

The Sino Myopia

Is the Corps too focused on the PRC?

by Col Philip G. Wasielewski, USMCR (Ret)

In April 1985, I published a *Gazette* article, “The Soviet Myopia,” arguing that the Marine Corps was too myopically or shortsightedly focused on fighting the Soviet threat and instead needed to better prepare to engage other, more probable opponents in the Third World.¹ Thirty-seven years later, the Marine Corps is making the same mistake regarding the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The current myopic focus on the PRC has been the driving factor in major force structure changes. Numerous distinguished former Marines have argued that these changes make the Marine Corps a less capable force.² This article agrees with their assessment and will focus on the driving reason for these changes—optimizing the force to counter the PRC—as well as why theories and national security policies regarding the PRC threat may not validate such wide-reaching changes, the difficulties of accurately predicting future wars,

>Col Wasielewski served on active duty and as a reservist in a variety of Infantry, Reconnaissance, and International Affairs billets including as a Reserve Attaché and Foreign Area Officer. He mobilized for Iraq and Afghanistan. He is currently a Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute.

a modern naval power while its ruling Communist Party has abandoned Marxist-Leninist ideology for Chinese nationalism as a source of legitimacy. This has caused some to theorize that nationalist impulses will motivate Beijing to attempt an armed reunification of Taiwan. Others theorize that the growing power of the PRC and the fear this causes the United States will eventually bring the two into conflict (i.e. the Thucydides Trap).

Theories do not always translate into reality. First, the primary motivation of the Communist Party, like all dictatorships, is to stay in power. The possibility of an unsuccessful war resulting in economic distress and then domestic political upheaval can be a strong brake

to war or in the second half of the 20th century when neither did the United States and the Soviet Union.

However, more than theories drive U.S. national security policy. PRC foreign and economic policies often clash with our own and its political system and a lack of respect for human rights is an anathema to our liberal democratic values. PRC military growth has unnerved its neighbors, many of whom are allies or partners of the United States. For these reasons, there has been a bipartisan shift in the U.S. Government’s view towards the PRC from hopes that it would become a responsible stakeholder in the international system to a recognition that it has become a revisionist power. This new viewpoint has been codified in the core national security documents of the past two administrations, specifically the 2017 *National Security Strategy (NSS)*, the 2018 *National Defense Strategy (NDS)*, the 2021 *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, the 2022 *NSS*, and the 2022 *NDS*.

These documents all acknowledge the threat the PRC poses to U.S. national security. The 2017 *NSS* classified the PRC as a revisionist power, along with Russia, but also specified other sets of challenges including the rogue states of Iran and North Korea and transnational threat organizations. The 2017 *NSS* placed no greater emphasis on threats emanating from the PRC over other challenges. It did call for restoring the military’s ability to produce innovative capabilities but, in the same sentence, also stressed the need to “grow

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the dangers of getting such predictions wrong, and how the war in Ukraine might inform current debates regarding force structure.

The primary conflict of interest between the United States and the PRC that could lead to war is Taiwan and that has been a matter of contention since the PRC’s founding in 1949. Since then, the PRC has become the world’s second-largest economy and

on adventurist risks such as an invasion of Taiwan. Russia’s current dilemma in Ukraine and the cost Putin’s regime may pay for his war must certainly be reinforcing this concept in Beijing. Second, the Thucydides Trap argument of conflict between rising and status quo powers often omits the number of times in history this has not happened such as in the late 19th century when the United States and Britain did not go

the size of the force so that it is capable of operating at a sufficient scale and for ample duration to win across a range of scenarios.”³ The 2018 *NDS* operationalized the guidance of the 2017 *NSS* for the DOD and has been described as the main impetus, along with the *Secretary of Defense’s Defense Planning Guidance*, for the 2019 *Commandant’s Planning Guidance* and *Force Design 2030*. The 2018 *NDS* called for the military to pivot its focus from terrorism to inter-state strategic competition and named Russia and China equally as revisionist powers. The *NDS* was multidimensional in its focus on threats by revisionist powers and rogue nations as well as transnational threats such as weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and terrorism. This multifocal vision of the *NDS* was clearly articulated in its section on prioritizing preparedness for war:

During normal day-to-day operations, the Joint Force will sustainably compete to: deter aggression in three key regions—the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East; degrade terrorist and WMD threats; and defend U.S. interests from challenges below the level of armed conflict. In wartime, the fully mobilized Joint Force will be capable of: defeating aggression by a major power; deterring opportunistic aggression elsewhere; and disrupting imminent terrorist and WMD threats.⁴

The 2021 *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* and the 2022 *NSS* are similar to the 2017 *NSS* in their enumeration of threats and challenges. The 2022 *NDS* does prioritize deterring the PRC, which is now called “our most consequential strategic competitor,” ahead of the Russian threat, but still requires the DOD “to remain capable of managing other persistent threats, including those from North Korea, Iran, and violent extremist organizations.” All provide specified or implied tasks for the Joint Force to be capable of operating in three vital geographic domains—the Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East—and to be prepared for a wide range of contingencies from conventional warfare against nation-states to irregular warfare against non-state actors.

