



*The Marathon Initiative*

# Building a Strategy for Escalation and War Termination

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This paper examines the necessity for the United States to formulate a theory of success in a conflict over Taiwan that includes denial but also indicates how to favorably manage escalation - that is, achieving its strategic-political goals without, at a minimum, precipitating a massive attack on the United States.

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## INTRODUCTION

Deterrence is undergoing something of a renaissance in U.S. defense strategy. In the concept's recent revival, however, there is a widespread belief that its tenets are due for repair. Some strategists believe a series of developments—in geopolitics, military-technical affairs, and even social psychology—have altered its foundations.<sup>1</sup> In a dynamic world, the requirements of deterrence appear to have fundamentally shifted. As Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has explained: “[Deterrence] now spans multiple realms, all of which must be mastered to ensure our security in the 21st century.”<sup>2</sup> Deterrence is back, in other words, but it may not be what it used to be.

To that end, the Department of Defense has introduced the concept of *integrated deterrence*, which drives the 2022 National Defense Strategy and is being implemented throughout the defense establishment. What is distinctive about the new kind of deterrence? According to the document, it means “working seamlessly across warfighting domains, theaters, the spectrum of conflict, all instruments of U.S. national power, and our network of Alliances and partnerships.”<sup>3</sup> In reality, this is an exceptionally broad and even vague description.

In light of its importance, this paper seeks to give more concrete and well-suited meaning to the idea of integrated deterrence. To do that, the paper surveys different approaches to integrated deterrence, appraises the elements of deterrence, and argues

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Decline of Deterrence* (Washington, DC: Hudson Institute, March 12, 2019), <https://www.hudson.org/research/14871-the-decline-of-deterrence>.

<sup>2</sup> C. Todd Lopez, “Defense Secretary Says ‘Integrated Deterrence’ Is Cornerstone of U.S. Defense,” *DoD News*, April 30, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2592149/defense-secretary-says-integrated-deterrence-is-cornerstone-of-us-defense/>.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, October 2022), p. 1., <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

for an integrated strategy of deterrence by denial that also selectively incorporates cost-imposition. The basic logic of the argument is that the concept of integrated deterrence can most usefully be applied to strategies of escalation management and war termination, which are increasingly salient in the context of great power rivalry, especially with China. The Department of Defense should develop and be prepared to implement a strategy of denial that integrates elements of cost-imposition to favorably manage escalation and seek to terminate a war with China.

## THE NEW WAVE OF INTEGRATION

Integrated deterrence has assumed a central place in Defense Department thinking under Secretary of Defense Austin. Yet what the concept means in concrete terms is unclear. Accordingly, there is a debate about what integrated deterrence means. Broadly speaking, there are three ways to think about integration. The first integrates institutional processes for developing defense strategy. The second overlays complementary national security concepts to build out a meta-theory of deterrence. Finally, the third, which represents the most ambitious approach, integrates contending theories of victory within a unified strategy.

The first approach focuses on integrating processes for developing and effectively implementing defense strategy. For instance, Brad Roberts argues that the Nuclear Posture Review disaggregates means of deterrence and wants to discard it.<sup>4</sup> Adam Mount and Pranay Vaddi offer that defense policy should integrate strategy reviews for conventional and nuclear forces.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, this resembles the approach practiced by the

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<sup>4</sup> Brad Roberts, “It’s time to jettison Nuclear Posture Reviews,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 76, no. 1 (2020), 31-36, <https://cgsr.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/Roberts-Jettison-NPRs.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Adam Mount and Pranay Vaddi, *An Integrated Approach to Deterrence Posture* (Washington, DC: Federation of American Scientists, December 2020), <https://uploads.fas.org/2020/12/An-Integrated-Approach-to-Deterrence-Posture.pdf>.

Pentagon, with its release of compiled strategy documents.<sup>6</sup> Still others believe integration occurs in dialogue and defense planning with allies and partners.<sup>7</sup>

The second approach conceives of integrated deterrence as a construct for organizing national security concepts and capabilities. As Frank Hoffman has fleshed out, a “Whole-of-Government Capacity” option puts strategic deterrence and warfighting alongside diplomacy, development, and domestic resilience. It elevates deterrence to something like a theory of general influence, even a grand strategy. Another option, “Comprehensive Military Deterrence,” entails the main missions of the Department of Defense, like missile defense and conventional military operations, amounting to a portfolio review. “Collective Security Deterrence” accounts for allies, access, capability, and industrial base factors, the basic building blocks of any defense strategy. Stacking them up without connecting concepts and capabilities risks strategic incoherence.<sup>8</sup> This approach also appears to resemble the idea of integrated deterrence promoted by the Biden administration, which heavily emphasizes the integration of non-military and non-kinetic tools as well as the efforts of a broad range of actors to achieve deterrence. Analysts interpret the Administration as emphasizing first resort to non-military tools,

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<sup>6</sup> Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, October 2022), <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

<sup>7</sup> Jane Hardy, “Integrated deterrence in the Indo-Pacific: Advancing the Australia-United States alliance” (Sydney: United States Studies Centre, October 15, 2021), <https://www.ussc.edu.au/analysis/integrated-deterrence-in-the-indo-pacific-advancing-the-australia-united-states-alliance>; Justin Anderson, “Allied Assurance and Integrated Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific,” *Inkstick*, March 14, 2021, <https://inkstickmedia.com/allied-assurance-and-integrated-deterrence-in-the-indo-pacific/>; Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, “The next National Defense Strategy is coming. These seven points are key to understanding it” (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, April 20, 2022), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-next-national-defense-strategy-is-coming-these-seven-points-are-key-to-understanding-it/>

