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Pathways to Protraction: Rethinking US-China Conflict

In recent months, discussion has grown in military and policy circles about the possibility of protracted conflict between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC). As analyst Iskander Rehman puts it, "[American] military planners are increasingly recognizing the need to think beyond the first salvo, and that an armed conflict with an adversary as large, wealthy, and powerful as the People's Republic of China would most likely evolve into a protracted war of attrition—one that would span several interlocking theatres, directly threaten the American homeland and civilian populace, and draw on all dimensions of national power."¹ Beyond planning itself, a growing number of reports and commentaries also emphasize that although planners on both sides have focused mostly on prevailing in the early stages of a conflict, war with China is likely to be much more prolonged than planners have expected. Their key argument, as professors Hal Brands and Michael Beckley summarize it, is that "the United States may be planning for the wrong kind of war with China."² These commentaries emphasize the idea that United States has devoted insufficient attention to preparing for protraction and would struggle to mobilize the manpower and resources needed to engage in prolonged conflict. Former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley and former Google

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CEO Eric Schmidt recently argued in an article for *Foreign Affairs* that “America isn’t ready for the wars of the future,” and security policy researcher Edward Geist warned that “defeat is possible.”³

Discussions of protraction thus far, however, have for the most part not systematically acknowledged or unpacked one fundamental challenge at the heart of US strategy and defense planning: planning for protracted conflict is not a

Planning for protracted conflict is not a single monolithic exercise, nor is protraction a single state of conflict

single monolithic exercise, nor is protraction a single state of conflict. Rather, the Indo-Pacific security environment is characterized by a cluster of multiple flashpoints that, if they escalate, could each converge into some kind of broader end state of protracted fighting between the United States and China. Because the initial pathways into conflict look so different, however, each pathway would change the nature of the protracted conflict facing the United States, and the resources available to prosecute it, increasing the breadth and complexity of planning

required.

Only a few analyses today acknowledge, let alone systematically analyze, the reality that analyst and wargamer Andrew Metrick described: “conflict protraction against a near-peer competitor is more complicated than the defense planning scenarios used since the end of the Cold War,” because there are “a wide array of different pathways that end in a protracted conflict,”⁴ each of which could result in a very different battlefield landscape than others. Multiple questions that have to be answered about the initial phase of conflict would profoundly shape both the United States’ and China’s subsequent strategy for any protracted struggle.

Given these complexities, what would progress in planning for protraction look like? Policymakers cannot weight the costs and risks of military action versus the alternatives if they do not understand where a conflict could go, and planners cannot execute their missions if they do not know the full spectrum of what they need to plan for. A first step toward progress on these questions is to systematically identify the factors that could shape the trajectory of protracted conflict at the strategic level. After cataloguing these factors and outlining both the range and relative likelihood of the scenarios they produce, planners can identify where each of these scenarios does and does not converge with others, and therefore what capabilities, authorities, plans, and training must be adjusted to prepare adequately for the possible futures ahead. Planning for protraction could also bolster political leaders’ efforts to deter conflict by credibly signaling

to Beijing that the United States sees the risk of costly protracted conflict as high enough to invest in preparing for it.

This article attempts to advance discussions of the risks associated with protracted conflict between the United States and China by taking that first step: cataloguing the array of possible pathways into protraction, identifying the factors in the early stages of conflict that would shape the face of a future protracted contest, and asking how the initial pathways into potential conflict scenarios could shape the way in which protraction might unfold. It is intended to offer an intellectual framework for thinking about the breadth of scenarios on the table, and an (inevitably non-exhaustive) agenda for planning for the complexity of protraction, framed around six key questions.

Where—And How—Might Conflict Start?

