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# Anticipating Chinese Reactions to U.S. Posture Enhancements



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# About This Report

This report documents research and analysis conducted as part of a project entitled *Chinese Reactions to U.S. Posture Enhancements*, sponsored by U.S. Army Pacific. The purpose of the project was to provide the Army with a framework to assess likely Chinese reactions to planned or proposed U.S. posture enhancements in Asia.

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# Summary

The dramatic increase in Chinese power and military capabilities over the past two decades has prompted calls for U.S. policymakers, and the U.S. Department of Defense in particular, to reevaluate their approach to the Indo-Pacific region, including changes to U.S. military posture. This report provides a framework for assessing likely Chinese reactions to planned or proposed U.S. posture enhancements to assist U.S. Army and other military planners with assessing such enhancements' likely deterrent value and whether they may induce aggressive People's Republic of China (PRC) responses.

## Assessing China's Reactions to U.S. Posture Enhancements

As the U.S. military considers potential posture enhancements to counter China's military development and influence, understanding how China could potentially react to these enhancements is a critical consideration. This report develops and presents a framework for assessing likely Chinese reactions to U.S. posture enhancements. The framework is intended to help guide the thinking of U.S. analysts and policymakers who may be considering recommending or implementing particular posture changes in the Indo-Pacific region and, in particular, when assessing whether a posture change is likely to result in an aggressive or escalatory PRC response. It does so by highlighting and encouraging consideration of several issues and factors that have demonstrated links with Chinese perceptions and reactions.

## Approach

Our framework provides a guide to key considerations that U.S. policymakers should take into account when assessing how China is likely to react to shifting U.S. posture in the Indo-Pacific. Although it is not intended to provide definitive results regarding specific Chinese reactions, it does help

ensure consideration of the factors and characteristics most directly linked with Chinese perceptions and behavior. The framework contains three main components. First, it identifies the key factors that appear to drive Chinese thinking and reactions. Second, it assesses how the characteristics of U.S. posture enhancements—their location, the U.S. allies or partners involved, their military capabilities, and the public profile or messaging that accompanies them—have the potential to affect Chinese reactions through each of the key factors. Third, the framework provides a typology of potential Chinese reactions, organized by their level of intensity. We then apply the framework to a series of hypothetical U.S. posture enhancements and offer concluding insights and recommendations.

## Key Findings

- *China assumes that most U.S. military activities in the region are hostile to China.* Although U.S. policymakers can likely assume a negative Chinese reaction to most U.S. military activities in the region, the question of the degree or intensity of those reactions, rather than just their direction, remains crucial.
- *China's level of concern for a posture enhancement does not directly correlate with the aggressiveness of its responses.* Rather, China will assess the leverage and capabilities it has against a specific country in addition to the escalatory potential of a response. China's responses to posture enhancements that it finds particularly concerning therefore tend to involve a multilayered mixture of political, economic, and military responses, including both carrots and sticks, that Beijing calibrates depending on the situation.
- *U.S. posture enhancements or activities that pose acute concerns for China are more likely to trigger consequential changes in longer-term PRC policies.* China may respond to posture enhancements with longer-term changes to Chinese policy, including economic initiatives and military reforms and investments. Policymakers should be mindful that the immediately observable set of Chinese reactions to posture enhancements may be followed by longer-term changes that may be more consequential.

- *The nature of U.S. alliance relationships in the region may limit the deterrent value of U.S. posture enhancements.* Because U.S. alliances in the region are bilateral rather than multilateral, whether U.S. posture enhancements in a particular country may help to deter China from more aggressive behavior elsewhere in the region may depend on whether China believes that the host nation will allow the United States to employ the posture or capabilities in a conflict.

## Recommendations

- Decisions on the location of U.S. posture enhancements should consider the possibility that China may be able to pressure the host nation to limit or deny access in certain contingencies.
- For the most robust U.S. alliance relationships (e.g., Japan, Australia), the United States should try to establish clear political understandings regarding the contingencies for which U.S. forces or bases on its allies' territories could be used and signal those understandings to China when advantageous.
- The U.S. government should prepare for Chinese responses to be multilayered across domains by coordinating whole-of-government response plans before executing U.S. posture enhancements.
- Short- to medium-range intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities that augment local states' abilities to detect Chinese forces in disputed areas and enabling agreements likely combine the greatest deterrent value with the lowest likelihood of a near-term PRC aggressive response for most locations.
- U.S. capabilities that can target PRC command and control, including in ways that affect nuclear forces or regime continuity, have perhaps the highest risk of producing a disproportionately aggressive PRC response, particularly over the long term.





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# Introduction

The dramatic increase in Chinese power and military capabilities over the past two decades has prompted numerous calls for U.S. policymakers, and the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) in particular, to reevaluate their approach to the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>1</sup> From the Obama administration's 2011 U.S. "rebalance" to Asia to the Trump administration's 2018 National Defense Strategy to emerging policies from the Biden administration, the need to respond to China's rise in ways that safeguard key U.S. interests, such as the security of allies and partners in the region, has become the focus of U.S. national security policy.<sup>2</sup> Highlighting the motivation for additional U.S. involvement in the region, a recent RAND Corporation analysis found that the conditions required to deter China from an attack on Taiwan have eroded substantially over the past decade, stemming in part from the shift in the balance of military capabilities in the region between the United States and China.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On the growth in Chinese military capabilities, see, for example, Eric Heginbotham, Michael Nixon, Forrest E. Morgan, Jacob L. Heim, Jeff Hagen, Sheng Tao Li, Jeffrey Engstrom, Martin C. Libicki, Paul DeLuca, David A. Shlapak, David R. Frelinger, Burgess Laird, Kyle Brady, and Lyle J. Morris, *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-392-AF, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament," Office of the Press Secretary, November 17, 2011; Jim Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2018; DoD, "Secretary of Defense Directive on China Task Force Recommendations," June 9, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Michael J. Mazarr, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Timothy R. Heath, and Derek Eaton, *What Deters and Why: The State of Deterrence in Korea and the Taiwan Strait*,

Despite these dynamics, the United States has to date made only comparatively modest changes to its military posture in the Indo-Pacific. For this report, we define *posture* as comprising U.S. personnel, capabilities, and agreements. This definition would include changes to nuclear posture, although we did not directly address such changes in this study. We did consider joint posture, although we primarily focused on posture assessments that would be of greatest interest to the U.S. Army.

Although some types of U.S. posture in the region have increased in recent years, by most measures they remain below levels from the late Cold War period and, of course, far below what the United States committed to the region earlier in the Cold War when it fought conflicts in Korea and Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> Given the increase in Chinese capabilities over the past two decades and the concerns that this has prompted in several U.S. allies and partners, as well as the consequences for the United States and the region should China decide to undertake armed aggression against a U.S. ally or partner, it is logical for U.S. policymakers to take a fresh look at U.S. military posture in the region. Posture issues are of particular concern for the U.S. Army, which relies more heavily on having personnel and capabilities present in the region in advance of potential crises or hostilities than do other services. Although the best future role for the U.S. Army in the Indo-Pacific continues to be debated, many of the kinetic and enabling capabilities at which the Army excels would be most effective if already deployed in the region.<sup>5</sup>

As the United States considers new, expanded, or different posture options in the Indo-Pacific, China's likely reactions to these posture changes

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Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3144-A, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Even in the decade between these two large-scale conflicts, however, U.S. posture in the Indo-Pacific was much larger than it has been over the past 40 years. We provide a detailed discussion of historical changes in U.S. posture in the region in the "Brief History of the U.S. Defense Posture in the Indo-Pacific" section that follows.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Flynn and Laura Potter, "Strategic Predictability: Landpower in the Indo-Pacific," War on the Rocks, May 6, 2021; Paul J. LaCamera and Theodore O. White, "Sustaining Joint Operations: Expanding Posture and Competition by Leveraging the Sustainment Warfighting Function," *Army Sustainment*, April–June 2021; David M. Finkelstein, "The U.S. Army and the Pacific: Legacies and Challenges," *Parameters*, Vol. 50, No. 3, Autumn 2020b.



are central to assessing their merits. U.S. posture enhancements that seek to deter China from attacking U.S. allies or partners will succeed or fail depending on how China responds to them, which will in turn depend on how China perceives and understands U.S. actions. In general, if China assesses that U.S. capabilities and resolve to defend an ally or partner have been increased by a posture enhancement, then it is likely to assess that the risks and costs for China of a potential attack on that ally or partner have also increased.<sup>6</sup> If instead China assesses that a U.S. posture enhancement fundamentally threatens a core Chinese interest, it may be motivated to attack before that enhancement can be put into place.<sup>7</sup> In either event, it is China's perceptions and reactions that determine the deterrent value of a U.S. posture enhancement.

Furthermore, the United States generally seeks to manage its intensifying competition with China in ways that maintain stability in the region—a region that accounts for roughly 30 percent of global GDP, which is expected to rise to 50 percent by 2050—making Washington sensitive to the risks of Chinese reactions short of armed conflict that may nonetheless prove destabilizing or disruptive.<sup>8</sup> Although some aggressive or assertive Chinese reactions below the threshold of armed conflict may be acceptable to U.S. policymakers given the potential military benefits of a posture enhancement, others may not be. Understanding and anticipating how China is likely to respond to U.S. posture enhancements in the region is therefore essential.

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<sup>6</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985, pp. 14, 28; Robert Jervis, "Rational Deterrence: Theory and Evidence," *World Politics*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 1989b, pp. 190–191. Chinese calculations regarding the potential threat from U.S. and allied and partner military capabilities are discussed in detail in Chapter Two.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of International Conflict*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999, pp. 35–44. The Cuban Missile Crisis represents perhaps the most famous example of a state (in this case, the United States) threatening military action before an adversary could complete a posture enhancement that the state assessed to be threatening. See, for example, Len Scott and R. Gerald Hughes, *The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Critical Reappraisal*, New York: Routledge, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Asian Development Bank, *Asia 2050: Realizing the Asian Century, Executive Summary*, Manila, Philippines, August 2011, p. 3.

Despite the importance of this issue, there have been only limited prior efforts in the public domain to understand how and why China is likely to respond to U.S. posture changes in the Indo-Pacific. Although we believe that this report develops the first rigorous and comprehensive framework for anticipating Chinese responses to U.S. posture enhancements, it does so by building on previous research in three key areas: (1) China's interests and strategies, (2) China's signaling behavior, and (3) U.S.-China escalation dynamics.

A wide variety of recent studies examine China's interests, threat perceptions, security strategies, and approach to regional competition. One outlines China's grand strategy, for example, and China's approach to managing relations with the United States while still achieving its strategic objectives.<sup>9</sup> Others assess how Chinese perceptions of threats and interests evolve over time, how U.S. activities can impact the development of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and how Chinese policymakers seek to combine various elements of national power to achieve their long-term regional and global visions.<sup>10</sup> We draw on the findings of such works throughout this report, but they typically adopt a strategic-level view of U.S.-China competition and do not attempt to identify the specific ways in which China might react to particular U.S. activities, such as posture enhancements.

A second body of research explores the drivers of Chinese aggression abroad. These studies have produced a variety of useful insights regarding Chinese behavior that is incorporated into the development of key factors affecting Chinese responses to U.S. posture enhancements found in Chapter Two of this report.<sup>11</sup> Notably, however, these works typically concen-

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<sup>9</sup> Andrew Scobell, Edmund J. Burke, Cortez A. Cooper III, Sale Lilly, Chad J. R. Ohlandt, Eric Warner, and J. D. Williams, *China's Grand Strategy: Trends, Trajectories, and Long-Term Competition*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2798-A, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy R. Heath, Kristen Gunness, and Cortez A. Cooper, *The PLA and China's Rejuvenation: National Security and Military Strategies, Deterrence Concepts, and Combat Capabilities*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1402-OSD, 2016; Nadège Rolland, *China's Vision for a New World Order*, Seattle, Wash.: National Bureau of Asian Research, NBR Special Report No. 83, January 2020.

<sup>11</sup> See, inter alia, Alastair Iain Johnston, "China's Militarized Interstate Dispute Behaviour 1949–1992: A First Cut at the Data," *China Quarterly*, No. 153, March 1998; M. Taylor Fravel, "Regime Insecurity and International Cooperation: Explaining China's Compromises in Territorial Disputes," *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 2, Fall

trate on explaining China's behavior in territorial and maritime disputes, which, although important, represents only one channel through which U.S. activities can drive Chinese responses. These studies also often focus only on China's military responses to the exclusion of its political and economic policies.

Equally useful are studies that evaluate China's approach to deterrence signaling and provide a more granular view of Beijing's decisionmaking. Some even develop typologies or frameworks for understanding China's behavior.<sup>12</sup> Lessons drawn from them inform our own analysis, particularly in Chapter Four, which examines patterns in China's near- and longer-term responses to different U.S. actions. A subset of this research focuses on analyzing Chinese behavior in crises and conflicts and has significantly enhanced our understanding of China's evolving approach to using military force to control escalation,<sup>13</sup> as well as the escalation risks associated with a U.S.-China conflict.<sup>14</sup> This work informs our analysis of potential high-intensity PLA responses, but it is less helpful for understanding how and

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2005; M. Taylor Fravel, "Power Shifts and Escalation: Explaining China's Use of Force in Territorial Disputes," *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 3, Winter 2007/2008; Andrew Chubb, "PRC Assertiveness in the South China Sea: Measuring Continuity and Change, 1970–2015," *International Security*, Vol. 45, No. 3, Winter 2020/2021; Zhang Ketian, "Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing's Use of Coercion in the South China Sea," *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 1, Summer 2019; and Michael Green, Kathleen Hicks, Zack Cooper, John Schaus, and Jake Douglas, *Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 2017a.

<sup>12</sup> Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Derek Grossman, Kristen Gunness, Michael S. Chase, Marigold Black, and Natalia Simmons-Thomas, *Deciphering Chinese Deterrence Signalling in the New Era: An Analytic Framework and Seven Case Studies*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A1074-1, 2021; Paul H. B. Godwin and Alice L. Miller, *China's Forbearance Has Limits: Chinese Threat and Retaliation Signaling and Its Implications for a Sino-American Military Confrontation*, Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, China Strategic Perspectives No. 6, April 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Burgess Laird, *War Control: Chinese Writings on the Control of Escalation in Crisis and Conflict*, Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, April 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Caitlin Talmadge, "Would China Go Nuclear? Assessing the Risk of Chinese Nuclear Escalation in a Conventional War with the United States," *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 2017; Fiona S. Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel, "Dangerous

why U.S. posture enhancements might cause China to adopt lower-intensity and nonmilitary forms of aggression, particularly in peacetime.

It is also worth noting a fourth and more limited body of research that has sought to identify the ways in which other states might respond to different U.S. posture enhancements. For example, we leverage methodological insights from a previous effort to predict potential Russian responses to U.S. posture changes.<sup>15</sup> More directly, RAND researchers have assessed potential Chinese responses to U.S. Army posture options, focusing on the degree to which China might view a U.S. posture shift as provocative and how effectively China might be able to counter or oppose it.<sup>16</sup> Although this body of research is in some ways more narrowly focused than our own, the reports have conceptual similarities, and we have built on their findings and research.

Taken together, these studies help reveal China's interests and the ways in which it might use its military coercively in both peacetime and during crises. However, they do not seek to comprehensively identify the drivers of Chinese aggression or provide a tool for predicting how China might respond to specific U.S. actions, such as posture enhancements.

This report, therefore, fills an important gap by providing a substantially more detailed, comprehensive open-source framework to assess likely Chinese reactions to U.S. posture enhancements than was previously available. We intend the research on China's reactions to be useful to a variety of audiences, including DoD leaders and military planners, who would likely find Chapters Two, Four, and Five of interest. Certain aspects of this report would also be of interest to more general audiences, such as U.S. policymakers, academics, or researchers seeking to better understand China's reactions to U.S. military posture changes. These audiences might find Chapters

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Confidence? Chinese Views on Nuclear Escalation," *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 2, Fall 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Bryan Frederick, Matthew Povlock, Stephen Watts, Miranda Priebe, and Edward Geist, *Assessing Russian Reactions to U.S. and NATO Posture Enhancements*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1879-AF, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Michael J. Mazarr, Derek Eaton, Tristan Finazzo, Christy Foran, Timothy R. Heath, Diana Y. Myers, Lisa Saum-Manning, and Daniel Tapia, unpublished RAND Corporation research, 2021.

Two, Three, and Four of most interest. Chapter Six provides our conclusions and recommendations.

As discussed in greater detail at the conclusion of this chapter, our framework retains relatively modest goals. It offers a method for ensuring consideration of a number of key issues that can be shown to affect Chinese perceptions and reactions, but it does not on its own provide a comprehensive assessment of costs and benefits. Our framework is therefore best used to support ongoing analysis of U.S. posture options but not as a replacement for other efforts that may also consider, for example, the costs and feasibility of different options for the United States, the trade-offs if capabilities are relocated from other regions, or the reactions of other U.S. allies and partners to the changes—issues that are not covered in detail in this report. The framework focuses primarily on Chinese reactions to posture enhancements rather than posture subtractions, which could be different in certain respects. It also does not provide recommendations for whether the United States should or should not undertake specific posture enhancements based solely on possible People's Republic of China (PRC) responses. In some cases, for example, it may be prudent for the United States to initiate a posture change in the Indo-Pacific region with the knowledge or expectation that it would lead to countervailing actions by the PRC. Of note, the framework has elements that would potentially be useful to U.S. allies and partners in assessing China's reactions to changes in their own posture or military activities. However, the framework does not currently incorporate how PRC perceptions of and reactions to non-U.S. posture enhancements may differ and, therefore, cannot be fully generalized to that purpose without additional research.

The remainder of this chapter first provides a historical survey of U.S. posture in the Indo-Pacific to place current debates and questions about U.S. posture enhancements in context and then concludes with an overview of the structure and methodological approach of the report as a whole.

## Brief History of the U.S. Defense Posture in the Indo-Pacific

As the United States considers various options to enhance its defense posture in the Indo-Pacific, it is helpful for defense planners to understand how the U.S. posture in this area of responsibility (AOR) has adapted and evolved over time. This section provides a brief history of major muscle movements in the U.S. overseas defense posture in the Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) since 1949.<sup>17</sup> It is organized around three elements of the U.S. overseas posture:<sup>18</sup>

1. *U.S. personnel deployed*, including in permanently assigned, rotational, and temporary force packages
2. *U.S. capabilities deployed*, including major weapon systems, equipment, and support infrastructure
3. *U.S.-enabling agreements*, including mutual defense treaties, status of forces agreements (SOFAs), basing and access agreements, and overflight and transit rights.

## Changes to Deployed U.S. Personnel

As Washington began developing a global defense posture aimed at containing the Soviet Union in the late 1940s, the U.S. Army had not previously intended to maintain a large standing force in the Indo-Pacific indefinitely.<sup>19</sup> The invasion of Communist forces across the 38th parallel

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<sup>17</sup> We do so with the caveat that this history of the U.S. defense posture in INDOPACOM generally excludes Hawaii. In addition, we note that until 2018, the AOR command was referred to as the Pacific Command or PACOM.

<sup>18</sup> On the definition of U.S. defense posture, see Michael J. Lostumbo, Michael J. McNerney, Eric Peltz, Derek Eaton, David R. Frelinger, Victoria A. Greenfield, John Halliday, Patrick Mills, Bruce R. Nardulli, Stacie L. Pettyjohn, Jerry M. Sollinger, and Stephen M. Worman, *Overseas Basing of U.S. Military Forces: An Assessment of Relative Costs and Strategic Benefits*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, RR-201-OSD, 2013, pp. 5–6.

<sup>19</sup> As Pettyjohn, 2012, explains, “Having no particular postwar enemy in mind,” the first global posture reviews (GPRs) and basing studies conducted in 1943–1945 “called for the creation of an extensive network of (primarily air) bases overseas” to serve as

in June 1950 irrevocably altered this calculus.<sup>20</sup> In the 70-plus years since, significant shifts in U.S. troop levels in INDOPACOM have fallen into two broad categories: (1) those due to major contingency operations (either in the AOR or in U.S. Central Command [CENTCOM]), and (2) those due to grand strategy realignments (primarily in peacetime). Altogether, since 1949, some 15 nations and three U.S. territories in the INDOPACOM AOR have hosted notable numbers (more than 100 troops) of U.S. military forces on a permanently assigned or rotationally deployed, multiyear basis (i.e., excluding temporary deployments).<sup>21</sup> As measured by overall U.S. personnel hosted, these partners can be roughly binned into three tiers of significance to the overall U.S. defense posture in the region over this period (excluding U.S. territories):

1. *large-scale presence*, with peak U.S. troop strength greater than 100,000 (Japan, South Korea, South Vietnam)

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the United States’ “strategic frontier” along the perimeters of Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Notably, these first plans did not call for building air bases on the European continent or stationing ground troops abroad permanently. This strategy, known as “perimeter defense in depth,” guided the U.S. global posture from 1943 to 1949. However, for a host of postwar reasons, the War Department was never able to fully implement this global basing strategy before a new one (“concentrated defense in depth”) took root in 1950 to counter Soviet and North Korean aggression. For a more detailed history of America’s defense posture in the Indo-Pacific before 1949, see Stacie Pettyjohn, *U.S. Global Defense Posture, 1783–2011*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-1244-AF, 2012, pp. 49–59.

<sup>20</sup> Pettyjohn, 2012, p. 61.

<sup>21</sup> For more details on these partnerships, including deployment sizes, dates, and key security agreements governing the U.S. overseas presence, see Table A.1 in Appendix A.

We note that the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) also reports smaller numbers of troops (less than 100) deployed for multiple years (i.e., three or more) at various points in eight additional countries: Bangladesh, China, Fiji, Indonesia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Moreover, DMDC reports very small numbers of deployed troops (typically less than ten) in a handful of minor locations for only one to two years (DMDC Reporting System [DMDCRS], homepage, undated). We have excluded these temporary deployments from our analysis. They include the Line Islands, Easter Island, Kashmir, Sarawak, Nauru, North Korea, Papua New Guinea, Brunei, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, and Wake Island (Micronesia).

2. *substantial presence*, with peak U.S. troop strength between 1,000 and 99,999 (Philippines, Thailand, Taiwan, Australia, Diego Garcia [a British territory]).
3. *limited presence*, with peak U.S. troop strength between 100 and 999 (New Zealand, Malaysia, Singapore, Cambodia, Laos, Hong Kong, India).

Taken together, the major muscle movements showing the ebb and flow of forces from these countries and other countries in the region with more limited presence are illustrated in Figure 1.1 and described below.

There have been four distinct periods of troop expansion in INDOPACOM since 1949. The first two were the massive theater buildups throughout the Korean War (1950–1953) and in the early years of the Vietnam War (1961–1968). While the former was reactionary and rapid, the latter was incremental and enabled by the Kennedy administration’s new defense strategy. Perceiving an end to American nuclear supremacy and rejecting President Eisenhower’s 1950s New Look strategy—which had sought to downsize the Army while increasing America’s nuclear arsenal—President Kennedy entered office in January 1961 seeking to expand and transform the Army and conventional forces, including greater investment in Army infantry, airmobile forces, and special forces.<sup>22</sup> Between 1962 and 1968, the number of Army divisions in the Indo-Pacific increased from four to 12.

However, as shown in Figure 1.2, despite the fact that these two conflicts temporarily shifted the preponderance of the U.S. military’s overseas presence to INDOPACOM, “U.S. defense strategy [during the Cold War] relegated the Asian theater to secondary importance for most of this period.”<sup>23</sup> To these ends, the only other notable (albeit comparatively minor) post-Vietnam troop increases occurred as a result of the Obama administration’s 2011 Indo-Pacific strategic rebalance and the Trump administration’s subsequent 2017 National Security Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy. However, troop additions to the theater over the last decade have been

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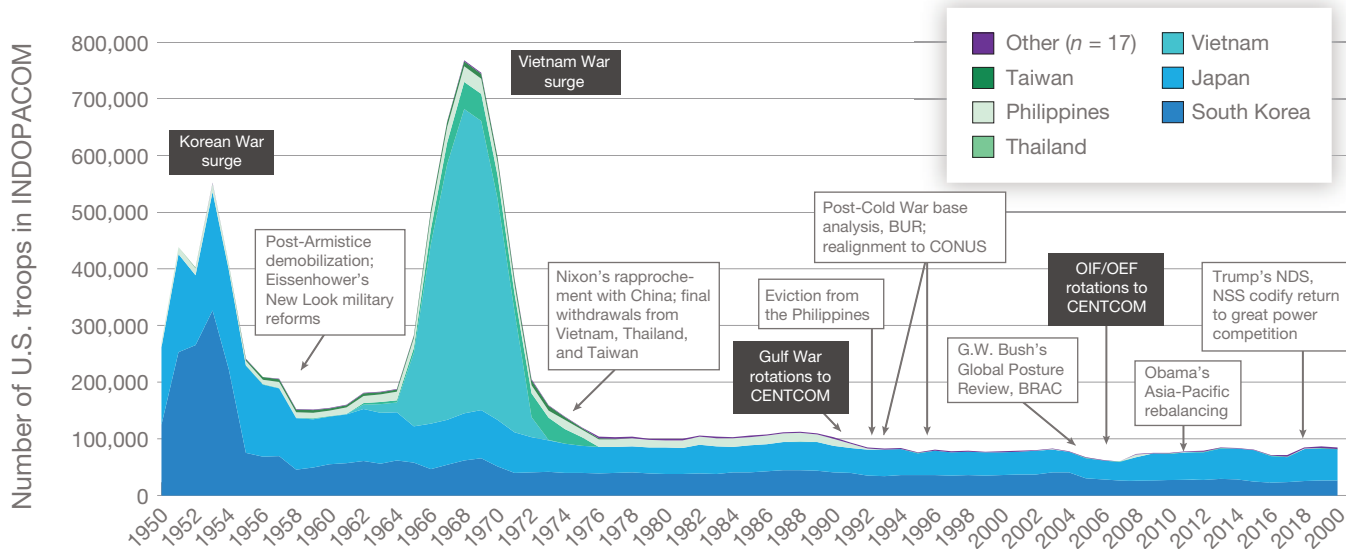
<sup>22</sup> Eric V. Larson, *Force Planning Scenarios, 1945-2016: Their Origins and Use in Defense Strategic Planning*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2173/1-A, 2019, pp. 41–42. See also Pettyjohn, 2012, p. 74.

<sup>23</sup> Pettyjohn, 2012, p. 70.



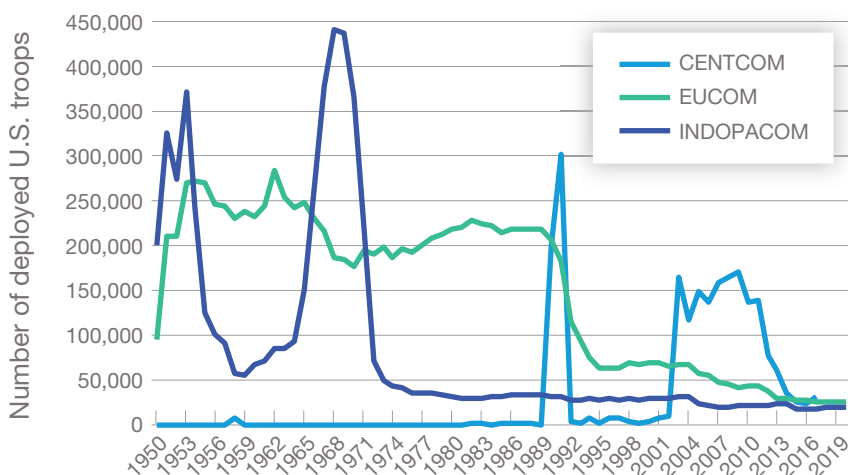
FIGURE 1.1

## Major Muscle Movements of U.S. Troops in INDOPACOM, 1950–2020



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of DMDC data (DMDCRS, undated) with additional RAND Arroyo Center analysis.

NOTE: Events in black text boxes indicate personnel changes because of major contingency operations, while those in white text boxes indicate posture changes because of major strategic policy shifts. BRAC = base realignment and closure; BUR = bottom-up review; CONUS = continental United States; NDS = National Defense Strategy; NSS = National Security Strategy; OEF = Operation Enduring Freedom; OIF = Operation Iraqi Freedom.

**FIGURE 1.2****Evolution of Army Posture in INDOPACOM, EUCOM, and CENTCOM, 1950–2020**

SOURCE: Authors' analysis of DMDC data (DMDCRS, undated) with additional RAND Arroyo Center analysis.

concentrated primarily on the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps (and to a lesser extent on the Air Force) in Japan, Australia, and Guam—rather than a concentrated Army presence in South Korea. Indeed, for the first time in post-World War II history, though largely because of declines in U.S. forces in other regions, the Army's enduring presence in INDOPACOM, European Command (EUCOM), and CENTCOM is trending toward relative parity.

In addition to these historic buildups, America's steady state posture has also been reset by four distinct periods of posture drawdowns since 1949. First, from 1953 through early 1961, the post-Korean War demobilization unfolded against the backdrop of President Eisenhower's New Look defense policy. Running for the White House during the height of the Korean War stalemate in 1952, the then–Allied Commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization campaigned on a platform of fiscal conservatism and defense spending cuts. To set the United States on an economically sustainable defense posture for the long haul of the Cold War, Eisenhower's “bang for the buck” defense strategy altered U.S. force structure by reducing total

Army divisions while increasing America's nuclear arsenal and strategic missile capabilities. As a result of this new defense posture strategy (and Korean War armistice), the Army's force posture in South Korea declined from seven infantry divisions (supported by one Marine division and one regional combat team) in 1953 to just two infantry divisions in 1955, which remained the steady state for nearly two decades. In Japan, the Army's four-division presence, which had been steadily maintained during occupation duties from 1946–1950, was incrementally redeployed to Korea between 1950 and 1953 and replaced by just one Marine division on Okinawa. Altogether, from the Korean War armistice in 1953 until the eve of the Kennedy administration's expanding involvement in Southeast Asia in 1960, U.S. force levels in INDOPACOM declined from 550,000 to 150,000 troops.

Second, during the U.S. withdrawal (1969–1975) from the conflicts in Southeast Asia, theater force levels plummeted about 86 percent, from 770,000 troops in 1968 to a little more than 100,000 troops in 1976.<sup>24</sup> Beyond near-total redeployments from Vietnam and Thailand, in 1971 the Army reduced its posture from two infantry divisions to one in Korea. The Army's enduring presence in the Indo-Pacific then continued to decline gradually throughout the late 1970s, contracting further from 50,000 troops in 1973 to slightly more than 30,000 troops at the start of the Reagan administration in 1981.<sup>25</sup> These posture changes were due to a confluence of factors that led to broader restraint in deploying U.S. forces overseas in the post-Vietnam era, including the start of détente, Nixon's rapprochement with China, growing domestic opposition to U.S. military interventions from the trauma of Vietnam, and President Carter's focus on defense spending cuts and reforms.

Beyond these major war demobilizations, smaller (yet still significant) periods of cross-theater drawdowns have followed major Joint Staff strategic

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<sup>24</sup> Beyond Vietnam withdrawals, in 1971 President Nixon reduced the Army presence in South Korea from two divisions to one, leaving one division in Hawaii as the Army's only other significant presence in the Pacific (Pettyjohn, 2012, p. 71).

<sup>25</sup> During the Reagan administration's military buildup (1981–1989), neither Army nor total U.S. troop levels rose significantly in the Indo-Pacific region. According to DMDC data, the steady state U.S. footprint increased no more than 5–10 percent in the AOR, despite the era of massive defense spending (DMDCRS, undated).

reviews.<sup>26</sup> As the 1990–1991 Gulf War concluded, the Pentagon was beginning to implement its first post–Cold War GPR, the 1989–1990 base analysis (which was followed by the 1993 BUR).<sup>27</sup> For the first time since the Korean War, U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR) and U.S. Army Pacific’s (USARPAC’s) forward-assigned garrison models received significant new scrutiny. At the same time, in 1991–1992 the Philippines withdrew its permission for the basing of U.S. forces there, ending the nearly century-long military presence that began in the Spanish-American War, after U.S. forces at Subic Bay and Clark Air Base were “assailed as a vestige of colonialism and an affront to Philippine sovereignty.”<sup>28</sup> Over the first half of the 1990s, DoD shuttered roughly 60 percent of its overseas facilities, repatriating almost 300,000 soldiers, largely from Germany, Spain, the Philippines, and Panama. In INDOPACOM, total force levels declined about 30 percent, from 110,000 troops in 1989 to about 77,000 troops in 1995.

A decade later, in the weeks after the 9/11 attacks, the Joint Staff issued to Congress its long-awaited *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR), mandating a new GPR in order “to gain transformational efficiencies and develop new capabilities to meet emerging requirements.”<sup>29</sup> To these ends,

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<sup>26</sup> The broad strategic reasons for these realignments have been manifold, including reduced threat environment, greater cost savings, better force protection, enhanced military family well-being, and stronger U.S.-host relationships.

<sup>27</sup> John Y. Schrader, Leslie Lewis, and Roger Allen Brown, *Quadrennial Defense Review 2001: Lessons on Managing Change in the Department of Defense*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, DB-379-JS, 2003, p. 4. We caveat that redeployments from INDOPACOM to CENTCOM for the 1990–1991 Gulf War were somewhat limited, particularly for the Army. The largest muscle movements included deployment of the III Marine Expeditionary Force from Okinawa; 376th Strategic Wing from Kadena Air Force Base (AFB), Japan; B-52 bombers from Diego Garcia; the *Midway* carrier group from Yokosuka, Japan; and other U.S. Navy (USN) and U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) prepositioned ships from Japan, Philippines, Guam, and Diego Garcia.

<sup>28</sup> David E. Sanger, “Philippines Orders U.S. to Leave Strategic Navy Base at Subic Bay,” *New York Times*, December 28, 1991.

<sup>29</sup> James L. Jones, “The Global Posture Review of United States Military Forces Stationed Overseas,” prepared statement before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C., S. Hrg. 108-854, September 23, 2004a. See also DoD, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, Washington, D.C., September 30, 2001. As Krepinovich and Work, 2007, asserts, the 2001 QDR was DoD’s first concerted attempt to define a post–Cold War

in 2004–2005 DoD completed the integrated global presence and basing strategy (IGPBS) review, or GPR,<sup>30</sup> in collaboration with the independent assessments of the BRAC Commission and the congressionally appointed Commission on the Review of Overseas Military Facility Structure of the United States (aka, the Overseas Basing Commission).<sup>31</sup> The net effect of these policy reviews was to reinforce early post–Cold War trends in USAR-PAC and USAREUR away from long-term forward-assigned garrisoned postures and toward rotational deployments in those theaters—leading to the consolidation and shuttering of main operating bases (MOBs) across Northeast Asia and Western Europe and the creation of more “temporary access arrangements” and maintenance of “warm facilities” to prosecute the war on terror.<sup>32</sup> Like the 1989 review, implementation of the posture shifts resulting from the 2001–2005 QDR, IGPBS, and BRAC review processes thus coincided with cross-theater leveling to resource the then-expanding

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steady state defense posture: Although the “reorientation of the U.S. military posture had been going on since the Berlin Wall in 1989 . . . [it had done so] without any clear central idea about the desired end state” (Andrew Krepinovich and Robert O. Work, *A New Global Defense Posture for the Transoceanic Era*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2007, p. 2).

<sup>30</sup> DoD, *Strengthening U.S. Global Defense Posture: Report to Congress*, Washington, D.C., September 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Authorized by Public Law 108-132, Military Construction, Army, Sec. 128, Commission on Review of Overseas Military Structure of the United States, November 22, 2003.

<sup>32</sup> The IGPBS called for the return to CONUS of roughly 70,000 of 200,000 total personnel from overseas bases (the most at one time since the Korean War), primarily in Europe and Asia; the repatriation of some 100,000 family members and civilians from DoD bases overseas; and the consolidation and redistribution of U.S. forces, namely in Germany and South Korea, but also in Italy, the United Kingdom (UK), and Japan, which cut the total number of U.S. military facilities overseas from 850 to 550 and established new, light-footprint bases in Eastern Europe, Africa, and Central Asia. By contrast, at the time that the first post–Cold War reductions in forward-assigned units began in 1991, there were 315,000 U.S. forces in Western Europe alone, stationed across 1,400 military facilities (Robert D. Critchlow, *U.S. Military Overseas Basing: New Developments and Oversight Issues for Congress*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, RL33148, October 31, 2005, pp. 1–2; James L. Jones, “The Global Posture Review of United States Military Forces Stationed Overseas,” testimony before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C., S. Hrg. 108-854, September 23, 2004b.

conflicts in Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Afghanistan. From the 9/11 attacks through the Iraq War surge in 2007–2008, Army forces in INDOPACOM declined about 30 percent from 30,000 to 20,000 troops, while total theater force levels declined from about 80,000 to 60,000 troops—their lowest since World War II—as a result of rotational mobilizations to CENTCOM. As the last major posture shift of this period preceding the era of renewed interstate strategic competition with China, the U.S. Congress passed the 2011 Budget Control Act (aka, “sequestration”), which resulted in the removal of one Army brigade from Korea and two from Europe.