<sup>8</sup> Frank Hoffman, “Guest Post: Dr. Frank Hoffman on ‘Conceptualizing Integrated Deterrence,’” *Lawfire*, January 8, 2022, [https://sites.duke.edu/lawfire/2022/01/08/guest-post-dr-frank-hoffman-on-conceptualizing-integrated-deterrence/#\\_ednref31](https://sites.duke.edu/lawfire/2022/01/08/guest-post-dr-frank-hoffman-on-conceptualizing-integrated-deterrence/#_ednref31).

inclusion of allies and partners, operation across the spectrum of conflict, and swiftness of action.<sup>9</sup> A senior policy official expounded further that integrated deterrence means:

Integrated across domains, so conventional, nuclear, cyber, space, informational...integrated across theaters of competition and potential conflict [and] integrated across the spectrum of conflict from high intensity warfare to the gray zone...[and] integrated across our allies and partners, which are the real asymmetric advantage that the United States has over any other competitor or potential adversary.<sup>10</sup>

That is, the Pentagon defines integration in terms of domains of interaction, intensity of interaction, and actors participant to the interaction. The problem is that DoD leaders have described attributes of a deterrence strategy, not its essence.<sup>11</sup> The kernel of strategy is its theory of victory, the formula by which deliberate action produces desired response.<sup>12</sup> Deterrence disintegrates when this formula does not compute. Integrating deterrence, therefore, calls for unifying theories of victory.

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<sup>9</sup> Mike Gallagher, “The Pentagon’s ‘deterrence’ strategy ignores hard-earned lessons about the balance of power,” *Washington Post*, September 29, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/09/29/pentagons-deterrence-strategy-ignores-hard-earned-lessons-about-balance-power/>; Mike Gallagher, “Biden’s ‘Integrated Deterrence’ Fails in Ukraine,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 29, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-integrated-deterrence-fails-ukraine-russia-invasion-taiwan-xi-china-diplomacy-sanctions-hard-power-defense-spending-budget-negotiations-11648569487>.

<sup>10</sup> Jim Garamone, “Concept of Integrated Deterrence Will Be Key to National Defense Strategy, DOD Official Says,” *DoD News*, December 8, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2866963/concept-of-integrated-deterrence-will-be-key-to-national-defense-strategy-dod-o/>. See also Brian Radzinsky, “Setting Priorities for Deterrence Integration,” Workshop Summary, (Livermore, CA: Centro for Global Security Research, August 30-31, 2021), [https://cgsr.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/Workshop\\_Summary\\_Integration2021.pdf](https://cgsr.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/Workshop_Summary_Integration2021.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Irving M. Copi, “Essence and Accident,” *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 51, no. 23 (1954): pp. 706–19, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2021504>.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Rumelt, *Good Strategy, Bad Strategy: The Difference and Why it Matters* (New York: Crown Business, 2011); Brad Roberts, “On Theories of Victory, Red and Blue,” Livermore Papers on Global Security No. 7 (Livermore, CA: Center for Global Security Research), June 2020, <https://cgsr.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/CGSR-LivermorePaper7.pdf>.

A third approach, which is less apparent in public descriptions by the Biden administration, conceives of integrating deterrence by fusing elements of differing strategies for achieving war aims and thus deterring conflict. For instance, deterrence by denial threatens to prevent an opponent from achieving war aims while deterrence by punishment threatens to inflict harm greater than the value of attaining goals. A major focus of this line of thinking is to integrate denial and punishment to different degrees and in different ways. Indeed, this is where much of the debate is, since few advocate strategies that are purely and exclusively either denial or punishment.

For example, in a Taiwan invasion scenario, Keith Payne and Mathew Costlow describe an expansive denial strategy to repel conventional attack and negate limited nuclear attack, while recommending economic and other punitive tools to help tip the balance.<sup>13</sup> Meantime, proponents of punishment strategies also accommodate some elements of denial.<sup>14</sup> Robert Blackwill and Philip Zelikow's gameplan for the Taiwan Strait is preparing to contest local invasion while, once it commences, freezing Chinese assets and severing transactions with China.<sup>15</sup> Melanie Sisson argues that "strategies of deterrence by punishment could increase China's anticipated costs by making Taiwan a harder target," denying gains to aggression or the ease with which those gains can be realized. Indeed, "a strategy designed to deter by increasing the costs of Chinese action might also include supporting Taiwan's direct defense."<sup>16</sup> Michael O'Hanlon is clearer in adopting elements of denial. His punishment strategy rests on economic reprisal for an aggressor's offense. Economic punishment is credible, O'Hanlon argues, because the United States can proportion it to the magnitude of aggression and sustain it in coalition

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<sup>13</sup> Keith B. Payne and Matthew R. Costlow, *Deterring China: A Victory Denial Strategy* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy, April 4, 2022), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/519.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Luis Simón, "Between punishment and denial: Uncertainty, flexibility, and U.S. military strategy toward China," *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 41, no. 3, (2020): pp. 361-384, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13523260.2020.1713604?journalCode=fesp20>

<sup>15</sup> Robert D. Blackwill and Philip Zelikow, *The United States, China, and Taiwan: A Strategy to Prevent War* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, February 2021), [https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/csr90\\_1.pdf](https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/csr90_1.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Melanie W. Sisson, "Taiwan and the Dangerous Illogic of Deterrence by Denial" (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, May 2022): p. 3, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/FP\\_20220505\\_taiwan\\_strategy\\_sisson.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/FP_20220505_taiwan_strategy_sisson.pdf).



with others. O’Hanlon’s strategy provides for military denial of large-scale conquest, declining to repel initial or local gains for fear of failure or escalation.<sup>17</sup>

Among these three broad approaches to integrated deterrence, conceptual integration at the level of strategy is most important. How, then, should the United States conceive of integrated deterrence strategy? To approach this problem, it is valuable to go back to the basics; after all, integrated deterrence is a theory of *deterrence*.