Much current analysis and planning focuses on a crisis in the Taiwan Strait, but that is not the only pathway by which the United States could find itself in military conflict with the PRC. The United States has now clarified that its Mutual Defense Treaty obligations with both Japan and the Philippines apply to areas where control is currently contested with China: the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the case of Japan and the South China Sea (including Second Thomas Shoal) with the Philippines.⁵

Conflict in each of these places could arise via either accident or deliberate escalation. Analysts have also raised the issue of potential “false flag” operations—citing Japanese actions in Manchuria in 1931 and Russian activities in Crimea in 2014 as potential precedents—that could be used to pursue revisionist aims while leveraging uncertainty to minimize the cost.⁶ Even in Taiwan, the PRC could employ force in several different ways to compel change to the status quo below the level of an attempted invasion, annexation, and occupation, and these could be staged in such a way to create potential plausible deniability. Scenarios such as a decapitation strike or assassination, taking one of Taiwan’s outlying islands alone, or a catalytic incident in the Taiwan Strait which could be blamed on Taiwan’s “provocation” could all be used to alter the status quo in Beijing’s favor.⁷

Even with this limited canvassing of both geographic flashpoints and initiating incidents, a complex matrix generating a wide range of scenarios already emerges. In each of these cases, the capabilities of the United States and whichever partners are initially involved affect their combined ability to mount an initial response, let alone sustain that response over any length of time. The way that the United States would work with the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF), for example, is likely to be different if the United States is asked to support Japan in operations to defend the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands than if the United

States asks for Japanese support in a contingency with respect to Taiwan, or Japanese support in a contingency involving the Philippines. Similarly, despite roughly comparable statements about the United States' commitment to defend its allies under their respective Mutual Defense Treaty obligations, American support for Japan versus the Philippines in a maritime crisis over disputed territory would look very different given the discrepancies in relative maritime capabilities of these two allies. Whether and how any political de-escalation or "crisis management" mechanisms might be in place to try to find an off-ramp also varies widely by scenario. As a result of all these factors, the challenges of political coordination could look very different depending on how each civilian leader involved attempts to combine diplomatic efforts at de-escalation with elements of a military response.

Another key question raised by examining the initial point of conflict is: What is the risk of immediate horizontal escalation? In any of the above scenarios, for

What is the risk of immediate horizontal escalation?

example, it is possible that North Korea could somehow decide to take advantage of a crisis elsewhere to coerce South Korea or conduct its own military operations, such as the bombardment of Yeonpyeong-do or the sinking of the naval corvette *ROKS Cheonan* in 2010.⁸

The emergence of simultaneous conflict in more than one location in Asia has, at minimum, the potential to significantly alter what assets and personnel are available as well as the attention and decisions demanded of key decision-makers in the opening hours or days. In the above example, which elements of United States Forces Korea (USFK) would play what roles in any regional contingency depends largely on whether or not those units are simultaneously engaged in combat operations on the peninsula.

How Might Protracted Conflict Evolve?

Discussions often overlook the fact that "protraction" is not just an umbrella term for the endpoint of multiple different conflict pathways, but a process that will look very different and change over time. For example, one much-discussed scenario is a possible PLA amphibious assault on Taiwan, but few analysts who study the Chinese political system and the Chinese military think that a failed amphibious attack would lead Xi Jinping to shrug and go home.⁹ Taiwan is one of the only concrete deliverables that Xi Jinping has tied to the objective of "national rejuvenation" by 2049, and attempting but failing to accomplish unification could jeopardize regime survival, leading to strong incentives for Xi to "gamble for resurrection" by continuing and prolonging the conflict in hopes of exhausting the resolve of Taiwan and its key supporters, including the United States.¹⁰

Failure of one or both sides to accomplish their goals in what they hoped would be a decisive opening phase would likely transition to a second phase that looks very different. In the event of a failed amphibious assault, for example, blockade may be the fallback option; the PLA's 2006 *Science of Campaigns* describes a joint blockade as a large-scale, long-term operation, and may be combined with efforts to establish air, sea, and information control.¹¹ Even then, a blockade alone is not a (guaranteed) war-winning strategy, so the PLA—and whoever it is fighting at that point—would need to figure out their respective political and operational strategies for conflict termination, or evolve into yet another phase of conflict.