## Changes to Deployed U.S. Capabilities

In keeping with changes in the total number of troops present in the region, there have also been substantial changes in deployed warfighting capabilities in the Indo-Pacific over time. In this section, we examine changes in three time-series metrics to assess major changes in capabilities, by INDOPACOM country over the past 70 years spanning the ground, naval, and air domains. These metrics were selected as examples to help illustrate how the larger trends in personnel numbers described above were reflected in specific capabilities, although of course many other capabilities not listed here—from light ground forces to fires to submarines—would be essential for a full understanding of U.S. capabilities in the region.

### Heavy Ground Forces

Because of the unique geographic challenges of fighting and projecting power across Pacific island chains and the nature of combat against the Japanese in the Indo-Pacific theater during World War II the Army and Marine Corps deployed far fewer heavy ground formations to Asia than to the European theater. In part as a legacy of this, steady state levels of heavy forces in the Indo-Pacific remained a fraction of those deployed to Western Europe (primarily West Germany) during the Cold War. Indeed, according to RAND estimates, from 1949–1989, the total annual number of sol-

diers and marines deployed to INDOPACOM in heavy units averaged on the order of 16,000, compared with about 78,000 annually in EUCOM.<sup>33</sup>

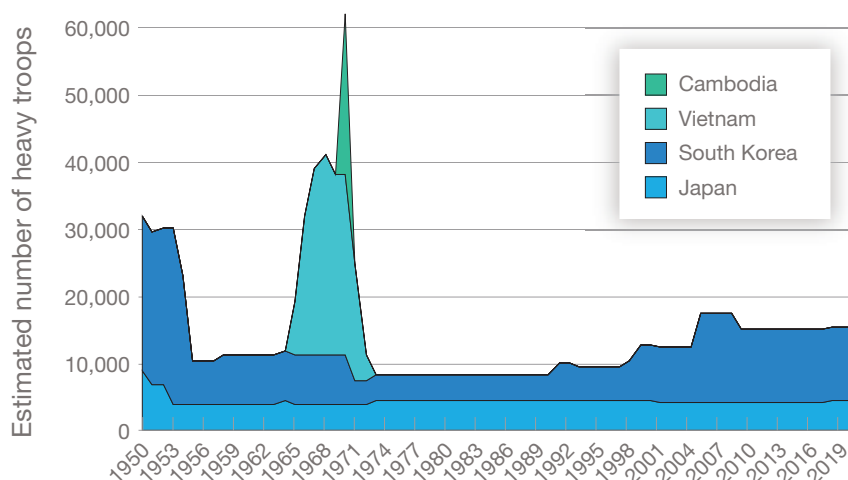
Perhaps not surprisingly, as illustrated in Figure 1.3, major muscle movements in heavy Army and USMC ground force capabilities—including armored, mechanized, artillery, and combat aviation units—have followed a similar pattern to ground forces overall. Aside from fluctuations during the Korean and Vietnam conflicts, the estimated U.S. heavy troop presence in Japan throughout the Cold War remained relatively constant, consisting primarily of artillery and tank elements with the 3rd Marine Division based in Okinawa and the deployment of a Marine air wing to Okinawa in the mid-1970s. The Army’s heavy footprint in Japan has historically been far more negligible than that of the Marine Corps’. Instead, the Army has maintained thousands of soldiers in heavy units in Korea over the past 70-plus years—with notable increases in heavy air defense capabilities throughout the 1990s and 2000s, according to publicly available data from the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).<sup>34</sup> Beyond Korea and Japan, the United States has generally refrained from deploying heavy troop formations at echelons above brigade to INDOPACOM since 1949, including in any of the “tier two” historical hosts (the Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand, and Australia).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Data on heavy U.S. ground capabilities was derived from Matthew Lane, Bryan Frederick, Jennifer Kavanagh, Stephen Watts, Nathan Chandler, and Meagan L. Smith, *Forecasting Demand for U.S. Ground Forces: Assessing Future Trends in Armed Conflict and U.S. Military Interventions*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2995-A, 2022. This research collection effort included two broad steps: (1) identifying the number and type of units involved in all historical U.S. overseas deployments since World War II and (2) calculating heavy force estimates using official Army and USMC tables of organization and equipment (TO&E).

<sup>34</sup> The U.S. Army footprint in Japan throughout the Cold War ostensibly was centered on a few corps and army-level command units and support staff that rarely surpassed 2,000 soldiers. By contrast, the Army maintained two infantry divisions (with heavy organic elements including tank and artillery units) in South Korea throughout the 1950s and 1960s. This heavy footprint in Korea was later reduced to one infantry division plus additional artillery and air defense combat units throughout the 1970s and 1980s (IISS, *The Military Balance*, London, various years).

<sup>35</sup> The small Army and USMC presence in these countries has seldom involved more than a few thousand service members, who were overwhelmingly assigned to train,

**FIGURE 1.3****Estimated Number of Heavy Ground Forces in INDOPACOM, 1950–2020**

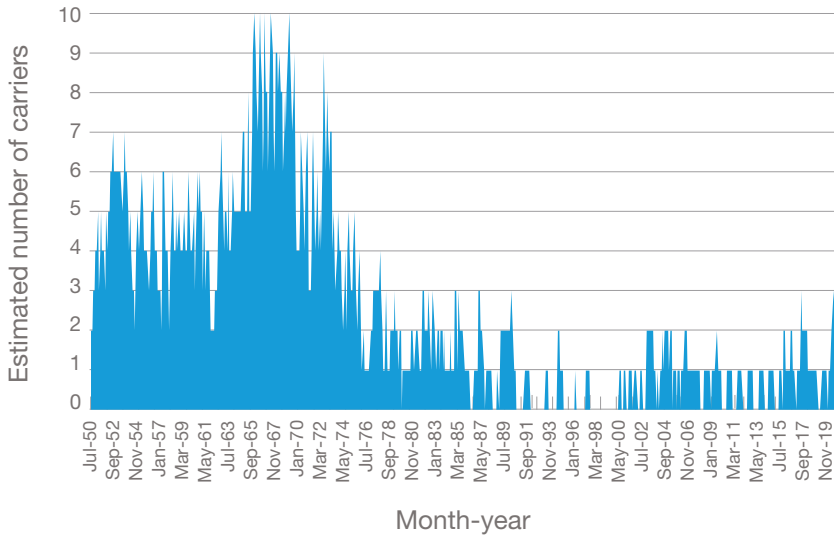
SOURCE: Authors' analysis of data from Lane et al., 2022, updated with 2018–2020 *Military Balance* data (IISS, various years) and additional RAND Arroyo Center analysis.

## Carrier Strike Groups

Broad historical trends in U.S. aircraft carrier movements largely track those in troop buildups and drawdowns. As illustrated in Figure 1.4, in the early years of the Cold War, the United States maintained a much more robust carrier strike group (CSG) presence in the Indo-Pacific than it does today. From the start of the Korean War (1950) to the end of the Vietnam War (1975), the U.S. Navy averaged 5.2 aircraft carriers in the Indo-Pacific theater every month, frequently reaching a peak of ten carriers in some months of the latter conflict, according to RAND analysis of publicly avail-

advise, and assist efforts and maintained few—if any—heavy troop formations. One potential exception in the case of the Philippines includes the assignment of an artillery battery to a USMC unit based in the Philippines during the 1980s, which probably amounted to no more than 150 marines.



**FIGURE 1.4****Estimated Number of U.S. Carriers Deployed to INDOPACOM, 1950–2020**

SOURCE: Updated from Bryan Frederick, Stephen Watts, Matthew Lane, Abby Doll, Ashley L. Rhoades, and Meagan L. Smith, *Understanding the Deterrent Impact of U.S. Overseas Forces*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2533-A, 2020, with [uscarriers.net](http://uscarriers.net) data accessed on July 30, 2021 ([uscarriers.net](http://uscarriers.net), "U.S. Carriers: United States Ships (USS) History and Deployments," webpage, undated).

NOTE: Light carriers, largely used in the decade after World War II, are excluded from these data.

able data on carrier group deployments.<sup>36</sup> By comparison, from the end of combat operations in Southeast Asia in 1975 through the end of the Cold War and up to 2020, we estimate a steady state presence of roughly one CSG in INDOPACOM at any given time—excluding those in transit or those that may be based in the region but engaged in operations in the CENTCOM AOR or elsewhere. Even during INDOPACOM's peacetime years spanning the mid-1950s to mid-1960s, the U.S. Navy maintained a much larger carrier group presence in the region than it does today, namely in and around Japanese waters.

After the Vietnam War, the U.S. Navy's posture was reduced to two carriers in INDOPACOM supported by another four carrier groups on the U.S.

<sup>36</sup> For details on RAND's methodology for coding these data, see Frederick et al., 2020, p. 145. These data were then updated through 2020 by consulting [uscarriers.net](http://uscarriers.net), undated.

West Coast. Typically, one of the Navy's two forward carrier task forces has operated in the vicinity of Japan and the other has generally operated in the vicinity of the Philippines and South Pacific, except for occasional deployments to the Indian Ocean.<sup>37</sup> At times in recent years, the Navy has deployed a third CSG to the theater to respond to crises (e.g., during heightened tensions with North Korea in 2017) or to conduct more muscular shaping operations (e.g., in the South China Sea [SCS] and East China Sea [ECS] in June 2020). Importantly, in November 2020, the Navy announced plans to resurrect the First Fleet in the Indo-Pacific region to help relieve the Seventh Fleet, the fleet traditionally stationed in the region. The First Fleet, which historically commanded naval operations in areas of the Western Pacific from 1947 to 1973, would be responsible for operations in the Indian Ocean–adjacent areas of the Pacific.<sup>38</sup> More-detailed discussion of the possibility of a reconstituted First Fleet can be found in Chapter Five.

### Fighter Aircraft

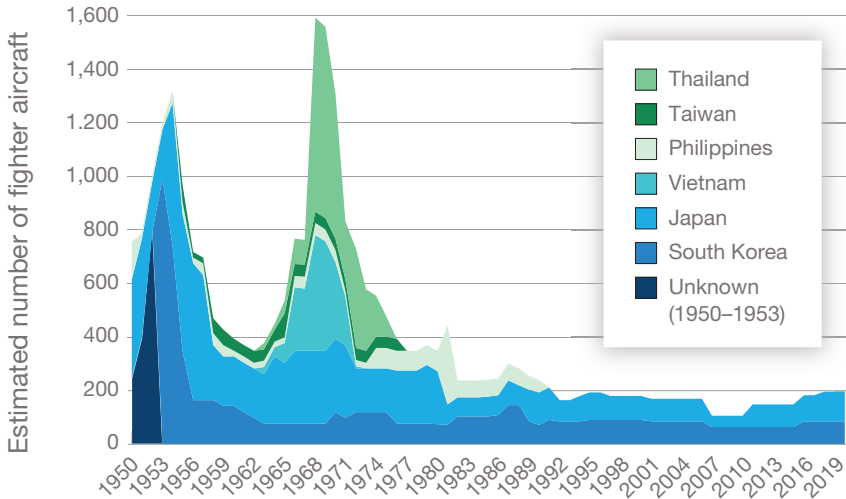
The evolution of long-term U.S. fighter aircraft deployments to INDOPACOM has also followed a pattern that is similar to those of carrier movements and ground troop buildups and drawdowns. As illustrated in Figure 1.5, four inflection points are noteworthy. First, the theater saw massive spikes during the Korean and Vietnam War surges, peaking at an estimated 1,300 fighters in 1954 and 1,600 in 1968, respectively.<sup>39</sup> Second, between the Korean War demobilization in the mid-1950s and the Vietnam War escalation in the mid-1960s, the U.S. Air Force (USAF) continued to maintain a massive number of fighters in the theater—approximately 400–1,000 in most years, primarily in Japan (about 200–500), followed by South Korea (about 75–300), Taiwan (about 20–90), and the Philippines (about

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<sup>37</sup> Edward J. Marolda, *Ready Seapower: A History of the U.S. Seventh Fleet*, Washington, D.C.: Department of the Navy, 2012.

<sup>38</sup> Joseph Trevithick, “The Navy Wants to Stand Up a New Fleet Aimed at Deterring China in the Indian Ocean,” *The WarZone*, November 17, 2020; Seth Robson, “Navy Pushes Ahead with Plans to Stand Up Another Numbered Fleet in the Indo-Pacific,” *Stars and Stripes*, December 4, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> We note that during the height of the Vietnam War, Thailand was host to the most fighters by far (approximately 713 in 1968 compared with 408 in South Vietnam, 273 in Japan, 75 in South Korea, and 44 in each Taiwan and the Philippines).

**FIGURE 1.5****Long-Term Deployment of USAF Fighter Aircraft in INDOPACOM, 1950–2020**

SOURCE: Updated from Frederick et al., 2020, with 2018–2020 *Military Balance* data (IISS, various years).

NOTE: This figure does not include squadrons that rotated into countries for short periods of time unless they were part of a continuous rotation with other squadrons. It also excludes smaller numbers of USMC and USN fighter aircraft that may have been prepositioned in the theater, namely in Japan. In years that specific aircraft numbers were unavailable, we normalized deployment estimates by assuming 22 fighters per squadron and 75 fighters per air wing. Because of the high operational tempo of unit rotations and high aircraft attrition rates during the Korean War, reliable time-series data on country locations are not readily available; consequently, country locations for most aircraft deployed in theater from July 1950 to July 1953 are identified as “unknown.” We note, however, that by the end of the Korean War, the preponderance of USAF assets had been shifted from Japan to South Korea.

20–40). Third, as malaise set in over the Vietnam quagmire amid other post-Vietnam crises and DoD spending cuts, the total number of fighters in the Indo-Pacific declined from some 1,300 in 1970 to about 350 in 1980. Fourth, for the last 40 years, the total number of U.S. fighters deployed on a continuous, rotational basis has remained relatively steady, fluctuating between approximately 100 to 300 annually, according to RAND estimates.<sup>40</sup> The

<sup>40</sup> These data are drawn from a data set that includes long-term deployments of fighter jets in the 27 countries worldwide where the largest number of USAF personnel have

nadir coincided with the joint force surge to CENTCOM during the height of the Iraq War around 2007–2008.

Altogether, since 1949 six countries in the INDOPACOM AOR have hosted U.S. fighter aircraft (excluding U.S. territories). As illustrated above, fighter aircraft were removed from Vietnam along with the final major troop movements in 1972; from Thailand after the fall of Saigon in 1975; from Taiwan in 1976, shortly before the departure of the last U.S. forces before Washington recognized the PRC in 1979; and from the Philippines after the closure of Clark Air Base and Subic Bay in the early 1990s over political disagreements with the host government.

## Changes to Security and Enabling Agreements

As the third component of the U.S. overseas defense posture, major security and enabling agreements allow U.S. forces to operate in permissive foreign environments in the first place. Since the end of World War II, the United States has signed three bilateral mutual defense treaties with the Philippines, 1951; South Korea, 1953; and Japan, 1960 and two multilateral defense treaties—Australia-New Zealand-United States (ANZUS), 1951; and South-east Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), 1955–1977—in the theater.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, since the early 1980s, the United States has maintained Compacts

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been deployed since 1950. It may thus exclude more minor historical deployments. This data set also excludes fighter deployments to U.S. territories in the Pacific, as well as squadrons that rotated into countries for short periods (i.e., not as part of a continuous rotation with other squadrons). To normalize variances in the levels of observation across different data sources, we assumed a standard squadron size of 22 fighters and an air wing size of 75 fighters (unless specific fighter numbers were otherwise reported). For more details and caveats on our coding methodology and data sources, see Frederick et al., 2020, pp. 147–148; Robert Mueller, *Air Force Bases*, Vol. 1: *Active Air Force Bases Within the United States of America on 17 September 1982*, Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, U.S. Air Force, 1989; Harry R. Fletcher, *Air Force Bases*, Vol. II: *Air Bases Outside the United States of America*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Air Force History, U.S. Air Force, 1993; Director of Statistical Services, *United States Air Force Statistical Digest Fiscal Year 1953*, Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, U.S. Air Force, 1953, p. 30.

<sup>41</sup> SEATO's Manila Pact (or Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty) initially included the Philippines, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, France, Great Britain, and the United States.

of Free Association with Palau, Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands. These agreements (in part) delegate to Washington full authority and responsibility for the defense of these three nations, while also providing the United States military access and transit rights in the Pacific island chains and denying other countries similar access. At present, the United States also maintains SOFAs with 14 partners in the theater.<sup>42</sup> A comprehensive list of these and other major posture-enabling agreements is provided in Table A.2 in Appendix A.<sup>43</sup>

## Research Approach

This report develops and presents a framework for assessing likely Chinese reactions to U.S. posture enhancements. The framework is intended to help guide the thinking of U.S. analysts and policymakers who may be considering recommending or implementing particular posture changes in the Indo-Pacific region. It does so by highlighting and encouraging consideration of a number of factors and issues that have demonstrated links with Chinese perceptions and reactions. Our framework is based on extensive analysis, as discussed in subsequent chapters, but it remains at heart a guide to key factors that U.S. analysts and policymakers should consider when assessing U.S. posture enhancements. That is, using this framework can help

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<sup>42</sup> These included SOFAs with Australia, Cambodia, Japan, Malaysia, Maldives, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, South Korea, Sri Lanka, and Timor-Leste. Washington has also in the past maintained SOFAs with Bangladesh and Nepal, although these are no longer in effect.

<sup>43</sup> We note that while the United States has signed no new mutual defense treaties since the start of the Obama administration's 2011 Indo-Pacific rebalance, it has signed many other types of enabling agreements and updated existing defense treaties to enhance the U.S. theater posture over the last decade. For instance, the United States has recently updated decades-old SOFAs with Japan (2016) and South Korea (2014, 2019). It has also signed a new SOFA with Australia (2011); new enhanced defense cooperation agreements providing for greater use of territory and facilities in the Philippines (2014) and Singapore (2015); and new mutual logistics support agreements guaranteeing U.S. aircraft and naval vessels access to foreign airports and ports for resupply and maintenance with partners such as India (2020). Most recently, it has focused new basing negotiations on Papua New Guinea (2018) and other third island chain nations.

ensure that the full range of the most-important links between U.S. posture and Chinese reactions are considered. But the framework cannot provide precise guidance regarding exactly how either Chinese or U.S. policymakers will or should weight these considerations in particular circumstances. And, therefore, it does not on its own either recommend or counsel against particular posture enhancements. Instead, it provides a vital analytical tool for U.S. analysts and policymakers to ensure that they are “covering all the angles” as they weigh the costs and benefits of shifting U.S. posture in the Indo-Pacific.

The next three chapters show the three key parts of this framework. Chapter Two identifies the key factors that drive Chinese thinking and reactions. It identifies these factors through extensive reviews of both Chinese-language and Western literature, as well as consideration of numerous recent historical cases that provide evidence for or against the inclusion or importance of different factors and the manner in which they may affect Chinese thinking. Chapter Three assesses how the characteristics of U.S. posture enhancements—their location, the U.S. allies or partners involved, their military capabilities, and the public profile or messaging that accompanies them—have the potential to affect Chinese thinking and reaction through each of the identified key factors. It enables users to assess each combination of posture characteristic and key factor individually to identify specific mechanisms observable in the literature and case studies by which posture characteristics may affect Chinese thinking. Chapter Four provides a rough typology of potential Chinese reactions that Beijing may consider. The typology is organized by the level of escalation or concern that different reactions would represent for China and further organized between military, economic, or political/diplomatic activities. It is based on an extensive review of PRC activities, as well as prior efforts in the literature to categorize Chinese behavior.

Having established the different parts of our framework, we then illustrate how it may be applied to a series of hypothetical U.S. posture enhancements. These applications may be interesting in their own right should U.S. policymakers consider any of the selected posture enhancements in the future (although they were not selected on that basis), but their primary value is to demonstrate in detail how our framework can be used to identify key ways in which specific U.S. posture enhancements

may affect Chinese thinking and reactions to better enable U.S. analysts to use the framework for the consideration of different or future posture options. Chapter Six concludes with a summary of key insights drawn from our research and recommendations to U.S. policymakers in general and the U.S. Army in particular. Appendix A provides additional historical data on U.S. posture in the Indo-Pacific.





# Key Factors That Affect Chinese Responses to U.S. Posture Enhancements

The first part of our framework identifies the key factors that are the most reliable and influential in affecting Chinese reactions to U.S. posture enhancements in the Indo-Pacific region. Our research highlighted six such factors that appear to affect Chinese thinking and perceptions most directly, and, in turn, Chinese responses. Taken together, they form the basis of our framework to assess how PRC thinking might be affected by a U.S. posture enhancement and the resulting nature and scale of potential Chinese responses. Table 2.1 summarizes these key factors.

We validated the significance of these six factors through both a survey of existing international relations research and historical case studies, described below, of China's reactions to specific events or U.S. activities. Two other potential factors were initially identified and tested but were ultimately excluded because of a lack of evidence or because of difficulties in applying them in a predictive capacity. Appendix B contains an analysis of these excluded factors, China's internal instability, and its own perceptions of its reputation for resolve.

In the remainder of this chapter, we explain and analyze the framework factors in detail. The discussion of each factor begins with a summary of the principal conclusions and implications regarding the potential effect of the factor on Chinese responses. We then assess the general level of theoretical and empirical support for the factor in existing research, as well as historical evidence from modern Chinese history. We briefly examine key cases that validate the role of the factor in shaping Chinese reactions to U.S. posture

TABLE 2.1

### Key Factors That Affect Chinese Responses to U.S. Military Activities

Key Factor	Example of Issues Considered
1. China's perceptions of the potential military threat from U.S., allied, and partner capabilities	Physical threats to China's security, including the potential for new or enhanced military capabilities to attack PRC territory, nuclear targets, command and control (C2), military/civilian infrastructure, or leadership
2. China's perceptions of U.S., allied, and partner hostile intent	Perceived U.S./allied intent or willingness to use military capabilities against China, which may be indicated by strengthening regional security alliances, perceived anti-China groupings (e.g., "the Quad"), or deterioration in U.S.-China bilateral relations or Chinese relations with U.S. allies
3. China's perceptions of threats to its regime legitimacy	Political or diplomatic threats to China's regime or territorial integrity, including U.S./allied support for Taiwan or other politically sensitive areas, such as Xinjiang, Tibet, or Hong Kong
4. China's perceptions of threats to its economic development	Threats that may interfere with PRC economic security or access to resources, including energy and regional or global markets
5. China's perceptions of threats to its regional influence	Challenges to China's maritime territorial claims, challenges to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), U.S. democracy promotion, or the strengthening of regional organizations or groupings that exclude China
6. China's perceptions of U.S. commitment to the defense of U.S. allies and partners	Evidence of U.S. rhetorical and demonstrated commitment to allies and partners, including credible signals of U.S. willingness to intervene militarily on their behalf

enhancements. Finally, we offer a synopsis of the implications for Chinese behavior derived from the preceding analysis. Following discussions of all six factors, the chapter ends with a brief survey of key conclusions regarding the factors as a whole.

It should be noted that although the key factors show how China's perceptions of threat may increase in response to many U.S. posture enhancements—and this increase in threat perception may incentivize the PRC to react more

aggressively—the scale, scope, degree, and intensity of China’s reactions would be expected to vary widely. As the application of our framework to specific posture enhancements in Chapter Five illustrates, Chinese reactions at the lower end of the escalation ladder remain the most likely in most circumstances. Moreover, as discussed in Chapters Four and Six, the scale of PRC concerns with U.S. posture enhancements may not correlate directly with the aggressiveness of its responses, particularly over the short term.

## Case Selection Methodology

To help validate the six factors that we have assessed as central to shaping Chinese reactions to U.S. posture enhancements, we identified recent test cases. We then analyzed these cases to examine our hypotheses regarding how U.S. military activities, including posture enhancements, might affect each of these factors. We selected the cases on the basis of four considerations. The first was recency. We limited our cases to those that occurred within the past two decades and, where possible, the most recent decade to have the greatest similarity between the underlying regional and structural conditions in the cases and those present today. The second was diversity. These cases capture a wide variety of U.S., allied, and partner activities—in their type, scale, scope, location, timing, intensity, and political context—which allows for a more robust evaluation of the explanations for China’s divergent reactions to them. The third was their applicability to each of the specific factors: their ability to test widely held assumptions about the drivers of Chinese aggressiveness. The final consideration was information availability. Although we often have a limited understanding of internal Chinese decisionmaking across our cases, the cases that we selected are all relatively well documented in terms of the public and visible reactions of the two sides involved. Of note, the case studies are not all posture-related; rather, they are meant to identify the degree of support for possible key factors driving Chinese perceptions and actions more generally. We use them to build a framework of Chinese thinking and behavior, which we then apply to U.S. posture examples. The framework itself covers a wider scope of Chinese interests and behavior and therefore leverages opportunities to learn lessons from such non-posture cases.

A summary of the cases is provided in Table 2.2. The cases provide significant evidence for the six key factors discussed in this chapter (and notably less support for the two excluded factors discussed in Appendix B). However, we emphasize that these case studies were not the sole basis of our inclusion of these factors, nor of our confidence in their importance. Extensive literature reviews of both Chinese-language and Western sources, including the broader international relations literature, also played an essential role in validating key factors.

**TABLE 2.2**  
**Summary of Cases**

Case	Date	Primary Key Factor	Level of Support Found: Key Takeaways
The U.S. hypersonic weapon programs	2000s–present	China’s perceptions of the potential military threat from U.S., allied, and partner capabilities	<b>Strong:</b> China is concerned about the threat of U.S. hypersonic weapon systems and has undertaken a variety of very intense (if not immediately aggressive) policy responses.
U.S. naval capabilities and the Malacca Dilemma	Late 2000s–present	China’s perceptions of threats to its economic development	<b>Moderate:</b> Chinese sensitivity to threats to its economic development, including its access to energy imports, fuels wide-ranging but not necessarily aggressive reactions.
China-Philippines Scarborough Shoal standoff	2012–present	Chinese perceptions that the United States and its allies/partners doubt Chinese resolve <sup>a</sup>	<b>Weak:</b> Sources suggest that China thought its past restraint had emboldened the Philippines and necessitated an aggressive response, but there are gaps in the evidence.
Japanese nationalization of the Senkaku Islands	2012–2016	China’s perceptions of U.S. commitment to the defense of U.S. allies or partners	<b>Weak to moderate:</b> China cut back its economic coercion following a strong and clear U.S. defensive commitment to the Senkaku Islands, but it remained aggressive in other ways and additional factors may have mattered at least as much.
Expansion of U.S.-Vietnam defense and security ties	2013–2016	China’s perceptions of threats to its regional influence	<b>Moderate:</b> China took aggressive actions against Vietnam, but it also implemented softer policies to entice Vietnam into acting more favorably toward Chinese interests.

**Table 2.2—Continued**

Case	Date	Primary Key Factor	Level of Support Found: Key Takeaways
U.S. bomber overflights of the SCS	2015 and 2020	China's perceptions of the potential military threat from U.S., allied, and partner capabilities	<b>Moderate:</b> China was more aggressive in 2020 despite having more capabilities, but it likely saw U.S. intent as more hostile.
U.S. Terminal High Altitude Areas Defense (THAAD) deployment to South Korea	2016–present	China's perceptions of the potential military threat from U.S., allied, and partner capabilities	<b>Moderate:</b> China acted politically and economically aggressively but was militarily restrained; other factors complicate this analysis.
Chinese reactions to the Duterte administration	2016–2018	China's perceptions of threats to its regional influence	<b>Strong:</b> The Duterte administration reduced Chinese concerns about threats to its regional influence, and China reduced its political and economic aggressiveness.
The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (aka, the Quad)	2017–present	China's perceptions of U.S., allied, and partner hostile intent	<b>Strong:</b> Overlapping disputes obscure links between aggressive Chinese reactions and specific aspects of the Quad, but there is evidence that China's perceptions of the Quad's hostile intent influenced its behavior.
U.S. support for Taiwan under the Trump administration	2018–2020	China's perceptions of threats to its regime legitimacy	<b>Strong:</b> Chinese perceptions of threats to its legitimacy from the interplay of Trump administration hostility and Tsai administration political popularity appear to have motivated Chinese aggression.
Strengthening of U.S.-India ties	2018–present	Chinese perceptions of U.S., allied, and partner hostile intent	<b>Moderate:</b> Anxiety about India's hostile intent, aggravated by U.S.-India security cooperation, may have been a significant driver of Beijing's aggressive reaction in the 2020 Sino-Indian border clash.
Hong Kong and the Vanguard Bank dispute	2019	Chinese internal unrest <sup>a</sup>	<b>None:</b> China may have been reluctant to escalate the dispute out of concern that doing so would embolden Vietnamese or ethnic Vietnamese to support the Hong Kong protests.

**Table 2.2—Continued**

Case	Date	Primary Key Factor	Level of Support Found: Key Takeaways
Hong Kong and the China-India border clash	2020	Chinese internal unrest <sup>a</sup>	<b>Weak:</b> Hong Kong protests may have played an indirect role in the clash, but other factors appear to have been much more important.
U.S. Freedom of Navigation Operations in the Taiwan Strait	2020	China's perceptions of threats to its regime legitimacy	<b>Strong:</b> The increased tempo of operations against Taiwan in 2020 most likely resulted from Beijing's sensitivity to the threat that Taiwanese independence poses to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) political legitimacy.

<sup>a</sup> See Appendix B for a discussion of why this factor was excluded from our framework.

## Factor 1: China's Perceptions of the Potential Military Threat from U.S., Allied, and Partner Capabilities

China's perceptions of the potential threat that U.S., allied, and partner military capabilities could pose to its regime or physical security appear to strongly shape Chinese reactions, with aggressive Chinese responses more likely the greater the perceived threat. Such threats could include the potential for foreign military forces to directly attack Chinese territory, China's nuclear C2 and deterrence capability, domestic military and civilian infrastructure and facilities, or its leadership. The Chinese response to such potential threats is likely to be relatively aggressive in order to signal China's resolve to defend itself and deter such attacks from occurring.<sup>1</sup> Chinese investments in new military capabilities, which are themselves driven by Chinese perceptions of the threats posed by competitors' military capabilities, enable and may embolden more-aggressive Chinese responses to posture enhancements that China sees as threatening.

<sup>1</sup> Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961; Paul K. Huth, "Extended Deterrence and the Outbreak of War," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 82, No. 2, June 1988; Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005.

All states carefully monitor their potential adversaries' development of military capabilities. They adapt their defense postures and responses on the basis of the perceived threats that these capabilities may pose to their regimes and physical security. Control of their physical territory is a key security interest of all states, and threats against territorial integrity are particularly likely to result in an aggressive response.<sup>2</sup> Conventional military threats to the security of nuclear forces are also considered to be highly likely to produce aggressive responses by states. When states face an adversary with similar nuclear capabilities, both states realize that nuclear strikes against the other would be accompanied by a risk of costly retaliation, incentivizing both to act with more restraint.<sup>3</sup> However, should the nuclear deterrent of either side be threatened by other means, including conventional capabilities that a potential aggressor might not necessarily assume would prompt nuclear retaliation, states have a strong incentive to act aggressively to signal their concerns and maintain their assured nuclear deterrent and second-strike capability.<sup>4</sup> Finally, state leaders are naturally highly concerned with

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<sup>2</sup> Stacie E Goddard, "Uncommon Ground: Indivisible Territory and the Politics of Legitimacy," *International Organization*, Vol. 60, No. 1, Winter 2006; Paul R. Hensel and Sara McLaughlin Mitchell, "Issue Indivisibility and Territorial Claims," *GeoJournal*, Vol. 64, No. 4, 2005; Paul F. Diehl, "Geography and War: A Review and Assessment of the Empirical Literature," *International Interactions*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1991; Paul R. Hensel, "Charting a Course to Conflict: Territorial Issues and Interstate Conflict, 1816–1992," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 15, No. 1, February 1996; John A. Vasquez, "Why Do Neighbors Fight? Proximity, Interaction, or Territoriality," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989a.

<sup>4</sup> There is evidence both that the United States has taken efforts to make the second-strike capabilities of other states more vulnerable and that China has responded to perceived threats to its nuclear capacity (Thomas J. Christensen, "The Meaning of the Nuclear Evolution: China's Strategic Modernization and U.S.-China Security Relations," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 2012; Austin Long and Brendan Rittenhouse Green, "Stalking the Secure Second Strike: Intelligence, Counterforce, and Nuclear Strategy," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 1–2, 2015).

physical threats to the leadership itself—often referred to as “decapitation strikes”—although this has not largely featured in Chinese writings.<sup>5</sup>

China’s past actions illustrate the care with which Beijing tracks potential threats to its regime and physical security from foreign military capabilities, as well as its willingness to respond aggressively if it perceives U.S. or allied forces may be threatening those interests. For example, China’s nuclear weapons program, which began in 1955 following the Korean War, is believed by both Chinese and U.S. scholars to have been a response to the threat posed by U.S. nuclear weapons to China and China’s changing relationship with the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> A decade later, China reacted strongly to U.S. deployments into South Vietnam because of concerns about a U.S. proxy on China’s southern border or a potential invasion of the PRC from the south.<sup>7</sup>

More recent Chinese literature and statements paint a similar picture. Chinese discussions regarding its “core interests” emphasize sovereignty and territorial integrity as critical to China’s security, and official Chinese statements over the past decade indicate a growing willingness on Beijing’s part to impose costs to deter countries from impinging on its territorial and sovereignty claims.<sup>8</sup> The inclusion of “sovereignty claims” in official statements indicates that China conceives of its territorial integrity as including

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<sup>5</sup> On the relationship between military capability development and leadership concerns over decapitation strikes, see Caitlin Talmadge, “Emerging Technology and Intra-War Escalation Risks: Evidence from the Cold War, Implications for Today,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 6, 2019, pp. 873–876.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Lewis, *Paper Tigers: China’s Nuclear Posture*, New York: Routledge, Adelphi Book No. 446, December 2014, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> Zhang Xiaoming, *Deng Xiaoping’s Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2015, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Core interests include (1) security: preserving China’s basic political system and national security; (2) sovereignty: protecting national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national unification; and (3) development: maintaining international conditions for China’s economic development. See Scobell et al., 2020, pp. 12–14.



not just its existing land borders but also other claimed areas, including maritime areas.<sup>9</sup>

China also views its nuclear forces as critical to regime and physical security and would likely perceive the development of foreign military capabilities that pose a particular threat to its nuclear deterrent as justifying a potentially aggressive response. Chinese analysis and official Chinese statements from the past decade hold that China views nuclear weapons as valuable tools for deterring nuclear attack, protecting national security interests, and cementing China's great-power status.<sup>10</sup> Although China publicly adheres to a no first use (NFU) policy, Chinese writings and Western analysis highlight concern about the ability of U.S. conventional precision strike weapons to hold China's nuclear forces at risk.<sup>11</sup> China has responded in various ways to this concern: For example, China has invested in conventionally armed short-, medium-, and long-range ballistic and cruise mis-

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<sup>9</sup> China's most recent national defense white paper states that "[d]isputes still exist over the territorial sovereignty of some islands and reefs, as well as maritime demarcation. Countries from outside the region conduct frequent close-in reconnaissance on China by air and sea, and illegally enter China's territorial waters and the waters and airspace near China's islands and reefs, undermining China's national security" (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "China's National Defense in the New Era," July 24, 2019a). The "countries from outside the region" is a clear reference to the United States.

<sup>10</sup> See "Xi Calls for Powerful Missile Force," *China Daily*, December 5, 2012; and Wei Fenghe and Zhang Haiyang, "Diligently Build a Powerful, Informatized Strategic Missile Force" ["努力打造强大的信息化战略导弹部队"], *People's Daily*, December 13, 2012. The 2019 Chinese defense white paper reiterated that China views nuclear weapons as a key capability for maintaining national security and deterring aggression from outside powers (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019a).