## ELEMENTS OF DETERRENCE

At the most basic level, deterrence is about persuading an actor not to take some action. A deterrer coerces an opponent’s compliance by raising the costs of noncompliance beyond the benefits expected to be gained. In other words: deterrence obtains when the opponent believes cost exceeds benefit and thus abstains; it fails when he does not. “The truth is that the aggressor deems the advantage to be greater than the suffering,” Thucydides counsels. However, “when there is mutual fear, men think twice before they make aggressions upon one another.”<sup>18</sup> True to its name, deterrence can inspire terror.<sup>19</sup> Deterrence, then, seeks to dissuade the targeted party from doing something one does not want. Practicing deterrence successfully, though, requires a theory of what deters and why. The following section describes three modes of deterrence.

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<sup>17</sup> Michael E. O’Hanlon, *The Senkaku Paradox: Risking Great Power War Over Small Stakes* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2019): pp.7-8. See also Michael E. O’Hanlon, Melanie W. Sisson, and Caitlin Talmadge, *Managing the Risks of US-China War: Implementing a Strategy of Integrated Deterrence* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, September 2022), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/managing-the-risks-of-us-china-war-implementing-a-strategy-of-integrated-deterrence/>.

<sup>18</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Benjamin Jowett, trans. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998): pp. 59–62.

<sup>19</sup> Austin Long, *Deterrence: From Cold War to Long War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND\\_MG636.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG636.pdf).

## PUNISHMENT

Deterrence by punishment, or cost-imposition, rests on the threat of penalty. A punishment strategy deters by threatening to impose costs disproportionate to the gains from aggression. Pure punishment does not primarily depend on the effort to resist aggression; rather, it assures retaliation. Michael Mazarr explains that “[t]he focus of deterrence by punishment is not the direct defense of the contested commitment but rather threats of wider punishment that would raise the cost of an attack.”<sup>20</sup> Nuclear powers are thought to deter significant homeland attack because they can devastate their attackers. The paradigmatic case is the Cold War concept of assured destruction. Deterrence through the promise of punishment, however, only works if the would-be aggressor believes that promise. The search for credibility comes easier when the interest in contest is immediate and total for the defending nation. It is much less credible when the would-be aggressor can reciprocate comparable damage, and when the interest at issue is less immediate and vital for the defender.

## DENIAL

A strategy of denial relies on frustrating an opponent’s ability to obtain objectives, persuading him that aggression is not worthwhile because it is unlikely to succeed at acceptable cost.<sup>21</sup> Deterrence by denial obtains when defense can depress the probability of successful offense. Means to deny resemble those to directly defend, while denial carries independent deterrent effect. Denying an aggressor territorial seizure, for example, could mean making coveted territory harder to seize or hold.<sup>22</sup> Denial tends to depend to a great degree on the balance of forces proximate to the object of deterrence.<sup>23</sup> A strategy of denial can be attractive because in many circumstances it is a more reliable

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<sup>20</sup> Michael J. Mazarr, “Understanding Deterrence” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE295/RAND\\_PE295.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE295/RAND_PE295.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 30-34.

<sup>22</sup> A. Wess Mitchell, “The Case for Deterrence by Denial,” *The American Interest*, August 12, 2015, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/08/12/the-case-for-deterrence-by-denial/>.

<sup>23</sup> As Glenn Snyder observes, “[i]n military affairs deterrence by denial is accomplished by having military forces which block the enemy’s military forces from making territorial gains.” Glenn H. Snyder, “Deterrence and Power,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 4, no. 2 (June 1960), p. 163, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/172650>.

deterrent than punishment, especially when the interest in contest is distant and partial for the defender. Since it does not rely on the broader infliction of cost but rather on the narrower frustration of the aggressor’s objective, it can avoid the generation of mutual cost infliction, keeping the overall cost of the conflict down relative to a punishment strategy.

Below is a table that includes the generally understood key conditions, benefits, and costs of punishment and denial.

	Punishment	Denial
Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most effective when resolve is strong because interest is immediate and total/existential.</li> <li>• Opponent has limited means of retort or lacks the resolve to implement them.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Depends on ability to actually deny opponent his objective.</li> </ul>
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tends to have lower military requirements. Because only cost infliction is necessary, the ability to defeat the opponent is not. Thus cost-imposition can be cheaper/easier - more “bang for the buck.”</li> <li>• Affords strategic flexibility to back-down.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires less in terms of resolve since it does not open conflict to cost infliction or may shield one from opponent’s.</li> <li>• More attractive especially in cases where interests are lower, e.g., extended deterrence.</li> <li>• Conditions for efficacy are broader than for punishment.</li> </ul>
Limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conditions for efficacy are narrower than for denial.</li> <li>• Depends significantly on perceived credibility.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Military requirements tend to be higher.</li> <li>• Reduces strategic flexibility to back-down.</li> </ul>

*Table 1: Punishment vs. Denial - Limitations, Benefits, Conditions*

## DOMINANCE

Dominance may achieve deterrence because, no matter an aggressor’s gains, preponderant power can simply overturn them. As two analysts explain, “[s]ince the end of the Cold War, military dominance has freed U.S. strategists from the need to consider deterrence as a problem separate and distinct from military advantage...the ability to decisively defeat potential opponents...is generally a sufficient condition for

deterrence.”<sup>24</sup> Rather than a discrete theory of victory, dominance is a condition. While not conceptually distinct from other models of deterrence, dominance greatly eases the burden of pursuing them. Indeed, when a state enjoys military dominance, deterrence does not ask much of strategy. It is evident that any action against the dominant state that triggers its dominant power will result in failure and is likely to cause costs beyond the benefits of acting.

