

H-Diplo | ISSF

Article Review 101

issforum.org

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Michael Beckley. "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China's Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion." *International Security* 42: 2 (2017): 78-119. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00294.

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Published by ISSF on 6 July 2018

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Michael Beckley's article argues that East Asian military forces possess local anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities to effectively balance the power projection of Chinese military forces in scenarios in Taiwan, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea. As a result, the U.S. can rely on its current level of security commitments, rather than giving up or dramatically increasing its security commitment, to achieve its strategic objectives in the region.

The article is an important contribution to the ongoing debate on the changing military balance in East Asia and the West Pacific. This article expands the debate by moving beyond a narrow examination of the China-U.S. military balance and incorporating other actors into the analysis. These other nations also invest heavily in their militaries, involve themselves in maritime territorial disputes and geopolitical competition, and play important third-party roles in the China-U.S. security relationship. Focusing on the interaction between great-power military balance and regional military balance is critical to analysing the long-term security trend in the region. The article also highlights the context affecting future Chinese military development, including technological changes, economic trends, and diversified security concerns. Although individual analysis of the trends might lead to more debate, the framework incorporating all these factors makes sense.

The article will generate further debate in two ways. First, it focuses on the "capabilities" of China's neighbours (80), a factor that is inadequate in these scenarios. The operational level of war is critical in analysing military balance associated with worst-case or armed-conflict scenarios. According to the military historians Allan Millett and Williamson Murray, the operational level of military activity centres on employing major forces to achieve strategic objectives within a theatre of war, in other words, a specific

campaign.¹ Operational level analysis has to go beyond bean counting, by thinking more about transforming available resources in the theatre into effective fighting power. In the current technological environment, on the operational level, militaries have to integrate their combat platforms and munitions into operational systems with command and control system (C2), intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance (ISTAR), as well as logistical support. The sustainability of an operational system also depends on a combination or balance of capability and capacity (size). Organisation, training, and doctrine also have a huge impact on the performance of operation systems. One methodological issue of the article is that it focuses too much on individual platforms and weapons while ignoring the forest of operations.

Second, since this is an article on the military balance between China and other countries, the analysis of the rapid change of the Chinese military or People's Liberation Army (PLA) should have been more detailed. First, with regard to sources, although many recent analyses by U.S. scholars and think tanks are utilised, Chinese and PLA sources are not consulted, with the exception of an outdated edition of *Science of Military Strategy*, published in 2005 (84). The volume of public and authoritative information on Chinese strategic intentions and guidance, regional policies, military reforms, operations and training provided by the Chinese side in both English and Chinese has expanded rapidly in recent years largely due to the increasing self confidence of the Chinese leadership and the PLA.² Although individual PLA theatre commands and service headquarters do not have their own website, they establish news channels on the app Wechat, publishing news articles every day. Under such circumstance, analysis heavily relying on U.S. and Western literature is unnecessary. Without taking the Chinese perception of their strategic intentions on particular issues into consideration, the article might exaggerate the gap between Chinese objectives and capabilities, such as those in the South China Sea.³ In addition, the recent release of PLA material, doctrine and organisation modernisation might challenge many of the analyses conducted five or ten years ago which the article extensively consults.

The purpose of this review is to continue the debate by responding to some major themes of the article, with an emphasis on operational level and Chinese military factors.

A2/AD and Power Projection as Operational Systems

One of the key themes of the article is the balance between power projection and offshore theatre defence, or the so-called A2/AD. The author regards the balance as being in favour of defence: the platform-centric power projection is too expensive to maintain, while munitions-centric A2/AD is cheap and sustainable (109). Both power projection and A2/AD are operation systems integrating a broad range of capabilities, rather than a

¹ Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray ed., *Military Effectiveness, Vol. 1: The First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 12.

² Besides traditional books published by PLA affiliated publishing houses and articles published in military journals, the PLA –run China Military website (<http://www.81.cn/>) frequently publishes news articles on PLA leadership and troops in English and Chinese.

³ Chinese military leaders frequently make public comments on sensitive Asia-Pacific security issues. For example, in the 2015 Xiangshan Forum, General Fan Changlong, then vice chairman of the Central Military Commission, elaborated Chinese military policy in the South China Sea. The English translation of the speech is available at <http://www.xiangshanforum.cn/artsix/sixforum/updates/201510/1289.html>.

collection of platforms and munitions. Major platforms of power projection forces integrate both offensive and defensive capabilities, including combat air patrol, offshore strikes, air/missile defence, surface warfare, and anti-submarine capabilities, supported by cyber, electronic, and space assets. Under such circumstances, power projection forces are capable of effectively neutralising uncoordinated and medium intensity A2/AD threats. Power projection forces also can use their less expensive munitions such as anti-ship and anti-air missiles to destroy the expensive and limited platforms of A2/AD forces such as advanced aircraft and surface combatants.

