

China's Active Defense Military Strategy

Competition considerations for U.S. forces operating in the Indo-Pacific region

by Maj Timothy A. Ornelas

The People's Republic of China's (PRC) strategic foreign policy decision making is framed by what Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials and state leadership have characterized as "inviolable" or "indestructible" core interests. These interests are traditionally communicated in various public statements and strategic correspondence, such as periodic defense white papers. An examination of CCP rhetoric reveals three distinct themes tied to China's strategic core interests: the survival of the CCP and the stability of China's political system, the defense of national sovereignty and maintenance of territorial integrity, and the continued long-term economic growth and social development of China.¹ Understand-

>Maj Ornelas is an Intelligence Officer and Northeast Asia Regional Affairs Officer with operational deployments to Afghanistan and the Southern Philippines. He holds a MA in International Relations from Norwich University and a MS in Strategic Intelligence from National Intelligence University. He currently serves as the Company Commander, Operations Company, 3d Intelligence Battalion, III MIF, III MEF.

ing these strategic core interest helps to explain and understand Chinese actions within the international system, providing context for observed behavior when China exercises elements of national power (e.g., diplomatic, military, economic, information). China's approach to asserting power takes a whole-of-nation approach, interweaving diplomatic, military, and economic actions in a holistic effort ...

weaving diplomatic, information, military, and economic actions in a holistic effort to exert influence and, at times, coerce actors within the Indo-Pacific region.² Evaluating the individually distinct strategies of each constituent piece of this broader holistic approach is useful in understanding how China is operationalizing their overall strategic core interests.

Active Defense Strategy Overview

China's perceived invasion threat from the Soviet Union in the 1980s was a significant turning point in China's military strategy. Following the Chinese Civil War, China's primary military strategy was influenced heavily by Mao Zedong's approach to guerilla warfare, which sought to draw an adversary deep into Chinese territory then reclaim any lost territory through a long protracted war of attrition using China's geography and population to its advantage.³ However, in 1980, China adopted new guidance which no longer called for the ceding of territory to an invading force but rather sought to actively repel an invasion and use counter-attack forces to remove any remaining occupying force. This shift was the foundation of the current active defense strategy.

China's active defense strategy has been, and continues to be, an evolving strategy that has traditionally focused

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China's approach to asserting power takes a whole-of-nation approach, inter-

Over the past three decades, China's operational military strategy has focused on an approach Chinese literature refers to as active defense.³ China characterizes their active defense strategy as "strategically defensive but operationally offensive."⁴ This article will provide an overview of China's active defense strategy in order to gain a bet-

on three key elements: forward-edge defense, effective control, and localized war.⁶ The emphasis on each of these three elements has varied over the years based on China's threat perceptions; however, despite the varying emphasis, these themes have remained consistent

an advancing threat upon its initial approach.⁸ According to the Defense Intelligence Agency, the PLARF boasts hundreds of theater-range missiles and over 1,000 short-range ballistic missiles capable of conducting precision strikes against civilian and military landbased

(TC) has placed an emphasis on joint operations in order to increase the effectiveness of the PLA's combined capabilities from across its traditionally insular service-level entities (e.g., PLA Army).¹⁰ The new joint model employs a unified commander over the joint forces within the geographic TC, providing the commander the ability to integrate operations across multiple domains (e.g., cyberspace, maritime) to increase the complexity and sophistication of the PLA's forward-edge defense posture.¹¹

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with observations in China's military modernization and reform efforts, which have reinforced the key elements of active defense. The following sections will discuss each element of the active defense strategy and provide examples of how the PRC has operationalized each component through military modernization and reform efforts.

Forward-Edge Defense

Based on Chinese defense guidance, forward-edge defense is designed to seize the initiative in a military struggle by establishing positional defensive positions in order to conduct operational or tactical level offensive operations against an invading force upon its advance.⁷ Perhaps the most pronounced example of forward-edge defense is found in the ongoing military modernization efforts, which has resulted in an increasingly contested environment within the Indo-Pacific region and recent military reforms which have placed an increased emphasis on joint operations to elevate overall People's Liberation Army (PLA) operational and tactical-level offensive capabilities.