What this means is that the conflict may not only be inconsistent across known time horizons, but that the type of conflict embedded in protraction may change more than once. As this happens, the leaders of both sides would likely change objectives and strategies based on updated information. The “fog of war,” however, may inhibit rational updating, and so the perceptions of the two sides may actually diverge more as conflict progresses, particularly due to divergent ways of obtaining and processing information for leaders in the American and Chinese political systems. We know that China's leaders sometimes struggle to get accurate information from the grassroots in domestic political crises, and similar problems could distort CCP leaders' understanding of the battlefield—a problem that has plagued other authoritarian leaders at war.¹² Divergent perceptions of how the war is going may also be especially acute if information operations and disinformation campaigns, or “strategic blinding” efforts, play a significant role in the conflict's early phases.¹³ And even without these problems, a prolonged war may make limited victory harder for one or both parties to accept, as war aims can expand with the scope of the conflict and the sacrifice required of the participants.¹⁴ The net effect would be to narrow the bargaining space and potentially to further prolong conflict—but to what extent this plays a role in protracted conflict scenarios depends on how the initial phase of conflict affects each party's ability to obtain information and update strategy throughout the course of fighting.

The outcome of any initial phase of conflict could also alter the risks of nuclear escalation in subsequent phases.¹⁵ If either the United States or China faces catastrophic risks and high casualties in order to regain losses incurred in the opening phase, the likelihood of discussion of nuclear weapons use could shift dramatically. While some Chinese military officials have written that it is implausible that countries would use nuclear weapons to reverse conventional battlefield losses, American scholars such as Fiona Cunningham and Taylor Fravel point out that these beliefs—and a mismatch between Chinese and American expectations with respect to the controllability of nuclear escalation—combine to exacerbate the risk of crisis instability and nuclear escalation.¹⁶

Initial conflict outcomes and nuclear escalation risk are related in several ways

Initial conflict outcomes and nuclear escalation risk are related in several ways. Once conflict begins, either side may be tempted to use nuclear weapons in a limited fashion to avoid defeat; some recent US think tank reports have called for consideration of tactical nuclear weapons to defeat a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.¹⁷ Other analysts have debated the risk of inadvertent escalation to the nuclear level given the reported intermingling of China's conventional and nuclear capabilities.¹⁸ A third, less direct way that the nuclear shadow

could shape the course of protracted conflict is through a version of the stability-instability paradox: surety that conflict would not escalate to the nuclear level could enable Beijing to adopt more aggressive warfighting strategies which exert extremely high costs on the United States in pursuit of victory. As political scientist Joshua Rovner put it, when it comes to nuclear escalation risk and protracted conflict, the United States may confront a “sober-

ing tradeoff: efforts to avoid nuclear catastrophe [could] increase the chance of a long and grueling fight.”¹⁹ Especially as China's nuclear modernization continues,²⁰ it will be important to understand Chinese views of these issues and their likely implications for the opening and subsequent phases of a potential protracted conflict.

What Is China Thinking about Protracted Conflict?

It is important to remember that this problem cuts both ways. Just as the United States has often ended up fighting wars that were different from what its leaders anticipated, Beijing also cannot count on achieving success via a quick decisive victory. Chinese discussions seem to focus even more than American ones on the need for quick decisive victory, and it is unclear to what extent the PLA and China's political leadership have considered alternate conflict trajectories, let alone engaged in serious strategic thinking and planning for them.