<sup>11</sup> Lewis, 2014, p. 36. For example, one Chinese military scholar states that should the U.S. launch a conventional attack on Chinese systems that support its nuclear capacity, the NFU policy might need to be revisited (Xi Luo, "U.S. Full-Domain Deterrence and Its Implications for Sino-U.S. Strategic Stability" ["美国构建全域制胜型战略威慑体系与中美战略稳定性"], *Foreign Affairs Review*, No. 3, 2018, p. 201. Another author notes that the expanding U.S. precision strike arsenal means China must develop the capability to penetrate these systems to ensure a second-strike capability—even if the new U.S. missile-defense systems are not aimed at reducing China's second-strike capabilities—because they impact China's capacity for nuclear retaliation (He Qisong [何奇松], "Trump Administration (Missile Defense Assessment)" ["特朗普政府(导弹防御评估)"], *International Forum* [国际论坛], No. 4, 2019.

siles and has developed its own boost-glide systems that allow the Chinese military to target U.S. forces farther afield. This suggests that U.S. or allied capabilities that can threaten China's nuclear deterrent could be met with an aggressive response, including one that could use these newer capabilities.<sup>12</sup>

Two additional more-recent cases provide further support for this factor. First, Chinese reactions to the U.S. hypersonic missile program and its potential deployment to the Indo-Pacific region illustrate China's concern over physical and regime security threats.<sup>13</sup> China worries that U.S. hypersonic weapons could negate China's anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) bubble and could target China's C2 and nuclear forces.<sup>14</sup> It has responded to the U.S. development of this capability by investing in its own hypersonic weapons program, bolstering its nuclear deterrent posture, and potentially revisiting its NFU policy to deter the use of U.S. conventional weapons against China's nuclear forces.<sup>15</sup> Chinese analysis directly ties these reactions to the PRC's

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<sup>12</sup> Lewis, 2014, p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> DoD is developing hypersonic weapons as part of its conventional prompt global strike program. There has been increased discussion of deploying long-range hypersonic weapons (LRHWs) to the Indo-Pacific region, as well as discussions on where to base the new capability. See John T. Watts, Christian Trotti, and Mark J. Massa, *Primer on Hypersonic Weapons in the Indo-Pacific Region*, Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, August 2020.

<sup>14</sup> For example, see Hao Xiaoxue [郝晓雪], Wang Zhong [王忠], and Han Guangsong [韩光松], "Discussion on the Operational Applications of Hypersonic Vehicles," *Ship Electronic Engineering*, Vol. 41, No. 7, July 2021. The authors note that hypersonic weapons have both large-scale maneuverability and nuclear warheads, making it difficult for the enemy to determine adversary intent and the warhead type of the incoming missile, which undermines strategic stability (Yong Zhao [赵永] et al., "U.S. Global Prompt Strike System Development Status and Trend Analysis" ["美国全球快速打击系统发展现状及动向分析"], *Cruise Missile* [飞航导弹], Vol. 1, No. 3, 2014; Tong Zhao, "Conventional Challenges to Strategic Stability: Chinese Perception of Hypersonic Technology and the Security Dilemma," Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> For a description of China's efforts to develop hypersonic weapons, see Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, May 2, 2019, p. 44; and Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, August 21, 2020, p. 56. Some Western scholars assert that China's No-First-Use policy could become more ambiguous to

view that U.S. deployment of hypersonic weapons could threaten China's nuclear forces and thus its ability to defend the mainland.<sup>16</sup> Although China's direct military response has not been aggressive so far, the United States has yet to deploy hypersonic weapons into the region, making this only a partial test of the hypothesis.

Second, following the 2016 announcement of the deployment of a THAAD system to South Korea, Beijing appears to have perceived several military threats to its physical security, including most notably that THAAD would weaken China's nuclear deterrent because of THAAD's highly advanced X-band radar, which could potentially be used to target Chinese intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), as well as target China's C2 nodes. In addition, China perceived the deployment of THAAD as an expansion of U.S. and allied regional missile defense architecture.<sup>17</sup> China responded with an aggressive diplomatic, economic, and media campaign that had substantial effects on the South Korean economy, eventually leading to promises by Seoul to limit future similar collaboration with

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account for China's potential nuclear retaliation after a conventional strike on its nuclear forces. See Fiona S. Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel, "Assuring Assured Retaliation: China's Nuclear Posture and U.S.-China Strategic Stability," *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 2, Fall 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Yong et al., 2014; Xu Liu [刘旭] et al., "Thoughts on Hypersonic Cruise Missile Combat Characteristics and Offense-Defense Model" ["高超声速巡航导弹作战特点及攻防模式思考"], *Cruise Missile* [飞航导弹], No. 9, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Li Bin, "The Security Dilemma and THAAD Deployment in the ROK," *China-U.S. Focus*, August 3, 2016. Chinese analysis cited the X-band radar, which Chinese missile defense experts argued could detect most Chinese missile tests in northeast China and strategic ICBMs in the western part of the country, as well as allow the United States to detect the radar signature from the back of the warhead and differentiate between a real Chinese warhead and a decoy, imperiling China's nuclear deterrent capability. Effective missile defense systems of even relatively modest scale could affect China's perception of the security of its nuclear response. The PLA's inventory of nuclear warheads on ICBMs is expected to grow to 200 in the next five years. By comparison, the United States has 1,740 nuclear warheads deployed and an inventory of 4,480. See Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. viii; and Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2017," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 73, No. 1, January 2017, p. 48.

the United States, although the THAAD deployment itself went forward.<sup>18</sup> China's military response was generally more restrained, including the cancellation of some military-to-military engagements, but other aspects were likely intended to signal serious concern, including a PLA Rocket Force combined ballistic and cruise missile exercise in the Bohai Sea, likely with the DF-26 intermediate range ballistic missile, which simulated a strike on a THAAD battery and a mock F-22 aircraft.<sup>19</sup> These events illustrate that while China does react aggressively to U.S. capabilities that it perceives threaten Chinese physical or regime security, its response may not necessarily be military in nature. In this instance, China likely believed that non-military levers would be more likely to achieve Chinese goals.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei's Regular Press Conference on July 8," July 8, 2016. Chinese officials frequently condemned the deployment. According to one study, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spoke out on the issue more than 50 times in 2016 and 2017, as well as conducted an extensive media campaign against the deployment (Ethan Meick and Nargiza Salidjanova, *China's Response to U.S.-South Korean Missile Defense System Deployment and Its Implications*, Washington, D.C.: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, July 26, 2017). Beijing's economic coercion efforts cost South Korea at least \$7.5 billion in economic losses (Victoria Kim, "When China and U.S. Spar, It's South Korea That Gets Punched," *Los Angeles Times*, November 20, 2020). The crisis eased in May 2017, after the inauguration of President Moon Jae-in. The new government made considerable effort to restore its relationship with China. Beijing responded positively, and on October 31, 2017, Beijing and Seoul announced a joint statement on their rapprochement.

<sup>19</sup> See Meick and Salidjanova, 2017; Ai Jun, "New Missile Signals China's Resolve to Counter THAAD," *Global Times*, May 10, 2017; and Deng Xiaoci, "China's Latest Missile Test Shows Country Can Respond to Aircraft Carriers, THAAD," *Global Times*, May 10, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Chinese experts recommended numerous military countermeasures against THAAD, although the extent to which the PLA considered implementing them is unclear. A PLA Academy of Military Science expert recommended the use of jamming and electronic warfare against the THAAD radar in the event of conflict. He also suggested using stealth and maneuvering technologies to enable Chinese missiles to evade the defense. He further recommended striking the deployment base with cruise missiles in the event of war ("Major General Zhu Chenghu: To Respond to THAAD, China Must Be 'Fully Prepared'" ["朱成虎少将: 应对美国'萨德' 中国要未雨绸缪"], *Bauhanian* [紫荆网], August 2, 2016). The crisis eased in May 2017, after the inauguration of President Moon Jae-in who worked to restore the relationship with China. Beijing and Seoul announced a joint statement on their rapprochement in October 2017. See Ministry of

China's perception of the threats generated by new U.S., allied, and partner capabilities has pushed China to develop its own new capabilities. These expand the range of PLA responses and increase China's confidence in its ability to respond with military means while controlling escalation.<sup>21</sup> In some areas, China's development of new military capabilities has therefore emboldened it to behave more aggressively.<sup>22</sup> Such capabilities include high-end systems, such as China's expanding A2/AD umbrella, as well as "gray zone" forces that operate below the threshold of armed conflict.<sup>23</sup>

Extensive literature and multiple cases therefore support the hypothesis that China is more likely to react aggressively when it perceives U.S., allied, and partner capabilities as threatening to its regime or physical security. It will probably often try to do so in ways that are sensitive to escalation risks. However, China's perceptions of threats have encouraged China to develop

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Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China and South Korea Communicate on Bilateral Relations and Other Issues" ["中韩双方就中韩关系等进行沟通"], October 31, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> David M. Finkelstein, "Breaking the Paradigm: Drivers Behind the PLA's Current Period of Reform," in Phillip C. Saunders, Arthur S. Ding, Andrew Scobell, Andrew N. D. Yang, and Joel Wuthnow, eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2019, pp. 45–84. China's 13th Five Year Plan (2015–2020) stated that by 2020 the PLA should have achieved mechanization and made progress in applying information technology and developing strategic capabilities. At the 19th Party Congress in 2017, President Xi Jinping reiterated these goals, stating that by 2035, national defense modernization should be complete and the PLA should be a "world-class force" ("Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at the 19th CPC National Congress," Xinhua, November 3, 2017; "CMC Opinions on Deepening National Defense and Military Reforms" ["中央军委关于深化国防和军队改革的意见"], Xinhua, January 1, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> Lyle J. Morris, Michael J. Mazarr, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Stephanie Pezard, Anika Binnendijk, and Marta Kepe, *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone: Response Options for Coercive Aggression Below the Threshold of Major War*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2942-OSD, 2019, pp. 27–42.

<sup>23</sup> China's gray zone capabilities include paramilitary maritime forces—the Chinese Coast Guard and the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia—and "nonconventional" capabilities, including information operations and cyber, space, and electronic warfare. See Lyle J. Morris, "Gray Zone Challenges in the East and South China Sea," *Maritime Issues*, January 7, 2019; and Andrew S. Erickson, "Maritime Numbers Game," Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, January 28, 2019.

more military options, which enables, and perhaps emboldens, it to respond more aggressively to U.S. actions than it has in the past.

## Factor 2: China's Perceptions of U.S., Allied, and Partner Hostile Intent

Whereas factor 1 focuses on the potential threat posed to the PRC regime and physical security from changes in foreign military capabilities, factor 2 focuses on China's perceptions of the hostility of U.S., allied, and partner intent. These two factors are closely related because the interaction of Beijing's concern over U.S., allied, and partner capabilities along with its perceptions of their intent informs how threatened China feels.<sup>24</sup> The greater the perceived hostility of the U.S. intent toward China, the more threatening U.S. military capabilities come to seem by Chinese leaders. Similarly, the greater the potential of U.S. military capabilities to attack China, the more sensitive Beijing will be to indicators of U.S. hostility. Taken together, factors 1 and 2 form the core of Chinese assessments regarding the threat that China may face from the United States and its allies and partners.

A significant body of international relations literature discusses states' tendencies to react assertively to adversary actions when their intent is perceived to be certainly or potentially hostile.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, states often rely on limited or false information or past experiences to infer the intent of their adversaries—sometimes leading to misperceptions and subsequent aggressive or escalatory behavior—such that initial perceptions of hostile intent can be difficult to change in the future.<sup>26</sup> Past crises, which states factor into current and future assessments of intent, also heighten suspicions between

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<sup>24</sup> For a general discussion of the interrelationship of perceptions of state intentions and capabilities, see Charles L. Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited," *World Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 1, October 1997, p. 178.

<sup>25</sup> James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 3, Summer 1995; Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2017.

adversaries while increasing the influence of hardliners and hawks on each side.<sup>27</sup> Adversary alliances or coalitions can further enhance perceptions of hostility, particularly if the states involved share a history of negative relations with the target state.<sup>28</sup>

Chinese perceptions of U.S., allied, and partner hostile intent in the Indo-Pacific region are well documented. For many years, the Chinese leadership's assessments of U.S. objectives and intentions toward China have assumed a high level of hostility toward the CCP. These assessments suggest that the United States intends to "strategically contain" China's rise, keep Taiwan separated from the mainland, challenge the legitimacy of the CCP, use military alliances to encircle China, and impinge on other Chinese "core interests."<sup>29</sup> U.S. military deployments to the region, particularly when combined with broader shifts in U.S. policy that indicate greater focus on the region, tend to exacerbate Chinese concerns about hostile U.S. intent as does U.S. security cooperation with regional states.

For example, some Chinese concerns about the U.S. rebalance to Asia in 2012 focused on the increased potential for the United States to interfere in territorial disputes in the SCS. According to Chinese statements, the rebalance heralded "the watershed of the SCS issue and the U.S. acted as the driving force and root cause behind the tension in the SCS."<sup>30</sup> The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the region was peaceful

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<sup>27</sup> John A. Vasquez, *The War Puzzle*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993; Paul R. Hensel, "An Evolutionary Approach to the Study of Interstate Rivalry," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 17, No. 2, September 1999.

<sup>28</sup> Glenn H. Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 4, July 1984, p. 470.

<sup>29</sup> David M. Finkelstein, "The Chinese View of Strategic Competition with the United States," testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Washington, D.C., June 24, 2020a. These are several of the primary complaints one sees in Chinese statements and literature, but there is a broader mistrust of the United States as a founder of the current liberal order, which Beijing views as antithetical to China's national interests. See Rolland, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Xu Bu, "U.S. 'Rebalancing' Is Fishing in S. China Sea's Troubled Waters," *Straits Times*, May 19, 2016; Zhao Beibei, "The South China Sea Issue and Sino-U.S. Relations Under the Background of U.S. 'Return to Asia'" ["美国'重返亚洲'背景下的南海问题与中美关系"], *Journal of the Party School of CPC Jinan Municipal Committee*, Vol. 5, 2014.



prior to U.S. interference, and then “the so-called Rebalance to Asia strategy” was introduced, leading to increased regional tensions.<sup>31</sup> Beyond the SCS issue, Chinese commentary indicated that the rebalance was viewed as an encirclement of China, specifically engineered by the United States and its allies to hinder China’s rise.<sup>32</sup>

Chinese literature also indicates that the PRC tends to view the primary purpose of U.S. regional alliances, partnerships, and military capabilities as the containment of China. This perception undergirds Chinese reactions to shifts in U.S. regional capabilities, particularly if those changes suggest closer relations between the United States and one of China’s neighbors or the strengthening of what China sees as a U.S.-led coalition intended to counterbalance against China’s rise. Chinese reactions to the deployment of THAAD in South Korea in 2017, which consisted of diplomatic, media, and economic pressure and some low-level military activities, are one example of Beijing regarding the deployment of a new U.S. capability that threatened China’s physical and regime security as also signaling an increasingly hostile U.S. intent.<sup>33</sup> China reacted aggressively as a result. Similarly, U.S. initiatives meant to strengthen regional partnerships, such as the 2016 Maritime Security Initiative, led to accusatory statements in Chinese media about the United States provoking a security dilemma in the region, followed by Chinese naval exercises in the SCS.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang’s Regular Press Conference on May 11, 2016,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, May 11, 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Many Chinese scholars stated that the rebalance had two main objectives: (1) strengthen the encirclement of China while containing China’s rise and (2) weaken China’s influence in the region while maintaining U.S. hegemony. See Zhu Lu-ming and Zhang Wen-wen, “The Causes and Influences of Strengthening the ‘American-Japan Alliance’ Under the Background of the Asia-Pacific Rebalancing Strategy” [“美国‘亚太再平衡’背景下美日同盟的强化原因及影响”], *Journal of Lanzhou University of Arts and Science* [兰州文理学院学报], Vol. 4, 2014.

<sup>33</sup> Zhong Sheng [钟声], “The U.S. and South Korea Must Understand the Deep Meaning Behind China and Russia’s Warnings—Deployment of ‘THAAD’ Threatens Peace in Northeast Asia” [“美韩须领会中俄严正警告的深意—部署‘萨德’威胁的是东北亚和平”], *People’s Daily* [人民日报], August 4, 2016.

<sup>34</sup> Zhao Minghao, “Washington Adds to U.S.-China Security Dilemma,” *Global Times*, July 27, 2016. The Maritime Security Initiative began in 2016 as a maritime capacity-building program for states in Southeast Asia.



In addition to these examples, two cases that we examined further support this factor. First, increased security cooperation since 2019 undertaken by the United States, India, Japan, and Australia within the framework of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the “Quad”) has provoked a stern diplomatic protest from China.<sup>35</sup> Quad activities have included the November 2020 Malabar exercises in the Indian Ocean, followed by “Quad Plus” naval exercises in the Bay of Bengal in April 2021, which also included France.<sup>36</sup> In March 2021, the Quad announced a collective plan to produce large numbers of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) vaccines for distribution throughout Southeast Asia.<sup>37</sup>

China has responded to the increased activity of the Quad with vigorous protests and criticisms in official statements and media commentary—directed at both the United States and the other Quad members.<sup>38</sup> How-

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<sup>35</sup> In 2019, senior leaders from all four countries stated that the Quad would support “rules-based order in the region that promotes stability, growth, and economic prosperity” and discussed cooperation on “counter-terrorism, cyber, development finance, maritime security, humanitarian assistance, and disaster response” (Office of the Spokesperson, “Media Note: U.S.-Australia-India-Japan Consultations (‘The Quad’),” U.S. Department of State, November 4, 2019; Tanvi Madan, “The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the ‘Quad,’” *War on the Rocks*, November 16, 2017; Jeff M. Smith, “Democracy’s Squad: India’s Change of Heart and the Future of the Quad,” *War on the Rocks*, August 13, 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Kunal Purohit, “India Joins French-Led Naval Exercise, Revealing Clues About Quad’s Plans to Contain China in Indo-Pacific,” *South China Morning Post*, April 4, 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Salvatore Babones, “The Quad’s Malabar Exercises Point the Way to an Asian NATO,” *Foreign Policy*, November 25, 2020; David Brunnstrom, Michael Martina, and Jeff Mason, “U.S., India, Japan and Australia Counter China with Billion-Dose Vaccine Pact,” *Reuters*, March 12, 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Chinese media commentary on the Quad’s naval exercises has focused on the increased security cooperation between the four nations, accusing the United States of forming a “clique” with destabilizing effects on the region. Foreign Minister Wang Yi, for example, called the Quad a “so-called Indo-Pacific new NATO.” He accused the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy of seeking to “trump an old-fashioned Cold War mentality” and “stoke geopolitical competition” in a bid to “maintain the dominance and hegemonic system” of the United States (Luo Zhaohui, “Jointly Safeguarding Peace, Stability and Development in the SCS with Dialogue, Consultation and Win-Win Cooperation,” transcript of the keynote speech by the vice foreign minister at the International Symposium on the South China Sea: From the Perspective of Cooperation, Ministry of

ever, China's military responses to Quad activities have so far been relatively muted. More aggressive have been Chinese actions against individual Quad members, such as the June 2020 Sino-Indian border clash, increased Chinese military incursions into Japanese maritime area and airspace near the Senkaku Islands, and frequent PLA military exercises in the SCS. Although not a direct response to Quad activities, these are likely meant to signal that Beijing will not be intimidated by the Quad or by increased U.S. activities with the other Quad members.<sup>39</sup>

The evidence therefore suggests that China views the Quad's development as an indicator of its members' hostile intent. China behaves more aggressively in response for two reasons. First, signs of the Quad's closer military and diplomatic cooperation stir fears that the United States is carrying out a containment strategy targeted against China that requires Chinese activism to overcome.<sup>40</sup> Second, China appears to see the United States as harboring particularly malign intentions regarding China's security and development interests. Therefore, U.S. success in building a coalition of countries that appears designed to oppose Chinese power reinforces

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Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, September 3, 2020). See also "Commentary: Forming Clique and Flexing Muscles only to Shake Regional Peace, Stability," Xinhua, October 23, 2020; and Zhang Yanping [张燕萍], "Can the U.S., Japan, India and Australia 'Quad Group' Contain China? Expert: There Is Not Much the United States Can Give to Its Allies" ["美日印澳'四方安全对话'牵制中国? 专家: 美国能给盟国的已经差不多了"], *Global Times*, February 19, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Yun Sun, "China's Strategic Assessment of the Ladakh Clash," War on the Rocks, June 19, 2020; Saibal Dasgupta, "China's Move to Empower Coast Guard Stirs Tensions," Voice of America, February 11, 2021; Zachary Haver, "China Begins Month of Military Exercises in South China Sea," Radio Free Asia, March 1, 2021. China has so far refrained from economic retaliation against the Quad, although Beijing has employed economic coercion against individual member countries over separate issues, but Chinese commentators warned that Beijing could retaliate economically against Quad countries if the cooperation continued. One commentary in the *Global Times* claimed China's economic pressure against Australia as an example of the types of instruments that could be employed (Wang Qi, "China Can Retaliate Economically if Red Line Crossed: Experts," *Global Times*, February 18, 2021).

<sup>40</sup> Fear of U.S. efforts to contain China and thereby prevent its ability to achieve the CCP's goal of national revitalization pervade Chinese commentaries. See Zhong Sheng [钟声], "Accumulating Damage to the Strategy to Contain China" ["对华遏制战略蓄患积害"], *People's Daily* [人民日报], August 31, 2020.

the perception that hostile intent toward China is growing and requires an aggressive response.<sup>41</sup>

The second case that we examined involved Chinese reactions to increasing levels of U.S. support to Taiwan during the Trump administration in 2019–2020. During that time, the Trump administration, following the passage of the Taiwan Travel Act, sent several high-level U.S. officials to Taiwan and significantly increased the quantity and quality of arms that it sold to Taipei and the frequency of its naval patrols around Taiwan.<sup>42</sup> These actions took place during a period of heightened cross-strait tensions that followed the electoral victories of Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen and her Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in 2016 and 2020, which raised concerns in Beijing that Taiwan could take steps toward independence.

China responded to these increased U.S. expressions of support for Taiwan by condemning the actions in official Chinese media and levying sanctions on U.S. companies involved in arms sales to Taiwan.<sup>43</sup> The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) increased airspace incursions, crossing the median line of the Taiwan Strait 40 times in 2020.<sup>44</sup> In addition, that year China con-

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<sup>41</sup> Chinese security assessments point to concern about the United States using coalitions of allies or partners to block China's access to key energy sea lines of communication (SLOCs), for example. See Hu Bo, "Three Major Maritime Security Issues Pose a Test for 'One Belt, One Road'" ["三大海上安全问题考验'一带一路'"], in Zhang Jie, ed., *Assessment of China's Peripheral Security Situation 2016* [中国周边安全形势评估 2016], Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Ralph Jennings, "U.S. Speeds Arms Sales for Taiwan as Island Revamps China Strategy," *Voice of America*, November 6, 2020. Arms sales in 2019 totaled more than \$10 billion, and those in 2020 totaled more than \$5 billion, significantly higher than had been extended in 2017 or 2018 (Ben Blanchard, "Timeline: U.S. Arms Sales to Taiwan in 2020 Total \$5 Billion amid China Tensions," Reuters, December 7, 2020a). For the increase in U.S. freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) and Taiwan Strait transits, see Lolita C. Baldor, "Sharp Jump in U.S. Navy Transits to Counter China Under Trump," *Associated Press*, March 15, 2021.

<sup>43</sup> We conducted a search of Chinese publications during this time period and found that the volume of articles in *Qiushi*, the official bimonthly publication of the CCP Central Committee, condemning U.S. and Taiwanese actions increased significantly in 2019 relative to 2018 or 2020 (David Brunnstrom, Mike Stone, and Krisztina Than, "China to Impose Sanctions on U.S. Firms That Sell Arms to Taiwan," Reuters, July 12, 2019).

<sup>44</sup> In 2020, PLA warplanes conducted more flights into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) than at any time since 1996, and by late 2020, such incursions had

ducted several military exercises, including naval exercises involving carrier operations, near Taiwan.<sup>45</sup> Beijing has also engaged in a variety of broader economic and subversive actions against Taiwan since President Tsai's first election in 2016.<sup>46</sup> China's reactions were likely driven both by Beijing's perceptions of increased hostility from the Trump administration's increased support to Taiwan and other bilateral tensions, such as the Sino-U.S. trade war.<sup>47</sup> Chinese literature and commentary further suggest that Beijing viewed increased U.S. FONOPs and Taiwan Strait transits, arms sales, and other actions in support of Taiwan as potentially emboldening President Tsai on the issue of Taiwan's independence.<sup>48</sup> This encouraged China to increase incursions into Taiwan's airspace, increase military exercises, and enact a range of punitive economic measures against the United States and Taiwan.

The literature and cases that we examined support the hypothesis that China is more likely to respond aggressively to U.S. and allied actions that it perceives as indicating heightened levels of hostility. Chinese responses to particular instances of perceived hostility have varied in intensity and involved a range of economic, diplomatic, and military measures, with the most potentially escalatory being the increased PLAAF incursions into Taiwan's airspace.

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become an almost daily occurrence (John Xie, "China Is Increasing Taiwan Airspace Incursions," *Voice of America*, January 6, 2021).

<sup>45</sup> Liu Xuanzun, "PLA Carrier, Warplanes Surround Taiwan in Drills, in Show of Capability to Cut Off Foreign Intervention," *Global Times*, April 6, 2021a.

<sup>46</sup> These have included actions to restrict the number of Chinese tourists in 2016 and strengthened tourist restrictions in 2019, as well as sanctions against Taiwanese pineapples in early 2021 ("China to Stop Issuing Individual Travel Permits to Taiwan," BBC News, July 31, 2019; Helen Davidson, "Taiwanese Urged to Eat 'Freedom Pineapples' After China Import Ban," *The Guardian*, March 2, 2021).

<sup>47</sup> By 2019, official CCP publications accused Trump of "seeing China as an enemy in all respects" (Zhang Hongyi [张宏毅], "America's Ability to 'Read China' Once Again Put to the Test" ["美国再次面临是否'读懂中国'的考验"], *Qiushi* [求是], November 7, 2019).

<sup>48</sup> Ren Chengqi [任成琦], "Playing the 'Taiwan Card' Is a Dangerous Game" ["大'台湾牌'是一场危险游戏"], *Qiushi* [求是], July 10, 2019.

### Factor 3: China's Perceptions of Threats to Its Regime Legitimacy

China's perception of how U.S. military actions threaten PRC regime legitimacy plays an important role in shaping Chinese reactions. While factor 1 focused on China's perceptions of threats to its physical security or physical threats to its leadership through the military threat from U.S., allied, and partner capabilities, factor 3 focuses on China's perceptions of threats to its political rule. The CCP legitimizes itself as the driving force behind China's rising economic and social prosperity and its defender against the foreign imperialists that have sought to exploit or divide China since its century of humiliation. The Chinese leadership is highly sensitive to foreign efforts that appear to challenge its ability to fulfill these roles, including U.S. military activities that support independence or pro-democracy movements in Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet, or Hong Kong. China is therefore more likely to respond aggressively to U.S. actions that it perceives as threats to its regime legitimacy.

The CCP seeks to legitimize its rule over China in two main ways. The first is by sustaining China's economic growth through CCP-driven market reforms that have led to rapid economic growth, alleviated poverty, and created substantial wealth for Chinese citizens.<sup>49</sup> The second is by portraying itself as the defender and promoter of Chinese interests and the driver of China's rise as an internationally powerful and respected country. This includes the Chinese leadership portraying itself as helping China overcome its "century of humiliation" (1840–1949) from foreign imperialist forces and the introduction of CCP policies, such as Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream, which outlines the steps toward "national rejuvenation" of the Chinese nation. The Chinese Dream includes continued Chinese economic development and social progress; unity (unification

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<sup>49</sup> Since Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms and opening up of China in 1978, the CCP has deemphasized its focus on central planning and state allocation of resources to allow for market reforms and economic liberalization (Jacque deLisle and Avery Goldstein, "China's Economic Reform and Opening at Forty," in Jacque deLisle and Avery Goldstein, eds., *To Get Rich Is Glorious*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2019, pp. 1–28).

with Taiwan and full implementation of the “one country, two systems” policies for Hong Kong); building a world-class military; and “pursuing an independent foreign policy of peace.”<sup>50</sup> Chinese reactions to threats to its economic development are addressed in factor 4 because they touch on a broader range of sensitivities beyond concerns of regime legitimacy. Factor 3 focuses primarily on the Chinese leadership’s long-running concern over external actors challenging the other pillar of the regime’s legitimacy: the CCP’s ability to promote and defend China’s national territory, unity, and reputation.

Concerns over perceived threats to these issues are far from unique. Foreign activities perceived as undermining state legitimacy can act as both near- and longer-term drivers of conflict for many states and particularly for authoritarian regimes.<sup>51</sup> This risk is compounded because the sources of China’s legitimacy are particularly prone to generating aggressive behavior. For example, China’s persistent territorial disputes with other countries—which lie at the heart of the CCP’s efforts to cast itself as the rectifier of China’s “century of humiliation”—are not only the most common driver of interstate conflict but also tend to be especially escalatory if they involve historical rivalries, as many of China’s disputes do.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, most states are deeply concerned about their reputations for national greatness or international prestige; studies suggest that competition over prestige shapes state

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<sup>50</sup> Qu Qingshan [曲青山], “Chinese Communist Party’s 100 Year Major Contribution” [“中国共产党百年大贡献”], *Renmin News*, March 30, 2021; “Xi Stresses Unity, Striving for National Rejuvenation at PRC Anniversary Reception,” *Xinhua*, September 30, 2019; Elizabeth C. Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

<sup>51</sup> Brian Lai and Dan Slater, “Institutions of the Offensive: Domestic Sources of Dispute Initiation in Authoritarian Regimes, 1950–1992,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 50, No. 1, January 2006. Note that personalistic regimes may be especially likely to initiate conflicts, whereas one-party states are typically less likely to do so, which suggests that China’s changing domestic political institutions may influence this factor (Jessica L. Weeks, “Strongmen and Straw Men: Authoritarian Regimes and the Initiation of International Conflict,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 106, No. 2, 2012).

<sup>52</sup> Dan Altman, “The Evolution of Territorial Conquest After 1945 and the Limits of the Territorial Integrity Norm,” *International Organization*, Vol. 74, No. 3, Summer 2020; John Vasquez and Christopher S. Leskiw, “The Origins and War Proneness of Interstate Rivalries,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 4, No. 1, June 2001.

behavior and can influence the likelihood of conflict.<sup>53</sup> Adjacent to these concerns are the legacies of perceived national humiliation, which may also fuel aggression in interstate disputes.<sup>54</sup> Chinese leaders' concerns over territorial issues, prestige, and historical humiliation coalesce in their tolerance for (if not embrace of) expressions of popular nationalism that appear to help legitimize the CCP.<sup>55</sup>

China has reacted to concerns that foreign actors—foreign countries, transnational networks, and terrorist groups—may undermine these sources of its regime legitimacy in several ways.<sup>56</sup> First, Beijing requests that all countries with which it has diplomatic relations acknowledge that there is only one China. The CCP has repeatedly identified, warned, and, in some cases, punished foreign actors for supporting what it perceives to

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<sup>53</sup> This reflects both an innate desire for status and the strategic value of gaining others' voluntary deference regarding issues of national importance (Deborah Welch Larson, T. V. Paul, and William C. Wohlforth, "Status and World Order," in T. V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William C. Wohlforth, eds., *Status in World Politics*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014; Jonathan Mercer, "The Illusion of International Prestige," *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 4, Spring 2017; Emilie M. Hafner-Burton and Alexander H. Montgomery, "Power Positions: International Organizations, Social Networks, and Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 50, No. 1, February 2006; Yuen Foong Khong, "Power as Prestige in World Politics," *International Affairs*, Vol. 95, No. 1, January 2019).

<sup>54</sup> Robert E. Harkavy, "Defeat, National Humiliation, and the Revenge Motif in International Politics," *International Politics*, Vol. 37, No. 3, September 2000; Oded Löwenheim and Gadi Heimann, "Revenge in International Politics," *Security Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 2008.

<sup>55</sup> On debates over the prominence of Chinese nationalism, see Alastair Iain Johnston, "Is Chinese Nationalism Rising? Evidence from Beijing," *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 3, Winter 2016/2017; and Jessica Chen Weiss, "How Hawkish Is the Chinese Public? Another Look at 'Rising Nationalism' and Chinese Foreign Policy," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 28, No. 119, 2019.

<sup>56</sup> In terms of concern over transnational actors, for example, Chinese leaders are concerned about the potential connections between the Uyghur diaspora and radical Islamist militant groups and the risk that these groups could infiltrate into China. See Sheena Chestnut Greitens, Myunghye Lee, and Emir Yazici, "Counterterrorism and Preventive Repression: China's Changing Strategy in Xinjiang," *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 3, Winter 2019/2020.

be separatist activities.<sup>57</sup> Second, China has ramped up PLA military coercion of Taiwan and frozen diplomatic relations with states that challenge its positions on Hong Kong or Tibet.<sup>58</sup> Third, the CCP has drastically curbed freedoms inside China in areas that it fears may have separatist tendencies, including arresting masses of pro-democracy protestors in Hong Kong and significantly expanding its security presence in Tibet and Xinjiang.<sup>59</sup>

We examined several cases that support the hypothesis that China would likely respond more aggressively when it perceives its regime legitimacy is threatened. The 1962 Sino-Indian border conflict provides some insight into Chinese behavior under these circumstances. India's sympathy for Tibetans and New Delhi's sheltering of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile played a part in fueling and escalating past Sino-Indian border tensions. One of the main drivers of China's decision to attack India in 1962 was Chairman Mao Zedong and the Chinese leadership's incorrect assessment that India was about to seize Tibet as a buffer zone. Mao and the CCP had arrived at this error in judgment for a variety of reasons, including misinterpreting Indian leader Jawaharlal Nehru's Forward Policy as a sign of aggressiveness toward China.<sup>60</sup> Another reason that Beijing launched the

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<sup>57</sup> China's history and the CCP's anxieties have caused Beijing to at times be more paranoid and aggressive than warranted in accusing other countries of seeking to divide China. Beijing has also at times sought to scapegoat foreign countries for its own domestic problems.

<sup>58</sup> Thomas Carothers, "The Backlash Against Democracy Promotion," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 2, March–April 2006; Dingding Chen and Katrin Kinzelbach, "Democracy Promotion and China: Blocker or Bystander?" *Democratization*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 2015.

<sup>59</sup> The 2019 China National Defense White Paper lists separatism as "becoming more acute." It names Taiwan and the DPP's views on "Taiwan independence" and "external separatist forces" pushing for "Tibet independence" and the creation of "East Turkistan" as posing threats to China's national security and social stability (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019a).

<sup>60</sup> Instead, the Indian policy of deploying small numbers of lightly armed Indian infantry deep into unoccupied disputed border areas was implemented to allow Nehru to maintain his overall less confrontational policy toward China but appease his domestic opponents who criticized him as weak on China. The policy was based on the belief among Indian leadership that China would abstain from conflict. See John W. Garver, "China's Decision for War with India in 1962," in Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross, eds., *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy*, Stanford, Calif.: Stan-



1962 China-India war was Mao and the CCP's belief that India was responsible for inflaming and sustaining strong Tibetan resistance to the CCP. The CCP's assessments and responses in the 1962 China-India war cautions against underestimating how aggressively China could respond given perceived challenges to its regime legitimacy.

U.S. support for Taiwan is another case that provides insight into Chinese reactions to threats to its regime legitimacy. Over the past several decades, Beijing has viewed the United States as Taiwan's primary backer and accused it of engaging in a variety of efforts to support Taiwan's independence, including a perceived U.S. willingness to militarily support Taiwan in the event of a PRC attack of the island.<sup>61</sup> Chinese leaders, including President Xi Jinping and military leaders, have warned of the possibility of using military force against Taiwan should it move toward independence.<sup>62</sup>

China has responded more aggressively against increased U.S. naval transits of the Taiwan Strait since Taiwan's DPP assumed power in 2016. In 2020, the frequency of U.S. FONOPs in the Taiwan Strait increased significantly. U.S. warships transited the strait 13 times that year, up from

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ford University Press, 2006, p. 103; and Johan Skog Jensen, "A Game of Chess and a Battle of Wits: India's Forward Policy Decision in Late 1961," *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 4, October 2012.

