

Foreshadowing Far East Conflicts

Today's analysis on tomorrow's war

by 2ndLt Tristan Hancock

The United States continues to lessen the American presence in the Middle East and the stage has been set for the next major conflict. As the Spanish-American philosopher George Santayana once said, “Only the dead have seen the end of war.” Military analysts and high-ranking generals alike have echoed that China is the United States’ pacing threat. Throughout the training period of The Basic School in Quantico, VA, young lieutenants entering the FMF are given the opportunity to hear from numerous guest speakers. Many of these guests are high-ranking officers who speak about what type of warfare the United States can expect to see in the years to come. LtGen Smith, MajGen Alford, and BGen Watson are just a few notable speakers who have faced this question, yet the answer always remains the same: *China is our pacing threat.*

To understand why the People’s Republic of China is seen as the most imminent threat by so many, one must seek the wider view of the global situation as well as analyzing the organic capabilities of China. The reality is that China has brought power transition theory to fruition. As their global power rises, the world is likely to see conflicts fabricate and current norms be disrupted. To analyze how these potential conflicts might look, one needs to take into account both China and the United States’ strategy and capabilities as well as the actions of foreign allies on the matter.

According to *MCDP 6*, “The highest class of information is understanding—knowledge that has been synthesized and applied to a specific situation to gain a deeper level of awareness of that situ-

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ation.”¹ This passage is a reminder that just acknowledging China as the United States’ pacing threat is not enough. The Marine Corps must continue to excel as an organization through training and advancements in research to ensure they are able to handle the rising threat. By continuing to be one step ahead of the closest competitor, the United States not only has the knowledge that China is a threat but also the understanding of what must be done to stay on top. Coming to this understanding of what must be done has been no easy feat, however. Following the advice of Sun Tsu’s ten-

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ant that “warfare is the Tao of Deception,” the Chinese have downplayed and actively hid the truth behind their defense spending and financial stability for decades.² This has forced the United States to rely on satellite imagery and extrapolation to conclude the current capabilities of the Chinese. This idea of deception by the Chinese is part of their hybrid style of warfare or what China’s Communist Party Central Committee deemed the “three warfares.”³ The elements of the “three warfares” include: influencing public opinion, spreading

specific information, and utilizing the “three warfare” system to legitimize Chinese claims. By spreading specific information to the public, the Chinese government is directly influencing public opinion both positively and negatively. Within their own country, the Chinese can manipulate the perception of their government; however, globally their facade has largely failed. Since much of the world has seen through their deception, however, it frees China to utilize another strategy called “salami slicing.” Salami slicing strategy is one which strategically accomplishes small goals that, although may be seen as aggressive, will not likely trigger a major military response from opposing nations.⁴ Through this lens we can see that in recent events, China has been able to cause friction and test their limits without sparking a major conflict, whether it be building artificial islands to house military infrastructure or impede movement in the South China Sea. That is not to say there were no consequences to their actions. The United States, for example, has begun freedom of navigation operations to combat the Chinese blockades and patrols in the South China Sea.⁵ The ugly truth, however, is that these new military islands and restrictions of movement in the South China Sea are just the beginning. China has a long history of entering conflict only to emerge stronger. Maj Gayl (Ret) points to examples of Taiping, general unrest in the 19th century, and Korea

causing a total of 460,000 Chinese deaths; yet, after each the country was more proud and stronger than ever.⁶ Given their history coupled with a salami slicing strategy, the Chinese have prepared themselves for war while trying to remain at the point of advantage. They have invested in defensive capabilities such as ballistic missiles, submarines, groundbased aircraft, and navy surface ships to protect themselves against any potential major conflicts.⁷ While their focus is to protect the area close to home, China is also utilizing their carriers to secure a protected trade route in the Indian Ocean.⁸ While this is not an inherently aggressive act, they hypocritically seek freedom of movement in other regions of the world for themselves while they limit movement for others in waters near their nation. These are not the only operations the Chinese are conducting offshore.

Since the fielding of the J-20 (China's primary fighter aircraft), China has been practicing long range missions to destroy high value targets. They have been doing this in conjunction with Russia, who is currently their closest ally but also the United States' second highest threat in terms of power.⁹ Because of the provocative actions by China in recent years, there is a growing number of experts who predict a major conflict soon. The grim reality is that any result short of a swift victory for the United States or China would result in mass casualties. If the Chinese were invaded on their own territory, history shows they have a preponderance for, and little fear of, waging warfare based on attrition. Though the United States is not as fond of attrition warfare, they would have little say in Chinese offensive actions if a major conflict were to be brought onto American soil. Additionally, China has recognized that a direct conflict with American forces would be futile since both sides would ultimately be weakened because of the inherent costs of a war of this magnitude. They have instead opted to engage in their hybrid style warfare.¹⁰ MGySgt Anderson said it best when he wrote that the Chinese have "no sense of fair play" and their leaders "can be brutally flexible in the pursuit of security."