Analyses of China's behavior often focus on its present reliance on “grey zone” tactics: a recent declassified estimate by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence suggests that through at least 2030, China is likely to employ “frequent, diverse, and damaging acts of coercion and subversion ...below what constitutes armed conflict but outside the bounds of historically legitimate statecraft.”²¹ As US Army War College Chair of China Studies Joshua Arostegui argues, foundational military texts—such as the *Science of Military Strategy* and national defense white papers—do not talk extensively about how to fight and

win a protracted campaign; rather, they focus on why it's a bad idea and how to avoid it in the first place.²²

Searching the term “protracted war” (持久战, *chijiuzhan*) quickly leads to Mao's classic text by that name, rather than current analysis of conflict protraction and the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s capabilities with respect to planning for and engaging with it. Even well-known books on operational art, like the *Science of Campaigns*, make references to protracted conflict, but for the most part these are warnings to *avoid* getting into one. Typically, analysts have assumed that China's strategy in a potential conflict—over Taiwan or elsewhere—is to plan and prepare to end the conflict as quickly as possible.

Nonetheless, thinking in China may also be shifting. News reports in early 2024 suggested that the prolonged trajectory of fighting in Ukraine had prompted the PRC to consider its own preparations for a protracted conflict.²³ Meanwhile, Chinese sources explicitly discuss PRC policies aimed at enhancing economic security and responding to Xi's directives on preparing for “extreme situations,” which include potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait. Such measures seem aimed at withstanding the imposition of longer-term external conditions, such as sanctions or conflict that would constrict seaborne trade, which could pose serious problems for China's economic security and overall stability.²⁴

There remain some key gaps in China's capabilities to execute a number of scenarios

More attention to how Chinese thinking evolves is warranted for several reasons. For one, a better understanding of Chinese views will inform the course of any future warfighting strategies adopted by the United States and its allies and partners. Conversely, understanding how China thinks about the risk of protracted conflict could also be a valuable component of deterrence in attempting to maintain regional and global peace and stability.

What Will China's Capabilities Be When Conflict Starts?

The trajectory of a potential protracted conflict will depend significantly on not just China's thinking, but also the PRC's military capabilities at the start of that conflict. Numerous American and international reports have documented the extent and rapid pace of the PRC's military buildup and modernization.²⁵ China's capabilities have grown and, given the pace of current defense spending, are likely to do so for the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, there remain some key gaps in China's capabilities to execute a number of the scenarios outlined above, most notably an invasion and occupation of Taiwan.

US defense capabilities also continue to evolve, as do allied and partner capabilities in the region. In July 2024, for example, former defense secretary Lloyd Austin's visit to Manila came with \$500 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF), which officials said would be focused on maritime self-defense and cybersecurity, and which formed part of a larger security assistance roadmap for the alliance with the Philippines.²⁶ At the US-Japan 2 + 2 dialogue occurring around the same time in Tokyo, the US-Japan Security Consultative Committee detailed a shift that analysts described as moving the alliance "from coordination to integration," including greater alignment on command and control arrangements, defense industrial cooperation, and regional security efforts.²⁷

Relative Military Balance

Specific shifts in the balance of military capabilities in Asia matter for the tactical and operational levels of any conflict in both the opening and any subsequent phases. But the relative military balance also matters for deterrence. For years, successful deterrence of war in the Taiwan Strait has arguably depended on Beijing believing not only that the window to take Taiwan is *not* closing, but that the PRC's chances to absorb Taiwan are better in the future than they are at the present. How best to shape Beijing's political-military decision calculus is at the core of US strategy in the Indo-Pacific and is much debated. Some scholars emphasize the political side of the equation, advocating that the United States engage in reassurance to persuade Beijing, which involves not only what capabilities the United States might or might not deploy or transfer in the region, but how it talks about them to Beijing and more generally.²⁸ Others focus on the military dimensions of deterrence, or argue for a combination of deterrence by denial and punishment. One recent article, for example, called for Taiwan to engage in a four-part strategy of "pre-planned resistance campaign, multilateral economic sanctions, regional balancing behavior, and a targeted campaign of scorched tech that would see Taiwan threaten to destroy or disable their semiconductor industry if China were to invade."²⁹

Exactly how best to combine political signaling with the acquisition and deployment of specific military capabilities, especially for more than one of the scenarios outlined above, is beyond the scope of this article. How the Chinese leadership perceives its window of opportunity interacting with its own beliefs about the PLA's capability relative to that of Taiwan and Taiwan's security partners (especially the United States), however, could shape the type of operation that Chinese leaders choose to initiate. And, as outlined above, the implications for both the initiating phase and the course of any protracted conflict look very different depending on how Beijing answers questions about relative military capabilities on day one.