## THE STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE

What does this mean for integrated deterrence? Before examining this question, we must first address what the United States needs from its deterrence strategy.

First, military strategy should follow from defense strategy. A theory for employing force, that is, should first posit the objectives that force should effect and the constraints within which it should operate. By extension, an integrated military strategy should follow from the nation’s defense strategy.

The object of U.S. defense strategy is deterring attack against allies and partners and, if necessary, defeating aggression at tolerable levels of cost and risk. The 2018 National Defense Strategy determined that China, in particular, threatened U.S. interests and prioritized the ability to defeat a Chinese theory of victory, above all against Taiwan.<sup>25</sup> The Biden administration has continued this focus. Secretary of Defense Austin

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<sup>24</sup> Eric Heginbotham and Jacob L. Heim, “Deterring without Dominance: Discouraging Chinese Adventurism under Austerity,” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 8, no. 1 (2015), pp. 185–199, [https://politicalscience.nd.edu/assets/262944/deterring\\_without\\_dominance\\_heginbotham\\_heim.pdf](https://politicalscience.nd.edu/assets/262944/deterring_without_dominance_heginbotham_heim.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy: Sharpening the American Military’s Strategic Edge* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, January 2018), <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>; Elbridge A. Colby, “Testimony Before the Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing on Implementation of the National Defense Strategy,” Testimony before the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, January 29, 2019, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Colby\\_01-29-19.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Colby_01-29-19.pdf).

designated China the pacing threat in his first message to the force, a status enshrined in the 2022 National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy.<sup>26</sup>

The method to deny China hegemony in Asia is a favorable regional balance of power.<sup>27</sup> China's best strategy is not to directly confront a defensive coalition but to corrode and collapse it. Frontline states like Taiwan are the primary target of the challenger's probes.<sup>28</sup> Their subordination could shatter the coalition's credibility in defending its members. Temptation to bandwagon with the threat, rather than balance against it, could overwhelm coalition members and lead to its collapse. As the coalition cornerstone, the United States must therefore anchor the coalition by defending frontline states, alongside their own efforts, but at a reasonable level of cost and risk.<sup>29</sup>

## THE STRATEGY OF DENIAL

How, then, can American military strategy—including integrated deterrence—underwrite the defense of allies and partners in Asia at a level of cost and risk tolerable to Americans?

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<sup>26</sup> White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: White House, October 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>; and Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, October 2022), <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

<sup>27</sup> Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy: Sharpening the American Military's Strategic Edge* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, January 2018), <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>; White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, December 2017), <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>; "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance" (Washington, DC: The White House, March 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> A. Wess Mitchell and Jakub J. Grygiel. *The Unquiet Frontier: Rising Rivals, Vulnerable Allies, and the Crisis of American Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

<sup>29</sup> Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).

## THE DEMISE OF DOMINANCE

These dilemmas of strategy would not be so pointed if the United States were dominant. In the unipolar moment, the United States could dispatch and sustain expeditionary forces at long distance, generate combat power in theater with relative sanctuary, and decisively defeat the enemy at its time of choosing. Dominance ensured deterrence because the United States could repel invasion or eject invaders, not to mention impose costs, with relatively little trouble.

In the 1990s and 2000s, China could neither assault Taiwan nor preclude American intervention on its behalf; nor could China credibly threaten limited nuclear escalation if it failed conventionally. American military mastery was manifest in uncontested carrier patrols during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis, a stark demonstration of Beijing's inferiority in power. At the time, the U.S. military enjoyed operational advantage across key domains of warfare.<sup>30</sup>

The era of dominance, however, is over.

Beijing's economic ascent has powered its military advances. China's economy grew from four percent of the global economy in 1990 to nearly 20 percent today.<sup>31</sup> Already, it exceeds U.S. gross domestic product in purchasing power parity terms and is on track to overtake it in market exchange rate terms. During the same period, China dramatically raised its defense spending. Yet, while conventional estimates may understate Beijing's defense burden, its expenditure remains a smaller share of its economy relative to the United States.<sup>32</sup> This means America cannot realistically expect to simply outspend China - not now and not for the foreseeable future.

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<sup>30</sup> Eric Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996-2017* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015).

<sup>31</sup> International Monetary Fund, "GDP based on PPP, share of world," (Washington, DC: World Bank, accessed June 8, 2022),

<https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/PPPSH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD/CHN>.

<sup>32</sup> World Bank, "GDP (current US\$) – China versus World" (Washington, DC: World Bank, accessed June 8, 2022), <https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=2&country=CHN>.