<sup>61</sup> Since 2008, there have been increasing Chinese concerns that "the U.S. has provided support to separatist forces in China's Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong using the excuse of human rights, religion, democracy, and freedom." China viewed the United States and U.S. social media platforms as enabling instability in Tibet and Xinjiang and blocked YouTube after unrest in Tibet in 2008 and banned Facebook and Twitter after riots in Xinjiang in 2009. According to a recent Chinese report, examples of U.S. support to Xinjiang also include providing funding to the World Uyghur Congress and related individuals through the congressionally funded National Endowment for Democracy and U.S. "think tanks or 'scholars' manipulating reports on 'oppression' in the region, media covering 'sad stories of victims,' and the U.S. government or the Congress backing bills and other political interference to pressure China" (Liu Xin and Lin Xiaoyi, "U.S. Supports Separatism in Rivals, Upholds Territorial Integrity in Allies: Report," *Global Times*, November 10, 2020).

<sup>62</sup> China's willingness to use force to prevent separatism and against "secessionist forces" was further codified into domestic law when Beijing passed the 2005 Anti-Secession Law (Tian, Yew Lun, "Attack on Taiwan an Option to Stop Independence, Top China General Says," Reuters, May 28, 2020).

nine times in 2019 and three times in 2018.<sup>63</sup> In 2020 and early 2021, China increased its military actions in the Taiwan Strait in response, particularly with the PLAAF, which conducted more flights into Taiwan's ADIZ than at any time since 1996.<sup>64</sup> By late 2020, such incursions had become an almost daily occurrence to the south of the island, between Taiwan and the Taiwan-controlled Pratas Islands.<sup>65</sup> Most of these incursions involved surveillance aircraft, but they occasionally included flights of a dozen or more warplanes, including fighters, bombers, and airborne early warning systems.<sup>66</sup> These air exercises were sometimes conducted in conjunction with People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) carrier operations and naval exercises near Taiwan.<sup>67</sup> The more aggressive Chinese military response is likely due to a combination of Beijing's concerns over increased U.S. support for Taiwan and the DPP from the Trump administration, which had signaled support for Taipei throughout 2020, including with arms sale packages, high-level visits of U.S. officials, and passage of legislation, such as the Taiwan Travel Act, along with increased U.S. naval activities and transits near the island. The Trump administration's actions against China in other areas, such as the trade war, might have also played a role in China's more aggressive response because the PRC likely perceived the U.S. intent as increasingly hostile during this period (see factor 2).

The literature and cases that we examined support the hypothesis that China is more likely to respond aggressively to U.S. actions that it perceives

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<sup>63</sup> Most of these transits were by single destroyers, although they occasionally involved more ships. Such U.S. operations were always roundly condemned in Chinese official statements and media, and the U.S. ships were often tailed by Chinese vessels or aircraft (Baldor, 2021; Caitlin Doornbos, "Navy Ties Record with Its 12th Transit Through the Taiwan Strait This Year," *Stars and Stripes*, December 19, 2020; Ben Blanchard, "U.S. Warships Transit Taiwan Strait, China Denounces 'Provocation,'" Reuters, December 30, 2020b; Ben Blanchard and Idrees Ali, "U.S. Warship Sails Through Taiwan Strait, Second Time in a Month," Reuters, April 23, 2020.

<sup>64</sup> "Chinese Incursions Highest Since 1996," *Taipei Times*, January 4, 2021.

<sup>65</sup> Xie, 2021; Ben Blanchard, "Taiwan Reports Large Incursion by Chinese Air Force," Reuters, January 23, 2021.

<sup>66</sup> Liu, 2021b.

<sup>67</sup> Liu Xuanzun, "PLA Prepared as U.S., Secessionists Provoke," *Global Times*, April 8, 2021b.

threaten Chinese regime legitimacy. China conducted more-aggressive military actions near Taiwan when it perceived increased U.S. support for Taipei in the aftermath of an electoral win for the pro-independence DPP combined with expanded U.S. naval actions in 2020. Although a historical case, China's reactions to India's support of Tibet and the Dalai Lama was a driver of Beijing's decision to attack India in 1962, illustrating that Beijing could respond aggressively to perceived challenges to its legitimacy and territory.

## Factor 4: China's Perceptions of Threats to Its Economic Development

China's perception of the threat that U.S. military actions constitute to PRC economic development or access to resources appears to play an important role in shaping Chinese reactions. Factor 1 considers the threats to China's physical security that the PRC might perceive from U.S., allied, and partner military capabilities. Factor 4 focuses specifically on China's perceived threats to its access to energy interests and regional markets. These perceived threats could be driven by U.S. capabilities that might impede China's access to key SLOCs or posture enhancements that could hamper China's ability to protect its regional economic interests. Chinese reactions to these concerns have recently ranged from nonaggressive activities, such as diversifying energy partnerships and access options, to more-aggressive reactions, including upgrading PLAN capabilities for counterpiracy operations to augment the military's ability to escort and protect Chinese shipping and developing the military capability to protect SLOCs or deny U.S. forces access to critical chokepoints.<sup>68</sup>

China is far from unique in its concern over economic interests. States typically consider economic threats to be one of their primary national security concerns. Trade, access to resources, and risks to economic development are generally regarded by international relations experts as common

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<sup>68</sup> Jeffrey Becker, *Securing China's Lifelines Across the Indian Ocean*, Newport, R.I.: China Maritime Studies Institute, U.S. Naval War College, China Maritime Report No. 11, December 2020.

motivations for interstate war.<sup>69</sup> Economic growth and the need to protect it also play a role in many states' political and domestic stability, including China's, in which the CCP relies on economic growth to underpin its political power.<sup>70</sup> Economic interests also provide an additional venue for competition between states, which can make states more antagonistic toward one another and increase the risk of escalation to conflict.<sup>71</sup> There are numerous examples throughout history of nations responding aggressively when economic interests are severely threatened. In perhaps the most infamous example, Japan's 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor was largely in response to U.S. economic sanctions, asset freezes, and the U.S. oil embargo rather than any direct military threat that the United States posed to Japanese territory.<sup>72</sup>

Chinese leadership has devoted significant effort to expanding access to the resources and markets necessary to sustain continued economic growth—both regionally and overseas. This prioritization has been driven by many factors, including the Chinese need for raw materials and energy imports, especially crude oil and natural gas, to fuel domestic economic growth.<sup>73</sup> As a result, Chinese leaders have expressed increasing concern that Chinese energy shipments are vulnerable to piracy or interdiction by foreign navies, especially in maritime “chokepoints.”<sup>74</sup> Chinese writings

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<sup>69</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 69; Edward D. Mansfield and Brian M. Pollins, “The Study of Interdependence and Conflict,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 45, No. 6, December 2001; United States Institute of Peace, *Natural Resources, Conflict, and Conflict Resolution*, study guide, Washington, D.C., September 14, 2007.

<sup>70</sup> For a discussion of Chinese leadership economic priorities, see Nicholas R. Lardy, *The State Strikes Back: The End of Economic Reform in China?* Washington, D.C.: The Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2019.

<sup>71</sup> A recent assessment of economic tools in national competition is Robert D. Blackwill and Jennifer M. Harris, *War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016.

<sup>72</sup> John M. Schuessler, “The Deception Dividend: FDR’s Undeclared War,” *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 4, Spring 2010.

<sup>73</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration, “Country Analysis Executive Summary: China,” Washington, D.C., September 30, 2020.

<sup>74</sup> In 2003, Hu Jintao labeled this the “Malacca Dilemma,” after the strait through which around 80 percent of Chinese oil imports flow. See Kaho Yu, Christopher Len,

also express concern that instability in the SCS could affect China's access to energy and resources, as well as disrupt shipping in general.<sup>75</sup> Although the United States has not explicitly threatened Chinese access to the Malacca Strait or other strategic waterways, U.S. military capabilities—particularly those that could be used to protect or defend key regional SLOCs—and increased USN presence in the SCS (e.g., CSG deployments) have exacerbated Chinese worries that these U.S. capabilities could also be used to restrict Chinese access to resources and investments.<sup>76</sup>

China has responded to these concerns by

- developing partnerships through the BRI for overland pipeline construction, for example with Russia and other central Asian countries, as well as Pakistan, as a means of enhancing energy security<sup>77</sup>
- prioritizing port construction and access agreements, particularly in the Indian Ocean, to increasing access to strategic waterways<sup>78</sup>

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Erica Downs, Mikkal E. Herberg, and Michael Kugelman, *Asia's Energy Security and China's Belt and Road Initiative*, Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Asian Research, NBR Special Report No. 68, November 2, 2017.

<sup>75</sup> Zhang Jie [张洁], "Assessment of China's Surrounding Security Environment in the New Era" ["新时期中国周边安全环境评估"], Institute of Asia-Pacific and Global Strategy, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, February 16, 2019.

<sup>76</sup> Some Chinese literature speculates, for example, that the United States will use "diplomatic resistance" and military tools to frustrate China's plans, including by inciting tensions in the SCS to complicate the development of the BRI maritime silk road. Other analyses speculate that increased U.S.-India maritime security cooperation and joint statements on the SCS have been intended as a response to the maritime silk road. See Hu, 2016, p. 193; and Fu Mengzi and Liu Chunhao, "Some Thoughts on Building the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road" ["关于21世纪'海上丝绸之路'建设的若干思考"], *Contemporary International Relations* [现代国际关系], No. 3, 2015, p. 2.

<sup>77</sup> Nadège Rolland, "The 'Belt and Road Initiative': China's Strategic Ambitions," presentation at the Navy League of Canada Maritime Security Challenges Conference 2020, virtual session 1, video, YouTube, October 20, 2020.

<sup>78</sup> Li Jian, Chen Wenwen, and Jin Jing, "Overall Situation of Sea Power in the Indian Ocean and the Expansion in the Indian Ocean of Chinese Sea Powers" ["印度洋海权格局与中国海权的印度洋扩展"], *Pacific Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 5, 2014, p. 75; Fu and Liu, 2015, p. 2.

- upgrading PLAN capabilities focused on counterpiracy to protect Chinese shipping and SLOCs, including shipboard missile defense and antisubmarine warfare capabilities<sup>79</sup>
- opening the PLAN base in Djibouti, which gives China access to energy-rich countries in Africa and the Middle East and provides a permanent naval presence overseas.<sup>80</sup>

Although many of these actions are not militarily aggressive—diversifying energy access and expanding port agreements are political and economic activities—the rationale behind them reflects deep concern over U.S. and allied intent and anxiety about the potential for U.S. naval interdiction of Chinese shipping should relations deteriorate more. The development of PLAN capabilities for SLOC protection and to secure maritime approaches are directly tied to China’s perception that this access is essential for its economic survival. For example, the PLAN’s modernization program has focused on enhancing China’s A2/AD bubble, which includes building the capabilities to secure China’s maritime approaches in the Near Seas (the ECS, SCS, and Yellow Sea) and key SLOCs. The counterpiracy operations that started in 2009 were a direct result of pressure on the PLA by the Chinese leadership to develop more capacity to protect Chinese shipping from security threats. The base in Djibouti represents a broader strategy of building overseas maritime power and protecting Chinese interests through a larger PLA presence. Although the base in its current form has limited capabilities and represents little threat to the United States or its allies or partners, it is possible that this or other future bases could be expanded alongside the growth in PLAN capabilities to enable more-aggressive Chinese responses to perceived threats to PRC access to economic resources in the future.

The Chinese literature and examples discussed above support the hypothesis that China is likely to react more aggressively to U.S. actions

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<sup>79</sup> For an overview of the PLAN’s capability development, see Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020; Becker, 2020; and Kristen Gunness, “The China Dream and the Near Seas,” in Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Tiffany Ma, eds., *Securing the China Dream: The PLA’s Role in a Time of Reform and Change*, Seattle, Wash.: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2020.

<sup>80</sup> “Commentary: China’s Djibouti Base Not for Military Expansion,” Xinhua, July 13, 2017.

that it perceives threaten Chinese economic development or access to vital resources. But it is also important, especially in the near term, not to overstate the acuteness of Chinese concerns. Threats to China's ability to access resources and maintain its economic growth are generally longer-term concerns for China. Although some of China's responses—such as diversifying energy sources—reflect short-term efforts to improve energy access, its other reactions are largely about mitigating the longer-term potential for U.S. or allied capabilities to restrict access to key waterways and shipping, should relations continue to deteriorate. The aggressiveness of Chinese reactions to threats to economic resources and assets are therefore likely to reflect, and are likely to track, broader concerns about U.S. and allied hostile intent. If overall Chinese perceptions of U.S. hostility continue to increase, so too will Chinese sensitivity over potential threats to economic resources and the likely aggressiveness with which China may respond.

## Factor 5: China's Perceptions of Threats to Its Regional Influence

China's perception of the threat that U.S. operations, activities, and policies—including posture enhancements—constitute to PRC regional influence appears to strongly shape Chinese reactions, although the nature of its reactions can be complex. China can react aggressively if it believes that doing so will help advance its regional influence and position, for example, by coercing regional states to not pursue closer partnerships with the United States, but China may also act less aggressively when its leaders believe that they can garner greater regional influence over time by tempering their reactions to posture enhancements that concern them or by co-opting regional leaders through incentives. Therefore, Beijing's responses to U.S. posture enhancements that it perceives as undermining its regional influence have included both coercive measures and incentives to shape the regional status quo in Beijing's favor and limit the risk of escalation.

International relations scholarship suggests that states are likely to respond aggressively when they believe that their influence in the international community is inconsistent with the influence to which they feel

that they are entitled.<sup>81</sup> When a state's position in the regional order does not reflect its perceived relative power, the state may take action to enhance its regional role and influence by force.<sup>82</sup> States will also use incentives to build regional influence or counter the effects of an adversary's attempts to undermine its regional standing.<sup>83</sup> This can include the cultivation of economic ties with neighboring countries through trade agreements, infrastructure investments, or other forms of foreign direct investment.<sup>84</sup>

China perceives a variety of challenges to its efforts to expand its regional influence. These include threats to Chinese sovereignty over disputed waters and territory that, if successful in challenging PRC claims, would undermine Chinese prestige and credibility; challenges to economic strategies for expanding China's influence, such as the BRI; threats to regional diplomatic initiatives designed to assert China's position as Asia's central power; and threats to domestic stability that could accrue from regional political, economic, and security developments that would in turn undermine China's ability to project power and influence abroad. China is also concerned with U.S. regional democracy promotion and other aspects of U.S. soft power, which China sees as potential drivers of destabilization that could reduce its regional influence or even spill over into China itself. These threats are interlinked and coalesce around a perception that the U.S. seeks to contain or block Chinese long-term strategic objectives.<sup>85</sup>

These concerns often prompt China to carefully scrutinize U.S. influence activities in its burgeoning so-called regional partnerships, particu-

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<sup>81</sup> Thomas J. Volgy and Stacey Mayhall, "Status Inconsistency and International War: Exploring the Effects of Systemic Change," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 1, March 1995; Douglas Lemke and Suzanne Werner, "Power Parity, Commitment to Change, and War," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 2, June 1996.

<sup>82</sup> Suzanne Werner, "Choosing Demands Strategically: The Distribution of Power, the Distribution of Benefits, and the Risk of Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 43, No. 6, December 1999.

<sup>83</sup> Todd S. Sechser, "Reputations and Signaling in Coercive Bargaining," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 62, No. 2, February 2018.

<sup>84</sup> Ludger Kühnhardt, *Region-Building*, Vol. I: *The Global Proliferation of Regional Integration*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2010, p. 52.

<sup>85</sup> Scobell et al., 2020.



larly with Vietnam. One Chinese scholar notes that the USS *Carl Vinson* aircraft carrier port call in Vietnam in 2018 was likely a manifestation of U.S. “naval diplomacy,” signaling to China that the United States stands with states that have territorial disputes with China and will be stepping up its defense cooperation and presence in the neighborhood.<sup>86</sup> Chinese scholars see these activities not only as a U.S. effort to warn China against taking aggressive action in the region but also to increase U.S. influence with allies and partners in the region.<sup>87</sup> By taking steps to counter or minimize the effects of U.S. activities, China seeks both to increase its own regional influence relative to the United States’ and to secure China’s core interests of national sovereignty, security, and development, as discussed in the above sections on factors 1 and 4.<sup>88</sup>

China’s responses to U.S. activities that it perceives threaten its regional influence have ranged from the relatively aggressive, when Beijing perceives that its core interests are at stake, to a more restrained mixture of coercive measures and incentives when China perceives it can press an advantage in the diplomatic or economic realms or diffuse the potential for escalation. Its reactions to challenges to its maritime claims in the SCS illustrate Beijing’s tendency to shape regional states’ actions with both carrots, (e.g., economic incentives and joint energy exploration agreements) and sticks (e.g., paramilitary forces and other gray zone activities meant to coerce other claimants and solidify China’s claims).<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Feng Zhu [朱 锋], “What Did ‘Carl Vinson’s’ Trip to the South China Sea Reveal?” [“‘卡尔文森’号南海之行透射出什么”], *World Affairs* [世界知识], No. 7, 2018.

<sup>87</sup> Feng, 2018, p. 32.

<sup>88</sup> China’s 2019 foreign policy white paper provided the rationale for this goal, marking the Indo-Pacific as the “foundation of China’s development and prosperity” and stating an intention to “lead regional cooperation and safeguard regional peace and development” (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “China and the World in the New Era,” September 28, 2019b; Scobell et al., 2020). See also Timothy R. Heath, Derek Grossman, and Asha Clark, *China’s Quest for Global Primacy: An Analysis of Chinese International and Defense Strategies to Outcompete the United States*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A447-1, 2021.

<sup>89</sup> For an overview of China’s activities in the SCS, see Ronald O’Rourke, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R42784, January 26, 2022.

China's BRI, meanwhile, exemplifies PRC efforts to gain influence using carrots by building regional economic dependencies with preferential trade conditions and free trade agreements.<sup>90</sup> China's strong-arm tactics in the SCS have somewhat mitigated the success of its economic endeavors, however, as China has tended to prioritize a firm stand on its territorial claims over opportunities to expand its influence with claimant states (a tendency that we discuss in the case of the Philippines below). Taken together, these examples show China's tendency to calibrate its responses to be less aggressive in one domain if it thinks it can advance its regional influence but to maintain its military pressure in sovereignty disputes.

We examined two cases that support the hypothesis that China is more likely to respond aggressively to perceived U.S. threats to its regional influence. The first examines the growth of U.S.-Vietnam security relations from 2013–2016. China clearly perceived U.S.-Vietnamese ties as threatening its regional influence, and Beijing employed both carrots and sticks in response. China's reactions to deepening U.S.-Vietnam security ties included criticizing U.S. involvement in the SCS, while seeking to further deepen PRC economic and political ties with Hanoi in an attempt to ensure Vietnam did not further tilt toward the United States.<sup>91</sup> Chinese analysts and scholars have discussed the benefits of strengthening economic ties with Vietnam and improving China's position in the region by partnering with Russia against the United States.<sup>92</sup> Chinese literature also highlights concerns that a stronger U.S.-Vietnam relationship could weaken China's relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a key target for and

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<sup>90</sup> Christopher K. Johnson, "President Xi Jinping's 'Belt and Road' Initiative: A Practical Assessment of the Chinese Communist Party's Roadmap for China's Global Resurgence," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 28, 2016.

<sup>91</sup> Cui Haoran [崔浩然], "The Adjustment of Vietnam's SCS Policy Under the New Situation and China's Response Strategy" ["新形势下越南南海政策的调整及中国的应对策略"], *Issues of Contemporary World Socialism* [当代世界社会主义问题], No. 4, 2018, pp. 163–164; "Xi Calls for Mended China-Vietnam Ties," *Xinhua*, August 28, 2014; and Robert S. Ross, "China-Vietnamese Relations in the Era of Rising China: Power, Resistance, and Maritime Conflict," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 30, No. 130, 2021.

<sup>92</sup> Luo Huijun [罗会钧], "U.S.-Vietnam Defense and Security Cooperation and Its Influence on China" ["美越防务安全合作及其对中国的影响"], *Journal of International Security Studies* [国家安全研究], No. 3, 2017, p. 147.

means of furthering China's influence in southeast Asia.<sup>93</sup> These reactions suggest that Beijing was concerned that closer U.S.-Vietnam security ties could weaken China's bilateral relationship with Vietnam, which would in turn both directly and indirectly risk reducing its regional influence.

We used a second case that explores the first several years of the Duterte administration in the Philippines to assess whether China reacts less aggressively when it believes there may be an opportunity to expand its regional influence. Duterte's first major decision as president in 2016 was to not press Manila's victory over China at the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling on resource rights claims in the SCS. The Duterte government instead signaled its openness to warmer relations with China, publicly suggesting bilateral SCS talks with Beijing even though China showed no softening in its SCS position.<sup>94</sup> A Chinese diplomatic charm offensive ensued that included economic aid, military assistance, and praise for Duterte's policies, but these policies persisted alongside continued PRC militarization of the SCS features under dispute and intermittent clashes between Chinese and Philippine forces.<sup>95</sup> This suggests that China will be pragmatic and strategically opportunistic when it sees a window of opportunity in the diplomatic and economic domains but that pursuing such opportunities is likely to remain secondary to staunchly defending territorial interests.

Although the literature and cases provide some evidence that China will react more aggressively when it feels its regional influence is threatened, PRC responses frequently combined economic inducements and diplomatic initiatives with military activities that primarily involve China's paramilitary maritime forces. When motivated by concerns regarding its regional influence, China's economic and diplomatic responses have tended to be conciliatory toward regional partners. However, there appear to be clear limits to

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<sup>93</sup> Luo, 2017.

<sup>94</sup> "China's New Spratly Island Defenses," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, December 13, 2016; Michael Martina and Ben Blanchard, "China Welcomes Manila's Offer for South China Sea Talks," Reuters, June 1, 2016.

<sup>95</sup> Yu Yichun, "Wang Yi: 'China Firmly Supports the Philippines in Pursuing an Independent Foreign Policy'" ["王毅: '中方坚定支持菲律宾奉行独立自主外交政策'"], *People's Daily Online*, July 25, 2017; Manuel Mogato, "China Offers \$14 Million Arms Package to the Philippines: Manila's Defense Minister," Reuters, December 20, 2016.

the use of such carrots. China's perception that losing ground in the pursuit of its territorial claims would damage Chinese influence and credibility can drive China to undertake aggressive military responses despite the fact that they risk limiting or undermining its efforts to improve its relations with regional claimants—although China remains sensitive to escalation risks and, as a result, mainly responds through paramilitary maritime forces or other gray zone capabilities. This suggests that Beijing's efforts to enhance China's regional influence are pursued through a combination of conciliatory and aggressive actions according to whether a targeted state might threaten other Chinese interests that could affect China's regional standing beyond its bilateral relationship with China.

## Factor 6: China's Perceptions of U.S. Commitment to the Defense of U.S. Allies or Partners

China's perceptions of how committed the United States is to the defense of its allies and partners likely shapes Beijing's reactions to U.S. posture enhancements. International relations literature suggests that states can deter attacks on their allies and partners by making credible commitments to come to their defense in the event that they are attacked.<sup>96</sup> States considering aggression against these allies or partners would then assess higher potential costs of doing so because they may need to risk fighting both the ally or partner and its protector.<sup>97</sup> These "extended deterrence" commitments rely on their credibility to be effective.<sup>98</sup> Credibility can be enhanced in numerous ways, including formal defense pacts, the forward stationing

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<sup>96</sup> Huth, 1988; Jesse C. Johnson, Brett Ashley Leeds, and Ahra Wu, "Capability, Credibility, and Extended General Deterrence," *International Interactions*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2015; Fearon, 1995.

<sup>97</sup> Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1974.

<sup>98</sup> Adversaries would of course not be unduly concerned by defense commitments that do not appear to be serious or that the state shows no signs of preparing to uphold (Bruce M. Russett, "The Calculus of Deterrence," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 7, No. 2, June 1963).

of military forces, or heightened levels of peacetime military coordination with the ally or partner.<sup>99</sup>

Although the primary goal of U.S. policies with respect to regional alliance and security partner relationships may be to enhance the perceived credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments, China has tended to adopt more-aggressive interpretations of U.S. behavior. It generally views the U.S. alliance structure in the Indo-Pacific region as a means by which the United States can expand its military capabilities and influence while balancing against China and checking Chinese power.<sup>100</sup> This perception has only grown as the U.S.-China competition has evolved, with the result that even when U.S. posture changes in the region involving allies have not been focused on China—such as the 2016 decision to deploy THAAD in South Korea—Beijing considers these actions as aimed at least in part at China and intentionally damaging to Chinese security interests and regional influence.<sup>101</sup> Similarly, China views the U.S.-Japan alliance as enabling Japanese remilitarization and allowing Japan to have a stronger regional security role, which China opposes.<sup>102</sup> Inclusion of new partners into U.S. defense policies or posture also concerns Beijing. For example, Australia's expanded military cooperation with the United States and other regional partners, such as Japan, has increased China's concerns over the multilateralization of the U.S. alliance system, which Beijing fears might allow the United States and other regional countries to hamper, in a coordinated manner, China's

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<sup>99</sup> Russett, 1963; Johnson, Leeds, and Wu, 2015; Vesna Danilovic, "The Sources of Threat Credibility in Extended Deterrence," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 45, No. 3, June 2001.

<sup>100</sup> Adam P. Liff, "China and the U.S. Alliance System," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 233, March 2018.

<sup>101</sup> THAAD's primary military value was in addressing the threat from North Korean missiles. However, China regarded South Korea's decision to accept the deployment as an insulting disregard for Beijing's preferences and as a betrayal of what China regarded as a friendly relationship. Beijing also regarded the move as a sign of potential U.S. success in strengthening its regional influence (Greg Torode and Michael Martina, "Chinese Wary About U.S. Missile System Because Capabilities Unknown: Experts," Reuters, April 3, 2017).

<sup>102</sup> Sun Jianguo, "Use History as a Mirror: Beware the Return of Japanese Militarism" ["以史为鉴：警惕日本军国主义的死灰复燃"], *PLA Daily*, June 23, 2014.

regional goals, particularly related to sovereignty and territorial disputes in the ECS and SCS.<sup>103</sup> The recent reinvigoration of the Quad has also been concerning to China for similar reasons.<sup>104</sup> These dynamics highlight how U.S. efforts to enhance deterrence may be interpreted by Beijing as signs of hostile intent, as discussed above.

With respect to the deterrent value of U.S. presence in the region, there is some evidence to suggest that Beijing proceeds more cautiously in its responses to U.S. allies' and partners' actions when the U.S. signals strong defense commitments to them. The 2011 rebalance to Asia, for example, certainly heightened Chinese concern about the U.S. developing a balancing coalition against China and augmenting U.S. military capability in the region. However, the Chinese reaction to the rebalance was relatively muted, consisting mainly of diplomatic protest and warnings.<sup>105</sup> Following the announcement of the USMC deployment to Australia, for example, the Chinese Ministry of Defense warned that it "is overreaction toward China's normal military moves and it might result in China's overreaction in the near future. This security dilemma, if it escalates, might lead to another Cold War."<sup>106</sup> China's relatively restrained military reactions, or at least its near-term responses, to the deployment of THAAD is another example in which the U.S. alliance commitment to South Korea, as well as Beijing's desire to maintain relations with Seoul, likely factored into China's decision to respond mainly with diplomatic protests and economic pressure.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Fang Xiaozhi, "U.S.-Australia Expand Military Cooperation: New Variable in Asia-Pacific Security Structure," *Contemporary World* [当代世界], Vol. 11, 2013, pp. 61–64.

<sup>104</sup> The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) comprises the United States, Japan, India, and Australia. China has responded to the Quad's development with vigorous protests and criticisms in official statements and media commentary, as well as with some naval and air exercises ("Commentary: Forming Clique and Flexing Muscles only to Shake Regional Peace, Stability," 2020).

<sup>105</sup> Bonnie S. Glaser and Brittany Billingsley, "U.S. Pivot to Asia Leaves China Off Balance," *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 13, No. 3, January 2012.

<sup>106</sup> Li Xiaokun and Li Lianxing, "U.S. Military Base in Australia Shows 'Cold War Mentality,'" *China Daily*, December 1, 2011.

<sup>107</sup> Meick and Salidjanova, 2017. China's near-term military responses were muted. It should be noted, however, that China's longer-term military responses have likely

China's responses to Japan's nationalization of the Senkaku Islands provides a useful case to test this hypothesis given Beijing's concerns over the U.S.-Japan alliance. In 2011, the governor of Tokyo entered into talks with the private Japanese owner of three of the Senkaku Islands to use official funds of the Tokyo metropolitan government and to build a dock on the islands.<sup>108</sup> Hoping to block this effort but wary of provoking a backlash from China, Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko decided to purchase the three islands on September 11, 2012.<sup>109</sup> In April 2014, President Barack Obama—in the first public statement by a sitting U.S. president on the issue—said in a joint press conference with Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzō, “[O]ur treaty commitment to Japan’s security is absolute, and Article 5 covers all territories under Japan’s administration, including the Senkaku Islands.”<sup>110</sup> This clarified that the United States backed Japan over the islands and that any efforts by China to counter Japan’s administrative control risked involving the United States.<sup>111</sup>

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included an acceleration of the PLA’s own hypersonic weapons program and development of other precision-strike capabilities.

<sup>108</sup> Until that time, a Japanese government ministry had been leasing three of the islands—Uotsuri, Kita-kojima, and Minami-kojima—to prevent conservative elements in Japan from developing the islands in any way (“Japan Government ‘Reaches Deal to Buy’ Disputed Islands,” BBC News, September 5, 2012; Yoko Wakatsuki, “Tokyo Governor Outlines Plan to Buy Islands Claimed by China,” CNN, April 17, 2012).

<sup>109</sup> The purchase included Uotsuri, Kita-kojima, and Minami-kojima. The United States still leases the other two Senkaku Islands—Kuba and Taisho. The three remaining islets/rocks remain in the ownership of the central government. For a detailed explanation of the incident, see Michael Green, Kathleen Hicks, Zack Cooper, John Schaus, and Jake Douglas, “Counter-Coercion Series: Senkaku Islands Nationalization Crisis,” Asia Maritime Transparency Institute, June 14, 2017c.

<sup>110</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, “Joint Press Conference with President Obama and Prime Minister Abe of Japan,” press release, Tokyo, April 24, 2014a; Office of the Press Secretary, “U.S.-Japan Joint Statement: The United States and Japan: Shaping the Future of the Asia-Pacific and Beyond,” press release, April 25, 2014b.

<sup>111</sup> Although the level of authority was the highest that could be given, it was not the first time a U.S. official had made this declaration. For example, prior to Obama’s statement, on January 18, 2013, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that although the United States does not take a position on the sovereignty of the islands, Washington opposed “any unilateral actions that would seek to undermine Japanese administration” (Hillary

China reacted with strong diplomatic protest and economic reprisals, including Beijing's support of boycotts against Japanese goods and protests against Japanese companies, resulting in both property damage and revenue loss for Japanese companies.<sup>112</sup> Militarily, Chinese paramilitary forces, such as the China Coast Guard (CCG) and the maritime militia, increased their incursions into Japanese territorial waters, and in November 2013, China unilaterally declared the creation of an ADIZ over the ECS that covered the Senkaku Islands.<sup>113</sup>

Although President Obama's statement reiterating U.S. commitment to the defense of Japan did not appear to reduce China's military responses, China did continue to follow a predictable pattern of behavior with regard to maritime incursions, relying primarily on paramilitary and civilian capabilities to send its message to Japan rather than escalating to the use of PLAN or air assets.<sup>114</sup> Direct evidence of PRC motivations are not available but this

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Rodham Clinton, "Remarks with Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida After Their Meeting," archived content, U.S. Department of State, January 18, 2013).

<sup>112</sup> For example, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement that said "the Chinese government solemnly states that the Japanese government's so-called 'purchase' of the Diaoyu Island is totally illegal and invalid. It does not change, not even in the slightest way, the historical fact of Japan's occupation of Chinese territory, nor will it alter China's territorial sovereignty over the Diaoyu Island and its affiliated islands" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China," September 10, 2012). For economic reprisals, see Richard Katz, "Mutual Assured Production," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2013.

<sup>113</sup> For the last four months of 2012, an average of 102 Chinese ships suddenly appeared in the Senkaku's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) while an average of 17 ships appeared in the Taiwan Strait. In 2013 and for the first four months of 2014, these monthly trends continued. In 2013, on average, 68 ships sailed in the EEZ and 16 ships sailed in the Taiwan Strait. And in the first four months of 2014, prior to Obama's statement, on average, 65 ships sailed in the EEZ and seven ships in the Taiwan Strait (Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), "Trends in Chinese Government and Other Vessels in the Waters Around the Senkaku Islands and Japan's Response" ["尖閣諸島周辺海域における中国海警局に所属する船舶等の動向と我が国の対処"], Japan Coast Guard, undated).

<sup>114</sup> Edmund J. Burke, Timothy R. Heath, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Logan Ma, Lyle J. Morris, and Michael S. Chase, *China's Military Activities in the East China Sea: Implications for Japan's Air Self-Defense Force*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2574-AF, 2018, p. 9.



decision likely reflected Beijing's concern over potential U.S. involvement and the risk of escalation to armed conflict should China employ military force. A 2021 RAND report on Chinese gray zone aggression examines the deterrent effects of U.S. commitments to Japan for countering Chinese actions toward the Senkaku Islands. Its authors assessed that the level of deterrence is strong when the United States and Japan are aligned in messaging commitments (in Japan's case, to the Senkaku Islands; in the U.S. case, to the defense treaty), when the United States and Japan have coordinated military capabilities to respond to China's gray zone aggression and when the United States has regional support from other countries for deterrence actions and capabilities.<sup>115</sup>

This suggests that U.S. signaling of a strong defense commitment to Japan can deter Chinese aggression. For example, China exhibits more caution in its ECS gray zone operations than in SCS activities—with Beijing generally avoiding in the ECS some of the more-escalatory actions it has taken in the SCS, including frequent ramming and overt harassment of other countries' ships by CCG and naval vessels.<sup>116</sup> This more predictable and slightly less aggressive approach likely reflects China's concerns over U.S. involvement in a Japan-China clash given the close U.S.-Japan defense relationship, as well as the capability of the Japanese Coast Guard to deter Chinese actions.<sup>117</sup>

Conversely, China seems less inclined to moderate its behavior where U.S. defense commitments appear to be weaker. China has employed aggressive tactics against the Philippines in and around disputed maritime territory in the SCS, for example, despite the U.S. defense commitment to

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<sup>115</sup> Michael J. Mazarr, Joe Cheravitch, Jeffrey W. Hornung, and Stephanie Pezard, *What Deters and Why: Applying a Framework to Assess Deterrence of Gray Zone Aggression*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3142-A, 2021, p. 50.

<sup>116</sup> In addition to an increased presence of CCG vessels in the SCS, China has increased its PLAN and PLAAF presence. Furthermore, China has pursued land reclamation projects to create artificial islands in both the Spratly and Paracel Islands, on which it has built runways, hangars, radars, and missile batteries (Mazarr, Cheravitch, et al., 2021, pp. 24–26).

<sup>117</sup> Japan has the most capable navy and coast guard in the region, which has also likely affected Beijing's calculations with regard to its response (Morris, 2019).

Manila.<sup>118</sup> U.S.-Philippines bilateral relations have been rocky at times and defense cooperation is less formalized than in the U.S.-Japan alliance, which includes U.S. bases and troops on Japanese soil and more institutionalized security cooperation, reflecting Japan's importance to U.S. regional strategy. This difference between the U.S. relationship with Japan versus the Philippines may have led Beijing to perceive the U.S.-Philippines alliance as relatively weaker and, therefore, the risk of disputes involving the Philippines escalating into a conflict with the United States as lower than in comparable disputes involving Japan.