One of the most significant aspects of the PLA's military modernization efforts is clearly visible in the continued development of the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF), which has increased the PLA's forward-edge defense posture by fielding a growing number of ballistic and cruise missiles with increasing ranges and precision-guided capabilities, intended to actively repel

targets as well as targeting naval vessels (to include aircraft carriers) operating on China's periphery.⁹

It is important to understand that

Effective Control

Effective control addresses China's primary approach toward offensive operational- and tactical-level warfare outlined in Chinese defense doctrine, which is commonly referred to as systems confrontation. Effective control

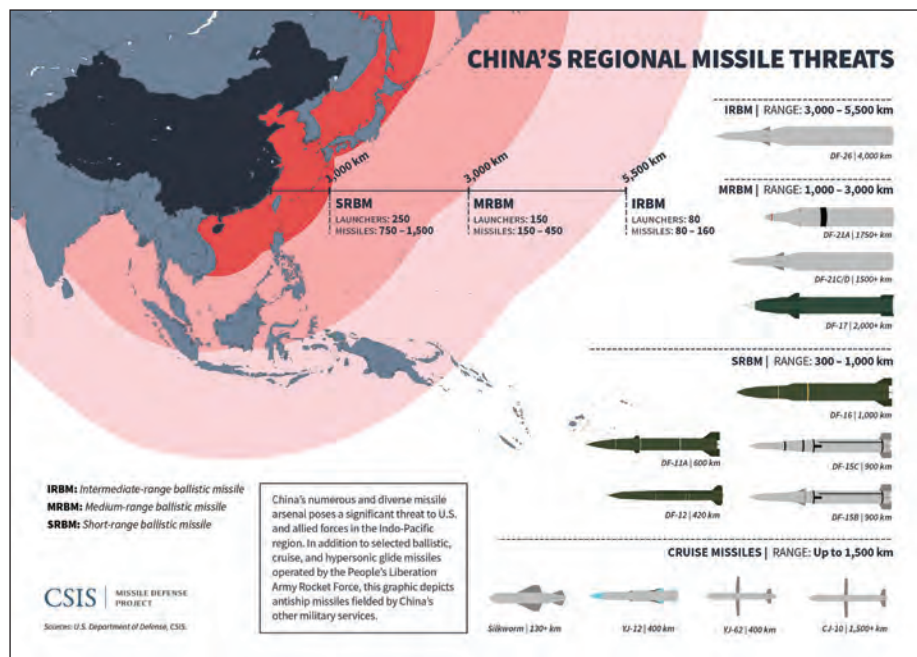


Figure 1. PLARF Support to China's Forward-Edge Defense Posture. (Source: Center for Strategic and International Studies Missile Defense Project.)

military modernization is only one component of China's continued implementation of forward-edge defense. Military reform is also a distinct and crucial component to the overall success of the PLA's application of forward-edge defense. Beginning in 2015, the consolidation of seven former Military Regions into five Theater Commands

focuses on the China's ability to conduct systems confrontation, and subsequent systems destruction, in a potential conflict by gaining dominance in three distinct domains: information, space, and air with information dominance being a prerequisite to achieving dominance in any other domain.¹² Through continued military modernization and

reform, the PLA has tailored their approach to systems confrontation to engage a “high-tech adversary” in order to paralyze the enemy’s operational system, thus rendering the enemy ineffective in their ability to resist.¹³

Chinese literature defines information dominance as the ability to protect one’s own information while attacking or disrupting an adversary’s information system.¹⁴ By disrupting an enemy’s information system, the PLA believes it can constrain an adversary’s actions and slow their deployment of forces.¹⁵ Moreover, PLA doctrine suggests that by protecting their own information system, the PLA can employ integrated joint force operations to achieve “comprehensive dominance” across all domains in a conflict against a technologically advanced enemy force.¹⁶

Following the 1991 Gulf War, China observed the effectiveness of the U.S. approach to network-centric warfare, which included sophisticated intelligence sensing capabilities, the use of precision-guided munitions, and the integration of advanced command, control, and communication systems.¹⁷ Analyzing how the U.S. system out-cycled and paralyzed the Iraqi operational military system informed China’s future military modernization and reform efforts, particularly in those areas which focused on achieving information dominance, as they found themselves unprepared to meet the challenges of warfare under high-technology conditions.¹⁸

Perhaps the most significant component of recent PLA reforms that support achieving information dominance, and by extension establishing effective control, is the formation of the PLA’s Strategic Support Force (SSF). In 2015, the PLA created the SSF as part of a broader reorganization, which fundamentally changed the nature of employment for cyber, electronic warfare (EW), space, and psychological warfare capabilities.¹⁹ Since the PLA views cyber, EW, space, and psychological operations as interconnected elements of a larger information warfare campaign, the reorganization of these capabilities under one unified command structure offers the PLA the ability to gain ef-

iciency and synergistic effects across the information domain.²⁰ Through a unity of effort across information-related capabilities, the SSF intends to create an “information umbrella” that will integrate with land, air, maritime, and rocket forces to enable joint operations and PLA force projection in the event of a conflict against a technologically advanced adversary.²¹



Figure 2. SSF Insignia. (Source: DIA China Military Power Report, 2019.)