Anti-Corruption Efforts

Beijing's calculus will likely also be shaped by where it is in a second, important, ongoing process: efforts to root out corruption in the People's Liberation Army. Why do anti-corruption efforts matter? First, because they might shape the pace of actual weapons systems development—for example, if corruption did lead, as reported, to flawed missile fuel and silo components in the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF).³⁰ (The accuracy of these reports was also contested.) Second, and potentially more importantly, because personnel changes associated with alleged corruption—such as the turnover in PLARF leadership and recent removal of the defense minister—could affect Xi's confidence in his military commanders and the assessments they provide to him of PLA readiness and the likelihood of success of any particular operation.

The pace and status of anti-corruption efforts at the time a conflict breaks out could affect CCP decision-making in at least three ways that bear on protracted conflict. First, if Xi lacks confidence in his military and believes that corruption has limited their ability to convert resources into fighting power, he may be more reluctant to engage in higher-risk types of military operations.³¹ Second, Xi's confidence in the PLA will likely affect China's conduct of actual warfighting; authoritarian leaders who distrust their militaries tend to intervene in management of the armed forces in ways that are detrimental and produce operational pathologies not always apparent in advance but that are likely to affect how China fights.³² Third, depending on the locus and extent of corruption, it could impact the ability of the PRC's defense-industrial base to sustain participation in a protracted conflict. Understanding China's progress and confidence in its anti-corruption efforts, therefore, could have important US planning implications for initial and subsequent stages of a potential protracted conflict.

What Will China's Strategy Be Toward US Allies and Partners?

Another key factor in the chessboard of protracted conflict involves the role of regional actors that are US allies and major security partners. Here, China faces potentially competing incentives that it must decide how to reconcile, and its choices in the opening stages of conflict are likely to shape who participates in a potentially protracted war or conflict scenario, and with what resources and capabilities.

China's initial choices are likely to shape which countries participate in a protracted conflict

Politically, Beijing has reasons to avoid internationalizing a cross-Strait conflict as much as possible. Trying to avoid protracted conflict could therefore mean limiting, from China's side, any horizontal escalation that risks bring US allies and partners (both regional and global) into the fight—avoiding, for example, an attack on US forces in southern Japan.³³ While China appears to have already priced in the United States coming to Taiwan's defense at least to some extent, it is probably less certain what other regional and global powers might do, partly because debates in those countries are themselves still evolving. Recent conversations with Japanese defense experts, for example, suggest that absent a direct attack on Japan itself, the JSDF is unlikely to participate in combat operations, and that the maximal role presently under consideration is maintaining a resupply corridor from bases or facilities in Japan.³⁴ China's strategists are likely to be especially cognizant of the benefits of sidelining allies such as Japan or Australia, which are relatively geographically proximate and militarily capable, in order to maximize the chances of winning quickly and avoiding the costs of protraction.

Additionally, in any potential regional crisis, whether over Taiwan or elsewhere, there is likely to be debate over whether and how ROK forces should participate, or if they should remain focused solely on maintaining deterrence on the peninsula, which could constrain their support for contingency operations elsewhere in the region. How much and in what way ROK military forces might engage is highly likely to depend not just on the exact conflict scenario that unfolds, but on what signals North Korea sends and how the ROK interprets the risks of potential North Korean opportunism.³⁵

China's *political* incentive, therefore, is to try to drive a wedge between the United States and its allies and partners on Taiwan's defense. One potential way to do that is to avoid attacking these allies, and if possible not attacking US forces and bases stationed on their territory. In the opening phase of any crisis or conflict, this strategy could be accompanied by diplomatic messaging along the lines of: "This is not your fight, keep yourselves safe and contribute to stability by not intervening." This kind of approach may also allow Beijing to employ information operations and leverage domestic politics in various allied capitals to its advantage, activating domestic public and political debates over the nature and extent of conflict participation that are democratically critical, but could slow decision-making in the potentially decisive opening phases of a conflict.