Similarly, Chinese behavior toward U.S. partners that lack formal defensive commitments also appears to be more aggressive than it has been toward Japan. Deepening U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation from 2013 to 2016, for example, did not deter China from sending a state-owned enterprise's oil rig into Vietnam's EEZ near the Paracel Islands in 2014, which resulted in a standoff between CCG and naval vessels and Vietnamese ships.<sup>119</sup> These two examples suggest that China may behave more aggressively in response to a U.S. ally or partner when it perceives U.S. defensive commitments to that state as relatively weak, although other factors, such as the level of military capability of the regional country involved, likely

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<sup>118</sup> China has become more assertive in territorial disputes with the Philippines in recent years, including around Second Thomas Shoal, Thitu Island, and Whitsun Reef, where the Philippines recently observed over 200 presumed Chinese maritime militia vessels in March 2021 (Rene Acosta, "Persistent Chinese Maritime Militia Presence off Philippines Raises Concerns in Manila," *USNI News*, April 12, 2021).

<sup>119</sup> When Vietnam sent vessels to the rig, China quickly sent dozens of CCG and maritime militia vessels, supported by PLAN vessels in overwatch and military aircraft flights over the rig area, while rumors spread about PLA ground troops operating on the land border with Vietnam. As the paramilitary vessels harassed the Vietnamese ships, China also pressured Vietnam to back down by breaking off diplomatic discussions, restricting border trade and tourism, and targeting Hanoi with cyberattacks (Carl Thayer, "China's Oil Rig Gambit: SCS Game-Changer?" *The Diplomat*, May 12, 2014; Bonny Lin, Cristina L. Garafola, Bruce McClintock, Jonah Blank, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Karen Schwindt, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, Paul Orner, Dennis M. Borrmann, Sarah W. Denton, and Jason Chambers, *Competition in the Gray Zone: Countering Chinese Coercion Against U.S. Allies and Partners in the Indo-Pacific*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A594-1, 2022).

also play important roles in China's calculations.<sup>120</sup> Finally, it is possible that if China perceives a very weak commitment to the region from the United States, it might act aggressively to demonstrate that it can coerce regional states without the United States coming to their aid, which would in turn cement China's status as the regional power.

These cases and examples suggest that China is more likely to respond aggressively to U.S. actions that involve allies or partners to whom the perceived U.S. defense commitment is weak and less likely to respond aggressively when the perceived U.S. defense commitment is strong. China did react to the rebalance to Asia, the deployment of THAAD, and the nationalization of the Senkaku Islands, but its concern over U.S. involvement and the risk of escalation appear to have tempered its responses. In contrast, China appears to have been less restrained in its dealings with U.S. allies or partners in the region seen as having weaker defense commitments, such as Vietnam or the Philippines.

## Conclusion

Taken together, two aspects of these framework factors deserve special consideration. First, each of the factors focuses on Chinese perceptions of U.S. posture enhancements rather than the posture enhancements themselves. How such perceptions might change as a result of actual on-the-ground actions of the United States and its allies and partners is difficult to anticipate or even to assess retrospectively, but it is nonetheless essential to try to do so. This means that careful attention needs to be paid to signals indicating Chinese leadership's views on events. Failing to anticipate Chinese perceptions risks U.S. posture enhancements being misinterpreted—potentially driving more-aggressive Chinese responses and increasing the likelihood of inadvertent escalation.

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<sup>120</sup> The Japan Self Defense Forces, for example, have more capabilities than the Philippine military and, in theory, are therefore more capable of unilaterally deterring Chinese aggression. Despite Japan's overall higher level of military capability, U.S. commitment to the defense of Japan and the U.S. forces and capabilities based there certainly add to Beijing's calculations as to whether to pursue an aggressive response.

Second, most of the factors shape, whether directly or indirectly, how intensely and the ways in which China feels threatened. Implicit is the assessment, well grounded in international relations and history, that China is likely to react more aggressively when it perceives a greater threat. Less obvious is that actions taken by the United States and its allies and partners that do not directly threaten China's interests today may nonetheless change China's perceptions of the threats that it will face in the future. China may therefore adopt near-term responses to those perceived longer-term threats that appear surprisingly or even unjustifiably aggressive in the present, a possibility that we explore in greater detail in Chapter Four.

In sum, a complex mix of variables informs China's conduct; attempts to flatten them into a single, or even a handful, of variables risks oversimplification or misleading predictions. Taken together, however, these six factors are particularly critical predictors. They are associated with a broad range of drivers of Chinese aggression and capture a range of indicators of historically aggressive Chinese responses. They therefore serve as a foundation for a framework to assess the potential nature and scale of Chinese reactions to a given U.S., allied, or partner action, including, in particular, U.S. posture enhancements. In the next two chapters, we describe the development of the remaining parts of this framework.

## Characteristics of U.S. Posture Enhancements That Affect Chinese Responses

The second part of our framework involves identifying the linkages between the key factors described in Chapter Two and the characteristics of U.S. posture enhancements. Put more simply, how do U.S. posture enhancements have the potential to affect these key factors? What are the ways in which they may affect Chinese perceptions and thinking through these key factors, and how might they motivate China to pursue different responses?

To address these questions, we considered how four different characteristics of potential U.S. posture enhancements—the geographic location, the U.S. ally or partner involved, the military capabilities involved, and the profile or messaging accompanying the posture enhancement—could affect each of the six key factors. We did so by reviewing each combination of key factor and posture characteristic individually and identifying the most plausible or likely ways in which the posture characteristic could affect that key factor, based on our subject-matter expertise and the findings from our research into each of the key factors summarized in Chapter Two. Our identification of these linkages is therefore not exhaustive, although it is extensive and covers a wide range of key issues likely to drive Chinese perceptions and thinking and, ultimately, Chinese reactions.

This chapter summarizes our identification of the linkages between posture characteristics and key factors in two ways. First, we discuss why we chose these specific four characteristics of U.S. posture. Second, we provide a detailed discussion of the most important linkages that we identified, by

key factor. At the conclusion of this chapter, in Table 3.2, we provide a summary of the main points identified in these discussions.

We focus on the characteristics of location, U.S. ally or partner involvement, capabilities, and profile because we assessed that they were likely to have the greatest salience and influence for China as it evaluates its level of concern with particular U.S. posture enhancements.<sup>1</sup>

We briefly summarize each of these four characteristics with illustrations for how they might vary in practice as follows (recapped in Table 3.1):

- *Location.* The United States can choose to deploy posture changes to areas of greater or lesser concern to the PRC. Posture enhancements that bring U.S. capabilities or forces closer to areas that are militarily or politically sensitive to China, such as key forces or regime targets, would likely be more concerning than deploying such capabilities farther away. For example, a U.S. deployment of strike capabilities to the southern Ryukyu islands would increase China's concern over the proximity of these capabilities to Chinese forces and bases across the Taiwan Strait, as well as to the Chinese mainland. Deployment of U.S. troops or a larger U.S. shift in military resources to Australia, however, would be of less concern given the greater geographic distance from Chinese forces and interests. Although of less overall concern than deployments in the Taiwan Strait, U.S. deployments to the SCS, where China has heightened concerns over U.S. involvement in territorial disputes, would be of greater concern than deployments to the Indian Ocean, which are farther away from disputed territory.
- *U.S. ally or partner involved.* The U.S. ally or partner involved in or hosting the posture enhancement can also play an important role in affecting China's reactions. The ally or partner involved could matter

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<sup>1</sup> We also carefully considered a fifth potential characteristic: continuity. That is, does whether U.S. posture enhancements constitute a break with past patterns of U.S. activity independently affect Chinese thinking and responses? We assessed that while China may take note of changes in U.S. patterns, ultimately the four selected posture characteristics would likely have a substantially greater effect on Chinese perceptions. As such, we incorporated some aspects of continuity that also overlapped with other characteristics into the analysis that follows, but we did not retain continuity as an independent fifth characteristic in our framework.

for several reasons, including the nature of the ally's or partner's relationship with China; the military capabilities that they possess, including how the U.S. posture enhancement could improve those capabilities through improved interoperability or other support; or the relationships the ally or partner has with other states in the region that could signal threats to PRC regional influence.<sup>2</sup>

- *Capabilities.* Posture enhancements that would increase U.S. capabilities that could be used against China in a conflict could also affect PRC reactions. This characteristic includes changes in the number of capabilities and increases in the range of capabilities. For instance, deploying additional capabilities to the region that appear intended for use in a Taiwan scenario, even if they are not novel in nature, would likely increase China's alarm over the posture change. The United States can also increase the level of technological sophistication or range of the capabilities deployed. The deployment of advanced capabilities, such as hypersonics in missile defense, may threaten PRC military missions or defenses, prompting a different response than previously deployed capabilities.
- *Profile.* The United States can also take steps to adjust the profile of its posture enhancements. It can vary the optics of the enhancement through the timing of deployments. For example, if U.S. posture changes follow PRC or PRC-led regional initiatives, they likely will be seen by China as directly responding to these activities. Similarly, if the United States deploys forces or capabilities, or announces a posture enhancement, on dates that are politically sensitive to China, they may be interpreted as a direct challenge to China. Conversely, the United States could conduct outreach to China to explain or deemphasize planned posture enhancements if it wishes to reduce the risk that China views these posture enhancements as a threat, provided of course that the alternative U.S. explanation is credible.

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that some U.S. posture enhancements would likely increase interoperability with allies and partners, for example, if the posture includes training with allied forces. However, increased U.S. military presence or capabilities in a host country does not inevitably lead to better interoperability because such interoperability is difficult to achieve.

TABLE 3.1

**Key Characteristics of U.S. Posture Enhancements**

Characteristic	Examples
Location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proximity to PRC or PRC forces</li> <li>• Proximity to politically, economically, or militarily sensitive areas</li> </ul>
U.S. ally or partner involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number, importance, and political disposition of U.S. allies or partners involved</li> <li>• Relevant military capabilities of U.S. allies or partners</li> </ul>
Capabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Novelty of U.S. capabilities</li> <li>• Lethal potential and wartime usefulness</li> <li>• Technological level employed</li> </ul>
Profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Timing of posture enhancement in relation to PRC or regional events</li> <li>• Visibility of posture enhancement</li> <li>• Associated U.S. rhetoric</li> </ul>

## Linkages Between U.S. Posture Characteristics and Chinese Perceptions of Potential Military Threat

The PRC will choose how to respond to U.S. posture enhancements based, in part, on the military threat that it believes that they could pose. We expect that China's perception of the potential military threat is likely to vary depending on the geographic location of the posture enhancement, the U.S. allies or partners cooperating with or agreeing to host the United States, and the capabilities involved. The potential military threat posed by U.S. or allied capabilities, as perceived by the PRC, will vary based on the location of the U.S. military action in relation to PRC areas of interest. U.S. posture enhancements that bring military capabilities closer to PRC forces, bases, or other militarily sensitive areas have the potential to increase PRC threat perceptions. When U.S. or allied capabilities move within range of striking such targets, they become capable of inflicting significant damage that would be more likely to prompt an aggressive PRC response. The same will also hold true for important domestic military and civilian infrastructure and facilities. If instead the United States adds posture enhancements outside of this geographic range, the United States will not hold China's



militarily sensitive areas at risk and the PRC will be less likely to respond aggressively. Likewise, if the United States shifts resources on a sustained basis away from areas that are militarily sensitive to China, this will reduce the potential military threat posed to the PRC and decrease the likelihood of an aggressive Chinese response.

The extent of allied and partner involvement can also affect the potential military threat that China perceives from a U.S. posture enhancement. When the United States cooperates with partners with greater military capabilities, their combined effect could be potentially more threatening to the PRC by virtue of being able to inflict greater damage on the PRC, its forces, or its areas of interest. If the partner also allows U.S. access to locations of high military utility for operations against China or its forces, the potential military threat posed by the posture enhancement may increase and the PRC would be more likely to respond aggressively. This may be especially the case if the PRC believes that these partners may support the United States by granting access or committing capabilities in the event of a military conflict. The level of cooperation between the United States and the ally or partner could also magnify the effects of these capabilities. Interoperability of capabilities and command structure enhances the warfighting ability of the United States and its allies and partners, which would pose a greater potential threat to the PRC in the event of a conflict.

In addition to the overall capabilities demonstrated or enabled by a posture enhancement, the nature of the capabilities involved will also help determine the extent of the potential military threat perceived by the PRC. Capabilities that could be used to threaten the CCP regime itself will likely be of foremost concern. China will therefore take careful note of capabilities that could target the PRC's second-strike nuclear capabilities or enable a decapitation strike of Chinese leadership, such as high technology and novel capabilities like hypersonic weapons. Capabilities with a high utility in a conflict scenario with China, such as coordinated joint air-sea weapon platforms, may also be more likely to be met with an aggressive, escalatory response, as such capabilities, if left unchecked by China, could grant the United States a significant advantage in a conflict scenario.

More generally, the PRC would be more likely to respond aggressively if U.S. and partner capabilities involved in or enabled by a posture enhancement increase PRC concern over its own ability to execute key military mis-

sions. However, if the capabilities involved are such that the PRC questions its own ability to manage escalation, it may instead choose not to respond in aggressive fashion, fearing that any resulting crisis could spiral out of control. This was potentially the case during the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, in which the PRC had few options to respond to a dual U.S. carrier presence short of opening fire, leading China to ultimately deescalate the crisis.

## Linkages Between U.S. Posture Characteristics and Chinese Perceptions of Hostile Intent

PRC perceptions of hostile U.S. intent are likely to differ based on the location of the U.S. posture enhancement in similar fashion to Chinese perception of the potential military threat that the enhancement may pose. When U.S. or allied capabilities move within range of striking militarily sensitive targets, they may increase PRC belief that the United States intends on using its forces and capabilities for aggressive purposes. The same will also be true for U.S. posture enhancements that occur in proximity to politically sensitive areas for China. U.S. posture enhancements near the SCS may be viewed by the PRC as indicative of U.S. intent to interfere in ongoing territorial disputes and an unwillingness to allow the PRC freedom of action in its sphere of influence. More broadly, posture enhancements that take place in a new, politically, or militarily sensitive location could demonstrate that the United States is willing to push further against PRC red lines.

The allies or partners that host or otherwise support a posture enhancement with the United States may be seen as clear indicators of the level of U.S. hostility. As we have noted, cooperating with states that have a history of adverse interactions with the PRC would be likely to increase Chinese perceptions that the posture enhancement is a sign of hostility. Any posture enhancement that involves U.S. allies and partners that the PRC believes to be firmly anti-China, such as Japan and Taiwan, would be likely to be seen as anti-China in nature. Cooperation with certain partners may also reinforce the message that the United States seeks to build an anti-China coalition. On the other hand, it is also the case that when the United States engages in cooperation with states with more neutral or even favorable ties to China (e.g., Vietnam), the PRC may interpret these activities as efforts by

the United States to recruit these states to become more anti-China. This may increase fears of strategic containment in China. As the United States engages in deeper cooperation with such states, these fears are likely to only grow. This may increase the likelihood of an aggressive PRC response to attempt to deter or counter U.S. actions.

Cooperation within the Quad could also stoke these fears by suggesting a significant coalition is emerging to contain Chinese power, which could be indicative of a Cold War mentality in the United States. Similarly, the involvement of U.S. partners and allies that had previously played little role in the region, such as France and Germany, might increase the perception that the United States seeks to expand a U.S.-led partnership to contain China. As this is a major PRC concern, China would be likely to attribute the expanded participation of extraregional allies in any posture enhancement as evidence of U.S. hostility.

PRC perceptions of hostile intent will also differ based on the capabilities involved in the U.S. posture enhancement in a similar fashion to its perception of the potential military threat. Posture enhancements that involve capabilities that could be of military utility directly against the PRC may be seen as a sign that the United States is preparing to engage the PRC in military conflict. If the United States demonstrates capabilities or concepts that are primarily or solely useful for combat with the PRC, Beijing may assume that the United States is preparing to use them. This is especially true if these capabilities are best used aggressively, such as for a preemptive strike on key PRC military targets. China will again be particularly concerned when posture enhancements include or enable capabilities that could threaten the PRC's second-strike nuclear capabilities or enable a decapitation strike of Chinese leadership. Posture enhancements that involve such capabilities would be therefore more likely to raise perceptions of hostility and lead to an escalatory PRC response.

Although likely not falling into the category of a posture enhancement, if the United States chooses to decrease the size or scale of an existing posture—perhaps through part of a reallocation of forces within the region—in a way that reduces U.S. capabilities that have previously elicited Chinese concern, this would likely lead to a decrease in PRC motivations for an aggressive response or at least those motivations driven by threats that China perceives from the United States.

The profile with which the posture enhancement is introduced can also send a signal that the PRC may take as an indicator of U.S. hostility. Highly visible or public displays, particularly when they involve military capabilities in or near areas of PRC political sensitivity, such as in or near Taiwan, may increase PRC perceptions of U.S. hostility and a disregard for PRC interests. U.S. posture enhancements will also more likely be seen as deliberately hostile when they coincide with politically sensitive dates for the PRC, such as multilateral activities with Taiwan that take place close to Taiwanese elections.

The United States and its partners can also alter the messaging surrounding posture enhancements in ways that would impact PRC perceptions of hostile intent. If the announcement of posture enhancements is accompanied by heated rhetoric from U.S. or allied and partner policymakers, the posture enhancements themselves will be seen as a greater sign of hostility even if the other characteristics of the activity itself do not change. If instead the United States seeks to deescalate a potential PRC response, including through outreach and transparency with the PRC in advance of a public announcement, this could reduce concerns that the PRC would otherwise have about the purpose of the posture enhancement and would make an aggressive response less likely, provided that China finds U.S. assurances to be credible.

## Linkages Between U.S. Posture Characteristics and Threats to Chinese Regime Legitimacy

U.S. posture enhancements that could pose a threat to Chinese regime legitimacy are a central concern for PRC leaders. A number of posture characteristics could alter PRC perceptions of this threat by affecting perceptions of the regime's role as the defender of Chinese interests and the sustainability of China's rise as a great power. For the CCP, regime legitimacy is intrinsically tied to defending the territorial integrity of China. Beijing will be highly sensitive to any U.S. posture that appears to threaten its territorial interests. As the CCP has historically seen the United States as engaging in efforts to support Taiwanese independence, any U.S. posture enhance-

ment on or near Taiwan would be more likely to be met with an aggressive response. Threats to other Chinese regional territorial claims may not risk undermining PRC regime legitimacy as directly, but as U.S. posture enhancements become more proximate to other PRC territorial or maritime claims, such as those in the SCS or ECS, they may still be seen as challenging PRC claims, holding at risk a pillar of CCP legitimacy.

Similarly, U.S. posture enhancements that involve allies and partners whose cooperation with the United States threatens the PRC's perceived territorial integrity may be more likely to be met with an escalatory response. Primarily, this means any U.S. cooperation directly with Taiwan. However, because the PRC has territorial and maritime disputes with states throughout the region, cooperation with other claimants may also trigger a PRC perception of a U.S. threat to its regime legitimacy should the U.S. posture enhancement appear to obstruct China's objectives to claim disputed territory.

When U.S. posture enhancements display capabilities that may have military utility for the defense of what the PRC sees as separatist actors, perceptions of the threat to regime legitimacy would be likely to increase. For example, if the United States adds capabilities in the region whose primary utility would appear to be the interdiction of a PRC attempt to invade Taiwan, the PRC might interpret these as a sign that the United States plans to take active steps to undermine its territorial integrity, a key pillar of CCP regime legitimacy.

The United States might also pose a threat to CCP regime legitimacy through the rhetoric associated with its posture enhancements. For example, if the United States were to accompany any posture enhancements on or near Taiwan with firmer rhetorical commitments to Taiwan's defense in the event of an armed conflict or issue statements that call into question the One China principle, Beijing would likely respond with greater escalation than if these accompanying statements had been absent. If instead U.S. posture enhancements on or near Taiwan were accompanied by statements that reinforced a U.S. commitment to the political status quo or statements that sought to restrain Taiwan from moves toward independence, China may be less likely to escalate in response.

## Linkages Between U.S. Posture Characteristics and Threats to Chinese Economic Development

The geographic location of a U.S. posture enhancement will be vital to understanding how China perceives the potential threat of the posture for its economic development. The PRC requires access to external markets and resources to maintain its economic growth. Any U.S. posture that threatens to close off access to these markets and resources would therefore likely be perceived as a threat to PRC economic development. All else being equal, U.S. posture enhancements near key SLOCs may reinforce concern over the potential obstruction or interdiction of Chinese shipping in the event of a conflict. If U.S. posture enhancements are located near other areas that the PRC deems vital for its economy, such as overland pipelines, or that could prove vital in the future, such as the potential locations of natural resources, this would also increase Chinese concerns.

Similarly, U.S. posture enhancements that involve allies and partners that have the ability to restrict PRC access to key resources and markets could have the same impact. If the United States is seen to be increasing cooperation with partners that can exert control over these key maritime access points, Beijing may see this as evidence that the United States is attempting to recruit these states to engage in efforts that could in the future hamper PRC economic activity.<sup>3</sup>

Specific capabilities involved in a U.S. posture enhancement may also trigger these concerns. If the United States demonstrates capabilities that appear designed to allow it to interdict PRC trade or otherwise interrupt PRC access to resources and markets, Beijing may see them as a direct threat to its economic development. For instance, when the United States masses significant capabilities, such as CSGs along regional SLOCs, the PRC may assess that it could become the target of a potential blockade and act to counter the U.S. military action in an aggressive fashion to deter or prevent the United States from taking such actions.

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<sup>3</sup> In Chapter Four, we address in more detail the nature and scope of possible Chinese responses to such concerns, which will be essential information for military planners deciding how to proceed and seeking to understand the consequences of different posture decisions.

The United States can also alter the likelihood of an escalatory PRC response through the messaging surrounding a U.S. military action. If the United States accompanies its military activities with statements calling into question PRC economic practices, the perceived threat posed to China's economic development might be heightened only to a small degree or not at all. If the United States instead spoke of how the PRC economy thrived only because the United States allowed it to do so, the potential for escalation should be higher. If the United States suggests that it may engage in economic coercion in the event of conflict, such as a blockade, this would send a clear signal that any subsequent activity demonstrating these capabilities poses a threat to PRC economic development. If instead U.S. messaging highlights that posture enhancements with the potential to threaten PRC economic interests were, in reality, aimed at addressing nontraditional security threats, such as reducing piracy or other shared regional security goals between the United States and China, such messaging may reduce the likelihood of an aggressive PRC response.

## Linkages Between U.S. Posture Characteristics and Threats to Chinese Regional Influence

Chinese reactions to U.S. posture enhancements are also likely to be affected by characteristics that signal threats to Beijing's efforts to expand its regional influence. In the case of regional influence, we may see the PRC respond with either the carrot or the stick. U.S. posture enhancements may be seen as a threat to PRC regional influence by encroaching on geographical areas of PRC interest. Posture enhancements that occur in proximity to or in influential states or regions of interest, such as Southeast Asia, may be seen as an attempt to shift influence toward the United States. In this case, the PRC might be more likely to respond with inducements toward these states to shift the balance back toward PRC influence or to discourage such states from allowing further enhancements. U.S. posture may also support efforts within the region to challenge perceptions of PRC credibility in defending its territorial claims, undermining perceptions of China's authority throughout the region as a whole. In this case, the PRC might respond in a more aggressive fashion to undermine U.S. efforts.

Beijing will likely also be concerned with specific types of ally and partner involvement because of the implications for PRC regional influence. The involvement of states that China sees as important bellwethers of China's regional influence, such as Vietnam and Indonesia, may be more likely to draw a PRC response. China would be more likely to respond aggressively if U.S. posture enhancements support efforts within the region to challenge PRC territorial claims (although the extent of the response may vary from minor to severe, an issue we address in Chapter Four). For example, if the United States were to engage with the Philippines following a dispute with the PRC over the Spratly Islands or with India following a dispute in the Galwan Valley, Beijing may believe that the United States seeks to undermine its regional influence by lending support to direct challenges to that influence.

If the United States accompanies the announcement of its posture enhancements with rhetoric suggesting that they are intended to challenge PRC influence and interests, that could increase the risk of an aggressive PRC response. Additionally, if the United States includes messaging surrounding the posture enhancement that runs counter to PRC narratives, the likelihood of an aggressive PRC response may increase as China seeks to reestablish its preferred narratives of U.S. decline and eventual withdrawal from the region. The same may be true for statements issued by U.S. allies and partners. If allies and partners insist that the PRC narrative that the United States has no staying power in the region has no merit, the PRC may feel the need to respond in an assertive fashion to buttress this narrative. If U.S. posture enhancements are timed such that they coincide with or follow PRC regional initiatives, Beijing may believe that the U.S. activities will undermine those initiatives or minimize their impact. Of course, the United States could also reduce China's perceptions of threats to its regional influence by doing the reverse—acknowledging Chinese interests and setting firm limits on the intent and scope of U.S. posture enhancements or citing motivations for them that are not contrary to Chinese interests.



## Linkages Between U.S. Posture Characteristics and U.S. Commitment to the Defense of Its Allies and Partners

Finally, China's perceptions of how committed the United States is to the defense of its allies and partners may shape Beijing's reactions to U.S. posture enhancements activities. When the United States undertakes posture enhancements with allies to which it has a formal defensive commitment, this may send a signal that further increases Chinese perceptions of U.S. commitment to the defense of these allies. Furthermore, increasing Chinese perceptions of U.S. resolve to defend one ally may bolster a reputation of U.S. commitment to all of its allies. When the United States engages in cooperative activities, and especially posture enhancements, with states with whom its military relationship has been growing, the PRC may believe that the U.S. commitment to defend these partners is also growing. If the PRC believes that the United States is firmly committed to the defense of its allies or partners, China may be less likely to challenge that commitment, at least in ways that it perceives would increase the risk of conflict.

A permanent U.S. presence would be likely to send the strongest signal of commitment. For example, a shift from a rotational presence to a permanent presence in the Philippines would suggest a higher likelihood that the United States is willing to be involved in the defense of the Philippines. As a result, we would expect the PRC to respond more cautiously in threatening the security of the Philippines, although China may respond aggressively at lower levels if it believes that doing so could help to undermine the Washington-Manila relationship.

Alternatively, certain U.S. changes to U.S. posture may make the PRC question U.S. commitment to its allies and partners. Perceptions of U.S. commitment may decline if a posture change entails a shift of forces and resources away from allies to which the United States was previously perceived to have had a clear defensive commitment. For example, if the United States reduced its presence in Japan to increase its footprint in the South Pacific, the PRC may be emboldened by this apparent shift in priorities away from a long-standing ally of the United States.

U.S. posture enhancements can also increase Chinese perceptions of U.S. commitment to the defense of its allies and partners by demonstrating the capabilities necessary to defend those allies and partners. If U.S. posture enhancements increase the level of interoperability between U.S. and Taiwanese military forces, for example, it could send a signal that the United States may be willing and more able to use its capabilities in the defense of Taiwan, giving China pause if it were considering aggressive actions against Taiwan.<sup>4</sup>

The United States can make its intent clear by making public statements or sending other signals that indicate that its posture enhancements are designed to improve the ability of the United States to defend the ally or partner. Furthermore, when such statements and messaging are reciprocated by the partner and affirm the common interests of the United States and its partner, this shows a high level of alignment that should reduce the risk of PRC misperception regarding U.S. commitment. However, statements by U.S. government actors who question whether allies are sharing an appropriate amount of the burden of the U.S. security commitment might imply that the value and importance of these alliances are low, leading the PRC to revise its beliefs about U.S. commitment and increasing its willingness to respond aggressively against the ally or partner.

The key points of the foregoing discussion are summarized in Table 3.2 for quick reference. We have added a simplified notation to indicate whether the linkage would be more likely (+) or less likely (–) to lead to aggressive PRC responses. However, as the above discussion clarifies, in many cases, the nature of PRC responses may be conditional, which cannot be reflected fully with binary coding. The primary value of Table 3.2, then, is in its summary of the issues involved and not the indicated direction of their potential effects on PRC behavior.

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, this improvement in perceptions of U.S. commitment to Taiwan would be in tension with threats that such actions could pose to PRC regime legitimacy, which would be expected to have a more escalatory effect.

**TABLE 3.2**  
**Linkages Between U.S. Posture Enhancement Characteristics and Key Factors Affecting Chinese Responses**

Key Factor	Location	U.S. Ally or Partner Involved	Capabilities	Profile
1. China's perceptions of the potential military threat from U.S., allied, and partner capabilities	+ Proximity to militarily sensitive areas, bases, or forces of the PRC, adjusted for geographic range	+ Interoperability of U.S. and allied or partner capabilities and command structure	+ Overall military utility or potential utility of U.S. capabilities involved against PRC	Not applicable
	– Shift of U.S. activity or resources away from militarily sensitive areas, bases, or forces of the PRC, adjusted for geographic range	+ Demonstrated U.S. access to allied or partner locations of high military utility for operations against China or Chinese forces	+ High-technology, novel capabilities that could undermine PRC defenses  + Demonstrated capabilities that increase PRC concern over its own ability to execute key military missions  – Demonstrated capabilities that reduce PRC confidence in its ability to manage escalation	

Table 3.2—Continued

Key Factor	Location	U.S. Ally or Partner Involved	Capabilities	Profile
2. China's perceptions of U.S., allied, and partner hostile intent	+ Proximity to militarily sensitive areas, bases, or forces of the PRC, including especially those that are novel, adjusted for geographic range	+ Posture with allies or partners that the PRC believes to be anti-China (e.g., Japan, Taiwan)	+ Military utility or potential of U.S. capabilities involved against PRC	+ Highly visible, public displays of military capabilities in or near areas of political sensitivity to PRC
	+ Proximity to politically sensitive areas in or near the PRC	+ Posture with allies or partners that the PRC believes the United State is recruiting to be more anti-China or to encircle China (e.g., Vietnam, India)	+ Particular concern for high-technology, novel capabilities that could undermine PRC defenses	+ Timing of U.S. posture enhancements appearing to coincide with politically sensitive dates for the PRC
		+ Posture with comparatively new allies or partners outside of the region (e.g., France, Germany)	+ Demonstration of capabilities or operational concepts perceived to be primarily or only useful for conflict, and especially U.S. aggression against PRC	+ Heated rhetoric from U.S. or allied or partner policymakers that might accompany the posture enhancement
		+ Depth of U.S. cooperation or engagement demonstrated with its allies or partners	– Decrease in scale of posture that had previously elicited Chinese concern  + Set of posture enhancements that together suggest concerted U.S. efforts to prepare for conflict	– Outreach and transparency with PRC in advance of any posture change

**Table 3.2—Continued**

Key Factor	Location	U.S. Ally or Partner Involved	Capabilities	Profile
3. China's perceptions of threats to its regime legitimacy	+ Proximity to Taiwan + Proximity to other PRC territorial claims	+ Posture with allies or partners whose cooperation with the United States threatens PRC's perceived territorial integrity (e.g., Taiwan)	+ Military utility or potential to defend against PRC actions against perceived separatist actors (e.g., Taiwan)	+ Accompanying statements that imply U.S. posture enhancements may be political challenges to PRC legitimacy  – Accompanying statements that reinforce commitment to political status quo and/or respect for PRC interests
4. China's perceptions of threats to its economic development	+ Proximity to SLOCs (especially energy) or maritime chokepoints	+ Posture with allies or partners that have the ability to restrict PRC economic access to resources or markets	+ Demonstrated capabilities that would enable the United States to interdict or otherwise interrupt PRC access to resources or markets	+ Accompanying messaging that U.S. capabilities may be employed to threaten PRC economy in the event of conflict

Table 3.2—Continued

Key Factor	Location	U.S. Ally or Partner Involved	Capabilities	Profile
5. China's perceptions of threats to its regional influence	+ Proximity to influential states or regions of interest to PRC (e.g., Southeast Asia)  + Proximity to disputed territories or other areas that could undermine regional perceptions of China's clout	+ Posture with specific allies or partners that PRC believes may undermine its regional influence if they become closer to the United States (e.g., Vietnam, Indonesia)	Not applicable	+ Accompanying statements that explicitly challenge PRC influence or interests  – Accompanying statements that acknowledge Chinese interests and describe limits to U.S. intent and scope  + Timing of posture enhancements to coincide with or undermine PRC initiatives  + Accompanying U.S., allied, or partner messaging that counters PRC regional narratives

**Table 3.2—Continued**

Key Factor	Location	U.S. Ally or Partner Involved	Capabilities	Profile
6. China's perceptions of U.S. commitment to the defense of U.S. allies or partners	Not applicable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Posture with allies to which the United States has a formal defensive commitment</li> <li>– Posture with allies or partners with whom the U.S. has increasing engagement</li> <li>+ Shift of forces or resources away from allies or partners to which the U.S. was previously perceived to have a clear defensive commitment</li> <li>– Posture enhancements that signal permanent presence or commitment rather than transitory, one-off U.S. involvement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Demonstrated capabilities that could be used to defend allies and partners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Accompanying political statements and signaling that posture enhancements are intended to better defend U.S. ally or partner</li> <li>– Alignment of political statements and messaging with those of U.S. ally or partner</li> <li>+ Accompanying U.S. political statements that question value or importance of U.S. alliance commitment</li> </ul>

NOTE: + indicates characteristics of U.S. activities that may increase the likelihood of a near-term aggressive PRC response; – indicates characteristics of U.S. activities that may decrease the likelihood of a near-term aggressive PRC response.





## Typology of Chinese Responses

The third part of our framework provides a typology of Chinese responses to U.S. posture enhancements, organized by the approximate level of intensity of those responses. China may respond in a more or less aggressive manner based on the considerations discussed in Chapters Two and Three. As China decides how to respond, it may choose among several different policy options that it believes will send relatively similar messages to the United States or other regional actors as it seeks to manage escalation risks while countering U.S. efforts. We argue that the choice among these different intensity *levels* is relatively more predictable than the choice of specific responses within each level. That is, selecting a more or less intensive or escalatory response is likely to be a decision that China considers carefully. But having decided how strong a signal to send, China's specific choice of policy response is likely to be highly context dependent and difficult to predict. Our typology is therefore intended to give U.S. policymakers a rough sense of the potential range of Chinese policy responses to posture enhancements that they may undertake.

China can also vary its responses along two other important dimensions: their time horizons and the types of state power that they employ. China may undertake both near-term and longer-term responses, some of which might not be immediately visible to U.S. observers. It could decide to not change its near-term policies, or change them only marginally, even as it begins to make significant changes to its longer-term policies. Chinese responses may also vary across different domains, incorporating political, economic, or military actions. It is worth noting that in determining the types and levels of Chinese responses in our typology, we attempted to conduct a holistic assessment of all potential Chinese reactions that we derived from many different sources. Our assessments of Chinese

responses, for example, include statements from Chinese media outlets that many might dismiss as propaganda. We do not necessarily treat these statements—what China says publicly through the media—as indicative of the level of Chinese reaction but rather as one element among several that lead to a holistic assessment of the level of Chinese response.

Although the choice of specific actions within each intensity level is likely to be context dependent, we did identify four general behavioral patterns in China's responses that may help U.S. policymakers better prepare.

## Near-Term Chinese Policy Responses

China's near-term responses can occur at a spectrum of intensity that ranges from very low, or virtually indistinguishable from existing patterns of PRC behavior, to very high, verging on or including the beginnings of war. Although divisions along the continuum of potential responses from more to less aggressive are in one sense arbitrary, we believe that it is useful to classify potential PRC responses according to a typology of five intensity levels. Table 4.1 presents these intensity levels, as well as two key dimensions along which the responses tend to vary: (1) *Relative visibility* captures both how clearly a Chinese action responds to a specific U.S. action and how public China's response is likely to be, and (2) *relative escalation risk* describes an approximate assessment of whether a Chinese response would generate inadvertent escalation or otherwise result in a conflict. Of note, Chinese responses to any U.S., allied, or partner military activity within the last several decades have been limited to level 3 and below. China has not

**TABLE 4.1**

### **Key Dimensions of the Intensity Level Typology**

Intensity Level	Relative Visibility	Relative Escalation Risk
Level 1: No/minor response	Low	Low
Level 2: Notable response	Medium	Low
Level 3: Elevated response	High	Medium
Level 4: Severe response	High	High
Level 5: Maximal response	Highest	Highest

recently undertaken any higher-intensity responses with greater escalation risks, although in the Cold War period such responses did occur and could again. In addition, many of China's responses have not been purely military but have also included diplomatic and economic actions either in isolation or combined with military responses.

Table 4.2 lists examples of potential near-term PRC responses to U.S. actions using this intensity level typology. Within each intensity level, the responses are categorized according to their functional area (i.e., primarily political, economic, or military in character). This method builds on previous analysis classifying China's approach to coercive signaling.<sup>1</sup> The specific actions that populate Table 4.2 were generated through the study of historical cases. This list of examples is of course not exhaustive but merely intended to provide representative options within each intensity level and functional area.