Localized War

Localized war began to appear in Chinese strategic guidance in the late-1980s, which was a significant departure from previous guidance that focused on total war.²² Total war doctrine called for a long and protracted attrition-based conflict, usually within Chinese territory. Localized war envisioned the future of warfare being localized geo-

order to solidify their own interests in the regions along China’s periphery.²⁵ To limit the potential for chain reaction warfare, localized war focuses on the rapid application of force to achieve operational objectives and force a quick resolution to a conflict.²⁶ The PLA’s continued military reforms and renewed focus on joint operations support the execution of localized warfare and underscore the PRC’s commitment to the evolving active defense military strategy.

Joint military reforms focus on mutually supporting operations among the air, maritime, land, information, and rocket forces to create dominance across multiple domains, swiftly and efficiently.²⁷ Amphibious assaults, maritime blockades, integrated joint firepower strikes, and anti-air raid operations all require integrated joint operations and are designed to geographically localize a conflict as well as bring the confrontation to a quick conclusion on Chinese terms.²⁸ Establishing TCs under a unified commander supports the implementation of these joint operations in a cohesive manner. Additionally, the unity of command created by the reorganization to TCs also supports potential multi-theater joint operations, which prepares the PLA to meet threats from multiple strategic directions and control the geographic scope of possible chain-reaction scenarios.²⁹

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graphically on China’s periphery and limited in scope, duration, and means.²³ The limited and geographically localized aspects of localized warfare support China’s core interest of ensuring territorial integrity. This approach also addresses an emerging concern of Chinese military planners: the potential for chain reaction warfare.²⁴

In chain reaction warfare, regional rivals exploit defensive gaps created by the PLA’s focus on a regional conflict in

Considerations for U.S. Forces

The active defense strategy carries a number of implications for U.S. forces operating in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly when evaluating how U.S. actions may influence PRC behavior within the context of China’s strategic core interests. Notably, the active defense strategy is only one aspect of China’s whole-of-nation approach (i.e., military) toward power projection; however, this aspect is the one that carries perhaps



Figure 3. PLA Marine Corps units conduct an amphibious assault training. (Source: DIA China Military Power Report, 2019.)

the most significant consequences in the event of a miscalculation among actors. After analyzing the components of active defense, there are two primary considerations for U.S. forces operating in the Indo-Pacific region to confront China’s military strategy: leveraging the U.S.’ competitive advantage to foster strategic partnerships and alliances with Indo-Pacific regional actors and supporting an enduring national competitive campaign plan through the forward-basing of operational-level capability in the region.

The United States’ competitive advantage is rooted in its commitment to the Nation’s enduring culture, interests, and values which have manifested themselves in the Nation’s scientific, economic, technological, and military strength.³⁰ Leveraging the United States’ competitive advantage to foster strategic alliances and partnerships within the Indo-Pacific region addresses two components of the active defense strategy: forward-edge defense and localized war. Alliances with regional actors such as the Philippines, Vietnam,

Japan, and South Korea provide access for U.S. forces within the interior lines of China’s forward-edge defensive posture. This dynamic directly challenges the PLA’s evolution in their defense doctrine, and to some extent their military modernization and reform efforts, by requiring the PLA to potentially defend against an adversary that is already deep into Chinese territory (i.e., revert

chain reaction warfare), likely requiring them to commit resources to counter the potential cost imposition created by combined and credible capabilities created by U.S. partnerships and alliances. A commitment of resources to counter capabilities across a broad set of regional partnerships directly challenges the PLA’s ability to control the scope, duration, and means of a con-

Alliances with regional actors such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Japan, and South Korea provide access for U.S. forces within the interior lines of China’s forward-edge defensive posture.

to Mao’s guerilla warfare approach). Additionally, the presence U.S. military capability within a diverse geographic region within the Indo-Pacific would require Chinese military planners to account for the potential for multiple dilemmas in the event of a conflict (i.e.,

conflict by introducing a complex adaptive system of cooperation underpinned by a competitive advantage that the CCP cannot replicate.

By demonstrating how mutual interests align and through creating positive-sum agreements with allies and partners

in the Indo-Pacific region, the United States can attract actors to work toward creating a meaningful framework for engaging China along the competition continuum. Eroding the effectiveness of China's forward-edge defensive posture and introducing uncertainty into China's ability to control the geographic scope and scale of a potential conflict through a complex adaptive system of allies and partners could serve as an effective deterrent against Chinese courses of action above the threshold of violence, ultimately contributing to improved peace and stability within the region. Related but distinct in purpose, the forward-basing of operational-level information-related capabilities is necessary to address perhaps the most significant aspect of active defense: effective control.

The enduring nature of competition at the national level requires a campaigning mindset.³¹ This mindset is characterized by long-term thinking of how military actions will integrate and mutually support all other elements of national power (e.g., information, intelligence, diplomatic) throughout the competition continuum. In order to effectively support an enduring national competition campaign, U.S. forces operating in the Indo-Pacific must posture themselves to effectively compete against China's system confrontation/systems destruction approach to operational- and tactical-level warfare. Serving as an enabler, U.S. forces could effectively degrade the PRC's ability to create an "information blockade" through the forward-deployment of capabilities designed to challenge the PLA's use of ubiquitous and layered intelligence sensing capabilities; precision-guided munitions; and integrated advanced command, control, and communication systems.