To combat the unfair playing field the Chinese have set, it is important for Marines to remember another passage from their own doctrine: "There are two dangers with respect to equipment: the over-reliance on technology and the failure to make the most of technological capabilities."¹¹ This is where China falls short. It is true that China has a large navy, one that is even larger than that of Germany, India, Spain, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom combined.¹² China also just commissioned a third aircraft carrier in 2019, but their equipment is outdated and inferior to that of the United States.¹³ For example, according to an article written by *Task and Purpose*, "Chinese carriers are believed to be slower and can only operate at sea for roughly six days before needing to refuel, whereas U.S. nuclear-powered carriers can operate continuously for years as long as the crew is resupplied." Additionally, the aforementioned ship commissioned in 2019 was an abandoned Soviet Union carrier skeleton from 1991 that China purchased and finished for their own use. It features outdated technology such as the ski-jump deck that was part of a flawed STOBAR system (Short Take-Off But Arrested Recovery). This system, as the name suggests, acts as a ramp to launch aircraft and thus requires less speed but comes at a price. The aircraft taking off must be as light as possible; therefore, the Chinese aircraft will be limited to only a few rockets and minimal fuel. China does not expect to have any new flat deck carriers until 2024 at the earliest.¹⁴ The next item in question is the aircraft that come from these carriers. The J-20 was very likely created using F-35 blueprints but never reached the same level as the advanced American model. For this reason, China changed the role of the J-20. Unlike the F-35, the J-20 is aimed to have "laserlike focus on destroying the slower, unarmed planes that support U.S. fighters with its long flight range and long-range missiles, thereby keeping them out of fighting range."¹⁵ Though it is clear there are similarities to the F-35, it is also important to note the Chinese could not achieve exact replication. In terms of submarines, Gen David Berger does

acknowledge that it is also important to note the underwater developments occurring in China.¹⁷ Their submarines have changed very little since the 20th century, but one way the Chinese are improving their capabilities is through the increased use of underground naval bases. Bases, such as the ones located at Jianggezhuang, Yulin, and elsewhere across the Chinese coastline, inhibit the United States from reconnoitering the actions of the submarines.¹⁸ This seemingly rudimentary change in Chinese tactics has given them a slight advantage. With the strategy and capabilities of China in mind, it is important to remember the words of Clausewitz that "war is a *Zweikampf*"¹⁹ and that the United States and its Marine Corps still have a say in what is to come.

Also, it is important to not lose sight of the ramifications of COVID-19. Enormous amounts of time, effort, and money have been poured into the effort to combat the virus. American lawmakers have even warned that in the coming year the military will likely see budget cuts because of the reallocation of funds to the healthcare sector.²⁰ In contrast, the actions by China in recent years have been a warning to the United States to bolster their military and further militarize the Far East.²¹ This continued action by American forces in the region combined with continued diplomatic support for opposing nations such as Taiwan has not set well with Beijing.²²

One of the most contentious of the U.S. relationships is the one it has with Taiwan. Though it is globally recognized as an independent nation, China continues to claim it belongs to the Republic of China. This has long been disputed by Taiwan with little avail; however, in 1979, congress enacted the Taiwan Relations Act: "The [Taiwan Relations Act] ignores One China sovereignty and mandates U.S. provision of military capabilities directly to Taiwan for its self-defense."²³ Over time, however, this support for Taiwan has evolved into more of a security alliance. Some agree that it is these types of alliances and feelings thereof that will likely lead to a major conflict.

With the probability of conflict at hand, the next course of action is to

decide how one might act when faced with a war. Gen Berger has a clear vision of what that might look like. He has outlined how Marines will likely be involved with submarine warfare in terms of disabling landbased capabilities “by offering forward logistics and support, as well as sensor and strike capabilities.”²⁴ Gen Berger is also changing the Marine Corps as a whole in order to better prepare for the next major conflict. He has initiated a massive shift from anything that does not align with traditional Marine operations. He hopes to stray away from a sustained warfare mindset and instead focus on naval-based operations and expeditionary warfare. His plan includes reducing the size of the Marine Corps and cutting out any unnecessary equipment to allow funds and space for “long-range strike capabilities and unmanned systems.”²⁵ Leaders in the Marine Corps are not the only ones who recognize that China is the pacing threat for the United States. As mentioned earlier, the Navy has been carrying out freedom of navigation operations for months to oppose Chinese blockades and implemented travel restrictions in the South China Sea.²⁶ Outside of the physical realm of warfare, the DOD has already drawn a line in the sand when it comes to power grids and cyberspace. The DOD even went as far as threatening Chinese hackers when they issued the statement that read “if you shut down our power grid, maybe we’ll put a missile down one of your smokestacks.”²⁷