Powered by decades of growing investment, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has undertaken a remarkable modernization. First, to keep the U.S. military out, the PLA developed anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities. This asymmetric model exploited weaknesses in American expeditionary warfare, rather than matching its strengths. The geography of Asia imposes twin tyrannies of time and distance on U.S. military operations. Mature trends in warfare—especially ubiquitous sensors and proliferated precision weapons—raise the price of power projection. As a result, America’s “competitive edge has eroded in every domain of warfare, air, land, sea, space and cyberspace, and it is continuing to erode.”<sup>33</sup> China is now also coupling this A2/AD capability with a growing ability to project power, first in its immediate environment but clearly with aims to do so much farther afield in the medium to longer-term.<sup>34</sup>

In light of this, defeating China’s counter-intervention strategy might well recall the trials of the Pacific Campaign in World War II. Tokyo designed a layered defense to exhaust American naval strength at its periphery. Along the first line of defense, long-range submarines, night attacks, and aerial bombardment were to impose attrition on the larger U.S. fleet. When remaining naval forces neared, the Imperial Japanese Navy would strike in a decisive blow. As Toshi Yoshihara has observed, “the [Imperial Japanese Navy] then, and the [People’s Liberation Army Navy] over the past decade, developed weapons and honed doctrines that would cut the opponent down to size. If Beijing learns from this history, a much more formidable anti-access challenge may lie in store for the United States.”<sup>35</sup> Against it, restoring military dominance is almost certainly fanciful.

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<sup>33</sup> James N. Mattis, “Remarks by Secretary Mattis on the National Defense Strategy” (Washington, DC: United States Department of Defense, January 19, 2018), <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1420042/remarks-by-secretary-mattis-on-the-national-defense-strategy/>.

<sup>34</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020*, 9-A3DFCD4 (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, August 11, 2020), <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2020 Report to Congress of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission* (Washington, DC: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, December 2020), Chapter 3, Section 2, <https://www.uscc.gov/annual-report/2020-annual-report-congress>.

<sup>35</sup> Toshi Yoshihara, “Anti-Access Lessons from the Past,” *Proceedings*, December 2013, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2013/december/anti-access-lessons-past>.

## THE DEMERITS OF PURE PUNISHMENT

While dominance is lost and cannot plausibly expect to be recovered, the United States could consider a strategy to defend allies and partners based on pure cost-infliction, or punishment. Deterrence by punishment does not contest the object of the opponent's attack but seeks to show that the costs of acquiring it would exceed its gains. The threat of devastating nuclear retaliation, for instance, underwrites strategic deterrence. But deterring large-scale attack on the homeland is credible because the stakes are immediate and absolute; even if the attacker can retaliate, the prospects are already so severe that the defender because of the scale and gravity of the attack that it can plausibly justify triggering that retaliation. Extending deterrence to allies and partners, however, is more difficult because those stakes are removed and partial for the extending power. The United States can impose punishment on China - but China can impose comparable punishment on America. For limited stakes, would such an exchange truly be worth it?

Horizontal escalation attempts expands the scope of conflict while conceding or at least deemphasizing the local struggle in order to try to shift the conflict to a broader frame. In practice, the United States could try to blockade China's maritime commerce or attack its interests abroad. In that case, a strategy of punishment appeals to U.S. comparative advantages in global military posture while seeming to evade China's in the local military balance. If China attacked Taiwan, for example, the United States could attempt a trade embargo while going after China's base in Djibouti and facilities in places like Pakistan, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka.

The catch is that horizontal escalation concedes interests China values more for ones it values less. China does not have anything like the global presence and interests the United States does, and their significance pales in comparison to the territorial status of Taiwan for Beijing. Further, for China, regional mastery is prior to global preeminence. Accordingly, Beijing's stated core interest in unifying Taiwan with mainland China on favorable terms very likely outweighs any such losses farther afield. Moreover, once it consolidated its hold on Taiwan, then Beijing would have fair reason to believe it could resecure access farther afield through a combination of military, economic, and diplomatic measures.



Even more aggressively, the United States could threaten China's vulnerable western periphery or even its means of domestic control, wagering that Beijing's sovereignty obsession would stimulate a disproportionate response. On the one hand, however, horizontal escalation might not be so effective as to draw significant Chinese focus and resources at the expense of Taiwan; on the other, such escalation could prove cataclysmic if Beijing perceives itself in existential jeopardy. Horizontal escalation for cost-imposition, then, could either amount to modest costs, unlikely to matter much, or costs so painful as to provoke severe retaliation.<sup>36</sup>

Germany's decision to commence unrestricted submarine warfare in World War I offers an illuminating example in this context. By restricting Berlin's access to international markets and rendering its cash reserves worthless, Britain's blockade had brought on food shortages and hunger riots in the Reich. Suffocating from it, Berlin sought to compel Britain to relieve the pressure by attacking merchant ships without warning. But Germany's horizontal escalation gambit, rather than puncture the blockade, brought American entrance to the war and ultimately German defeat.<sup>37</sup>

While war-widening is likely to be a poor proposition for the United States, the punitive threat of vertical escalation—intensifying the violence applied—is likely to present even greater demerits. Restrained punishment may not shake an opponent, especially when the target of retaliation is not very important to the other side. As in the horizontal variant, victims of punishment may accept diffuse costs of vertical escalation as the price of concentrated benefits. General sanctions, for example, may not bear upon state leadership. What is more, the mechanics of coercion may backfire. Destroying enemy cities could catalyze public opposition to war but is more likely to galvanize support for the cause.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Elbridge A. Colby and David A. Ochmanek, "How the United States Could Lose a Great-Power War," *Foreign Policy*, October 30, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/29/united-states-china-russia-great-power-war>.

<sup>37</sup> Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 23. Thanks to Chris Vassallo for this example.

<sup>38</sup> Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 25.