Due to the resilience of power projection systems, a mature A2/AD system has to develop and integrate multiple capacities and capabilities, to achieve survivability, real time locating, tracking and targeting enemy forces in the theatre, and project multiple, and in some cases overlapping, layers of firepower to paralyse and defeat enemy systems. The Chinese military modernisation in the last two decade gradually established a mature A2/AD operational system. By 2000, the PLA was equipped with Su-30 fighter/bombers, Kilo-class submarines, and Sovremenny-class destroyers that were capable of striking U.S. power projection forces with lethal munitions, but these assets were not integrated into an operational system capable of breaking through U.S. defence perimeters and launching their weapons. The well integrated U.S. joint forces, by contrast, could easily defeat and even destroy these Chinese assets in defensive and offensive operations, given that the latter's quantity was limited. In recent years, the commissioning of indigenous advanced combat aircraft, surface combatants, submarines, ballistics, and cruise missiles finally addressed the capacity and capability deficiencies, forming multiple layers and concentrations of firepower covering vast regions within the First Island Chain. Meanwhile, improved logistics support as well as C4ISR capabilities and assets finally connect all the sensors, platforms, and firepower together, make operation system integration possible. Finally, the reorganisation of command structure and combat units, the changing doctrine, and training speed up the adaptation of the PLA to A2/AD operations.⁴ As a result, the PLA operational (A2/AD) systems pose a real threat to the US power-projection system.

Accordingly, the A2/AD capabilities of military forces discussed in the article, as well as their balance against the PLA, vary. Japan has the most advanced operational system among them. However, in maritime dispute-related scenarios, since it is doubtful the PLA has any intention to launch a major campaign against the Japanese home islands, as the U.S. planned and partially executed in the end of the Pacific War, Japan might not have the chance to fully employ its system against the PLA in the East China Sea. The ASEAN claimants do possess assets capable of striking long-distance maritime targets, but it is too early to assert that these A2/AD systems can effectively neutralise power projection forces composed of advanced platforms. First, because many of China's neighbours rely on imported major combat platforms, and face budgetary constraints, their sustainability, in particular in high intensity conflict, is problematic. Their strike assets, such as fighter/bombers and submarines are limited, and some of them under maintenance might not be available. In the end, these assets will generate limited combat sorties, even if one does not take their combat loss into account. Second, these forces lack advanced C4ISR assets to support and coordinate operations of combat platforms.

⁴ For PLA joint training for maritime operations, see ‘联战联训，我的战位在哪里——南海舰队深入推进联合训练闻思录’ (Joint Operation and Training, Where is My Position: Reflections on Joint Training Progress of South China Sea Fleet), *PLA Daily*, December 12, 2017, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1901812.

Another relevant issue is whether one can characterise Chinese military operations in areas discussed in the article as power projection. From the U.S. military perspective, the Chinese A2/AD system can effectively operate in these areas. In Taiwan and East China Sea scenarios, the PLA is able to conduct various joint operations mainly supported by bases and facilities on continental China. Many advanced Chinese combat aircraft can carry out combat missions in these areas without aerial refuelling. In the South China Sea, while the flight distance between Hainan Island and Singapore is 2,000 kilometres, the distance between Hainan and the contested territories is closer. For instance, the distance between Hainan and the Yongshu (Fiery Cross) Reef is 1,034 km. That is to say, advanced Chinese combat aircraft, in particular those loaded with air-to-air missiles carrying out air superiority missions, could patrol in many of these areas without refuelling. In addition, in the non-U.S. conflict scenarios discussed in the article, many Chinese facilities in the South China Sea islands and reefs will improve situational awareness and logistical support for the PLA operations. In other words, PLA operations in the South China Sea might be more power projection than those in Taiwan and East China Sea, but will be quite different from other cases of power projection, such as the Royal Navy Task Force in the Falklands in 1982.

Taiwan

The article envisages four types of possible PLA operations against Taiwan, including surprise air and missile strikes, amphibious operations, blockade, and strategic bombing, and argues that the PLA has difficulty in achieving objectives in any of them (83-95). In Chinese politics, Taiwan is higher than any other security issue in the West Pacific. Once a deterioration of the situation necessitates the use of force, the PLA could concentrate all the conventional military power at its disposal and integrate a broad range of joint operations to achieve a strategic objective such as prevention of Taiwan independence, rather than trying different approaches one by one. If this happens, the defenders would not have a chance to focus on one or two types of operations at a time. In the combat platform balance, the PLA not only increases both quantity and quality of traditional strike assets, such as ballistic missiles, combat aircraft, naval combatants, but also introduces new assets capable of conducting cross-strait strikes, such as long-range rocket artillery, stealth aircraft, attack helicopters, drones, and land attack cruise missiles. Meanwhile, Taiwan's defensive capabilities upgrade goes slowly.⁵

