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Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich. "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia." *International Security* 41:1 (Summer 2016): 7-46

Charles L. Glaser and Steve Fetter. "Should the United States Reject MAD? Damage Limitation and U.S. Nuclear Strategy toward China." *International Security* 41:1 (Summer 2016): 49-98.

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When the Cold War ended in the late 1980s, Washington and Beijing were on good terms—the military balance between the two countries was not politically salient. Much has happened in the ensuing decades. While American attention turned towards battling Iraq in two wars, responding to the threat posed by al-Qaida in Afghanistan and around the world, and in dealing with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS/DAESH) as the latest manifestation of the jihadist threat, the status quo was changing in Asia. China has emerged not only as a global economic and political power, but also as a conventional military power in the Western Pacific that possesses a small nuclear arsenal that under permissive circumstances can hold a few United States (U.S.) cities at risk. The conventional and nuclear balance in Asia is shifting from one of overwhelming U.S. preponderance to a situation in which things might become a bit more sporting.

The well-crafted and provocative articles reviewed here examine the most important venues of the emerging military competition between the United States and China. The first, written by Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, describes how the ability to maintain control over and project conventional military power into the commons in East Asia (i.e., the South China Sea and the islands that bound it to the East) will likely shift by the year 2040. The second, written by Charles Glaser and Steve Fetter, explores U.S. strategic options in dealing with the increasing likelihood, again by about 2040, that China will be able to threaten the U.S. mainland with nuclear weapons in a second-strike mode. Neither article suggests that Sino-American

hostilities are imminent. Instead, they seek to describe the nature of the future military balance. Regrettably, this balance could become increasingly important in the years ahead.

Goodbye Command of the Sea

There is a simple way to describe Biddle and Oelrich's depiction of the emerging conventional military situation in the South China Sea: their analysis is best explained using the ideas of Sir Julian Corbett, the early twentieth-century British naval historian and geostrategist. Today, the U.S. Navy probably enjoys command of the South China Sea in the sense that it can use it for its own purposes (movement of forces, re-supply of allies, project power ashore, etc.), while denying similar uses to enemy combatants. Nevertheless, by 2040, this situation will change to one of "command in dispute"—the U.S. Navy and its allies will have to engage their People's Liberation Army (PLA) opponents in a significant battle before either side can operate in the Western Pacific.

The reasons for this change, according to Biddle and Oelrich, are linked to China's economic growth and the proliferation of increasingly advanced technology. The precision reconnaissance-strike complex currently possessed by the United States will soon be possessed by China. This strike complex, given the physics of existing space and air-based reconnaissance systems, will allow land-based weapons to target and destroy air and sea-based platforms out to a range of about 600 kilometers from shore. Although maritime forces could come to possess similar systems with similar strike ranges, they face a more difficult problem: identifying targets against the background clutter of terrain. Silhouetted against the empty sky and sea, the maritime force is at a disadvantage against a similarly equipped land-based force. Ironically, this too has been a consistent pattern in maritime warfare, a pattern that Corbett would have recognized: for a host of reasons, coastal artillery generally trumps naval gunfire. Maritime forces engage equally capable coastal defenses at their peril. Biddle and Oelrich also are not optimistic about the U.S. ability to outpace Chinese capabilities by 2040. They note that U.S. "Airsea" concepts, designed to destroy Chinese reconnaissance sensors through competing precision strikes, will not be cost-effective at the margins, especially against a PLA that is supported by the largest economy in the world.

Biddle and Oelrich's analysis depicts a situation in which both the PLA or the U.S. Navy and its allies will become increasingly constrained when it comes to operating within 600 kilometers from land-based antiaccess/areal denial systems. Because the economic and operational advantage (based on ease of target acquisition) lies with land forces, maritime operations will become problematic, which places the United States at a strategic disadvantage. What is also clear, however, is that a reconnaissance-strike complex could come to shape military operations in the Western Pacific, as both sides increase their ability to conduct long-range conventional strikes against high value targets. This conventional balance could also impact the strategic nuclear balance between the United States and China by placing the PLA's strategic nuclear force at increased risk of destruction in a pre-emptive conventional attack.

A Window of Nuclear Opportunity?

Whether or not U.S. officials should accept a situation in which the United States becomes vulnerable to a Chinese nuclear strike is the issue that sets Glaser's and Fetter's pens to paper. Their analysis is informed by a bit of Cold War history. By the late 1960s, the Soviet Union found itself able to assure destruction of the United States under virtually any set of realistic circumstances. In other words, by destroying the top 100 urban-industrial centers in a nuclear second-strike against the United States, the Soviet Union could ensure

that the survivors in North America would probably envy the dead. The fundamental reason why this situation emerged is that U.S. policymakers did not launch a preventive nuclear war against the USSR while the Soviets only possessed a rudimentary nuclear capability to strike the United States. There are many reasons why this preventive war was not undertaken, but the lesson is that once a nuclear arsenal reaches a certain size, it becomes virtually impossible to limit damage suffered in a nuclear second-strike. Too many 'leakers' will survive a pre-emptive counterforce attack and get through even robust missile and air defenses: a score of medium-size nuclear detonations distributed in an efficient manner across large cities can easily generate upwards of twenty million casualties.