Most important, punishment begets reciprocal punishment from a highly capable opponent. Sanctions rely on their employer's willingness to suffer economic loss. Bombardment of enemy cities invites a comparable response. The more vigorous the violence applied, the more searing the pain likely to be inflicted in return by a highly powerful adversary like China. Because of this, employing a punitive strategy may very well bleed a state of its popular resolve to persist in the conflict. The problem of reciprocal punishment is especially acute for war-making coalitions. The punitive threat of vertical escalation, then, is likely to be a losing strategy against a state as powerful as China, and at minimum is likely to trigger costs far out of proportion to the interests at stake.

### THE CASE FOR DENIAL - AND ITS LIMITS

In light of these factors, the United States' best strategy to prevent aggression against allies and partners in Asia is one that relies primarily on deterrence by denial. As noted, denial discourages offensive action by reducing the probability that it will succeed such that the potential aggressor chooses not to "pull the trigger." Denial sets a more modest and negative standard for deterrence than, for instance, dominance; frustrating the opponent's objectives is sufficient. It does not require total victory or submission.

In this model, the United States should prepare a direct defense of Taiwan and other allies and partners in Asia by ensuring the ability to deny China the ability to seize and hold these allies' key territory, with Taiwan as the pacing scenario at the forefront of the problem.<sup>39</sup> For the defenders, limited political objectives lead to limited military objectives. Rather than needing to annihilate or dominate the enemy, the defense needs only to degrade Beijing's military advantage sufficiently to defeat its ability to conquer the key territory of the ally. The defenders may focus on disabling the attacker from seizing key territory or holding it. While the aggressor must accomplish both to achieve victory, the defender can jeopardize just one to successfully deny.

The problem is the United States may not be able to effect a strategy of denial on the timeline required to defeat Chinese aggression against Taiwan. Above all, this is a

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<sup>39</sup> David A. Ochmanek, *Sustaining U.S. Leadership in the Asia-Pacific Region* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE142.html>.

possibility if the United States fails to muster the resolve and resources quickly enough. Taiwan's armed forces have also lagged, failing to adapt sufficiently for asymmetric defense. Meanwhile, China's military modernization has continued apace. PLA A2/AD systems are estimated to be able to comprehensively range U.S. forces west of the International Date Line by 2025.<sup>40</sup> As Thomas Shugart has assessed, the PLA's rapid growth of long-range missile and bomber forces and world-class naval expansion will coincide in this decade with a significant decrease in available U.S. platforms and strike capacity. The precarious military balance in the mid- to late-2020s heightens the danger of aggression and defeat.<sup>41</sup> This means the United States may simply fail to attain denial as a standard, compelling Washington to consider other options.

### THE NEED FOR A THEORY OF ESCALATION AND WAR TERMINATION

More fundamentally, however, even if local denial is attainable, denial cannot fully account for the higher levels of escalation that would be possible in such a great power conflict. This is a central problem because China may decide to escalate out of a local or even regional war for several reasons. First, if the United States is inadequately or not credibly prepared at higher levels of escalation, Beijing may decide to escalate its way to victory as its primary strategy. Alternatively, even if the United States is better prepared, China may decide to try to escalate its way out of local defeat, in the now familiar logic of "escalate to de-escalate" or "escalate to victory." Finally, China could decide not to escalate but simply press on with a more limited war, accepting a protracted war and hoping to bleed or outlast America and its coalition partners. This might prove intolerable for the coalition. Thus, if the United States and its allies do not have a good strategy and posture for dealing with such escalation or deliberate effort to protract the war, they could well fail.

Denial alone is insufficient or ill-suited in these contexts because in its abstract form pure denial would tend to spiral toward unconstrained violence as a conflict escalated. It is important to bear in mind that denial is a relative concept. Denial is, after all, about

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<sup>40</sup> Demetri Sevastopulo, "Admiral Warns US Military Losing Its Edge in Indo-Pacific," *Financial Times*, March 9, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/61ea7ce5-7b68-459b-9a11-41cc71777de5>.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas H. Shugart III, "Trends, Timelines, and Uncertainty: An Assessment of the Military Balance in the Indo-Pacific," Testimony before Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, March 17, 2021, [https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/031721\\_Shugart\\_Testimony.pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/031721_Shugart_Testimony.pdf).

denying *someone the ability to do something*. But it can be framed over different periods of time and to different standards of adequacy. For instance, a local or limited denial of China's ability to invade Taiwan might mean simply sinking or shooting down its existing amphibious and air assault forces. Or a more maximalist form of denial might be taken to mean denying Beijing's ability to reconstitute such forces and their supporting elements, which would in turn require extensive attacks on factories, shipyards, naval installations, and other facilities throughout China.

In light of this, the natural endpoint of a pure denial approach would be the full-scale defeat of the Chinese military and state - that would be fully and finally "denying" China's ability to attack again. Yet a more maximalist form of denial campaign along those expanded lines would incur enormous risks and be exceptionally difficult to pull off. Most pointedly, such an expansive war—one aimed at denying not just a Chinese assault but Beijing's ability to keep up a losing battle or mount such an assault again—could prompt China to use its nuclear forces and other strategic capabilities at scale. The recent revelation of hundreds of intercontinental ballistic missile silos, part of a modernizing triad of strategic delivery systems, creates new vulnerabilities on the part of the American homeland while laying to rest any notion of preemptively disarming China of its nuclear deterrent.