However, China's political incentives with respect to allies and partners may cut against its operational incentives. At an operational level, the PLA may be tempted to try to remove certain assets from the chessboard by striking first—whether US forces in Guam, southern Japan, the Philippines, or elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific. Given the co-location of key bases and assets with civilian populations and infrastructure, however, a Chinese preemptive strike would

risk bringing that country immediately into the fight on self-defense grounds. The implications of that choice may increase over time as forces flow across the Pacific to what could become a protracted conflict, especially if a first strike on a third country subsequently mobilizes others against Beijing.

In a personalized decision-making system like the one that Xi Jinping now oversees in China, predicting which logic will ultimately determine China's strategy is inherently uncertain. What planners need to be aware of, then, is that there are two main branches of the decision tree with respect to China's approach to allies and partners, and that which one is followed in the opening phases will subsequently shape the character of any protracted conflict, affecting not only what US assets remain in theater to work with, but what allied and partner capabilities can and will be brought to bear alongside them.

How Will Publics and Economies React to Protraction?

A number of studies have already commented on the ability of the United States and China to mobilize their economies and societies in the case of protracted conflict.³⁶ It is also important to understand, however, how early "results" from the opening phases of conflict—in terms of material damage, casualties, and public perception of success or failure—will shape the material and social dimensions of support and mobilization for protraction. How would the United States and the PRC respond to a conflict that does not achieve rapid, decisive results (for either side), and that has the potential to incur immense losses of equipment and life (or conversely, smaller numbers, depending on the conflict scenario)? How will the scenario and conditions of initial conflict, including perceptions of who is to blame for the outbreak of fighting, shape subsequent public support or lack thereof in the United States, China, and whichever other countries might be involved?

On the US side, analysts have expressed deep concern over the state of the American defense-industrial base. In particular, this includes inadequate stockpiles of munitions that have been depleted by the war in Ukraine, which will not be quickly replenished and would likely be exhausted early in a potential US-China conflict—one wargame-based report estimated less than a week.³⁷ (This problem is not limited to the United States; other allies face similar issues.) Similar concerns have been raised about the state of American shipyards and capacity for replacement ship production relative to the PRC.³⁸ Whether these problems, which include both production and repair capacity, are corrected in peacetime, and to what extent, will be important variables shaping not only efforts to deter conflict, but the course that a conflict might take in the medium-to-protracted timeframe.

American public reaction to early outcomes may also matter for longer-term mobilization and societal sustainment. While recent public opinion polls in the United States show that a strong majority of the American public favors airlifting supplies (74 percent), imposing sanctions (72 percent), and sending arms to Taiwan (59 percent) in the event of a US-China conflict over Taiwan, support for direct American military involvement is softer: only around a third of Americans support using the US Navy to try to break a blockade (37 percent) or sending US troops to Taiwan to defend the island (36 percent).³⁹ While an outright attack on Taiwan, or a US ally in the region such as Japan or the Philippines, might produce a temporary surge in support (the so-called “rally around the flag effect”), it is also possible that early casualties or battlefield failures could lead to calls to minimize US involvement and future losses.