Beckley argues that the PLA will not be able to eliminate all the air-defence and anti-ship missiles in Taiwan, and doubts the possibility of PLA gaining air and sea control to carry out successful amphibious operations. Nevertheless, these missile launchers rely on major air-defence command system and sensors, such as early warning radar systems, and even real-time missile defence warning intelligence from the U.S. military, to effectively conduct air and missile defence operations. As a result, the PLA can concentrate on striking major command centres, rather than destroying every missile launcher to undermine the defence system. In addition, the PLA can also combine electronic countermeasures and standoff strikes to suppress individual defence systems that pose serious threats in follow-on strikes. After losing air dominance, the defenders' anti-ship missile batteries will also be exposed to more precision strikes and electronic countermeasures. In addition, as losses inflicted by defenders are not something unexpected in the planning and execution of major amphibious operations, commanders and forces should be prepared to control and cope with them.

⁵ For figures on Mainland and Taiwan military capabilities, see 'Chapter Six: Asia', *The Military Balance* 118:1 (2018): 219-314, DOI: [10.1080/04597222.2018.1416982](https://doi.org/10.1080/04597222.2018.1416982)

As for the amphibious operations, the article pays attention to the limitations of air and missile strikes prior to landing. Since these strikes will leave many combat platforms of the defenders intact, that might inflict heavy losses on landing forces. Nevertheless, these strikes rarely seek to annihilate the defending forces as a whole. They aim to reduce the strength and combat power of defenders' combat units, make manoeuvres and transportation difficult if not impossible, and undermine prepared defence positions. The goal would be that once the PLA launched amphibious operations, it will face a seriously weakened instead of an intact defence system at least, or a demoralised and collapsed one like the Iraqi defence in 1991. Finally, the reorganised and intensively trained PLA ground forces, in particular its new synthetic battalions, integrating troops from all major combat branches with strengthened command structure and access to close air support and long range fire power, are more competent than their predecessors in fighting on the beach, coordinated by agile Special operations and airborne forces operations behind the enemy defence line.⁶

East China Sea

The article presents a scenario of a struggle for sea control in East China Sea between China and Japan. While indicating the balance of naval tonnage is shifting in China's favour, the article asserts that "geographic and technological factors give Japan an enduring A2/AD capability that can plausibly deny China sea and air control in the East China Sea" (98). The geographical features on the two sides of the East China Sea are asymmetric: the Chinese side is dominated by the continent, but the Japanese side includes Kyushu, one of its home islands and the Ryukyu Islands. On the continental side, the PLA can field many A2/AD forces such as combat aircraft, surface vessels, submarines, ballistic and cruise missiles, as well as the supporting ISTAR assets that effectively put most of the East China Sea within their operation and strike range. The Japanese can field most of their major naval combatants and aircraft in Kyushu and Okinawa, but the small Ryukyu Islands in the south are only capable of accommodating anti-ship as well as air defence missiles or fixated sensors. Andrew Krepinevich, a leading U.S. strategist, calls for taking advantage of these Islands in U.S.-led major operations against China, to deny sea-control to the PLA.⁷ However, in an East China Sea scenario between China and Japan, their impact could be marginalized by the PLA. First, unlike the Chinese A2/AD systems covering vast regions of the East China Sea theatre, the range of the Japanese missiles only covers peripheral areas of the Islands they are deployed, thus they could be outgunned by the Chinese. Second, although the mobility of the Japanese missile launchers might reduce their vulnerability in the initial phase of the conflict, the small islands constrain their manoeuvring space, offer limited shelter and logistical support, and isolate them from friendly main forces elsewhere. The Chinese forces may either concentrate some long-range strikes to disable them or deal with them in the mop-up phase of the operation. Moreover, the changing balance also challenges the operational impact of Japanese anti-submarine superiority. On one hand, the rise of the Chinese surface fleet and air power ends the PLAN's dependence on submarine in maritime operations, on the other hand, the surface fleet and air power can provide more cover for PLA submarines by suppressing Japanese anti-submarine forces. Therefore, the Japanese forces cannot establish their own A2/AD system

⁶ For force integration of synthetic battalions, see 合成营长吴春明掀起的“学习革命” (Learning Revolution of Wu Chunming, a Synthetic Battalion Commander), *PLA Daily*, 15 August 2017, http://zb.81.cn/content/2017-08/15/content_7718812.htm.

⁷ Andrew Krepinevich, 'How to Deter China: The Case for Archipelagic Defense', *Foreign Affairs* (March-April 2015): 78-86.

based in some islands on the East China Sea. After the Chinese address their long-term inferiority in tonnage and technology, the Japanese geographical disadvantage in the East China Sea becomes obvious day by day.