With all the talk about a future war on the horizon against a major competitor, it would be important to analyze the capabilities of the United States as it stands. According to the Heritage Foundation’s Index, the United States is barely able to meet the demands of defending itself:

The foundation based its assessment on the ability of America’s armed forces to engage and defeat two major competitors at roughly the same time, and judged that the U.S. military currently could handle only one major enemy.²⁸

Since the most likely scenario of a major war involves Russia coming to the aid of China, this assessment poses a major concern. A major part of this assessment

is because of outdated equipment. The American Navy currently has around 300 ships, half of which are over 20 years old, and only a third are available day to day for operations. Of the 100 that are operational at once, only 60 on average are located in the vicinity of China. This leaves the United States at nearly a six to one disadvantage.²⁹ While the sheer numbers seem like impossible odds, it is important to remember the deficiencies in the Chinese fleet noted earlier. Additionally, U.S. naval capabilities, though outdated, still greatly exceed that of the Chinese. U.S. carriers are able to accomplish a much wider array of missions including the ability to launch fighters, fighter-bombers, surveillance and airborne-control aircraft, and even small transports.³⁰

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This is highly advantageous when one considers the limited aircraft that the Chinese are able to launch from their decks. Additionally, the planes being launched from U.S. carriers are also technologically superior. The F-22 and the F-35 are both highly sophisticated and are integrated with premier stealth technology. Though it is true that the F-35 has a limited range when compared to other aircraft, when in direct comparison to its Chinese and Russian counterparts, the F-35 is much more all-encompassing. The J-20 and the PAK-FA were only designed for one specific mission set; however, the F-35 can gather, analyze, and disseminate information quickly. According to *Business Insider*, “The F-35 plays like a quarterback, sending targeting information to any platform available.”³¹ These are the capabilities that pave the way for future American success in warfare. Nevertheless, it would be remiss to think that in the event of another world war, that only the world’s superpowers would be involved. Thus,

one must take a larger sample of major powers into consideration.

Though many Americans do not see much agreement with China for their actions in the South China Sea, there are nations who still ally themselves with China. Brunei, a small peaceful nation in the Pacific, has watched the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) become increasingly divided by the issue of the South China Sea. In a small attempt to preserve the relative peace, they have voiced their support for China’s claims in the region.³² Additionally, nations were kept from trade deals involving the American F-35. Consequently, many of them will likely choose to purchase the Chinese J-20. Depending on the magnitude of sales and who purchases them, this could be

a major issue for the United States.³³ In conjunction with Australia, India, and Japan, the United States recently stated the need to advance a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.”³⁴ ASEAN members also reaffirmed “the importance of maintaining and promoting peace, security, stability, safety, and freedom of navigation and overflight” in the region.³⁵ The European Union Ambassador Nicolas Chapuis takes the warning to China even further by stating, “We need to have a common understanding to say ‘no’ to bullying and intimidation, coercive diplomacy, ‘wolf-warrior’ diplomacy.”³⁶ The United States has not only voiced support but also taken action to fulfil the moral obligations outlined by the committees it attends. By providing training, arms, and military protection to nations like Taiwan who are opposing the oppressive Chinese power, the United States is preparing them to help in the future potential conflict. Some American military analysts feel as though this support is too much commitment and the United States is just

being used.³⁷ If this support is what the global community the United States aligns itself with is promising, then it is their duty as a world leader to uphold those promises. Nations like Taiwan are not just looking for other nations to fight their battle either. Through the support and training provided by the United States, Taiwan has already been launching missions to reconnoiter Chinese vessels in the Taiwan Strait.³⁸ This global support for freedom is crucial in the effort to not only prevent a major conflict in the far east but also to win in the event prevention fails.

Through the analysis of China and the United States' strategy and capabilities, as well as other nations actions on the matter, it is clear that a major conflict is not inconceivable in the near future. As China sets its eyes on controlling the South China Sea and the surrounding areas near its nation, it is understandable why they are seen as the current aggressor. The United States, however, is playing directly into their strategy. It is important to note the United States is doing so in an effort to prevent a major conflict, but how long can this last? With tensions rising, Chinese claims emboldening, and the involved parties increasing, it is only a matter of time until the peace collapses. Without drastic diplomatic measures taken post haste, it is likely many of those alive today will see the next global conflict in the Pacific.

Notes

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