This flexibility in national security and defense security guidance is prudent and recognizes the dangers of focusing too much on one specific threat because world events are unpredictable making it hazardous to predict who and where the United States will fight next. This has been a historic challenge for the U.S. military since its inception to correctly discern the place and type of the next war. Usually, we get it wrong. As former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates once wrote:

In the forty years since Vietnam, our record in predicting where we will be militarily engaged next, even six months out, is perfect: we have never gotten it right, not in Grenada, Haiti, Panama, Libya (twice), Iraq (twice), Afghanistan, the Balkans, or Somalia. When it comes to predicting future conflicts, what kind of fights they will be, and what will be needed, we need a lot more humility.⁵

The *Commandant’s Planning Guidance* also recognizes this risk on its first page, yet the changes *Force Design 2030* institute are inconsistent with that recognition of ambiguity and seem fixed on concentrating to fight the PRC to the detriment of other contingencies.

However, let us suppose that is the correct decision and, similar to War Plan Orange before World War II, we have properly predicted our enemy and the correct strategy to oppose him. Would that validate the vision behind *Force Design 2030*? It depends.

First, as stated before, the most likely source of conflict between the PRC and the United States is Taiwan. However, a PRC invasion of Taiwan does not guarantee war between our two nations. The United States has not had a defense treaty with Taiwan, the Republic of China (ROC), since 1980 and is not obligated to defend it. An American president could offer military aid to Taiwan yet refuse to commit U.S. military forces, which has been our policy for Russia’s 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine. It is entirely possible that the U.S. military would play no role in a PRC-ROC war.

Second, if the United States did declare war against the PRC in response to an invasion of Taiwan, how would or could these new concepts and force

structures be utilized? The cockpit of a PRC-ROC war would be the Taiwan Strait where amphibious assault forces must transit to reach Taiwan. There are several small island groups within the Strait and Pratas Island (approximately 250 nautical miles [nm] to the south of the Strait’s center), which are ROC territory. Deployment of Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR) assets to ROC islands in the Taiwan Strait would fulfill the Stand-In Force (SIF) mission to reassure partners and deter adversaries. In the event of hostilities, these islands would also be the proper environment to win the reconnaissance battle and disrupt PRC attempts to gain the initiative. However, when could MLR forces be deployed? Despite the recent bipartisan political agreement on the PRC threat, neither political party advocates the deployment of U.S. forces to Taiwan before hostilities—if even then. In the event of a U.S. PRC war over Taiwan, the timely deployment of SIF forces to islands in the Taiwan Strait during high-intensity air and sea combat cannot be guaranteed. An MLR could deploy to Taiwan itself but under current plans will lack long-range anti-air and ballistic missile defense systems essential for defending the island.

The geography and politics of other options are problematic. Japan’s Yaeyama and Miyako islands lie approximately 125 nm and 200 nm respectively northeast of Taiwan. Surface fires from these Japanese islands could engage targets approaching Taipei from PRC ports near Wenzhou and Taizhou, but engagement distances would be over 200 nm. This is beyond the range of most ground-based anti-ship missiles currently in our inventory. The Strait of Luzon, through which the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) Southern Fleet must pass to attack or blockade Taiwan from the east, is narrow enough so that forces based on the Philippines’ Batanes or Babuyan islands could interdict PLAN movements with the 150-nm Naval Strike Missile. However, considering the volatility of Filipino domestic politics and foreign policy, and despite territorial conflicts with the PRC in the South China Sea, there is no guarantee that the Philippines would go

to war over Taiwan. The same applies to other South China Sea nations.

