.: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, 2004), p. 86.

⁵²James Dobbins, "War with China," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (2012), p. 7.

⁵³Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>.

⁵⁴Syed Sabir Muhammad and Muhammad Ali Baig, "Exceptionalism in US Foreign Policy: A Case Study of ISIS," *IPRI Journal*, Vol. XIX, No. 1 (Winter 2019), p. 146.

crests and troughs in U.S.-China relations can be regarded as the true manifestation of international politics being dynamic.

Despite limited cooperation, China and the U.S. are bound to be strategic rivals.

It is worth mentioning that in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, China offered military equipment and military know-how to the Iraqi military.⁵⁵ China also cooperated with the United States in brokering the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) as the solution to the Iran nuclear issue, along with France, Britain, Russia and Germany.⁵⁶ Yet, in spite of the repeated

requests from the United States to China to convince or perhaps pressurize North Korea to abandon its nuclear program, China seems strong-minded in not following the U.S. steps but determined to pursue its own way. To understand this dilemma, four models are introduced here. First, it can be understood by the strategy of buck-passing outlined by John Mearsheimer, since North Korea is a potential buck-catcher, in case a U.S.-China conflict becomes imminent. Second, Clausewitz regarded defense to be the strongest form of combat; and North Korea behaves like a wall that defends China from the U.S. forces deployed on the Korean Peninsula. Third, North Korea, as a peculiar yet important strategic partner of China, was referred to as “teeth and lips” by Chinese paramount leader Mao Zedong; it holds a pivotal position in the essence of Chinese military strategy. Fourth, Chinese strategic history reveals that aggression against Pyongyang may later turn out to be aggression against Beijing. Therefore, it can be argued that China might be willing to cooperate with the United States in such non-traditional security issues as countering piracy and terrorist activities waged by other non-state actors, as well as in HA/DR operations. However, China is not likely to yield to the United States in traditional security realms and resort to the strategy of appeasement, a strategy that John Mearsheimer clearly forbade from adopting.⁵⁷ In fact, Chinese strategic history indicates the

⁵⁵David Kilcullen, *Blood Year: The Unraveling of Western Counterterrorism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 57.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁵⁷Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 139–140.

drawbacks of adopting appeasement, as it greatly resulted in China's "century of humiliation."

Conclusion

Arguably, Clausewitzian "primordial violence" provides a viable logic in understanding competition, the potentiality of conflict and limited cooperation between the United States and China. The role of nationalism and Clausewitz's theory on Trinity comprising of emotion, chance and reason⁵⁸ are also useful instruments in understanding the varying degrees of cooperation, competition and potential conflict. John Mearsheimer noted that "nationalism makes it hard to subdue and manipulate the people in defeated states"⁵⁹ and maintained that "nationalism is probably the most powerful political ideology in the world, and it glorifies the state."⁶⁰

Although nationalism and Clausewitz's theory on Trinity have relatively indirect influence on the U.S.' and Chinese conventional military doctrines, both affect the war-fighting and conceiving of military doctrines. For instance, on May 7, 1999, after the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade,⁶¹ the Chinese people exhibited the elements of nationalism and vehement emotions. On June 18, 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping reflected on "primordial violence" and paid "homage to Chinese martyrs killed in NATO bombing."⁶² As Clausewitz argued, "everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult. The difficulties accumulate and end by producing a kind of friction

⁵⁸Clausewitz's Trinity comprises three specific elements: (1) primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; (2) the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and (3) subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason. Put simply, these elements can be categorized into "emotion-chance-reason." See Clausewitz, *On War*, Chapter 1.

⁵⁹Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 148.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, p. 365.

⁶¹James D. Perry, "Operation Allied Force: The View from Beijing," *Aerospace Power Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Summer 2000), p. 79.

⁶²Xinhua, "Xi Pays Homage to Chinese Martyrs Killed in NATO Bombing," *China Daily*, June 18, 2016, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016xivisitree/2016-06/18/content_25754368.htm.

that is inconceivable unless one has experienced war.”⁶³ However, Clausewitzian “friction” and “fog of war” greatly hinder the judgement of the commanders and retain the probability in generating conflict and escalating it.

The trajectory of world transformation is dangerous, since the enhanced military capabilities of China are reshaping the security environment in the Asia-Pacific region and the West Pacific in particular. China’s Active Defense Doctrine and the Air-Sea Battle Doctrine of the United States are calling for forward deployment of conventional armed forces, which is augmenting their security competition and significantly contains potential for a limited military conflict between the United States and China. Moreover, the roles of non-state actors, false flag operations, mercenaries and accidents have all risen due to complex geography, geostrategy, geopolitics and the momentarily increased lethality of conventional weapons.

The defensive, offensive and deterrent value of the U.S.’ and Chinese conventional military doctrines are greatly influencing the varying degrees of cooperation, competition and conflict between the two great powers in the West Pacific. Through the lens of military doctrines and strategic history of both powers, the United States and China, as rational actors, will surely attempt to avoid any direct military conflicts by John Mearsheimer’s strategy of buck-passing and using their respective buck-catchers to pursue policy objectives; they will also try to expand cooperation on such non-traditional security issues as countering piracy and terrorist activities. However, given their forward-deployment-oriented military doctrines and the rising uncertainty in regional future, the United States and China are likely to be engaged in an unintended escalation of conflicts if they hold a rigid view toward each other’s military doctrines and fail to maintain stable military ties based on timely communication and constructive interaction.

⁶³Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 119.