The United States therefore needs a theory of success in such a conflict that includes denial but also indicates how to favorably manage escalation - that is, achieving its strategic-political goals without, at a minimum, precipitating a massive attack on the United States. In other words, because China cannot be comprehensively disarmed and decisively defeated, Beijing will have to be persuaded not to escalate a conflict or to terminate one if it refuses to do so and Washington believes it necessary to end the war.

Achieving this, though, will require a U.S. strategy and posture that would plausibly persuade China to cease the conflict without it resulting in damage far out of proportion to any benefits gained.

## THE ESCALATION STRATEGY OF DENIAL-CUM-PUNISHMENT

The best way to achieve this is through a strategy that integrates elements of cost-imposition with denial, both leveraging the advantages and mitigating the disadvantages of each. This optimal approach would combine a fundamental approach of denial with selective and conditional cost-imposition. As a complement to denial operations, cost-imposition would not be the primary victory mechanism of the strategy. Rather, building on the effort to disable China's ability to attack U.S. allies—a narrower form of denial—cost-imposition would be used selectively and conditionally to persuade China's leadership that escalating or persisting would not only fail in its goal but also incur greater cost.

In such a denial-plus strategy, the predicate would be effective denial in a narrower sense in the local battle - denying, for instance, China's near-term ability to successfully pull off an invasion of Taiwan. With this as the baseline, selective and conditional cost-imposition would focus on striking at interests and targets that the Chinese government values and would ideally also degrade its current or future warmaking ability, but without precipitating a massive retaliation. The logic resembles U.S. strategy for war termination during the later Cold War, designed to influence Soviet decision-makers by employing discriminate and targeted force against that which they valued most, but without triggering a full-scale riposte.<sup>42</sup>

Objects of value will vary in degree and by circumstance, but include local military targets, deep military targets, strategic and industrial targets, and ultimately regime targets. What and how relatively prized those valuable assets are are of course matters of conjecture and debate, but a longstanding focus of analysis in the U.S. government. But in the ideal, selective and iterative cost-imposition would represent coercive “hypothesis-testing.”<sup>43</sup> The United States would observe whether incremental costs stimulated a desired response and calibrate subsequent attacks accordingly. This would be an efficient approach because it would seek to identify the most effective points of leverage, while preserving space for de-escalation if risk and costs became prohibitive

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<sup>42</sup> Elbridge A. Colby, “The United States and Discriminate Nuclear Options in the Cold War,” in Jeffrey A. Larsen and Kerry M. Kartchner, eds., *On Limited Nuclear War in the 21st Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), pp. 49-79.

<sup>43</sup> Thanks to Alex Velez-Green for this insight.

for the United States. The strategy thus would be more likely to succeed—or fail gracefully.

In this model, cost-imposition upon the opponent would be conditional, or “avoidable by accommodation.”<sup>44</sup> To promote intra-war deterrence, the strategy would communicate to Beijing that its recalcitrance was bringing the harm on itself but that its restraint could end the pain. Coupled with a sense of futility about the local battle that the baseline denial approach would produce, this would apply intensifying but selective pressure for China to cease or avoid escalation and, if necessary, terminate the war.

Restraint and conditionality would be key parts of this strategy. By withholding more expansive and broadly damaging strikes, the strategy would create incentives for China to limit the conflict. Beijing is more likely to forego escalation—such as nuclear strikes on the United States—if it has something to lose as well.

Moreover, conditionality is important for maintaining the defending coalition’s cohesion, which is a foundational goal of the whole war. Allies and partners might be too afraid or alienated if the United States was seen to be too aggressive, risk-acceptant, or cruel. Thus, the United States should not appear to inflict pain and especially court massive retaliation without cause. Indeed, Beijing and important observers should understand that China could end the pain by recognizing the evident reality of its defeat over the local battle. By extension, they should understand that Beijing’s malice and recklessness caused the mounting pain and risk for all those implicated, not American aggression or recklessness.

The strategy would thus selectively and conditionally layer the imposition of pain on top of the perception of futility about the local battle, thereby leveraging both denial and cost-imposition to influence Beijing’s calculus. The goal would be to convince Beijing that it could not reverse its local defeat over Taiwan, that the costs and risks of continuing its struggle were too great, and that its interests would be best served by acceding to the defenders’ limited demands. Such an approach would thus present China with the choice of either conceding or continuing to lose valued goods with no

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<sup>44</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1966; 2020), p. 2.

good prospect of reversing its fortune. The more China sought to escalate its way out of its quandary, the more it would worsen its predicament.

Such an integrated strategy would thus combine denial and cost-imposition: direct defense against assault of the ally would be the critical predicate, but coupled with cost-imposition to persuade China to accepting a limited defeat. Denial would defeat China's theory of victory against the vulnerable state. Cost-imposition layered atop denial would be designed to induce Beijing to accept that local defeat or at minimum restrain its escalation. This approach would be more tailorable and controllable, and more likely to fail gracefully, and such a campaign would be less prone to spiral into a catastrophic conflict against a China possessed of survivable nuclear forces.

Moreover, denial and cost-imposition could be fused in the application of the strategy. In particular, the strategy could focus on inflicting costs precisely on those assets that are highly valued *and* would contribute to China's ability to regenerate its forces for offensive action - to name just a few: military industrial plants, shipyards, and key energy nodes for military employment. This approach would both hurt what Beijing cared about but also inhibit its ability to pursue aggression again.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR CAPABILITY DEVELOPMENT

This paper has identified the principal scenario for which the Department of Defense should prepare and outlined the integrated military strategy it should develop and implement to deal with the critical problem of China's ability to escalate or make a war protracted, even in the face of local defeat.