Possibly the best way before hostilities to fulfill the SIF concept and ensure that proper reconnaissance, surveillance, anti-air, and anti-ship assets to defend Taiwan are positioned to serve as a deterrent or repellant force may be not via MLR deployments but via foreign military sales, foreign military financing programs, or direct commercial sales to

required by some of the world's most advanced economies pass through it daily. However, war in the South China Sea would stop all shipping in those sea lanes and shut off the PRC's access to oil and raw materials. Without the oil shipments that arrive via these sea lanes, the PRC's economy cannot function, and it cannot make up for this loss via existing pipelines connecting it to Central Asia and Siberia. Politically and economi-

naval campaign that the PLAN does. Besides the PLAN, there is no other hostile naval power that the concepts underlying *Force Design 2030* need apply but there are plenty of other powers, state and non-state, that threaten U.S. security interests. Combat against them may be quite different from the combat the Marine Corps is preparing for against the PRC.

Initial impressions from the ongoing war in Ukraine have led some to say that the Corps' major Force Design changes are the correct approach and are being borne out in actual combat. Such analysis should be done cautiously for a war not yet completed and because of the tendency, caveated in a recent study on U.S. military learning from foreign conflicts, to interpret events to support already perceived ideas (i.e. confirmation bias).⁶

For example, heavy losses in Russian armor seem to validate the decision to remove all tanks from the Marine Corps' inventory. Yet, the Ukrainians want more tanks and are using their tanks effectively to counterattack. The first obituary for the tank was written after the 1973 October War. This proved premature. Hand-held, anti-tank weapons have decimated Russian armored vehicles, but several years ago the Marine Corps faced a similarly motivated enemy with plenty of hand-held, anti-tank weapons in an urban environment and did not suffer comparable losses. Part of the reason may be as much about tactics and leadership as materiel. The Russian-Ukraine war is being waged with newer anti-tank technologies including drones. But as we analyze the results of those new technologies and use them to justify long-term decisions, we may wish to remember that in the history of warfare for every advancement in armaments, there is a countervailing advancement to neutralize or deflect it just waiting in the wings.

This war is also highlighting other aspects of military art and science relevant to our Force Design debates. The Ukrainian military is asking for more cannon artillery pieces and using those they have to great effect. High artillery ammunition usage rates in high-inten-

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the ROC Marine Corps. Having ROC Marines fulfill the SIF mission for the defense of their own country would achieve U.S. national security goals vis-à-vis deterring the PRC at limited diplomatic costs thus making it more politically feasible to do.

Critics of the above analysis may reply that there are other PRC threats to U.S. interests in Asia than just a PRC-ROC war and, in contrast with Taiwan, the archipelago geography of Japan, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia better support the Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) and SIF concepts, which are necessary, if not essential, to deal with the reality of anti-access/area-denial weapons. They may also argue that EABO and SIF concepts are not even PRC or theater specific.

These are valid points but how likely is the PRC to fight a war with the United States over any other objective than reunification with Taiwan and how well do the EABO, SIF, and *Force Design 2030* concepts apply to other scenarios, theaters, or threats?

There is only one territorial dispute between the PRC and Japan, the Senkaku islands, but it is hard to see it leading to war. There are several territorial disputes between the PRC and Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam in the South China Sea. The strategic importance of this sea is obvious since the raw materials, especially oil,

cally, the cost of settling any of these maritime boundary disputes by war is not worth the high costs and virtually nil gains. Therefore, while war in the South China Sea leading to U.S. military involvement is possible, anything is possible, it is unlikely because the PRC already has the most important thing it needs in the South China Sea—open sea lanes.

Other national security threats could require a naval campaign to secure U.S. interests. Two examples in littoral regions are the Straits of Hormuz and the Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb. Freedom of navigation through these straits is as important to U.S. security as freedom of navigation through the South China Sea. Of the parties who might wish to block these straits, Iran is not a major naval power and the Houthis do not even have a navy. Both are equipped with their own anti-access/area-denial weapons protected by large amounts of combat-experienced and dedicated infantry fighters. Would a naval campaign against them require the same approach and forces as envisioned in the EABO and SIF concepts for conflict against the PRC or would it require a balanced combined arms force? The same applies to conflict with Russia. The Russian navy is not on par with the combined naval forces of NATO and neither the Norwegian, Black, or Baltic Seas pose the level of threat to a

sity combat has been another lesson (re) learned. The high rate of expenditure of both precision and non-precision munitions indicates that while long-range rocket units have their value, their precise but costly ammunition is a limitation. Here logistical viability, as well as combat capability, raises its head in designing the force since expensive and slow-to-produce rockets are likely to run out ahead of shells for cannon artillery and while these two indirect fire assets complement each other—they cannot replace each other.