Although Glaser and Fetter recommend that the United States not attempt to adopt a damage limitation strategy by taking action to reduce the vulnerability of the United States to nuclear attack, the current and future nuclear balance they depict highlights a situation in which the PLA is vulnerable to a 'splendid first strike' (i.e., the total destruction of China's long-range land and sea based nuclear force is within the realm of possibility for the United States). In other words, in normal peacetime operations (day-alert), China's nuclear forces are vulnerable to pre-emptive attack. Its nuclear weapons are apparently not mated to their missile delivery systems in peacetime, its mobile missiles are apparently kept in garrison, its silo-based missiles are unfueled with their liquid propellants, and its submarines might have to return to port to upload nuclear warheads. There is thus a reasonable chance of destroying China's nuclear forces capable of attacking the continental United States if the United States (1) uses nuclear weapons first in a splendid first strike, and (2) catches China's nuclear force in a day-alert posture. Moreover, the modest growth Glaser and Fetter depict when it comes to China's mobile missile deployments only increases the incentives for the United States to destroy these mobile missiles while they are in garrison.

Because of the observable activities that would ensue if the PLA placed its forces on generated-alert, incentives for the United States to pre-empt in a crisis could become profound as China's nuclear force moved to a war footing. As nuclear warheads are mated to land-based and submarine-based missiles and as silo-based missiles are fueled and mobile missiles prepare to depart from garrisons, U.S. policymakers would know that their ability to limit damage to the United States produced by a Chinese first or second-strike was declining. Glaser and Fetter recognize that the PLA's alerted submarines and fixed and mobile missiles remain vulnerable to a concerted U.S. counterforce campaign, but even today's Chinese strategic nuclear force, once placed on generated alert, could probably inflict significant damage on the United States in a second-strike mode. Glaser and Fetter expend a good deal of effort estimating what that level of damage might be under different scenarios, and whether or not enhancing U.S. counterforce capabilities might limit this damage in a significant manner, but it is hard to imagine that U.S. attitudes towards a potential conflict with China would not be shaped by the belief that it could result in millions of dead Americans even following a *nearly* splendid first strike.

The Future Strategic Balance in the Western Pacific

It is not surprising that the editors of *International Security* decided to pair these two manuscripts together: combined, they paint a sobering military balance in about twenty-five years. Biddle and Oelrich depict a situation in which both sides have deployed sophisticated and highly capable long-range conventional precision-strike weapons that will have reconnaissance, surveillance, and warning systems as their primary target. Even if the United States does not deliberately target the PLA's strategic nuclear forces in a conventional attack, it will be difficult for Chinese leaders to ignore the possibility that American "Airsea" strikes are not a prelude to an American splendid first strike. If the Chinese alert their nuclear force in the

course of this sort of conventional conflict, U.S. policymakers would encounter additional incentives to attack Chinese nuclear forces to limit damage from a potential first or second-strike. U.S. policymakers might hope to use their superior nuclear capability to deter the Chinese decision to alert China's nuclear force, allowing the U.S. to destroy it using conventional weapons, and then rely on its escalation dominance to preclude a Chinese decision to attempt a ragged nuclear retaliatory blow against the continental United States. Admittedly, it would probably be difficult to prevent PLA nuclear attacks against U.S. bases and allies in the region, but in this scenario, the 'lesser of two evils' could conceivably involve millions of casualties.

Although these two analyses suggest that the prospects of inadvertent or even deliberate nuclear escalation could be on the rise in the Western Pacific, much can change in the next twenty-five years. On the one hand, the military balance in Asia might not be shaped by a heated arms race, or the military balance might lack political salience, especially if both parties moderate their policies and seek a peaceful adjustment to a rising China. If diplomacy responds to the challenge, it might be possible to stop this arms race before it gains much momentum. It might be possible to alter the politics of the relationship so that the military balance is not viewed as politically or militarily salient. It might not, however, be possible to eliminate completely the potential for deliberate or inadvertent escalation, but that potential will not matter much if relations are constructive.

On the other hand, both analyses assume that the future will more or less mirror the past. This is a questionable assumption at a time when Moore's law is having a profound impact on economies, societies, politics, and militaries. "Future Shock" has become "Today's Shock" as individuals and governments find it increasingly difficult to adjust to the pace and scope of change. Biddle and Oelrich acknowledge this reality—they note that their analysis fails to account for the interaction of cyber attacks on the exquisitely synchronized long-range precision strikes they describe. Nevertheless, there are other technologies on the horizon that could also have a significant impact on the military balance in the Western Pacific. Artificial intelligence might play a significant role in tactical, operational, and even strategic decisions – giving a potentially game-changing advantage when matched against systems that keep humans too much "in the loop." Similarly, nanotechnologies and autonomous systems could greatly increase the range and lethality of long-range strikes and area denial weapons, reducing the survivability of today's weapons systems. Matters could indeed be worse than the situation depicted here: both sides could encounter a situation in which their conventional and nuclear forces become vulnerable due to some technical innovation or operational revolution. Given the time frame involved in these analyses, it is indeed likely that at least some new weapon or mode of operation that threatens the force structures in the Western Pacific will burst upon the scene by 2040.

One final caveat is in order. Although the strategic interactions involving deliberate or inadvertent escalation described above might be considered by some as far-fetched or the product of a 'Cold War mentality'—a point acknowledged by Glaser and Fetter—the escalation potential inherent in the military balance in the Western Pacific could be unleashed today. All that is needed is for some political confrontation or unfortunate military incident to again make the military balance highly salient in Chinese-American relations. The only way to ensure that this does not occur is to consider seriously the potential for escalation of a crisis in the Western Pacific.

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