South China Sea

The article argues that China “claims ownership of more than 80 percent of the South China Sea based on a nine-dashed line” (98). This is not the Chinese position on South China Sea, reflected by the Chinese official statement in July 2016.⁸ In addition, the concept of sea control is attractive to many strategic analysts who focus on long term U.S.-China competition in the South China Sea, but it is not the primary narrative in maritime territorial disputes among China and Southeast Asian claimants. Possessing advanced weapons is one thing, using them to strike others in most of the maritime disputes scenarios is another matter. One of the current U.S. South China Sea policy dilemmas is that concerns over territorial disputes are inadequate to mobilise regional allies and partners to strengthen its sea control effort in the South China Sea.⁹

The article mentions the performance of the Vietnamese air defence system during the Vietnam War and the current modernisation of air defence. The effectiveness of the Vietnamese air defence then relied on large scale military assistance from both the Chinese and the Soviets, and more than 150,000 Chinese air-defence artillery forces who participated the air defence battles in North Vietnam between 1965 and 1968.¹⁰ In recent years, the Vietnamese have imported advanced platform such as the Russian S-300/400 missiles and Su-27/30 fighters, but Vietnam’s sustainability and firepower density will not reach the degree of its predecessor in the Vietnam War.

While the article highlights the Vietnamese advantage due to its proximity to contested territories in the South China Sea, the military balance between China and Vietnam in both crisis and worst-case scenarios will be broader than that sector. The land border between China and Vietnam is not a strategic or operational liability to Chinese military planners, based on the experience of the Third Indochina War (1979-1989). As long as China enjoyed overall military superiority and sought limited strategic objectives accordingly, the Chinese military maintained ground initiative throughout the conflict. Due to recent modernisation and reorganisation, current PLA army combat formations enjoy unprecedented firepower and mobility superiority in the same front when compared to 30 years ago. In addition, during the last war, Chinese naval and air power had limited strike capabilities and made minimal operational contribution, but the current Chinese maritime and air power in nearby regions are capable of launching long range and precision-strike missions from their bases to northern Vietnam. Finally, during the recent military reform, the PLA established the Southern Theatre Command, responsible for joint operation command in the two provinces bordering

⁸ ‘China Adheres to the Position of Settling Through Negotiation the Relevant Disputes Between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea’, 13 July 2016, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/t1380615.shtml.

⁹ For recent analysis of US strategy toward the South China Sea, see Hal Brands and Zack Cooper, “Getting Serious About Strategy in the South China Sea,” *Naval War College Review* 71:1 (2018): 13-32.

¹⁰ Deng Lifeng, ‘A Summary of the War to Aid Vietnam and Resist America’, *Contemporary China History Studies* 9:1 (January 2002): 84-92. (In Chinese)

Vietnam as well as the South China Sea.¹¹ Therefore, in high-intensity conflict scenarios, Vietnam will have more chance of facing a multi-front and domain battle than a remote maritime engagement near its southern bases.

The article also argues that the U.S. forces can effectively strike Chinese forces in the South China Sea with moderate risk (108). A direct U.S. military intervention in the South China Sea will definitely change the centre of gravity of PLA operations to counter-intervention. Beckley cites a Rand report arguing that U.S. air wings might launch their strikes from major bases in Japan (Okinawa) and Guam, while the Chinese are reluctant to strike the U.S. bases due to fear of U.S. escalation (107).¹² Nevertheless, once the centre of gravity changes, it is difficult to imagine that PLA commanders would allow their reserve long range forces such as conventional ballistic missiles and aircraft, in particular those in the west coast of the East China Sea, to sit in idle.

In the end, the East Asian regional stability rests more on the strategic than the operational level. Most of East Asia has experienced peace for at least a quarter century. Based on this experience, decision makers and public opinion on all sides have a strong motivation to maintain peace and development in spite of military modernisation efforts. While maritime territorial disputes complicate political and security relations, this recent history lessens the likelihood that they will lead to a conflict, especially an all-out war. In the cross-strait relations, use of force is the last resort. Military planners have to continue their work on various contingency planning, including those of worst-case scenarios. Strategic decision makers have strong incentives and a broad range of options to ensure that those contingency and operation plans stay on the shelf, only accessed by future historians.

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¹¹ Joel Wuthnow and Phillip C. Saunders, 'Chinese Military Reforms in the Age of Xi Jinping: Drivers, Challenges, and Implications', *China Strategic Perspectives* 10 (March 2017): 17-19.

¹² Eric Heginbotham, Michael Nixon, Forrest E. Morgan, Jacob Heim, Jeff Hagen, Sheng Tao Li, Jeffrey Engstrom, Martin C. Libicki, Paul DeLuca, David A. Shlapak, David R. Frelinger, Burgess Laird, Kyle Brady, and Lyle J. Morris, *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2015), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR392.html.