Establishing durable, integrated, and forward deployed information-related capabilities, which would directly compete against China's information system, would erode China's ability to achieve information dominance within the Indo-Pacific region and complicate their ability to conduct systems destruction warfare in the event of a conflict. Below the threshold of violence, main-

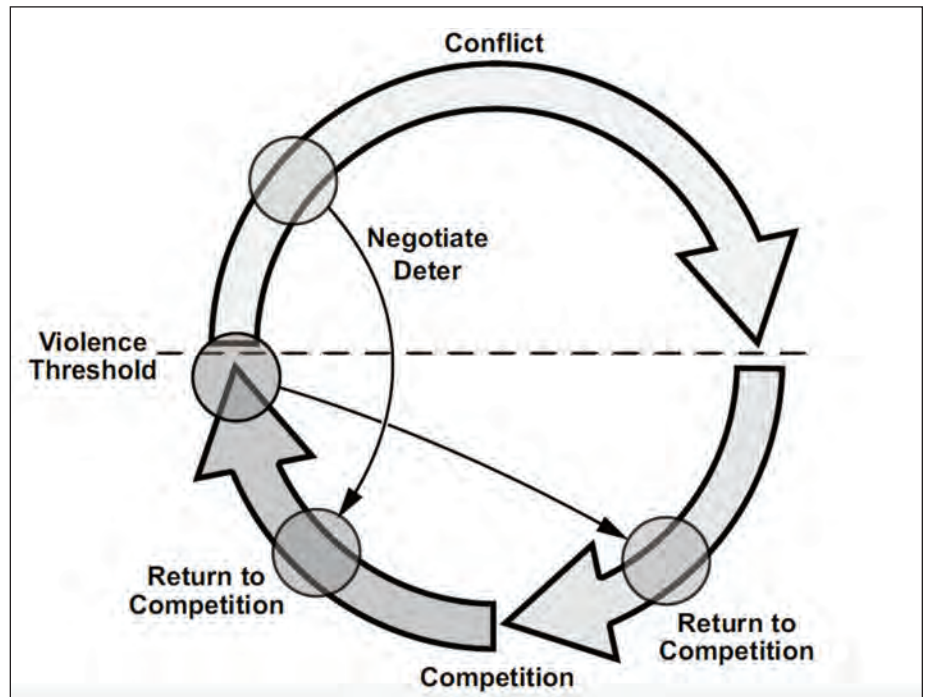


Figure 4. Competition Continuum. (Source: MCDP 1-4 Competing.)

taining a persistent forward deployed information-related operational system will allow U.S. forces to actively compete against the PLA's system confrontation approach to achieve information dominance, potentially delaying operational- and tactical-level decision making by introducing uncertainty about the PLA's ability to gain and maintain information dominance.

Conclusion

Examining the PRC's military strategy over the past several decades suggests China's active defense strategy will continue to evolve to keep pace with advancements in technology, developments in the global security environment, and in response to internal changes within China. External and internal forces may drive adjustments in the execution of China's active defense strategy; however, the inviolable core interests that have guided the development and implementation of the active defense strategy will likely remain the foundation of the broader CCP national strategy and foreign policy decision-making framework. As in the past, this resolute commitment to China's indestructible core interests will continue to produce common themes

and characteristics in China's overall approach to national defense. Based on the unwavering nature of China's core interests, it is likely that future iterations of China's military strategy will continue to include approaches characterized by establishing a forward-edge defense; gaining and maintaining effective control; and controlling the scope, means, and duration of a conflict (i.e., localized war).

Through studying and understanding each aspect of China's military strategy, U.S. forces can actively contest each pillar of China's military strategy and compete more effectively within the Indo-Pacific region. The forward-posturing of resilient and redundant strike capabilities in what China perceives to be their interior lines will erode the PLA's forward-edge defense posture. The deployment of durable and integrated information capabilities (i.e., C5ISR-T, C-C5ISR-T) will directly challenge the PLA's ability to gain and maintain effective control in the event of a conflict. Finally, actively leveraging the United States' competitive advantage to foster alliances and partnerships will expand localized war across geographically dispersed avenues of approach, creating multiple dilemmas

for PLA planners in their attempts to guard against chain reaction warfare. By directly challenging the three aspects of China's active defense strategy, United States' forces can introduce uncertainty into China's military planning process and effectively deter against PLA aggression, ultimately supporting regional peace, prosperity, and freedom for all actors within the Indo-Pacific region.

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