In practice, PRC leaders tend to respond to U.S., allied, and partner activities by adopting one or more responses from an intensity level, mixing options from across functional areas depending on both the specifics of the action and the political-strategic context. As a result, near-term responses are very difficult to anticipate. Moreover, in some circumstances, China may choose to undertake a relatively low-intensity response in the near term even as it prepares or executes a more impactful longer-term response.

It is important to note that a Chinese decision to respond at one level of intensity would not preclude its use of policy options at lower levels of intensity as well. So, an *elevated* response could include policy options from levels 3, 2, and 1, and not just level 3 alone. In this report, we identify PRC responses by the highest level that would likely be included, which should be understood as potentially incorporating responses from lower levels as well. The remainder of this section summarizes in more detail the PRC responses associated with each of the intensity levels.

At level 1, no or minor response, Chinese behavior can appear similar to routine activities that might have occurred even absent a U.S., allied, or partner action. Such signals may therefore be difficult to separate from the noise of common political conduct or military operations. This intensity

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of such work include Godwin and Miller, 2013, pp. 29–46; Chubb, 2020/2021; and Beauchamp-Mustafaga et al., 2021.

TABLE 4.2

**Examples of Potential Near-Term Chinese Responses**

Intensity Level	Political Options	Economic Options	Military Options
Level 1: No or minor response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Negative but routine public statements, media criticism</li> <li>Formal diplomatic protest/demarche</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Isolated protests of U.S./A/P companies</li> <li>Warnings of possible damage to regional or global economy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase intelligence collection on U.S./A/P activities</li> <li>Display of Chinese military capabilities</li> </ul>
Level 2: Notable response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concerted campaign of criticism in domestic media and associated international channels</li> <li>Public or backchannel warning of escalation risk</li> <li>Cancellation or rescheduling of key meetings or engagements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limiting of Chinese tourism to U.S./A/P</li> <li>Limit Chinese students studying in U.S./A/P</li> <li>Limit select trade/aid/investment to U.S./A/P</li> <li>Limit availability of international or public resources to the U.S./A/P</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited military-to-military exchanges with U.S./A/P</li> <li>Tests of new military capabilities targeted at U.S./A/P</li> <li>Investments in new capabilities or strategies to counter U.S./A/P</li> <li>Increased military engagements with third-party countries</li> <li>Increased activity to challenge or block U.S./A/P military activity</li> </ul>
Level 3: Elevated response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explicit threat to use force</li> <li>Attempts of political interference in U.S./A/P state</li> <li>Halt to cooperation with United States</li> <li>Deepening of PRC support for U.S. adversaries</li> <li>Closing of U.S. consulate; sending back U.S. diplomats</li> <li>Anti-U.S./A/P activity in UN and other international fora</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Widespread harassment of U.S./A/P businesses operating in China</li> <li>Boycott or destruction of U.S./A/P goods</li> <li>Hampering of production or export of U.S./A/P goods made in China; restrictions to U.S./A/P access to Chinese-controlled or Chinese-dominated supply chains</li> <li>Sharply constrained international or public resources to U.S./A/P</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explicit threat to use force</li> <li>Targeted cyber and disinformation operations against U.S./A/P</li> <li>Aggressive response to U.S./A/P reconnaissance activity and force transits</li> <li>High-profile posturing, exercises, or signaling (i.e., major change to PLA status quo posture and activity)</li> </ul>

**Table 4.2—Continued**

Intensity Level	Political Options	Economic Options	Military Options
Level 4: Severe response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Closing of U.S./A/P embassy</li> <li>• Proposal of anti-U.S./A/P resolution in UN; broad condemnation and call for anti-U.S. action in China-dominated fora</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full boycott or trade cutoff of U.S./A/P</li> <li>• Effort to build anti-U.S. trade movement in China-dominated blocks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Direct use of force against U.S./A/P</li> <li>• Paramilitary action against U.S./A/P</li> <li>• Large-scale cyber and disinformation campaign against critical targets of U.S./A/P</li> </ul>
Level 5: Maximal response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Declaration of war against U.S./A/P</li> <li>• Detainment or internment of U.S./A/P nationals in China</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seizure or appropriation of U.S./A/P firm assets</li> <li>• Interdiction of U.S./A/P trade beyond PRC borders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High-intensity strikes against U.S./A/P targets</li> <li>• National mobilization</li> <li>• Heightened nuclear alert status</li> <li>• Invasion or seizure of contested U.S./A/P territory</li> </ul>

NOTE: UN = United Nations; U.S./A/P = U.S., allied, or partner (adjective) or United States, ally, or partner (noun).

level can also include more-visible responses, however, including diplomatic demarches, governmental permission for or even facilitation of small-scale protests against foreign diplomatic stations or companies, and general demonstrations of military strength. These activities are typically limited in not just their intensity but also their scope and duration, because they are intended more to warn other states about PRC dissatisfaction than to directly coerce states into changing their behavior.

Examples of level 1 policy responses are ubiquitous. In September 2015, for example, during a period of highly strained Sino-Japanese relations associated with Japan's nationalization of the Senkaku Islands, China held a military parade in Beijing's Tiananmen Square to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. The parade, which displayed a variety of military equipment, including ICBMs and anti-ship ballistic missiles, served in part as a warning to regional actors like Japan regarding China's development of the military capabilities necessary to defend its interests in

the ECS.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, however, China's response was limited in intensity and duration, and although it helped demonstrate China's displeasure, it did not significantly increase the risk of escalation.

Level 2, or notable, responses tend to be more visible than level 1 responses. They are intended, in other words, to send clearer and more overt signals to foreign actors that China has changed its behavior in response to foreign activities. Although this means that level 2 responses are often public, they can still be delivered privately. For example, whereas displays of Chinese military capabilities within level 1 responses might include media coverage detailing an already known Chinese weapon system, a level 2 equivalent might include an unpublicized military test of novel capabilities conducted in a way that is likely to be detected by U.S., allied, and partner intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. They also tend to be of longer duration or involve PRC policy changes that, by their nature, tend to take longer to implement than level 1 responses.

Level 2 responses are prominent in the historical cases that we examined. For example, China's approach to the revival of the Quad included a variety of level 2 responses.<sup>3</sup> Politically, China mounted a concerted campaign of protests and criticism using official statements up to the ministerial level, as well as through media commentary. Economically, China's approach has been to allow the media to issue veiled threats about the imperiled economic interests of Quad member states should they follow the United States' anti-China line. It has also used various forms of level 2 economic coercion against Quad member states, such as Australia, although it is worth noting that it has also sought to employ economic means as a carrot rather than as a stick to entice greater bilateral cooperation between China and regional Quad member states. Finally, the PLA has conducted some naval exercises described in press reports as responding to Quad activities.

Level 3, or elevated, responses tend to make more-explicit threats, cause greater diplomatic or economic harm, and increase the risks of escalation than level 2 responses. Regarding threats, level 3 is marked by rela-

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<sup>2</sup> Chris Buckley, "Military Parade in China Gives Xi Jinping a Platform to Show Grip on Power," *New York Times*, September 3, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> More details about China's responses to the Quad are available in Table 2.2 in Chapter Two.

tively clear signaling of political-strategic redlines and the consequences for violating them. Such threats can be specific and detailed or they can describe ambiguous consequences, but regardless, they will overtly describe China's willingness to use force in response to a U.S., allied, or partner action. Whereas level 2 responses tend to suggest the potential for long-term political and diplomatic costs if the United States or its allies and partners do not modify their activities, level 3 responses typically inflict real costs to demonstrate the credibility of China's deterrent or compellent threats to inflict even greater costs in the future. Such cost imposition can involve diplomatic measures (e.g., reducing the U.S. diplomatic and intelligence-gathering footprint in China or by attacking U.S. interests in international organizations), economic punishment (e.g., disrupting U.S. businesses in China or restricting U.S. access to Sino-centric supply chains), and military activities (e.g., using tailored cyber operations against military targets or aggressively challenging the transit of other states' ships and aircraft). By their nature, such level 3 responses tend to run greater risks of escalation than level 1 or 2 responses. This is often by intent: The risk of escalation associated with more-intense responses, such as targeted cyber options or aggressive responses to U.S. reconnaissance activities, serves as a source of coercive leverage with which China can attempt to shift U.S., allied, and partner behavior.

Of course, the risk of escalation also means that China is less likely to adopt level 3 responses unless it perceives relatively serious threats. It also means that in some circumstances China may prioritize political and economic rather than military measures, because it may see the former as less likely to trigger an armed conflict. Beijing's response to the deployment of a THAAD missile system in South Korea serves as a case in point. After the United States and South Korea agreed to deploy a THAAD battery to defend against North Korea in July 2016, Beijing quickly implemented a variety of level 1 and 2 diplomatic protests that quickly metastasized into threats of retaliation in media commentary. Militarily, China froze cooperation and engagement with South Korea, carried out missile exercises that included simulated strikes on the THAAD battery, and appears to have

also increased cyber espionage on the South Korean government.<sup>4</sup> Its most intense responses, however, were economic. Korean celebrities disappeared from Chinese airwaves; China reduced the flow of Chinese tourists to South Korea; and Chinese officials punished Korean companies through formal and informal punitive measures that cost Korea an estimated \$7.5 billion in economic losses.<sup>5</sup> Most prominently, China cracked down on grocery conglomerate Lotte for providing part of a golf course as THAAD's deployment sight by embroiling it in tax and safety inspections that eventually erased much of its footprint in China at great expense.

Level 4, or severe, responses lie between peacetime crisis and the opening stages of a conflict. Because of their seriousness, they are very rare in the history of post-1978 U.S.-China relations, but they are more common in China's relations with regional states, especially in response to perceived challenges to China's territorial integrity. In general, level 4 responses are intended to not just inflict costs, but also to significantly increase the risk of war in order to coerce other states' behaviors. It is worth noting that even though level 4 responses occur in the near term, they are likely to have significant long-term effects on China's relations with both the United States and its allies and partners. Diplomatic responses such as embassy closures, economic responses such as across-the-board boycotts of foreign companies, and military actions such as the direct use of force can not only leave deep, lingering damage in bilateral and multilateral relationships but also shape future diplomatic, economic, and military patterns of behavior. As a result, level 4 responses are very likely to occur alongside longer-term Chinese policy changes.

China has not undertaken a level 4 responses to U.S., allied, or partner activities since the Cold War. The closest that China has come to doing so over the past three decades was the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995–1996, during which China test-fired missiles, conducted live-fire exercises, and simulated amphibious landings off the Taiwanese coast in order to coerce

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Cheng and Josh Chin, "China Hacked South Korea Over Missile Defense, U.S. Firm Says," *Wall Street Journal*, April 21, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Kim, 2020.



Taiwan and shape its presidential elections.<sup>6</sup> However, even these uses of force straddle the line between level 3 and level 4 responses, because the PLA did not directly target Taiwanese or U.S. forces.

Finally, level 5, or maximal, responses constitute the most intense that China is able to exert against the United States or its allies and partners. Maximal political and economic responses—such as interning U.S. or allied and partner nationals in China or seizing foreign financial and economic assets within China—may be intended as either final attempts short of war to coerce other states in disputes that Chinese leaders perceive as critically important or as complementary parts of an anticipated coercive military campaign. Maximal military responses constitute direct preparations for the immediate outbreak of war, as well as precipitating acts of war. In this sense, level 5 responses represent either the failure of PRC deterrence of the United States or its allies and partners or the culmination of PRC compellence efforts against them. Over the past 30 years, there have been no examples of China undertaking level 5 responses to U.S. actions. However, each of China's two largest foreign wars since 1949—its interventions in Korea against UN forces from 1950 to 1953 and its invasion of Vietnam in 1979—involved level 5 responses to perceived threats that PRC leaders judged unresolvable absent the direct, large-scale use of force.

Although there are fewer historical examples of China's use of level 4 and level 5 responses, our framework suggests that certain U.S. activities and posture enhancements could trigger these more-intense PRC reactions. Such activities could include posture changes or development of U.S. capabilities that can target Chinese C2 in ways that affect nuclear forces or regime continuity, such as by deploying LRHWs, which China currently has no defenses against, to a regional ally or partner. Additionally, posture changes that involve Taiwan and, specifically, enhancements that would deploy a U.S. troop presence on the island would be viewed by China as a threat to its regime legitimacy and would involve a high risk of incurring these more-aggressive PRC responses. These are, however, only examples. China could also assess severe threats to its security and interests through the combination of other concerns, as illustrated by its Cold War invasions

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<sup>6</sup> An overview of the crisis is provided in John W. Garver, *Face Off: China, the United States, and Taiwan's Democratization*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997.

of both Korea and Vietnam, neither of which involved direct threats to Chinese C2 or to the status of Taiwan. Ultimately, Chinese reactions are likely to be driven by a holistic assessment of the threats that it faces rather than by examining a small number of simplified redlines.

## Longer-Term Chinese Policy Responses

As previously noted, in some cases China's short-term responses may be quite limited and its longer-term policy changes more pronounced; in other cases, China may use only short-term responses. China can choose to respond on different time horizons in order to address different problems posed by U.S., allied, and partner activities. China might judge shorter-term responses to be sufficient if they allow it to address whatever concerns are raised by U.S. actions. However, China might also adopt longer-term responses intended to improve its future strategic position by altering the political, economic, and military foundations of U.S.-China competition. The likelihood that it would do so may depend in part on U.S., allied, and partner actions. In general terms, the greater the impact of those activities on China's expectations regarding its ability to achieve its long-term goals, the more Chinese leaders will be motivated to react through longer-term changes in PRC policy.<sup>7</sup>

China may respond to threatening U.S. activities through a mixture of both near- and longer-term responses that it views as complementary. Its near-term responses may serve as signaling devices or be used to address pressing threats and seize immediate opportunities, for example, while its longer-term measures improve China's strategic position by altering the political, economic, and military foundations of U.S.-China competition. For example, U.S. development of ballistic missile defense systems has encouraged China to increase funding for systems intended to defeat such

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<sup>7</sup> China's most important policy goals and strategies for achieving them are analyzed in Scobell et al., 2020. China's assessments of the international environment and threats to its interests are also explored in Heath et al., 2016.

defenses, including hypersonic glide vehicles.<sup>8</sup> Longer-term responses can also be economic or political. The BRI was a response to both the global financial crisis, which seemed to China to signal the end of U.S. economic primacy, and the Obama administration's rebalance to Asia which many Chinese observers interpreted as a U.S. commitment to containing China.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the PLA's long-term investments to develop capabilities that could be used to protect or control key SLOCs is a response to Chinese perceptions of the threat that U.S. military capabilities pose to PRC economic development or access to resources.<sup>10</sup>

Like the near-term responses analyzed above, longer-term responses can also include political, economic, and military policies. Table 4.3 lists several examples, but of course it is also not exhaustive.

Longer-term responses can also vary in their intensity. However, we do not disaggregate the options shown in Table 4.3 by intensity level because we found less publicly available information about what might distinguish different intensities of longer-term responses than we did about near-term responses. Moreover, many of those distinctions would rely on us intuiting whether China is doing something relatively more or less—such as spending more on PLAN or making larger investments in military infrastructure abroad.

## Patterns in Chinese Responses

As discussed above, predicting more precisely which policy responses that China may choose to employ following a U.S. posture enhancement is quite

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<sup>8</sup> As the 2020 DoD report on China states, Chinese efforts to develop hypersonic weapons and other advanced technologies, such as directed energy weapons, are driven in part by the desire to achieve the “defeat of missile defense systems” (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. 148).

<sup>9</sup> Weifeng Zhou and Mario Esteban, “Beyond Balancing: China’s Approach Towards the Belt and Road Initiative,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 27, No. 112, July 4, 2018; Michael Clarke, “Beijing’s Pivot West: The Convergence of *Innenpolitik* and *Aussenpolitik* on China’s ‘Belt and Road’?” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 29, No. 123, May 3, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Becker, 2020.

TABLE 4.3

**Potential Longer-Term PRC Policy Responses**

Political Options	Economic Options	Military Options
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prioritizing relations with particular countries</li> <li>• Becoming more or less aggressive or friendly toward particular countries</li> <li>• Emphasizing or deemphasizing certain interests (e.g., territorial disputes)</li> <li>• Changing the intensity of ideological competition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Altering BRI or other investment levels in particular countries</li> <li>• Modulating PRC openness to certain external investments</li> <li>• Moving supply chains or sourcing of goods or resources to or from particular countries</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adjusting spending levels</li> <li>• Shifting spending for different capabilities</li> <li>• Investing in militarily supportive infrastructure</li> <li>• Modifying PLA force posture</li> <li>• Revising military strategic guidelines or strategic direction</li> <li>• Updating PLA doctrine and operational concepts</li> <li>• PLA reorganization</li> </ul>

NOTE: Policies may shift slightly or substantially depending on the level of PRC concern generated by the U.S. activity.

challenging. Within the same intensity level, China may select responses from different functional areas depending on the circumstances. Although we acknowledge that greater precision in anticipating Chinese responses in a generalized framework such as ours is still quite challenging, our study of numerous cases of PRC reactions throughout this report has highlighted four patterns that we discuss further below. These patterns show how and when China typically pairs different functional types of responses together (e.g., military, political, and economic), how it sequences responses, and how its behavior tends to change across different intensity levels. Although certainly not iron-clad rules, these tendencies do appear worth noting.

### Pattern 1: China Tends to Adopt Multilayered Responses to U.S. Actions of Greater Concern

China's responses to U.S. activities, including posture enhancements, that it finds particularly concerning tend to involve a multilayered mixture of political, economic, and military policy changes that Beijing calibrates—and integrates—depending on the situation. For example, the 2011–2012 U.S. rebalance to Asia, which China perceived as an attempt to increase U.S.

influence in the region and to refocus U.S. military capabilities on countering China's rise, helped motivate China to undertake the BRI, which seeks to grow China's regional influence through economic incentives. It also pushed Beijing to increase its own investments in military capabilities to address perceived threats, including in its SCS maritime disputes, and to adopt more forceful rhetoric denouncing the United States as a destabilizing actor in the region.<sup>11</sup>

China appears especially likely to adopt multilayered responses when it perceives threats to its regime security and legitimacy, or its territorial integrity. The case studies that we examined that touched on these concerns in which China used diplomatic, economic, and military actions including those related to Taiwan and the U.S. deployment of THAAD, which were perceived as physically threatening to China's regime security, and those related to territorial disputes in the ECS and the SCS. In most instances, Chinese messaging and warnings through media and official statements were followed by some type of economic threat or action combined with a military response.

Three cases serve to illustrate this tendency. The first is the Trump administration's increased support for Taiwan between 2019 and 2020.<sup>12</sup> China responded first by condemning the actions in official Chinese media and then levied sanctions on U.S. companies involved in arms sales to Taiwan. This was followed by the PLAAF increasing its incursions into Taiwanese airspace, as well as PLA exercises near Taiwan.<sup>13</sup> The second is the Scarborough Shoal incident in 2012. China responded by publicly criticizing the Philippines' incursions into Chinese waters, which was followed by customs restrictions to tie up imports of bananas from the Philippines and by restricting Chinese tourism. Militarily, China deployed the maritime militia and CCG to coerce Manila, while PLAN vessels were stationed nearby.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Zhu and Zhang, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Brunnstrom, Stone, and Than, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> In 2020, PLAAF warplanes conducted more flights into Taiwan's ADIZ than at any time since 1996, and by late 2020, such incursions had become an almost daily occurrence (Xie, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Michael Green, Kathleen Hicks, Zack Cooper, John Schaus, and Jake Douglas, "Counter-Coercion Series: Scarborough Shoal Standoff," Asia Maritime Transparency

The third is the 2016 deployment of THAAD to South Korea. China first relied on diplomatic pressure and public statements, followed by economic measures targeting tourism to South Korea and South Korean businesses in China. Upon news of the deployment, Beijing immediately cancelled high-level military engagements. PLA exercises simulating the targeting of THAAD and related systems began later, in August 2017.<sup>15</sup> These cases illustrate China's tendency to use the full spectrum of its diplomatic, economic, and military power to respond to U.S., allied, and partner activities that it perceives as especially significant or threatening to its core interests.

## Pattern 2: China's Responses to U.S. Military Activities of Limited Concern Tend to Be Primarily or Exclusively Military in Nature

Although PRC responses to U.S. military activities of greater concern tend to be multilayered across several dimensions of Chinese power, responses to less concerning U.S. military activities tend to remain military in nature and do not include corresponding sustained economic or diplomatic responses. Furthermore, in responding, the PLA generally tailors its demonstrated capabilities, exercise location, and tempo to signal its ability to counter a specific U.S. action, while keeping the response commensurate with the level and type of U.S. activity or change in posture.

Two recent examples help illustrate this tendency. The first is China's response to dual U.S. CSG operations in the SCS, which involved PLA fighter aircraft conducting live-fire drills in the SCS and deploying fighters to the Paracel Islands.<sup>16</sup> The PLA Rocket Force also launched one anti-ship DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missile in an exercise in the SCS.<sup>17</sup>

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Initiative, May 22, 2017b.

<sup>15</sup> Meick and Salidjanova, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Minnie Chan, "South China Sea: Chinese Air Force 'Sends Warning' to U.S. Navy with Live-Fire Drills," *South China Morning Post*, July 21, 2020; Brian W. Everstine, "B-1s Fly Through South China Sea Sending Message to Beijing," *Air Force Magazine*, July 23, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> David Lague, "Special Report: Pentagon's Latest Salvo Against China's Growing Might: Cold War Bombers," Reuters, September 1, 2020; Liu Xuanzun, "PLA Rocket

At the end of July 2020, PLAAF and PLAN aviation bombers drilled over the SCS.<sup>18</sup> Although Chinese media condemned U.S. military operations during the PLA drills, China's main response was military and specific to U.S. activities. The second example is the increase in USN transits in the Taiwan Strait and U.S. FONOPs near Taiwan in 2020. China responded by boosting PLAAF incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ.<sup>19</sup> By late 2020, such incursions had become an almost-daily occurrence.<sup>20</sup> However, Beijing appears to have made few directly associated political or economic responses.

### Pattern 3: China's Development of Less-Escalatory Military Options Increases the Likelihood of a Lower-Level Military Response

Over the past decade, China has developed a variety of military and paramilitary capabilities at the lower end of the escalation risk scale. This expanded development of less-escalatory military options has increased the likelihood that China will feel comfortable responding with military levers, because doing so with these improved lower-level capabilities would be accompanied by a reduced escalation risk. China's approach to territorial disputes in the ECS and SCS, for example, has evolved as China's gray zone capabilities have increased, and now emphasizes the use of paramilitary and cyber forces whose use is either deniable or would not cross the threshold of armed conflict. Over the past decade, moreover, China's responses to maritime territorial disputes have involved fewer PLAN ships and more CCG and maritime militia forces. China is also employing more cyber capabilities, although information gaps make the extent of this usage difficult to analyze.

Examples of this tendency from the case studies that we examined include China's response to Japan's nationalization of the Senkaku Islands

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Force Launches DF-26 'Aircraft Carrier Killer' Missile in Fast-Reaction Drills," *Global Times*, August 6, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Mathieu Duchâtel, "China Trends #6—Generally Stable? Facing U.S. Pushback in the South China Sea," blog post, Institut Montaigne, August 6, 2020; Everstine, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> "Chinese Incursions Highest Since 1996," 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Xie, 2021; Blanchard, 2021.

in 2012, which involved regular incursions into Japan's EEZ with CCG ships and fishing vessels. Even though China had the capability to deploy naval vessels, it primarily used the less-escalatory paramilitary forces during this time period.<sup>21</sup> This might also have been a result of the strong U.S. defense commitment to Japan, which likely made China wary of potentially escalating the issue to an armed conflict involving the United States. Another example is the 2019 Vanguard Bank incident involving China's response to Vietnamese-approved drilling operations by the Russian firm Rosneft. In response, China dispatched a maritime research vessel and several CCG vessels to the area, with one vessel reportedly intimidating Vietnamese vessels with high-speed maneuvers performed close to nearby vessels.<sup>22</sup> There are numerous other instances of China using paramilitary forces around disputed territorial waters to increase its presence and coerce regional nations. This prevalence probably also reflects China's belief that these types of capabilities have been very effective in enforcing its territorial claims.

#### Pattern 4: China's Use of Diplomatic and Public Responses Is Not Reflexive but Calibrated to Achieve Chinese Objectives

In the cases that we examined, China's initial response to U.S. actions that it regarded as serious almost always began with the political signaling of Chinese interests and displeasure. This signaling was conducted through a variety of public and private channels, including media commentary and propaganda dissemination, official statements, and diplomatic protests, such as demarches or suspension of high-level civilian or military visits.

China's military reactions, particularly the more provocative ones, were all preceded and accompanied by extensive media commentary and sometimes by official statements that aimed to build domestic and international political support for China's position and demonize any potential target of China's actions. This pattern is particularly apparent in China's responses

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<sup>21</sup> Green et al., 2017a, pp. 80–81; Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), undated.

<sup>22</sup> Lye Liang Fook and Ha Hoang Hop, "The Vanguard Bank Incident: Developments and What Next?" *ISEAS Perspective*, No. 69, September 4, 2019, p. 6.



to the THAAD deployment, the China-Vietnam standoff over Haiyang 981, and the China-Philippines standoff over Scarborough Shoal.

There is therefore a tendency to assume that regardless of U.S. actions, a routinized PRC diplomatic response will accompany them. But China occasionally deviates from this pattern, particularly when it hopes to deescalate a crisis or dispute. For example, the China-India clash in 2020 erupted suddenly and authorities appeared eager to deescalate tensions and reduce the risk of conflict. China's media downplayed the military developments and frequently echoed the messages of officials who called for de-escalation. Additionally, in the cases of Chinese economic retaliation and coercion, officials sometimes downplayed any direct linkage between coercive economic practices, such as tourism restrictions and increased import inspections, and a particular U.S. military action. Examples of this pattern include the China-Philippine standoff near Scarborough Shoal, the restriction of banana imports from the Philippines, and the THAAD deployment in South Korea when China targeted South Korean businesses and restricted tourism.<sup>23</sup>

This aversion to directly linking economic coercion to a specific military activity in public statements likely reflects China's desire to maintain its reputation as a business-friendly country. An exception to this pattern is China's sanctions of U.S. defense companies, which it explicitly links to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan.<sup>24</sup> The difference is likely due to China's view of Taiwan as a core interest and the arms sales as a particularly sensitive issue on which Beijing seeks to send a forceful message.

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<sup>23</sup> Meick and Salidjanova, 2017; Green et al., 2017b; "Philippines Claim Illegal—Beijing," *Manila Times*, April 28, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Brunnstrom, Stone, and Than, 2019.



## Applying the Framework to Illustrative Posture Options

Having presented the three components of our framework for assessing likely Chinese reactions to U.S. posture enhancements, we now illustrate how to apply the framework in this chapter. This demonstration is specifically meant to assist U.S. military analysts in considering the different components of the framework when assessing U.S. posture options. To do so, we first describe the five steps that military analysts will need to complete in order to apply the framework to particular U.S. posture options. Then, we provide a series of illustrative applications of the framework to a hypothetical set of U.S. posture enhancements in the Indo-Pacific region. We selected these illustrations—a U.S. ISR hub in the Philippines, the basing of a reconstituted First Fleet in Australia, and a package of enhanced access agreements with India—to touch on various locations, capabilities, and countries in order to show how the framework can be applied in a variety of circumstances. They do not indicate likely or recommended options for the United States.

### Steps for Applying the Framework

There are five main steps to applying the three parts of the framework described in the previous chapters. This section reviews each of these steps in detail. As the prior chapters make clear, this is a complex framework, designed to be nuanced and relatively comprehensive in its assessment of PRC perceptions and reactions. It is not a quick guide that can be used by relatively junior analysts or those without substantial knowledge of the PRC

and the region. Instead, it is designed to be a supporting tool for analysts with deep prior knowledge of these issues who nonetheless would benefit from a framework that helps to ensure that they have considered all key issues. Military planners or others seeking to apply the framework to a potential posture enhancement should consider these requirements in deciding when and how best to use this framework.<sup>1</sup>

## Step 1: Specify Key Characteristics of the Posture Enhancement

To begin, it is first necessary to specify all of the key characteristics of the proposed posture enhancement, covering the four main categories discussed in Chapter Three: its location, the U.S. allies or partners involved, its capabilities, and its profile. Because an assessment of the posture enhancement as a whole will be dependent on these characteristics, it is important to specify them in detail up front, even if doing so will require some projections or assumptions. In particular, the profile with which the posture enhancement will be introduced may not be known months or even years in advance of its execution. It is nonetheless important to specify what the analyst's assumptions are about the profile of the posture enhancement, because the resulting analysis may be dependent on them.

## Step 2: Identify Relevant Context

Having specified the key characteristics of the posture enhancement, analysts will next need to identify the relevant context that may bear on the assessment. By relevant context, we mean prior events and history that relate specifically to the posture enhancement and its key characteristics. It is assumed that analysts will be generally familiar with overarching strategic issues, such as the tenor and direction of U.S.-China relations, and the overall trajectories of the balance of power in the region. What this

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<sup>1</sup> For example, this framework can be useful for informing various types of assessments on building capabilities and evaluating gaps in security cooperation for regional allies and partners with which military planners may be tasked under DoD Instruction 5132.14, *Assessment, Monitoring, and Evaluation Policy for the Security Cooperation Enterprise*, Washington, D.C., January 13, 2017.

step seeks to ensure is that more-specific details that may not be general knowledge are also accounted for. To do so, analysts should consider relevant context that may bear directly on the proposed posture enhancement for each of the six key factors identified in Chapter Two. Although the below examples are not comprehensive, they include some of the key questions that analysts should consider when thinking about how context could affect China's responses.

- *Factor 1: China's perceptions of the potential military threat from U.S., allied, and partner capabilities.* Have the military capabilities or defense spending of the United States or its allies or partners involved changed substantially in recent years? Has China demonstrated concern for specific U.S., allied, or partner military capabilities near to or in a similar location to where the posture enhancement would be taking place? Has China been conducting military operations in recent years against the United States or its ally or partner involved in the U.S. posture enhancement, and if so, what capabilities do those operations rely on?
- *Factor 2: China's perceptions of U.S., allied, and partner hostile intent.* What has been the recent trajectory of PRC relations with the United States or its ally or partner involved? Have U.S.-China relations recently featured any disputes specifically involving this ally or partner? What has been the recent trajectory of U.S. relations with the ally or partner involved in the U.S. posture enhancement, particularly involving defense issues?
- *Factor 3: China's perceptions of threats to its regime legitimacy.* Have there been notable recent U.S.-Taiwan cooperation efforts? Has the ally or partner involved in the U.S. posture enhancement had recent notable statements on or interactions with Taiwan? Has the U.S. ally or partner made other recent statements or implemented initiatives on other areas of separatist concern to Beijing, such as Xinjiang, Tibet, or Hong Kong?
- *Factor 4: China's perceptions of threats to its economic development.* Is the U.S. ally or partner involved in the U.S. posture enhancement located near any key maritime chokepoints or SLOCs important to China? Does that ally or partner have naval capabilities that could

enable it to restrict Chinese shipping, and does it have a history of exercising those capabilities together with the United States? Do the U.S. ally or partner and China have a notable history of shared resource extraction or is China dependent on the U.S. ally or partner for raw materials?

- *Factor 5: China's perceptions of threats to its regional influence.* Does the U.S. ally or partner involved in the U.S. posture enhancement have a notable role in the region itself? Has it been working to expand its influence? Has China made notable recent efforts to gain influence with the U.S. ally or partner?
- *Factor 6: China's perceptions of U.S. commitment to the defense of U.S. allies or partners.* How strong and explicit has the U.S. commitment to defend the ally or partner involved in the U.S. posture enhancement been in the past? What has been the prior history of U.S. basing and security cooperation in the allied or partner country? Have there been any notable tensions in that bilateral relationship that may have caused China to question the credibility of any U.S. promises to defend the allied or partner country?

Although the relevant context will likely vary considerably across different posture enhancements, these example questions should provide analysts with a starting point for the types of issues to consider.

### Step 3: Assess the Linkages Between Posture Characteristics and Key Factors

The next step in applying the framework is to identify linkages between posture characteristics and key factors (summarized in Table 3.2 in Chapter Three) and apply them to this particular posture enhancement. Table 3.2 lists 48 different ways in which posture characteristics may affect the six key factors and, through them, Chinese responses. For a full application of the framework, each of these linkages should be considered individually (although it is possible to use pieces of the framework to address more-narrow questions). For example, to assess the first of these potential linkages (top row, second column), consider whether the location of the proposed posture enhancement is proximate to militarily sensitive areas, bases, or

forces of the PRC, adjusted for geographic range. After assessing this linkage, the analyst would then consider the next: whether the posture enhancement entails a shift of U.S. activity or resources away from militarily sensitive areas, bases, or forces of the PRC, adjusted for range—and so on, working through the remaining 46 potential linkages.

In reviewing all potential linkages between posture characteristics and key factors, the analyst should also consider what effect the relevant context identified in step 2 may have on these linkages. For example, has China expressed prior concern for U.S., allied, or partner military operations in a given location, or has that location been the source of prior tension between the two states? If so, then the importance of the linkage between the location of the posture enhancement and PRC concerns over military threats from U.S., allied or partner capabilities (factor 1) may be enhanced. Our framework treats relevant context as a potential multiplier of concern for linkages that apply to a given posture enhancement. That is, although context on its own is unlikely to make a posture characteristic concerning for China, when combined with a clear linkage with a key factor as outlined in Table 3.2, China's concern over that posture characteristic may be heightened.

#### **Step 4: Aggregate the Overall Effects on Chinese Thinking by Posture Characteristic**

After assessing all of the potential linkages between posture characteristics and key factors, the next step in applying our framework is to aggregate overall Chinese concerns, first by each posture characteristic category, then by the posture enhancement as a whole. Thus, again using Table 3.2 in Chapter Three as a guide, the analyst would first review all of the concerns (and the potential direction of their effects) noted in step 3 in the location column, then consider them together. How substantial do the concerns for all location linkages assessed in step 3 appear to be? Do they appear to reflect only minor or limited concerns for China? Or do they instead suggest fundamental threats to Chinese interests likely to be of great concern to Beijing? Or somewhere in between? Furthermore, do some linkages suggest considerations that would reduce PRC concerns or its willingness to respond aggressively that may outweigh motivations for more aggressive action?

This process would then be completed for each of the remaining three posture characteristic categories (the columns in Table 3.2) before further aggregating these linkages into a single assessment for the entire posture enhancement. Our framework suggests aggregating PRC concerns by posture characteristic category as an interim step because these characteristics are the levers that U.S. military planners considering a potential posture option may wish to alter in response to the results of the analysis. If Chinese concerns with the specific location of a posture enhancement are very high, for example, but the specific location is not essential for U.S. goals for the enhancement, which are focused on improving interoperability with the ally or partner, then planners may wish to alter the location while maintaining other posture characteristics.

In the examples below we use a simple summarization scheme that borrows the same category names from the PRC reaction typology introduced in Chapter Four (no or minor, notable, elevated, severe, or maximal response) to indicate the approximate aggregate intensity level of PRC concern with a given posture characteristic. Although these categories are artificial, they do allow for rough divisions of potential intensity levels of PRC concern, and we believe that choosing five intensity levels strikes an appropriate balance between too few levels, which would not provide an opportunity to reflect real differences, and too many levels, which would force analysts to provide a false precision from their assessments.

The process of aggregating PRC concerns is subjective and reliant on the judgment and expertise of the analyst. Although in some cases a large number of identified linkages in step 3 for a given posture characteristic (i.e., a column in Table 3.2) may indicate an elevated Chinese concern, in other cases one or two linkages may on their own be sufficient to indicate an existential area of concern for China. Our framework can help ensure that analysts account for a fuller range of considerations that may bear on Chinese thinking, but decisions regarding how to weight those considerations (i.e., which are more important than others and how likely would each push China to consider taking more-escalatory responses) will ultimately need to rely on the judgment of the analyst applying the framework.