How, then, should a strategy of denial-cum-cost-infliction shape the development of U.S. operational concepts and military capabilities? To achieve this combined approach, the Joint Force must be capable of two operating modes: localized denial as well as both limited forms of denial and cost-imposition in escalation. In other words, it must be able to conduct effective local denial operations and transition to more focused forms of denial as well as selective punishment operations, consistent with the strategic phase of the conflict. Given the scarcity of resources relative to the problem, to the extent practicable, force development might most profitably emphasize platforms and weapons systems fungible in both forms of high-end warfighting.

Importantly, availability of priority platforms and munitions, such as penetrating bombers and standoff munitions, is limited in the near-term. Therefore, while focusing on expanding capacity over the long-term, targets that overlap both localized denial and cost-imposition (e.g., seaports) should likely receive priority in the near-term. Expanded capacity would not only mitigate attrition; it would also allow for more tailored escalation management. If, for example, munitions capable of striking mainland targets are scarce, there will be pressure to escalate early by striking the highly valued targets for the best return. Deeper capacity will allow for more flexibility and options when it comes to managing escalation.

Best use of scarce resources will also depend on how China conducts the invasion. For example, if China commits all of its high-end warships to the invasion, then the United States can use more of its high-end anti-ship weapons in the denial campaign. If China were to hold back high-end warships outside the vicinity of Taiwan, then the United States must reserve more high-end anti-ship weapons for the cost-imposition campaign. U.S. intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities will be at a premium to track how China employs its invasion force and which targets to service in either the denial or cost-imposition campaign.

#### DENIAL OPERATIONS

The primary thrust of the strategy is decreasing the probability of successful offense by denying military objectives—that is, seizure and occupation of defended key territory. It corresponds to the first operational mode of the strategy: localized denial operations. This mode prioritizes the capability of the Joint Force to conduct direct denial operations, both on its own and in tandem with denial efforts by allies and partners.

There is extensive analysis on denial operations in the Western Pacific. Analysts have identified discrete operational challenges and promising concepts and capabilities to overcome them. Those concepts and resulting capabilities that would be consistent with the escalation strategy laid out here could include:



Targets	Missions	Capabilities
PLA Navy components operating in the Eastern Theater Command	Destruction of invasion fleet.	Generate long-range littoral fires; conduct sea-denial within enemy A2/AD envelope.  Preposition stocks and equipment for air-delivered precision munitions.  Maintain persistent ISR coverage; conduct offensive electronic warfare.  Resilient, dispersed and redundant command and control networks; mission command and discretionary rules of engagement.
PLA Rocket Force components operating in the Eastern Theater Command	Attrition of enemy salvos.	Operate resilient and dispersed forward-deployed forces and bases. Regional Integrated Air and Missile Defense architectures
PLA amphibious assault forces	Delay and degrade territorial seizure.	Indigenous asymmetric capability development, including coastal and air defense, naval mining, anti-armor weapons, civil defense.  Special operations forces

*Table 2: Denial Operations - Targets, Missions, Capabilities*

**DENIAL-CUM-COST-IMPOSITION OPERATIONS**

The denial-cum-cost-imposition approach places a premium on graduated applications of force, designed to impose costs that matter to the enemy leadership but not sufficient to provoke a massive riposte. In particular, the strategy would focus on inflicting costs on targets that would *both hurt and degrade* China’s ability to mount, sustain, or reconstitute its invasion forces. In rough order of increasing intensity, forces and concepts in this vein could include:

Targets	Missions	Capabilities
Seaborne supplies (military, energy commercial).	Distant interdiction.	Low-end surface fleet (e.g. FFGs), Coast Guard, and converted merchant ships, as needed; Ally and partner naval blockade (e.g., Japan, Australia, India)
Sealift capacity.	Destroy dual-use civilian sealift ships outside the vicinity of the Taiwan strait.	Low-cost munitions; low-survivability platforms.
Mainland seaports.	Disrupt inshore naval and civilian maritime operations.	Standoff, aerial, UUV-delivered seaminging
Dual-use critical infrastructure, such as internal transportation infrastructure (e.g., rail tunnels, bridges, dams, marshal yards) energy production and distribution sites, telecommunications nodes, and airports and seaports.	Degrade civil-military integration.	Potential cyber/EW mission or long-range strike mission. Employ ground-based theater-range fires, penetrating/standoff bombers, possibly undersea fires (e.g., “upward falling payload” program). Critical infrastructure targets occur along of a gradient of military, commercial, and civilian use.
PLA Northern and Southern Theater Commands	Creation of intra-theater force deployment dilemmas along the enemy’s eastern seaboard to compel division of forces.	Capable ally and partner armies and navies (e.g., Australia, India) to conduct feints or incursions.
PLA Navy and PLA Air Force conventional and nuclear power projection forces outside the Western Pacific theater	Cost-imposing counterforce attacks.	Ground, sea, and undersea long-range precision fires (highly survivable cruise missiles, hypersonic missile), penetrating/standoff bombers; Reliable and timely ISR over mainland targets; Limited nuclear options and reliable methods of delivery.
Defense industrial base (e.g., shipyards, ammunition plants), commercial technology production, and financial sector targets.	Counter-recovery attacks to retard reconstitution of power projection capabilities.	Ground-based theater-range fires, penetrating/standoff bombers, possibly undersea fires (e.g., “upward falling payload” program); Limited nuclear options.

*Table 3: Denial-Cum-Cost-Imposition Operations - Targets, Missions, Capabilities*