The recent Russian debacle on the Siverskiy Donets river also shows the dangers of attempting a river crossing with an inadequate bridging capability. The high attrition rates of jet and helicopter aviation should also caution against cutbacks in aviation strength. There are new lessons to be learned from the war in Ukraine but also possibly old lessons to be reconfirmed such as having in infantry battalions large enough to sustain high casualties and still fight, sufficient cannon artillery dedicated to specified infantry battalions, and sufficient air assets to deal with combat and maintenance related attrition and still provide sorties to support the ground force.

War with the PRC is not inevitable. It is possible, but it is just one of many scenarios for the employment of U.S. military forces. The scale of change and focus on a PRC-centric littoral campaign is not commiserate with the possibility of actually using these forces in the manner we wish to or with the guidance provided regarding this threat against all others. Relevant national security directives call for all the Services to be prepared for this scenario but also to be prepared for a number of other contingencies. This prudence is because of the historical risk of preparing for just one type of war against a particular enemy to the exclusion of almost all others.

This does not mean that the concepts being discussed such as the EABO and SIF are not without merit. At its core, EABO updates the Marine Corps' place in the conduct of naval campaigns and SIF is an interesting concept that could be redesigned by creating a couple of

units similar to the World War II era Base Defense battalions and combining them with task-organized force multipliers and headquarters when needed. In criticizing some changes, we should also recognize positive aspects coming from the commandant's planning guidance especially the Logistics in a Contested Environment and Light Amphibious Warship concepts and the creation of a fourth active duty Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron.

However, it has been the myopic focus on fighting the PRC, like our earlier myopia about the Soviet Union, which we never fought, that has led to force structure changes some believe imperil the Corps' ability to fulfill its statutory missions across a full spectrum of military requirements. The war in Ukraine has shown that Russia still threatens our national security interests as do North Korea, Iran, and other state and non-state actors. The war in Ukraine will provide many new lessons but probably reinforce some old ones, which seem to be at variance with recent Force Design changes. Dissent regarding these changes results not from disloyalty or "old thinking" but from a sincere desire of many Marines to make sure that we have examined the direction we are going before we go too far. For example, if the Navy had better examined the validity of the concepts underlying the Littoral Combat Ship program, we may have saved billions of valuable shipbuilding dollars on this unsuccessful venture. The same applies to examining the validity of a concept that focuses the Marine Corps on one particular foe over others. To update the final sentence from the author's article 37 years ago, "the world will continue to be a very explosive place for decades to come, and it will present military problems beyond just those that were once found on the Fulda Gap or today are found in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea."

Notes

1. Philip G. Wasielewski, "The Soviet Myopia," *Marine Corps Gazette* 69, No. 4 (1985).

2. Paul Szoldra, "A Fundamental Transformation Is Taking Place within the Marine Corps. Is That a Good Thing?" *Task and Purpose*, April 19, 2022, <https://taskandpurpose.com/news/marine-corps-force-design-intro>; Anthony Zinni, "What is the Role of the Marine Corps in Today's Global Security Environment?" *Task and Purpose*, April 19, 2022, <https://taskandpurpose.com/opinion/zinni-marine-corps-role>; P.K. Van Riper, "The Marine Corps' Plan to Redesign the Force will Only End up Breaking It," *Task and Purpose*, April 20, 2022, <https://taskandpurpose.com/opinion/marine-corps-force-design-infantry>; Gregory Newbold, "The Marine Corps' New Talent Management Plan Forgets What Makes the service Unique," *Task and Purpose*, April 21, 2022, <https://taskandpurpose.com/opinion/marine-corps-talent-management-critique>; Terry Drake, "The Marine Corps' Reorganization Plan Will Cripple Its Aviation Capabilities," *Task and Purpose*, April 22, 2022, <https://taskandpurpose.com/opinion/force-design-2030-cripple-marine-aviation>; Jim Webb, "The Future of the Marine Corps," *The National Interest*, May 8, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/future-us-marine-corps-152606>; and Charles Krulak, Jack Sheehan, and Anthony Zinni, "War is as Dirty Business. Will the Marine Corps Be Ready for the Next One?" *Washington Post*, April 23, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/04/22/marines-restructuring-plan-scrutiny-generals>.

3. Office of the President, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, (Washington, DC: December 2017).

4. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America*, (Washington, DC: 2018).

5. Robert Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014).

6. Brent L. Sterling, *Other People's Wars: The U.S. Military and the Challenge of Learning from Foreign Conflicts* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021).



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