Similarly, little is known about potential Chinese public opinion in the event of an initial military conflict, let alone how the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party might or might not factor public opinion into its decision calculus. Indeed, faced with potentially regime-threatening losses, the CCP may well decide that it needs to stoke anti-foreign nationalism to new heights in order to mobilize popular support—but it then risks narrowing its own negotiating space when it comes to finding a pathway toward conflict resolution and war termination. It would also be helpful to have more precise estimates of the potential speed and capacity for protracted economic mobilization in China, factoring in the effects of recent changes made to management of militia and reserve forces and the use of Military Readiness Offices to connect state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in industries involving transportation and logistics to the PLA in the event of a crisis.⁴⁰

Finally, third-party reactions to the initial phase of conflict will matter. Much attention has already been paid to Taiwan’s ability, in the event of a cross-Strait conflict scenario, to sustain itself politically, economically, and militarily beyond the first days and weeks of fighting—a topic which has generated more analyses and commentaries than the scope of this single article can comprehensively cover.⁴¹ The same, however, is potentially true if conflict originates in a location or manner that involves other US allies. Their military capabilities for protracted conflict, and the reaction of their publics to the incipience of conflict, could also decisively shape that country’s pathway into and appetite for protracted conflict. Depending on the exact scenario, these countries could not only have asymmetric stakes in the outcome of the conflict, but also may or may not be fully aligned with the United States in their views of how those stakes shape the acceptable range of battlefield or negotiated solutions.

Planning for the Right (Protracted) War

In contemplating the possibility of a protracted conflict, some analyses focus on the long-term industrial and military capabilities that the United States and China could mobilize, others on the history of great power conflicts becoming protracted, and others on the perceived stakes—whether geopolitical or for regime survival—that could raise the price of defeat so high as to prolong even a grinding, high-casualty conflict. All, however, emphasize that assumptions of a short and localized conflict are unwarranted.

Despite this growing realization, US scenario planning for protracted conflict with China remains uneven. Failure to acknowledge the multiplicity of pathways that could lead into protraction runs the risk that different parts of the US military and government, as well as American allies and partners, will plan based on different assumptions about what a future protracted conflict will look like—leading to potentially lethal gaps in capabilities, authorities, and plans in a crisis. The US Marine Corps' stand-in forces (SIF) and expeditionary advanced basing operations (EABO), for example, disperse units with the goal of providing an anti-access umbrella for ongoing naval operations.⁴² In contemplating protracted conflict, planners must know how the US Navy will resupply these units—which presumably will be targeted early and often by Chinese missiles and air power—while simultaneously engaged in high-end conventional conflict. Similarly, the Pentagon must rethink a model of military medicine honed to precision during the Global War on Terrorism, but reliant on assumptions like small casualty numbers, ability to transport injured personnel quickly to major medical centers, and uncontested airspace for evacuation operations—few of which appear likely to hold in a protracted conflict against a peer competitor in the Indo-Pacific.⁴³ How the Joint Warfighting Concept and defense planning incorporate the technological changes currently shaping warfare, such as the recent use of unmanned attack drones in Ukraine and the Middle East, into protraction scenarios⁴⁴—and how these concepts, force design decisions, and operation plans are communicated to civilian policymakers, allies and partners, and the American public—will matter greatly for how well the US military performs its mission in any potential future conflict.

US efforts to plan and prepare for a protracted conflict with China could have another important effect: strengthening deterrence by credibly signaling to Beijing that the United States sees the likelihood of costly protracted conflict as high enough to invest in preparations for it. Planners rightly point out that there are tradeoffs between planning for protraction and optimizing preparation

Assumptions of a short and localized conflict are unwarranted

for other scenarios,⁴⁵ such as an attempted Chinese *fait accompli*—for example, in terms of how much and which capabilities the US deploys within/along the first island chain. But if China’s assumptions about whether and how to initiate conflict are based on the belief that the PLA can avoid protracted conflict scenarios, communicating the dangers of this assumption may be a key part of deterring conflict in the first place.

The six questions above—where and how conflict starts; how it evolves; how Beijing approaches protraction; what China’s capabilities for a protracted conflict are; how allies and partners get involved; and how publics and economies will react if a grinding and costly war emerges—will all shape the contours of potential conflict with China. None are pleasant to contemplate. However, grappling with these questions will help policymakers and planners try to deter worst-case outcomes, or help them prepare for the possibility that conflict with China becomes, against all efforts to prevent it, protracted.

Notes

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