## Step 5: Identify Potential Chinese Responses

After assessing an approximate intensity level of PRC concern from the posture enhancement, the final step in applying our framework involves identifying the type of PRC actions that could plausibly occur in response. As noted above, our framework suggests aggregating PRC concerns to an approximate intensity level that matches the categories used in the PRC reaction typology summarized in Tables 4.1 and 4.2 in Chapter Four. The analyst would then review the examples at the assessed intensity level and those below it and identify potential responses that would fit the specific circumstances of the posture enhancement. The illustrative applications of the framework below provide several examples of this process.

More challenging, however, is identifying the trade-off between potential near-term and long-term PRC responses. As discussed in Chapter Four, China may decide to respond only in a limited fashion in the near term to U.S. posture enhancements of greater concern while investing substantial resources in longer-term responses that might ultimately be of greater concern to U.S. policymakers. Although we provided some guidance in Chapter Four regarding when less-visible, longer-term policy changes may be an important aspect of Chinese responses, it may be worth emphasizing here that the higher the level of Chinese concern with a U.S. posture enhancement, the larger the potential for China to undertake an accompanying longer-term shift in policy with its more visible near-term responses. We summarize the five steps of applying our framework in Table 5.1.

As we discussed in Chapter One, our framework is a guide to help organize an analyst's thinking regarding how China may perceive and react to U.S. posture enhancements. It is not a mathematical formula that translates inputs (posture enhancements) into outputs (Chinese reactions) with precision. Many key steps in the application of the framework, and step 4 in particular, require judgment calls by the analyst. The value of the framework, then, comes from forcing the analyst to consider the full range of ways in which Chinese perceptions and thinking may be affected by U.S. actions, and then helping the analyst to document the assumptions made upon which assessed Chinese reactions depend. The following sections provide illustrative examples of how we used the framework in combination with our subject-matter expertise to assess likely Chinese reactions to three different hypothetical U.S. posture enhancements.

**TABLE 5.1****Summary of Framework Application Steps**

Step	Considerations
1. Specify key characteristics of the posture enhancement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Location</li> <li>• U.S. ally or partner involved</li> <li>• Capabilities</li> <li>• Profile</li> </ul>
2. Identify relevant context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prior history or events related to posture option and key characteristics</li> </ul>
3. Assess the linkages between posture characteristics and key factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 48 potential linkages (shown in Table 3.2, Chapter Three)</li> <li>• Relevant context</li> </ul>
4. Aggregate the overall effects on Chinese thinking by posture characteristic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Combination and interaction of PRC concerns by posture characteristic category</li> <li>• Combination and interaction of PRC concerns for posture option as a whole</li> </ul>
5. Identify potential Chinese responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Typology of PRC responses to identify level and type of likely Chinese reactions (shown in Tables 4.1 and 4.2, Chapter Four)</li> </ul>

## Framework Application 1: United States Builds an ISR Hub in the Philippines

This framework application explores China's potential reactions if the United States were to deploy a robust ISR hub to various locations in the Philippines. We assessed that China's potential reactions would likely be elevated (level 3 of 5) in nature. China's responses could be more aggressive in nature from this posture enhancement primarily because of its concerns over the proximity of the ISR assets to the SCS and Taiwan and the potential for the Philippines and the United States to use the ISR sites to monitor Chinese forces around territorial disputes in the SCS and the Taiwan Strait. China would also likely be concerned by a closer U.S.-Philippines defense relationship and apparent Philippine movement toward a more anti-China stance, which would affect China's regional standing and influence. The likelihood of an aggressive Chinese response would be somewhat mitigated, however, by the increased U.S. defensive commitment to the Philippines and by providing ISR capabilities that could be used to better defend Philippine territory and forces. Plausible Chinese responses could include information

operations campaigns directed against the United States and the Philippines, limited economic retaliation against the Philippines, and increased Chinese military exercises, patrols, and incursions in disputed territorial waters in the SCS and in or near the Taiwan Strait. Any substantial direct PRC military action against the Philippines, however, would be unlikely.

## Posture Enhancement Details

This posture enhancement would include multiple installations throughout the Philippines, deploying a combination of short- and medium-range radars that could augment ISR and maritime domain awareness (MDA) in contested SCS waters, including those close to Taiwan. Specific locations include installations on Luzon and/or Basco in the north, close to Taiwan, near Manila, which would allow for increased ISR in the SCS and around contested features, such as Scarborough Shoal; and in Palawan, which would range the contested Spratly Islands and other Southeast Asian features. The sole partner for this posture enhancement is the Philippines, which would provide some infrastructure for the ISR locations and local military assistance in operating the ISR stations in conjunction with U.S. forces.

The ISR hub would also include a sizeable number—in the hundreds—of smaller surveillance unmanned aircraft systems (UASs), launched from the various ISR sites. These surveillance drones would be augmented by ground-based short- and medium-range radars, which could allow the United States and the Philippines to surveil the majority of the SCS and the waters around Taiwan. In addition to radars and surveillance drones, the United States would deploy 500–1,000 U.S. Army personnel on a rotational basis to assist the Philippine military with manning the ISR systems and training Philippine personnel to maintain and operate them, as well as helping to process the data and intelligence gathered from the new ISR capabilities to form a more coherent common operating picture.

We assumed that this posture enhancement would be accompanied by statements from U.S. and Philippine leaders on the need for maritime surveillance around the Philippines because of China's assertive actions around SCS territorial disputes. The United States would further message that increased surveillance could help protect FONOPs in international waters in the SCS. In addition, U.S. leadership and congressional state-

ments would reference the Philippines as a key ally in countering Chinese regional influence and assertive actions in the SCS.

## Relevant Context

Several pieces of prior context would likely inform Chinese perceptions and reactions to this posture enhancement. These include China's existing information advantage in the SCS, increasing U.S. naval presence in the SCS, and tensions in the China-Philippines bilateral relationship because of territorial disputes and energy exploration issues. We discuss this context as it relates to each of the six key factors that drive China's reactions to posture enhancements and summarize key points in Table 5.2.

China's perceptions of the military threat posed by broadening ISR capabilities in the Philippines would likely be affected by concerns over losing its ISR advantage in the region. Chinese forces currently use a combination of maritime assets, unmanned systems, and satellite surveillance to conduct coercive maritime operations in and around territorial disputes in the SCS. With this advantage, PRC forces are often able to arrive in a disputed area before other claimants know that they are there, leading to a delayed response by regional countries.<sup>2</sup> Enhanced U.S. ISR in the Philippines would somewhat reduce this PRC advantage. In addition, increased U.S. military presence and surveillance in the SCS likely would add to China's concerns. For example, official Chinese statements have noted that "the [increased U.S.] surveillance activity around China is a sign the U.S. is stepping up combat readiness."<sup>3</sup>

China's perceptions of hostile intent from the Philippines hosting U.S. ISR capabilities would be informed by existing tensions in the China-Philippines bilateral relationship, mainly stemming from maritime territorial disputes. Although China has tried to mitigate tensions through offering joint energy exploration deals and other economic carrots, Chinese maritime forces have continued operations around disputed waters

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<sup>2</sup> Felix K. Chang, "China's Maritime Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Capability in the South China Sea," Foreign Policy Research Institute, May 5, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> John Feng, "U.S. Flew over Two Spy Planes a Day in South China Sea Throughout April," *Newsweek*, March 5, 2021.

and features claimed by the Philippines.<sup>4</sup> Chinese perceptions of threats to regime legitimacy from the deployment of ISR to the northern Philippines near Taiwan would likely be affected by recent U.S. efforts to rally allied and partner support for Taiwan, as well as increased U.S.-China tensions over Taiwan, which could augment Chinese fears of the use of increased ISR to detect and target PRC forces in a conflict.<sup>5</sup>

For threats to economic development, China's reactions could be influenced by concern over U.S. ability to interdict Chinese shipping and fleet movements in Southeast Asian SLOCs, as enhanced ISR in the SCS would augment U.S. ability to monitor key shipping lanes and potentially restrict Chinese forces in a conflict.<sup>6</sup> For China's perception of threats to regional influence, China's view of the Philippines' role in ASEAN and U.S.-Philippines relations would likely affect Chinese concerns. Despite China attempting to drive a wedge between the Philippines and ASEAN, the Philippines remains engaged with the ASEAN states, reiterating support for a peaceful resolution to the SCS disputes and ensuring sovereignty for all nations.<sup>7</sup> Finally, Chinese perceptions of the U.S. commitment to the defense of the Philippines would likely be informed by the U.S.-Philippines defense relationship, which has weathered challenges over the past several years, including the near-cancellation of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA).<sup>8</sup> Table 5.2 summarizes the relevant context for this posture enhancement.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, in April 2021, China moved 220 maritime militia vessels within the Philippines' EEZ and anchored them in Whitsun Reef days before the United States and the Philippines held their annual U.S.-Philippines Balikatan Exercise (Enrico Dela Cruz, "Philippines, U.S. to Begin 2-Week Joint Military Drill on Monday," Reuters, April 11, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> For example, PLAAF incursions across the median line of the Taiwan Strait significantly increased in 2020 (Liu Xuanzun, "U.S. Attempts to Monitor PLA Submarines with Increased Spy Ship Activities in S. China Sea: Think Tank Report," *Global Times*, July 13, 2021c).

<sup>6</sup> Gunness, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Permanent Mission of the Republic of the Philippines to the United Nations, "PH Highlights ASEAN and Philippine Perspectives on Upholding the UN Charter," United Nations, January 9, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> In 2019, the Philippines submitted a termination letter for the VFA, but the agreement was extended twice before the Philippines withdrew the letter completely, stat-

**TABLE 5.2****Summary of Relevant Context for U.S. ISR Hub Deployment in the Philippines**

Factor	Key Points
PRC perceptions of	
1. potential military threat from U.S., allied, and partner capabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• China's loss of ISR advantage in the SCS</li> <li>• Increased U.S. surveillance and military presence in SCS</li> </ul>
2. U.S., allied, and partner hostile intent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tensions in the China-Philippines bilateral relationship</li> </ul>
3. threats to its regime legitimacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• U.S. attempts to rally allied and partner support for Taiwan</li> <li>• U.S.-China tensions over Taiwan</li> </ul>
4. threats to its economic development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Existing U.S. ability to interdict key Southeast Asian SLOCs</li> </ul>
5. threats to its regional influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• China-Philippines bilateral tensions</li> <li>• Philippines' role in ASEAN and region</li> </ul>
6. U.S. commitment to the defense of U.S. allies and partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complex U.S.-Philippines defense relationship</li> </ul>

## Effects of Posture Enhancement Characteristics on Chinese Thinking

This section describes the effects of each of the posture enhancement's characteristics (location, U.S. ally or partner involved, capabilities, and profile) on Chinese perceptions and thinking and the likely level of aggressiveness of any resulting PRC responses. We provide a summary of our assessments across all posture characteristics in Table 5.3.

### Location

We assessed that the location of an ISR hub in the Philippines would affect Chinese reactions through five different factors. For China's perceptions of the potential military threat posed by U.S. or allied capabilities, deploying

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ing its decision to continue the VFA was made "in light of political and other developments in the region" (Raissa Robles, "Philippines' Visiting Forces Agreement with U.S. in Full Force After Duterte 'Retracts' Termination Letter," *South China Morning Post*, July 30, 2021).

ISR stations to locations in the northern Philippines (Basco and/or Luzon) would increase Chinese concerns because those installations could range Taiwan and the surrounding waters, making it easier for the United States to detect Chinese forces and maritime activities, particularly during a conflict. The ISR installations near Manila and in the southern part of the Philippines would also raise Chinese concerns because they could be used to detect China's maritime paramilitary forces—the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia and the CCG—before they could arrive in disputed waters or around disputed features. This would negate China's current ISR advantage in the area.

Similarly, Chinese perceptions of U.S. and allied hostile intent would likely increase as China would likely believe that the location of the ISR installations near the SCS and related territorial disputes was selected in order to detect and respond to Chinese actions in those areas. As noted in the above "Relevant Context" section, these concerns would be heightened by prior Chinese worries over an increased U.S. military presence in the SCS and U.S. efforts to promote shared ISR among allies and partners.

The location of these ISR assets would also likely affect Chinese perceptions of threats to its regime legitimacy because of the increase in surveillance capabilities that could be used in a Taiwan conflict to surveil and target Chinese forces. In addition, the ISR installations' other locations in Manila and the southern Philippines could be used to detect Chinese activities in and around maritime territorial disputes. Prior Chinese angst over U.S. support to Taiwan would heighten the level of concern for this posture characteristic.

China's perceptions of threats to its economic development would also be heightened because the location of these ISR assets is close to Southeast Asian SLOCs, and the additional ISR could augment the U.S.-Philippines ability to surveil key shipping lanes. In addition, the enhanced ISR in the Philippines could be used to detect illegal Chinese energy exploration or fishing activities in the SCS, which would increase China's concerns over regional nations' abilities to interdict or obstruct Chinese maritime forces and activities in that area. Prior PRC anxiety about U.S. ability to interdict Southeast Asian SLOCs and the rocky history of China-Philippine energy exploration would likely augment the level of Chinese concern.

Finally, China's concern over threats to its regional influence would also likely increase as the location of the ISR installations, close to the SCS, may signal more U.S. presence and commitment to countering China's territorial claims, and this could be used to build U.S. influence in Southeast Asia with other claimant states, such as Malaysia and Indonesia.

We therefore assessed the overall level of Chinese concern with the location of this posture enhancement to be elevated (level 3 of 5). China's concerns primarily focus on the proximity of the ISR hubs to sensitive areas in the SCS, which could be used to surveil disputed territorial waters and hamper China's ability to conduct maritime operations against rival claimants. In addition, ISR that could range Taiwan heightens Chinese fears that such capabilities could be used in a Taiwan conflict. China's concern would likely not be higher than elevated because the United States already has fairly good ISR in the SCS region and around Taiwan, so the additional capabilities provided by this posture enhancement would be more limited or localized in nature. The enhancements would likely be insufficient to fundamentally alter China's perceptions of the balance of forces in the region. Thus, although the addition of the ISR hub to the Philippines would be worrying for China, it would not be a cause for more-escalatory reactions.

### U.S. Ally or Partner Involved

We assessed that the involvement of the Philippines with this posture enhancement, by hosting the U.S. deployment and cooperating in its operation, would likely affect Chinese thinking and perceptions through four key factors. First, Philippine support for and participation in the ISR hub would likely increase China's perceptions of the potential military threat from U.S. or allied capabilities, because it demonstrates greater interoperability of U.S.-Philippines military forces, as well as more U.S. access to Philippine military installations. Chinese concern would also be elevated by previous worries about increased U.S. naval presence in the SCS. In addition, enhancing ISR for the Philippines would concern China because it could hamper Chinese maritime forces' ability to conduct operations in disputed waters, which currently rely on China's ISR advantage.

Chinese concerns about U.S. and allied hostile intent would also likely increase, because the Philippines allowing the presence of more U.S. military personnel and capabilities would suggest that Manila is moving toward



a stronger anti-China stance and a potentially closer relationship with the United States. These concerns would likely be enhanced by historical tensions in the China-Philippines bilateral relationship over territorial disputes and energy exploration issues. In addition, deeper military integration between U.S. and Philippine forces may signal Philippine support for the United States in a SCS or Taiwan conflict, which would elevate the level of Chinese concern.

China's concerns over threats to its regional influence would also potentially increase with the involvement of the Philippines in this posture enhancement. Closer military cooperation between the United States and the Philippines and demonstrated access for capabilities to counter Chinese coercive activities could serve as a model for other regional states considering closer defense relations with the United States and thus threaten China's regional influence. These concerns would be enhanced by prior tensions in the China-Philippines bilateral relationship and the Philippines' interaction with other regional states in Southeast Asia and ASEAN, where Manila could use its influence to sway other nations to support stronger relations with the United States.

Finally, by demonstrating a closer defense relationship between the United States and the Philippines, this posture enhancement would likely increase Chinese perceptions of U.S. commitment to defend its ally. In addition to demonstrating closer U.S.-Philippines ties, developing a robust ISR hub in the Philippines would further increase interoperability between the military forces, which would likely increase Chinese perceptions that the United States would intervene to support its ally in the event of a conflict. The investment in Philippine ISR capabilities also would reflect a longer-term commitment by the United States to Philippine security. Prior Chinese concerns about increasing U.S. naval capabilities in the SCS along with other recent signs of a stronger U.S. defense commitment to the Philippines would also potentially increase Chinese perceptions of such U.S. commitment.

We did not assess that involvement of the Philippines would affect Chinese reactions for factor 3, Chinese perceptions of threats to its regime legitimacy, because the Philippines would likely remain only supportive of Taiwan to a limited degree, and factor 4, Chinese perceptions of threats to its economic development, because the Philippines would likely have lim-

ited interest in threatening PRC economic access, and Beijing and Manila have, at various times, discussed joint energy exploration deals in the SCS.

In aggregate, we assessed that the level of Chinese concern stemming from the involvement of the Philippines in this posture enhancement would be elevated (level 3 of 5). The decision by the Philippines to allow increased U.S. military presence, capabilities, and access would likely be perceived as indicating a move by Manila toward an anti-China stance and potentially the beginnings of the formation of an anti-China coalition in Southeast Asia. However, the increased U.S. defense commitment to the Philippines may help deter a direct, aggressive Chinese response against the Philippines, although China would remain motivated to express its concerns in other ways. Furthermore, China's level of concern would likely not be higher than elevated because the United States already has a defense treaty with the Philippines. Thus, although this posture enhancement would bolster the U.S.-Philippines relationship and augment the Philippines' ISR capabilities, it would not be entirely unexpected by China given existing U.S.-Philippines defense relations.

### Capabilities

We assessed that the capabilities enabled by building an ISR hub in the Philippines would affect Chinese reactions through three key factors. First, Chinese concerns about the potential military threat from U.S. and Philippine capabilities would likely increase with this posture enhancement, because it would raise the Philippines' ability to detect and potentially target China's naval and paramilitary maritime forces in the SCS and near Taiwan. This would reduce the previous ISR advantage that China had over regional countries in the SCS and hinder China's ability to defend disputed maritime territory or conduct coercive operations. However, increased ISR in the SCS could also deter China from aggressive responses, because Chinese maritime activities would be more visible and, without the element of surprise, which would give Philippine forces time to respond, China might fear that its actions could lead to escalation. Previous Chinese concerns about efforts by the United States to augment or coordinate regional intelligence and surveillance data sharing, as well as the PRC's reliance on its current information advantage, would likely

elevate the level of Chinese concern about better U.S. ISR capabilities to conduct regional maritime operations.

Similarly, Chinese perceptions of U.S. and allied hostile intent would likely also increase with the deployment of new ISR capabilities to the Philippines, because China would be likely to assess that these capabilities were intended to detect Chinese forces in disputed waters, as well as potentially target PRC forces in a SCS or Taiwan conflict, though of less utility or unnecessary for other uses.

Finally, although China may perceive hostile intent from these capabilities, it may also assess that better ISR capabilities would enhance the Philippines' ability to defend its territory through increased surveillance and intelligence capabilities, which in turn would allow the Philippine military to coordinate a response. This would in turn raise China's assessment of the potential costs of aggressive military action against Manila, potentially decreasing the likelihood that Beijing would do so.

We did not assess that enhancing ISR capabilities in the Philippines would affect Chinese reactions for factor 3, Chinese perceptions of threats to its regime legitimacy, because these capabilities are not specifically directed toward a Taiwan conflict nor are they new or novel capabilities; rather, they augment existing U.S. ISR near Taiwan. We also did not assess that this posture characteristic would be relevant for factor 4, Chinese perceptions of threats to its economic development, because these capabilities do not significantly augment U.S. ability to conduct SLOC operations and interdict Chinese shipping nor would they be relevant in restricting China access to SCS energy resources. For factor 5, Chinese perceptions of threats to its regional influence, the capabilities involved would likely have limited utility for U.S. efforts to undermine PRC regional influence or enhance U.S. regional influence.

Overall, we assessed that the Chinese level of concern for the capabilities of this posture enhancement would be notable (level 2 of 5). China's concerns about enhanced ISR capabilities in the Philippines primarily would focus on the increased ability of the Philippines and the United States to detect Chinese maritime forces in the SCS and near Taiwan and potentially target these forces in a conflict. China's level of concern for such capabilities would likely not be higher than notable for this posture enhancement because the ISR radars would be relatively short range, involve limited

capability for a Taiwan scenario, and merely augment ISR capabilities that already exist in the region.

### Profile

The profile or messaging that we assumed would accompany this posture enhancement would likely affect Chinese reactions through two key factors. First, China's concern for threats to its regional influence would likely increase because the public messaging by the United States would highlight that the increased ISR capabilities would be used to assist the Philippines and the Southeast Asia region with countering Chinese coercive maritime operations in SCS territorial disputes. In addition, the publicity accompanying the posture enhancement would emphasize a closer U.S.-Philippines defense relationship and increased U.S. military presence in the Philippines. Both messages would augment Chinese concerns about its regional influence and ability to sway the Philippines and other regional states from aligning more closely with the United States.

Second, the profile of this posture enhancement would emphasize the closer security relationship between the United States and the Philippines, as well as the Philippines' increased ability to use the new ISR capabilities for its own security and to assist others with detecting Chinese activities in disputed waters. In turn, this would likely increase Chinese perceptions of the U.S. commitment to defend its ally.

We did not assess that the profile of this posture enhancement would likely be relevant to Chinese reactions for factor 1, because the messaging would not affect the level of military threat that China would perceive; for factor 2, because the messaging would be relatively restrained and would likely not substantially increase China's perception of U.S. and Philippine hostile intent; for factor 3, because the messaging would not target China's actions over Taiwan or other sensitive territorial disputes; or for factor 4, because the messaging would also not directly touch on potential threats to China's economic development.

Thus, we assessed the overall level of Chinese concern with the profile of the posture enhancement to be notable (level 2 of 5). China would likely pay most attention to U.S. and Philippine messaging that emphasizes that the ISR capabilities are meant to help counter China's actions in the SCS and around territorial disputes. However, these types of messages would likely

be of low concern to China in general. China's concerns would likely not rise above notable because the profile accompanying the posture enhancement would only add to the messaging that the Philippines and the United States already convey in general on countering China's coercive actions in the SCS.

## Summary of Effects on Chinese Thinking and Possible Responses

In summary, deploying an ISR hub and associated resources to various locations in the Philippines would likely have an elevated (level 3 of 5) effect on Chinese reactions. Aggregating across the four posture characteristic categories, we identified an elevated level of Chinese concern for location and U.S. ally or partner involved and a notable level of PRC concern for capabilities and profile. Given that the location and the partner involved—the Philippines—is relevant for both China's existing concerns over territorial disputes in the SCS and for a potential Taiwan conflict, we weighed these two characteristics as being sufficient to likely trigger an elevated reaction. The primary Chinese concerns from this posture enhancement include the location and proximity of the ISR capabilities to territorial disputes in the SCS and near Taiwan that could be used to detect and target Chinese forces. Additionally, China would have elevated concerns about the Philippines drawing closer to the United States and adopting a stronger anti-China stance, which could affect China's regional influence. However, the posture enhancement would demonstrate a stronger U.S. commitment to defend the Philippines, which could deter a more aggressive Chinese response.

The typology of potential PRC reactions (shown in Tables 4.2 and 4.3 in Chapter Four) illustrates some of the specific actions that China could take at an elevated level of concern. Potential short-term responses could include Chinese information operations and propaganda campaigns. For example, this messaging could characterize the increase in U.S. military capabilities in the region as destabilizing, include statements that deride the Philippines for allowing this increased U.S. military presence, and emphasize that China is the primary regional power with legitimate claims to the SCS and call for resolving disputed claims bilaterally. Additionally, China might engage in limited economic retaliation against the Philippines, such as restricting cer-

tain types of exports or imports that could impact the Philippine economy, as well as potentially restricting Chinese tourism to the Philippines.

China's reactions at this elevated level also might include increased or larger-scale military exercises and patrols in and around disputed territory in the SCS involving PLAN, PLAAF, and CCG. This would potentially also be the case near Taiwan, with increased PLAAF incursions across the Taiwan Strait and naval patrols near Taiwan likely. Despite these elevated responses, we assessed that direct Chinese military action against the Philippines would be unlikely for this posture enhancement, because U.S. ISR capabilities, though concerning to China, do not directly threaten Chinese forces, and the increased U.S. defense commitment to the Philippines and the greater capabilities enabled by the ISR hub would help to deter a more direct PRC military response.

Finally, we assessed that this posture enhancement would not likely result in any long-term changes to Chinese investments or capabilities, although it would somewhat negate the ISR advantage that China already has. In terms of the China-Philippines relationship, China might adopt a more coercive posture against the Philippines if Beijing were to assess that Manila had firmly turned toward the United States and against China. However, it would be more likely that China will continue to use a combination of carrots and sticks to influence Philippine decisions regarding future U.S. military presence and footprint. Although this deployment of U.S. forces to the Philippines would be noteworthy, Beijing would certainly be mindful that substantially larger and more-concerning deployments could be undertaken in the future if Manila were to turn more resolutely against China. Table 5.3 summarizes the posture characteristics, level of Chinese concern, and key effects on the potential aggressiveness of Chinese responses from this posture enhancement.

TABLE 5.3

### Summary of Effects of U.S. ISR Hub Deployment in the Philippines on Chinese Thinking

Posture Characteristic	Level of PRC Concern	Key Effects
Location	Elevated (3/5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased PRC motivation for aggressive response because of               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>proximity of ISR to SCS and Taiwan</li> <li>proximity to Southeast Asian SLOCs</li> <li>concerns enhanced by increased U.S. naval presence in SCS and U.S. efforts to promote ISR and data sharing with regional states.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
U.S. ally or partner involved	Elevated (3/5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased PRC motivation for aggressive response because of               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>increased U.S.-Philippines ISR interoperability</li> <li>greater U.S. access to Philippine military sites</li> <li>Philippine support for U.S. military that suggests move to anti-China coalition</li> <li>deeper U.S.-Philippines military integration could signal Philippine support for the United States in a regional conflict</li> <li>closer U.S.-Philippines cooperation could reduce China's regional influence</li> <li>concerns enhanced by existing PRC-Philippine tensions and the Philippines' role in ASEAN and the region.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Decreased PRC motivation for aggressive response because of               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>demonstrated formal U.S. defense commitment to the Philippines</li> <li>increasing U.S.-Philippines military integration and likely sustained U.S. presence.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

**Table 5.3—Continued**

Posture Characteristic	Level of PRC Concern	Key Effects
Capabilities	Notable (2/5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased PRC motivation for aggressive response because               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>enhanced U.S.-Philippines ISR could be used to detect or target PRC forces in SCS or around Taiwan</li> <li>ISR capabilities could hamper PRC ability to defend SCS territorial claims</li> <li>Chinese ISR advantage to conduct coercive maritime operations could be lost.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Decreased PRC motivation for aggressive response because               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ISR capabilities could enhance defense of Philippine territory</li> <li>ISR capabilities could make China's actions more visible and, lacking the element of surprise, allow regional countries to respond in ways that China does not wish to escalate.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Profile	Notable (2/5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased PRC motivation for aggressive response because               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>U.S. messaging highlights increased ISR capability to assist the Philippines and region with SCS territorial disputes</li> <li>U.S. messaging emphasizes increased U.S. military footprint in the Philippines</li> <li>tensions in PRC-Philippine relations could heighten as a result of an increased U.S. military presence in the SCS and U.S. efforts to promote sharing of ISR with regional countries.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Decreased PRC motivation for aggressive response because               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>U.S.-Philippines messaging highlights closer security relationship</li> <li>U.S.-Philippines messaging highlights value of ISR for the Philippines and SCS maritime security.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>



## Framework Application 2: United States Restores and Deploys the First Fleet to Australia

This posture application explores China's potential reactions if the United States were to reconstitute the USN First Fleet and base it in Australia with redeployed forces from Japan. We assessed that China's reactions would likely be notable (level 2 of 5) in nature. China would have some motivations for an aggressive response to counter the U.S. effort, primarily as a result of the increased U.S. military proximity to South and South-east Asian SLOCs and the enhanced capability to conduct SLOC interdiction operations given increased interoperability with the Royal Australian Navy. China would also likely be concerned about the implication of a closer U.S.-Australia defense partnership and Australia's apparent turn toward an anti-China coalition. Other characteristics of the deployment would likely reduce Chinese motivations for aggressive action, however. Increased U.S. forces in Australia would likely reduce the likelihood of an aggressive direct Chinese military response against Australia. Further, the shifting of some U.S. naval forces away from Japan to Australia in order to reconstitute the First Fleet would likely decrease Chinese concerns stemming from their current location. Chinese notable responses could include limited economic retaliation against Australia; information operations, such as media, diplomatic, and messaging campaigns to bolster China's own narrative; and increased Chinese naval patrols in the Indian Ocean.

### Posture Enhancement Details

This posture option explores China's reactions if the United States were to restore the First Fleet and station it in Australia.<sup>9</sup> The location of the new First Fleet would be Perth, because it has existing deep port facilities and a naval base, HMAS *Stirling*, which could support a substantial U.S. naval presence, including a permanently deployed CSG. Furthermore, Perth's

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<sup>9</sup> We drew this posture enhancement from two public sources: Peter Suci, "The U.S. Navy to Restore the First Fleet. The Reason Is China," *National Interest*, December 7, 2020; and Megan Eckstein, "SECNAV Braithwaite Calls for New U.S. 1st Fleet Near Indian, Pacific Oceans," *USNI News*, November 19, 2020.

location on Australia's western coast provides ease of access to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region, which would constitute the fleet's primary mission areas. Australia would provide the port facilities and basing infrastructure to support fleet operations out of Perth. Australia would also assist with local labor and logistics support for port operations, supply, and sustainment for the fleet, akin to how the Seventh Fleet operates in Japan.<sup>10</sup> Australia has for years supported the U.S. Navy and Marines through exercises, port visits, and training rotations in the Northern Territory, and this posture enhancement would extend the cooperation between the Royal Australian Navy and the U.S. Navy on regional maritime security issues.

The hypothetical First Fleet capabilities would include the permanent stationing of a CSG, which has been redeployed from Fifth Fleet to the port facility in Perth.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the First Fleet would include at least six destroyers, five SSBNs, and two amphibious warfare ships redeployed from the Seventh Fleet in Japan—slightly fewer than the number of ships currently stationed at the Seventh Fleet.<sup>12</sup> These naval forces would be augmented with a regular rotation of additional ships, so that the size of the fleet would ultimately be around 30–40 ships in total, along with 80–100 aircraft. In addition to ships, an estimated 10,000 military personnel would be either permanently stationed in Perth or regularly rotating to the base. The First Fleet's capabilities could range the Indian Ocean region and South and Southeast Asia, including key chokepoints, such as the Malacca Strait.

In our hypothetical example, the reestablishment of the First Fleet is accompanied by statements from U.S. and Australian leaders on the need to protect U.S. and Australian interests, enhance regional allied and partner defense, and counter China's increasing naval capabilities and reach into Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region. The Australian defense minister would also suggest that hosting the fleet is a hedge against potential conflict in the Indo-Pacific region and that Australia must be prepared for

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<sup>10</sup> For a description of the Seventh Fleet's size and capabilities, see Commander, U.S. 7th Fleet, "The United States Seventh Fleet," fact sheet, undated.

<sup>11</sup> Fifth Fleet does not currently include a CSG, and the Navy has no ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) homeported outside the United States. However, for this hypothetical example, we assumed the redeployment of these capabilities.

<sup>12</sup> Commander, U.S. 7th Fleet, undated.

any contingency. The announcement and deployment of the fleet is timed to avoid sensitive PRC dates or events, such as the National People's Congress or other political or regional gatherings important to China. The deployment of a permanent fleet to western Australia would be a clear break from the status quo, but going forward, it would demonstrate a long-term and ongoing U.S. commitment to the region and to Australia.

## Relevant Context

Several contextual pieces would likely inform PRC reactions in the event of a deployment of the First Fleet to Australia. Most notably, these would include existing Chinese concerns over increasing U.S. naval capabilities and deployments to or near the SCS, Beijing's concerns that the United States may be co-opting regional states into an anti-China coalition, and the growing influence of both the United States and Australia in the Indo-Pacific region. We discuss the relevant context below as it relates to each of the six key factors that drive China's reactions to posture enhancements and summarize key points in Table 5.4.

China's perceptions of the military threat posed by the First Fleet would likely be affected by China's current concerns over U.S. naval capabilities and the increasing number of CSG deployments in the SCS. Increased U.S. military presence in the SCS has heightened China's view of the area as a flashpoint for U.S.-China rivalry.<sup>13</sup> For example, in July 2021, the PLA announced it "drove away" the USN destroyer *Benfold*, which it stated illegally entered Chinese-claimed waters near the Paracel islands.<sup>14</sup> A Chinese think tank warned that the United States was trying to monitor Chinese submarine activities and that "U.S. ocean surveillance ship activities are

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<sup>13</sup> Andrew Scobell, "The South China Sea and U.S.-China Rivalry," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 133, No. 2, Summer 2018, pp. 208–209.

<sup>14</sup> The PLA stated that the USN warship "seriously violat[ed] [PRC] sovereignty and undermin[ed] the stability of the South China Sea" and called for the United States to "to immediately stop such provocative actions" (Ryan Woo and Jay Ereno, "China Says It 'Drove Away' U.S. Warship on Anniversary of Tribunal Ruling," Reuters, July 12, 2021).

a huge threat to the PLA, not only to its submarine forces, but also to its submarine-based strategic nuclear missiles.”<sup>15</sup>

Chinese perceptions of the hostile intent that agreeing to host the First Fleet represents from Australia would likely be affected by the 2020 increase in the Australian defense budget by \$186.5 billion with the intention of acquiring long-range strike capabilities to counter Chinese naval and missile forces.<sup>16</sup> Following the announcement, Chinese academics warned that the new budget illustrated that Australia was aligning itself with the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy and the “Australia-U.S. alliance will have strong stability for a long time to come. This kind of stability comes from Australia’s pessimistic attitude toward the Indo-Pacific strategic security environment.”<sup>17</sup>

Chinese perceptions of threats to its regime legitimacy from the First Fleet deployment would likely be affected by recent U.S. efforts to rally allied and partner support, including Australia’s, for Taiwan. In April 2021, Australian Defense Minister Peter Dutton stated that conflict with China over Taiwan “should not be discounted,” and Australian armed forces were maintaining high levels of preparation to defend its allies.<sup>18</sup> In response, a Chinese official stated that “it is hoped that the Australian side will fully recognize the high sensitivity of the Taiwan issue, abide by the one-China

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<sup>15</sup> The think tank also warned that U.S. ships disrupt fishing boat activity because of their noise and implied that U.S. vessel movements could threaten Chinese food security (Liu, 2021c).

<sup>16</sup> Scott Morrison, the Prime Minister of Australia, stated, “We want [an] Indo-Pacific free from coercion and hegemony” (Colin Packham, “Australia to Sharply Increase Defence Spending with Focus on Indo-Pacific,” Reuters, June 30, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Xiao Huan, “The Adjustment of Australia’s Defense Strategy and Its Impact on the Indo-Pacific Security Situation,” *Foreign Language Research*, No. 1, 2021. In prior decades, China has cautioned Australia against increasing its military presence and alliances in the region. Following an announcement for a USMC base in Australia, Chinese newspapers stated that Australia should be cautious about following the United States because Americans will use Australian bases to “harm China” and cautioned that Australia could get “caught in the crossfire” (Jackie Calmes, “A U.S. Marine Base for Australia Irritates China,” *New York Times*, November 16, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Amber Wang, Rachel Zhang, and Jun Mai, “Beijing Tells Australian Defence Minister Peter Dutton to Abide by One-China Principle after Taiwan Warning,” *South China Morning Post*, April 26, 2021.

principle, be prudent in words and deeds, [and] refrain from sending any false signals to the separatist forces of ‘Taiwan independence.’”<sup>19</sup>

Chinese perceptions of threats to its economic development from the First Fleet would likely be influenced by prior Chinese concern over the pre-existing U.S. and Australian abilities to interdict Chinese shipping and fleet movements in key Southeast Asian SLOCs, as well as China’s dependence on Australian raw materials.<sup>20</sup> Chinese leaders over the past decade have expressed concern that Chinese energy shipments are vulnerable to piracy or interdiction by foreign navies, especially in maritime “chokepoints.”<sup>21</sup> From China’s perspective, U.S. military capabilities—particularly those that could be used to protect or defend key regional SLOCs—and increased USN presence in the SCS have exacerbated Chinese worries that these U.S. capabilities could also be used to restrict Chinese access to resources and investments. Basing a First Fleet in Australia would potentially increase Chinese concerns over threats to economic development, particularly should Australia signal a willingness to support U.S. SLOC protection operations.

Chinese perceptions of threats to its regional influence from the First Fleet deployment may be affected by prior Chinese concerns over the United States forming an anti-China coalition, such as the Quad or with states in ASEAN, and growing U.S. and Australian influence in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands. China’s reactions to the U.S.-led Quad, for example, illustrate existing PRC concerns over closer U.S. military and diplomatic cooperation with regional states and fears of a containment strategy that targets China.<sup>22</sup> In addition, China has reacted to growing Australian influence in the region. For example, Australia’s efforts to boost relations with

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<sup>19</sup> Wang, Zhang, and Mai, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> For example, 60 percent of China’s iron ore originates in Australia (Huileng Tan, “China May Punish Australia with Trade Curbs—but It Can’t Stop Buying Iron Ore from Down Under,” CNBC, June 12, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Key chokepoints include the Lombok and Sundra straits, and most notably, the Malacca Strait. In 2003, Hu Jintao labeled this the “Malacca Dilemma,” because around 80 percent of Chinese oil imports flow through that strait (Hu, 2016, p. 193).

<sup>22</sup> Zhong, 2020.

Pacific Island countries have concerned Beijing, which is also seeking to build influence there.<sup>23</sup>

Chinese perceptions of the U.S. commitment to allied and partner defense implied by the First Fleet deployment would likely be affected by the previous history of a strong U.S.-Australia defense relationship and an overall recent increase in U.S. presence in the region. Chinese analysts have observed the increasingly close defense relationship between the United States and Australia and the growing importance of Australia in U.S. military plans and posture—factors that would likely increase the reliability of U.S. defense commitments to Australia.<sup>24</sup> Table 5.4 summarizes the relevant context for this posture enhancement.

## Effects of Posture Enhancement on Chinese Thinking

This section describes the effects of each of the posture enhancement characteristics (location, U.S. ally or partner involved, capabilities, and profile) on China's perceptions and thinking and the likely level of aggressiveness of any potential PRC responses. We provide a summary of our assessments across all posture characteristics in Table 5.5.

### Location

We assessed that the location of the deployed First Fleet in Australia would likely affect Chinese perceptions and thinking through several factors. For factor 1, deploying the First Fleet to Australia would likely overall decrease the level of Chinese concern regarding the potential military threat from the location of U.S. forces, because this posture enhancement would take away forces from the Seventh Fleet in Japan. Decreasing the number of ships deployed to the Seventh Fleet and shifting them to a location much farther away in Perth would likely be viewed by Beijing as reducing the

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<sup>23</sup> Jason Scott, "Australia's Influence in Pacific Islands Grows as China's Wanes," Bloomberg News, January 3, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Liu Xuanzun, "Magnifying Legal Chinese Ship Presence Near U.S.-Australian Military Drill Unreasonable: Experts," *Global Times*, July 18, 2021d; Andrew Greene, "Second Chinese Spy Ship Approaches Australia to Monitor Military Exercises After Being 'on Our Radar for Some Time,'" ABC News Australia, July 17, 2021.

TABLE 5.4

### Relevant Context for Restoring and Deploying the First Fleet to Australia

Factor	Key Contextual Points
PRC perceptions of	
1. potential military threat from U.S., allied, and partner capabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prior PRC concern over U.S. naval capabilities in SCS scenarios</li> <li>• Overall increasing U.S. presence in region</li> </ul>
2. U.S., allied, and partner hostile intent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recent changes in Australian defense budget</li> </ul>
3. threats to its regime legitimacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recent U.S. efforts to rally allied and partner support for Taiwan</li> </ul>
4. threats to its economic development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PRC concern over existing U.S.-Australia ability to interdict Southeast Asian SLOCs</li> <li>• PRC dependence on Australian raw materials</li> </ul>
5. threats to its regional influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Progress of a U.S. regional anti-China coalition (e.g., the Quad)</li> <li>• Growing Australian influence in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands</li> </ul>
6. U.S. commitment to the defense of U.S. allies and partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong prior U.S.-Australia defense relationship</li> </ul>

overall military capability that the United States would bring to bear in a Taiwan or ECS scenario.

For factor 4, threats to Chinese economic development, Chinese concerns would increase because the location of this posture enhancement, Australia, is closer to key South and Southeast Asian SLOCs, and China already has prior concerns, as noted in the above “Relevant Context” section, that the United States will use its naval capabilities to obstruct or interdict Chinese shipping in the Malacca Strait and other key shipping lanes. In addition, improved interoperability between U.S. and Australian naval forces that could augment both forces’ capabilities to patrol and control shipping lanes in South and Southeast Asia would increase Chinese concern about access to these maritime chokepoints.

For factor 5, Chinese concern over its regional influence would likely increase because U.S. naval assets would be much closer to states in South-east Asia, including Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore, where the United States and China are locked in competition for influence. Several of these states—Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia—are also involved in territorial disputes with China, and the shifting of USN forces closer to these areas would likely increase Chinese concern about its ability to influence (or coerce) these states.

We did not assess that location would be relevant for factor 2, Chinese perceptions of U.S. and allied hostile intent, because USN forces are already present in the region; for factor 3, Chinese perceptions of threats to its regime legitimacy, because moving U.S. forces to Australia would not directly impact Taiwan's or China's control over other key territorial claims; and for factor 6, Chinese perceptions of U.S. commitment to the defense of allies or partners, because the particular location within Australia would be less important than engagement with this particular ally, as we discuss in the next section.

In aggregate, we assessed that the location of this posture enhancement would generate a notable (level 2 of 5) level of concern for China. Primary Chinese concerns would focus on the First Fleet's proximity to key SLOCs in South and Southeast Asia, which would augment U.S. ability to interdict or obstruct Chinese shipping and access to energy resources. However, this concern could be partly mitigated by the reduction in USN presence in Japan because some of the ships and resources would be moved from the Seventh Fleet to Australia.

### U.S. Ally or Partner Involved

We assessed that the particular ally involved in this posture enhancement, Australia, would affect Chinese perceptions and thinking through four different factors. For factor 1, Chinese perceptions of a potential military threat would likely increase given that deploying the First Fleet to Australia would result in greater naval interoperability between the United States and Australia. Although the U.S. and Australian navies have exercised, patrolled, and cooperated on various maritime security initiatives in the past, having extensive USN capabilities based in Perth would allow for a deeper level of naval cooperation and integration of command structure where applicable. This would increase Chinese concern that Australian and U.S. naval capa-



bilities that could be brought to bear against China would be enhanced. In addition to interoperability, basing a USN fleet in Australia would signal increased U.S. access to locations of high military utility in Australia that could be used in a SCS scenario. As noted in the above “Relevant Context” section, China has a prior heightened level of concern over the recent increase in U.S. naval forces in the SCS, so the additional potential for the United States to operate forces from Australia for a SCS scenario would likely further increase the level of Chinese concern. In addition, the posture change could suggest that Australia may be willing to allow the U.S. military to conduct more-extensive operations from locations other than Perth in the future.

For factor 2, Chinese perceptions of U.S. and allied hostile intent would likely increase because China would view Australia’s willingness to accept the deployment as evidence that Canberra might be moving toward an anti-China stance and, therefore, would be willing to cooperate more with the United States on military and security issues. In addition, this posture enhancement would demonstrate deeper U.S. cooperation and engagement with the Australian government and the military, especially the Royal Australian Navy, which would likely be viewed as motivated by anti-China concern. Increases in Chinese perceptions of U.S. and allied hostile intent could be shaped by the existing political and strategic context, including recent increases in Australia’s defense budget to invest in military capabilities to counter the PLA and augment Australia’s defenses, as well as progress in U.S. efforts to form a regional anti-China coalition through initiatives such as the Quad.<sup>25</sup> In addition, Beijing has experienced backlash in Australia to prior Chinese influence efforts, which would likely exacerbate its perception of Australia becoming more anti-China.

We also assessed that deploying the First Fleet to Australia would increase China’s perception of threats to its economic development (factor 4), because a USN fleet based in Perth could indicate that Australia might be willing to assist the United States with SLOC interdiction capabilities that could be used to restrict Chinese access to maritime chokepoints and energy resources. The increase in Chinese perceptions of threats to

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<sup>25</sup> Packham, 2020.

its economic development would likely be augmented by prior concerns over the existing USN ability to interdict Southeast Asian SLOCs and hamper Chinese shipping, as well as China's dependence on Australian raw materials and threats to that economic relationship should Australia become firmly hostile to Beijing.

For factor 6, however, basing the First Fleet in Australia would likely decrease the risk of an aggressive Chinese response because it would underline a formal U.S. defensive commitment to Australia, both through the commitment of forces in the near term and by establishing a permanent presence that would be difficult or costly to relocate. The deployment also would demonstrate increasing military engagement with the Australian armed forces, underlining the credibility of U.S. promises to defend its ally. Previous context that further emphasizes the reliability of the U.S. defensive commitment to Australia includes the historically strong U.S.-Australia defense relationship and a general rise in U.S. military presence in the Indo-Pacific region. On the other hand, shifting USN forces away from the Seventh Fleet in Japan could have the opposite effect with respect to Chinese perceptions of the U.S. commitment to Japan, because fewer U.S. forces would be available to respond. For example, the Trump administration's questioning of U.S. defense commitments in Asia could also contribute to the perception in Beijing that the United States is less committed to defending Japan. However, the overall strong, highly institutionalized U.S.-Japan defense relationship, along with the continued presence of large numbers of U.S. forces in the country, would likely limit any substantial shift in Chinese perceptions of the U.S. commitment to Japan.

We did not assess that the involvement of Australia, in particular, was relevant for factor 3, Chinese perceptions of threats to its regime legitimacy, because the involvement of Australia does not appear to threaten China's territorial integrity or existing territorial claims; or for factor 5, China's perceptions of threats to its regional influence, because the involvement of Australia does not itself affect China's competition for influence with regional states.

Taken together, we assessed that Chinese concerns over the involvement of Australia and its willingness to host the First Fleet would be elevated (level 3 of 5). Chinese concerns would center around indications that Australia had moved further toward an anti-China stance and could be increas-

ingly willing to partner with the United States to counter China. Although such demonstration of increased U.S. commitment to Australia would also help deter any direct Chinese aggression toward Australia, Beijing would be motivated to seek out other avenues to express its concerns.

### Capabilities

The military capabilities present in the reconstituted First Fleet would primarily affect PRC perceptions and thinking through three key factors. First, we assessed that the net shift of U.S. naval capabilities away from Japan and toward Australia, farther from China's borders and other areas of greatest tension between the two states, would likely reduce PRC perceptions of U.S. hostile intent stemming from those capabilities, because the United States would not be able to deploy them as quickly in a regional contingency. Second, Chinese perceptions of the threat to PRC economic development would likely increase over First Fleet capabilities to interdict China's access to resources in the SCS or key maritime chokepoints. China's concern could potentially be augmented by preexisting concerns over USN and Australian capabilities to interdict Southeast Asian SLOCs and chokepoints, which basing the First Fleet in Australia would enhance. Finally, the capabilities in this posture enhancement would likely increase Chinese perceptions of U.S. ability and commitment to defend Australia, decreasing PRC motivations for direct aggression.

We did not assess that the capabilities of the First Fleet were directly relevant for factor 1, Chinese perceptions of a military threat posed by U.S. or allied capabilities, because most of these USN capabilities already exist in the region through the Seventh Fleet. First Fleet capabilities were also unlikely to directly affect Chinese perceptions of threats to its regime legitimacy, because they would likely not be directly useful for conflicts over Taiwan or other key disputed territories; or for factor 5, China's perceptions of threats to its regional influence given their limited utility for enhancing U.S. regional influence efforts.

Overall, we assessed the level of Chinese concern with the capabilities of the First Fleet to be notable (level 2 of 5). The United States would gain some increase in its ability to interdict South and Southeast Asian SLOCs through partnering with Australia and locating naval forces closer to these areas, which would increase Chinese concern. However, many of the capabilities

involved would have already been present in the region through the Seventh Fleet, so there would likely be only limited changes in U.S. (or Australian) military capabilities that would be concerning to China.

### Profile

The relatively high-profile, coordinated announcement of the First Fleet deployment, while also timed to avoid dates of particular political significance for the CCP, would likely affect Chinese thinking and perceptions through three factors. The accompanying messaging would likely increase Chinese perceptions of threats to PRC economic development by emphasizing the fleet's mission in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia region, including its capabilities to conduct SLOC and counterpiracy operations, as well as other maritime security capabilities. These concerns would be enhanced by the PRC's prior concerns of USN and Australian capabilities to interdict Southeast Asian SLOCs and chokepoints.

The profile of the First Fleet deployment would also likely affect China's perceptions of threats to its regional influence, because U.S. messaging would emphasize that one of the missions of the deployment would be to counter China and enable other states to resist Chinese pressure. In addition, the messaging from U.S. and Australian leaders would highlight the First Fleet as a symbol of U.S. commitment and staying power in the region, undermining PRC narratives that the United States is an unreliable partner.

Finally, the profile of the First Fleet deployment would likely affect Chinese perceptions of U.S. commitment to the defense of its allies or partners by underscoring the significant public and political U.S. commitment to Australia's defense. These perceptions would likely be enhanced by the strong prior U.S.-Australia defense relationship and increasing USN presence in the region.

We did not find that factors 1, 2, and 3 were relevant for this posture characteristic, because the messaging accompanying the deployment of the fleet would not affect China's perceptions of military threat from U.S. or allied capabilities, the timing and messaging would not themselves significantly change PRC thinking on U.S. and allied hostile intent, and the messaging around the deployment would not touch on Taiwan or other concerns related to PRC regime legitimacy.

We assessed that overall Chinese concerns regarding the profile of this posture enhancement would be notable (level 2 of 5). Although the United States would take steps to mitigate Chinese perceptions of U.S. hostility prior to deploying the fleet, U.S. and Australian messaging would emphasize countering China in the Indian Ocean and SCS while publicly demonstrating the strength of the U.S.-Australia defense relationship.

## Summary of Effects on Chinese Thinking and Possible Responses

In summary, restoring and deploying the First Fleet to Australia would overall have a notable (level 2 of 5) effect on Chinese reactions. The primary Chinese concerns from this posture enhancement would include increased U.S. proximity and U.S.-Australia capability to interdict key South and Southeast Asian SLOCs, Australia's closer defense partnership with the United States, and Australia's turn toward an anti-China stance. The precise location of the fleet base within Australia would likely be less important in terms of Chinese responses, because many of the U.S. capabilities involved were already present in the region through the Seventh Fleet. The shifting of forces away from Japan to Australia would likely decrease Chinese concerns as the U.S. would have fewer forces in region for a conflict.

The typology of potential PRC reactions (shown in Tables 4.2 and 4.3 in Chapter Four) illustrates some of the specific actions that China could take at a notable level of concern. For this posture enhancement, specific short-term responses could include limited economic retaliation against Australia, including sector-specific Chinese restrictions on trade and tourism. This would demonstrate Chinese displeasure with Australia's choice to allow the United States to base the fleet in Perth, while also attempting to coerce Australia into reversing course. In addition to economic coercion, China would likely employ information operation campaigns, including diplomatic and public messaging meant to counter the narrative of a stronger U.S.-Australia alliance and increased U.S. presence in the region. China would also likely increase Chinese naval deployments to the Indian Ocean, including submarine patrols, to demonstrate its capability and send the message that it will not be deterred from its own activities by an increased U.S. presence in the Indian Ocean region. However, the presence of the First Fleet in Aus-

tralia as a demonstration of U.S. commitment to Australia's defense would make it less likely that China would pursue direct military action against Australia or U.S. forces based there.

In terms of longer-term Chinese reactions, basing the First Fleet in Australia could potentially cause the PLA to reorient some of its maritime forces in the Indian Ocean in the future if that area becomes more of a priority for the United States. This could include more surface ship and submarine patrols in the Indian Ocean region, as well as the establishment of a base or logistics hub in Southeast Asia where the PLA could forward deploy maritime and air forces. Table 5.5 summarizes the posture characteristics, level of Chinese concern, and key effects on the potential aggressiveness of Chinese responses to this posture enhancement.

### Framework Application 3: Substantial Expansion of Military Access with India

This posture enhancement examines China's potential responses if the United States and India were to substantially expand military access through a series of agreements that would station U.S. ISR assets along the China-India border; pave the way to conduct U.S.-India military exercises in the Himalayas, the Indian Ocean, and with the Seventh Fleet; and provide the U.S. Navy with greater port access to the Bay of Bengal. We assessed that China's reactions to this posture enhancement would likely be elevated (level 3 of 5). China could be motivated to pursue an aggressive response because of concerns over U.S. ISR and forces near disputed border areas and Tibet, as well as the greater capabilities that could be achieved by increased U.S.-India military interoperability and India's apparent turn toward joining an anti-China coalition. The likelihood that this more aggressive response could take the form of a direct attack on India would likely be somewhat reduced by the signal that this posture enhancement would send of a stronger U.S.-India defense relationship and the potentially greater willingness of the United States to assist India in defending its border against Chinese incursions. More likely potential Chinese responses could include a greater number of incursions across the disputed border, more PLAN operations in

TABLE 5.5

### Summary of Effects of First Fleet Deployment to Australia on Chinese Thinking

Posture Characteristics	Level of PRC Concern	Key Effects
Location	Notable (2/5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased PRC motivation for aggressive response because of               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>proximity of Australia to SLOCs and maritime chokepoints</li> <li>shorter distance to influential states in Southeast Asia</li> <li>concerns enhanced by recent increased U.S. naval operations in region.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Decreased PRC motivation for aggressive response because of               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>shift of U.S. forces away from Japan.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
U.S. allies/ partners involved	Elevated (3/5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased PRC motivation for aggressive response because of               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>potential threats from greater U.S.-Australia military interoperability</li> <li>increased signal of U.S. access to locations of high military utility in Australia</li> <li>PRC belief that Australia has become increasingly anti-China</li> <li>shift of U.S. forces away from Japan</li> <li>concerns enhanced by recent Australian defense budget increases and apparent progress of U.S. anti-China coalition.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Decreased PRC motivation for aggressive response because of               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>demonstrated formal defense commitment, including permanent presence, and increasing military engagement with Australia</li> <li>strong prior U.S. defense commitment to Australia.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

**Table 5.5—Continued**

Posture Characteristics	Level of PRC Concern	Key Effects
Capabilities	Notable (2/5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased PRC motivation for aggressive response because of               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>First Fleet capabilities to interdict PRC access to energy resources</li> <li>heightened concerns as a result of existing U.S.-Australia ability to interdict Southeast Asian SLOCs.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Decreased PRC motivation for aggressive response because of               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>demonstrated capabilities that could be used to defend Australia</li> <li>decrease in naval capabilities in Japan that had previously elicited Chinese concern.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Profile	Notable (2/5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased PRC motivation for aggressive response because               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>U.S., Australian messaging highlights utility of First Fleet to the Indian Ocean region, SLOCs, and counter-PRC operations</li> <li>messaging emphasizes U.S. commitment and staying power in region</li> <li>existing U.S.-Australia ability to interdict SLOCs enhance concerns.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Decreased PRC motivation for aggressive response because               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>messaging emphasizes U.S. commitment to the defense of Australia</li> <li>strong prior U.S. defense commitment to Australia has not changed.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

the Indian Ocean, and a regional diplomatic and messaging campaign to counter U.S. influence.

## Posture Enhancement Details

This application of our framework examines China's potential reactions if the United States and India were to expand their military access agree-



ments.<sup>26</sup> These hypothetical agreements would result in increased U.S. military access at several locations in India, including on the China-India border and at the Visakhapatnam port on the Bay of Bengal. As part of the agreements, UAS basing would be established near the China-India border along with an information- and ISR-sharing protocol. The UAS installations would be manned by U.S. military personnel on a small scale, fewer than 20 people. In addition to expanding surveillance along the China-India border, the United States and India would also sign an agreement to hold joint military training exercises in high-altitude areas in the Himalayas with the U.S. Army 10th Mountain Division, although this assessment assumed that such exercises had not yet taken place.

The agreements would also have a maritime component, with expanded access for USN ships at Visakhapatnam port, including regular port calls, fuel storage, and logistics access. In return, the United States would agree to coordinate more activities between the Indian Navy and the Seventh Fleet, including a regularized schedule of port calls and a series of bilateral and multilateral naval exercises with India and other members of the Quad.

The agreements would be announced publicly and accompanied by high-profile senior leader statements and joint appearances, including photos of the agreements being signed by U.S. and Indian leaders. The subsequent statements from U.S. and Indian officials would emphasize the two countries' joint interest in protecting against China's coercive actions along the Indian border and China's increasing naval presence in the Indian Ocean. In addition, the U.S. and Indian militaries would specify plans for the military exercises to be highly visible and publicized through major U.S. and Indian media channels. Although the agreements would build on decades of incremental progress in U.S.-India defense ties, the UAS deployment and the joint exercises in the Himalayas would illustrate a clear U.S. reorientation toward assisting India against China's border incursions, which would be a new direction for the United States.

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<sup>26</sup> For an overview of current U.S.-India defense cooperation efforts, see Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, "U.S. Security Cooperation with India," fact sheet, U.S. Department of State, January 20, 2021.

## Relevant Context

Several areas of prior context would likely inform Chinese reactions to this posture enhancement, including the recent history of border clashes between China and India, India's participation in and support for the Quad, and increases in U.S.-India defense ties. We discuss the relevant context below as it relates to each of the six key factors that drive China's reactions to posture enhancements and summarize key points in Table 5.6.

China's perceptions of the military threat posed by increasing U.S. military access with India would likely be affected by the recent increase in Indian military capabilities, particularly along the disputed border areas. Following the clashes along the line of actual control (LAC) in 2017, India began a series of efforts to procure weapons, tanks, and planes for its armed forces.<sup>27</sup> India was also in the process of acquiring 30 MQ-9 B Predator drones from the United States in 2021 to augment surveillance capabilities.<sup>28</sup> These defense acquisitions are aimed at deterring Chinese incursions along the border and would augment China's perception of threat from additional U.S. ISR assets.

For perceptions of hostile intent, China's reactions would likely be informed by the recent China-India border clashes. The most recent conflict began on May 5, 2020, when clashes between Indian and Chinese forces broke out. Within days, these clashes spread to other regions of the LAC; Chinese and Indian soldiers were fighting in the middle LAC along the North Sikkim border.<sup>29</sup> By the end of June 2020, at least 20 Indian and four Chinese soldiers died in clashes along the LAC, although these numbers are

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<sup>27</sup> In January 2021, India approved the purchase of 21 MiG-29 and 12 Sukhoi Su-30MKI fighter aircraft from Russia for around \$15 billion and an additional 83 light combat aircraft Tejas from India's Hindustan Aeronautics Limited for about \$6 billion to bolster its air force (Sudhi Ranjan Sen, "Defense Stocks Rise as India to Buy \$6 Billion Local-Built Jets," Bloomberg, January 13, 2021).

<sup>28</sup> Inder Singh Bisht, "India to Finalize MQ-9 B Predator Drone Acquisition," *Defense Post*, July 30, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Kiran Sharma, "India and China Face Off Along Disputed Himalayan Border," *Nikkei Asia*, May 29, 2020.

disputed by both sides.<sup>30</sup> China and India continue to hold talks to deescalate tensions; however, China would certainly take these crises into account when assessing the hostile intent of this posture enhancement.<sup>31</sup> In addition, closer U.S.-India security cooperation exemplified by India's participation in the Quad and increased bilateral defense ties also would likely enhance China's perceptions of hostile intent.<sup>32</sup>

Chinese perceptions of threats to its regime legitimacy might be enhanced by India's ongoing hosting of the Tibetan government in exile; however, New Delhi does not formally recognize it as a government and does not recognize the Dalai Lama as its head of state.<sup>33</sup> Despite this, Tibet and the Dalai Lama remain an area of sensitivity in China-India relations, and this might color Chinese perceptions of this posture enhancement.

Chinese perceptions of threats to its economic development would likely be influenced by the recent expansion of Quad naval activity in the Indian Ocean and near Southeast Asian SLOCs. Although this posture enhancement would not represent a substantial increase in India's or the United States' naval capabilities, it would likely touch on PRC fears of regional partners that could support the United States in interdicting Chinese shipping in a conflict.<sup>34</sup> China's perceptions of threats to its regional influence might

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<sup>30</sup> Soutik Biswas, "India-China Clash: An Extraordinary Escalation 'with Rocks and Clubs,'" BBC News, June 16, 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Anjana Pasricha, "Indian, Chinese Troops Disengage from Himalayan Border Area," Voice of America, August 7, 2021.

<sup>32</sup> "U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy Undermines Peace and Development Prospects in East Asia: Wang Yi," Xinhua, October 13, 2020. India and the United States have steadily increased their levels of security cooperation over the past several years. See Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Fiona McConnell, "A State Within a State? Exploring Relations Between the Indian State and the Tibetan Community and Government-in-Exile," *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 2011, pp. 299–300.

<sup>34</sup> For example, the Quad's 2020 Malabar exercises, conducted in the Indian Ocean, involved India, Japan, the United States, and Australia. China paid close attention to the exercises, particularly the potential for greater interoperability between participants on counterpiracy and SLOC protection. See Task Force 70 Public Affairs, "India Hosts Japan, Australia, U.S. in Naval Exercise MALABAR 2020," U.S. Navy Office of Information, November 2, 2020; and Harsh V. Pant and Anant Singh Mann, "India's

also be affected by India's recent efforts to build ties with Southeast Asian states through initiatives, such as the Act East policy, which involves building its diplomatic, economic, and military integration with Southeast Asia and represents a counterpoint to Chinese influence efforts.<sup>35</sup> Finally, China's perceptions of U.S. commitment to India's defense would be informed by the strengthening U.S.-India defense relationship and, in particular, the increased emphasis on joint exercises, which potentially could illustrate more robust defense cooperation between the two countries and a greater U.S. commitment to India's defense.<sup>36</sup> Table 5.6 summarizes the relevant context for this posture enhancement.

## Effects of Posture Enhancement on Chinese Thinking

This section describes the effects of each of the posture enhancement characteristics (location, U.S. ally or partner involved, capabilities, and profile) on China's perceptions and thinking and the likely level of aggressiveness of any potential PRC responses. We provide a summary of our assessments across all posture characteristics in Table 5.7.

### Location

We assessed that the location of the access agreements—along the China-India border and in a port on the Bay of Bengal, as well as the exercises in the Himalayas—would affect Chinese levels of concern about this posture enhancement through three key factors.

First, China's perceptions of U.S. and allied hostile intent would likely increase because of the locations covered by the access agreements; these

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Malabar Dilemma," Delhi: Observer Research Foundation, ORF Issue Brief No. 393, August 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Dhruva Jaishankar, *Acting East: India in the Indo-Pacific*, New Delhi: Brookings Institution India Center, Brookings India Impact Series 102019-02, October 2019.

<sup>36</sup> For example, the United States and India held their first tri-service military exercise in 2019, Tiger Triumph, which involved the Indian Army, Navy, and Air Force and the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps. It appears that DoD intends to make this an annual exercise and to include both the U.S. Army and Air Force in the future. See Bradley Bowman and Andrew Gabel, "U.S., India Bolster Their Military Partnership in Tiger Triumph Exercise," *Defense News*, November 13, 2019.

TABLE 5.6

### Summary of Relevant Context for Expansion of Military Access with India

Factor	Key Contextual Points
PRC perceptions of	
1. potential military threat from U.S., allied, and partner capabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expanding Indian defense capabilities</li> </ul>
2. U.S., allied, and partner hostile intent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recent India-China border clashes</li> <li>• Indian support for the Quad</li> <li>• Expansion of U.S.-India defense cooperation</li> </ul>
3. threats to its regime legitimacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• India's hosting of Tibet's government-in-exile</li> </ul>
4. threats to its economic development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expansion of Indian and the Quad's naval activity in the Indian Ocean</li> </ul>
5. threats to its regional influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• History of India's Act-East policy and efforts to expand its influence in Southeast Asia</li> </ul>
6. U.S. commitment to the defense of U.S. allies and partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing U.S.-India defense ties</li> </ul>

locations would allow U.S. forces to operate in proximity to disputed regions along the China-India border. The 2020 China-India border clashes, India's support for the Quad and associated activities, and the recent expansion of U.S.-India bilateral defense cooperation would further heighten China's concerns about expanded U.S. military access to sensitive areas along the border.

Second, the locations covered by some of the agreements could play a role in increasing Chinese perceptions of threats to its regime legitimacy. Depending on the planned locations for the UAS deployment and military exercises, they could occur near Tibet or the Tibetan-exile Central Tibetan administration in Dharamshala, which could be perceived by China as signaling an enhanced U.S. willingness to involve itself in that dispute. China's prior anxiety over India's support of the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan exiles would further enhance Chinese concerns related to regime legitimacy.

Finally, China's concerns about threats to its regional influence would also likely increase given the locations covered by the access agreements.

India's allowing of U.S. forces and military capabilities to operate close to sensitive Chinese border areas would illustrate that China's military presence and coercive measures along the China-India border had not deterred India from strengthening defense cooperation with the United States, which could highlight a decrease in China's influence in South Asia. Additionally, increased access to the port at Visakhapatnam would likely illustrate greater U.S. military involvement and presence in the Indian Ocean region. These concerns could be enhanced by recent Indian efforts to expand its influence in Southeast Asia, such as through the Act-East policy initiative.

We did not assess that location was relevant to Chinese reactions for factor 1, because the agreements on their own would not significantly increase the level of U.S. or partner military capabilities along the disputed border areas; for factor 4, because the location of expanded U.S. military access would not threaten Chinese trade routes or other economic interests; or for factor 6, because the location covered by the agreements would not substantially affect China's view of the U.S. commitment to defend India if attacked.

Taken together, we assessed that the overall level of Chinese concern stemming from the locations covered by the set of agreements in this posture enhancement would likely be elevated (level 3 of 5). Chinese concerns would likely focus on the proximity of U.S. forces and surveillance capabilities to the China-India border, although enhanced U.S. access to the Indian Ocean region would be carefully scrutinized as well.

### U.S. Ally or Partner Involved

We assessed that expanding access agreements with India would affect Chinese perceptions through five key factors. First, deployment of UAS along the China-India border would demonstrate increased interoperability and ISR capability between the U.S. and Indian armed forces more broadly, which would likely increase China's perception of a military threat from this greater integration between its two main competitors. Although the specific capabilities enhancements on the border enabled by improved ISR may concern China as well, as discussed in the "Capabilities" section below, the more-general improvements in U.S.-India interoperability could raise concerns about other threats that could arise if this integration were to continue and deepen.

Second, Chinese concerns about hostile intent would likely increase as the agreements would illustrate a reorientation of United States-India defense cooperation toward the disputed border regions, where China would be the only plausible adversary and where the United States had previously avoided direct involvement. In addition, China would be concerned by access agreements that increase U.S. military posture in India and facilitate greater Indian presence in East and Southeast Asia through more interaction with the Seventh Fleet, because they would underscore U.S. efforts to further recruit New Delhi to an anti-China coalition. Chinese concerns would be enhanced by recent, largely successful U.S. efforts to reinvigorate India's role in the Quad.

Third, for Chinese perceptions of threats to its economic development, greater interoperability between the U.S. and Indian militaries and more access of U.S. naval assets in Indian ports could increase China's concerns about planned or future U.S., allied, or partner capability to patrol or interdict Chinese ships in key SLOCs in the Indian Ocean region. Recent expansion of the activities of the Quad and an increase in naval exercises between Quad members could augment Chinese concerns about the potential for the United States and India to obstruct Chinese shipping in a conflict. However, the fact that China-India economic relations have remained stable despite substantial tensions in the bilateral relationship over the past decade illustrate China and India's caution before taking steps that could threaten their mutually beneficial economic relations.

Fourth, China's concerns about its regional influence might also increase because India's decision to allow greater U.S. military access and posture in India could suggest greater Indian alignment with the United States on weakening China's clout throughout the region, particularly in South Asia and through the Quad. Additionally, India's expanded efforts to build influence in Southeast Asia would likely play a role in enhancing Chinese concerns.

Lastly, a larger U.S. military posture in India could potentially indicate a greater willingness on the part of the United States to come to India's defense in the event of a Chinese attack. Although these limited steps would likely produce a correspondingly limited shift in Chinese perceptions of any U.S. commitment to defend India—which of course has not been made formally—any shift in this direction would certainly be of concern and

likely result in some increase in Chinese caution when contemplating any direct military actions against India.

We did not assess that the involvement of India in this set of access agreements would notably affect China's perceptions of threats to its regime legitimacy, because the Indian military itself does not have strong links with Taiwan—or for that matter Tibetan-exile groups—that might suggest any direct threats to China over these issues.

Overall, we assessed the level of Chinese concern from India's involvement in and support for this posture enhancement to be elevated (level 3 of 5). China's concerns would be primarily related to the increased interoperability and level of ISR capabilities that these agreements would bring to the Indian armed forces more broadly, the apparent shift in focus of U.S.-India defense cooperation efforts to the disputed border, and the signal that these agreements send about India's greater alignment with the United States to form an anti-China coalition and counter China's regional influence. The potential for a direct, aggressive Chinese response against India would likely be slightly mitigated by China's perception of a stronger U.S.-India defense relationship and the greater risk of U.S. military support for India.

### Capabilities

The capabilities involved in this posture enhancement would likely affect China's reactions through three key factors. For perceptions of military threat, China's concerns would likely increase as more U.S. and Indian ISR capabilities along the China-India border would somewhat diminish China's surveillance advantage and allow Indian forces to better respond to China's military actions in a future border clash. However, better ISR capabilities along the border might also deter China from aggressive actions, because without the element of surprise, China might feel that its actions could be too escalatory, particularly if it would need to use larger forces to achieve similar effects to those when India had more limited ISR capabilities. Similarly, Chinese concerns would increase for U.S. and allied hostile intent, because the expanded surveillance capabilities could likely only or primarily be used to detect Chinese actions and forces along the border. The prior context of the recent China-India border clashes and recent expansion of U.S.-India defense cooperation would further heighten China's worries about U.S., allied, and partner hostile intent.



Finally, expanded U.S. and Indian ISR along the border in addition to high-altitude training exercises that demonstrate joint capabilities that could be used against China in the event of a border crisis would also likely indicate enhanced U.S. ability and willingness to defend India in the event of a Chinese attack.

We did not assess that the capabilities demonstrated through this set of agreements would be especially relevant to China's perceptions of threats to its regime legitimacy, because none of the capabilities in the access agreements would heighten China's concern over Taiwan or, realistically speaking, over Tibet. The capabilities involved in the agreements would also not be perceived by China as particularly threatening to its economic development, because the ISR would be deployed along the Indian border and the port access, while it could demonstrate increased U.S.-India naval cooperation, would not significantly change the United States' or India's ability to patrol key shipping routes. We also assessed that the capabilities specified in the agreements would not impact China's perception of threats to its regional influence.

Overall, we assessed that there would be notable (level 2 of 5) Chinese concern about the capabilities for this posture enhancement. China's primary worries would be related to the expanded ISR along its border with India and the potential for those capabilities to be used in a future border clash or to undermine China's surveillance advantage. But the scope and scale of the U.S. or Indian capabilities directly affected by these agreements would be limited, although as discussed, the implications that they could have for the future trajectory of the U.S.-India relationship or regional dynamics may be more concerning to China.

### Profile

The expanded access agreements would be accompanied by official statements and media publicity, as well as plans to publicize the joint exercises. This relatively high profile would likely affect China's concerns and reactions through three key factors. First, China's concerns regarding U.S. and allied hostile intent would likely increase, because the publicity and statements accompanying the agreements would emphasize the anti-China aspect of the posture enhancement. China would also likely view the publicly stated intent to hold joint military exercises near Tibet and sensitive

border areas as provocative, particularly given the history of China-India border clashes.

Second, China's concerns over threats to its regional influence would also likely increase, because the agreements would be accompanied by statements about augmenting capabilities along the China-India border that challenge PRC claims to the disputed territory and, by extension, China's claim to be an ascendent power in South Asia. India would also likely publish statements emphasizing the closer U.S.-India defense relationship and underscoring U.S. commitment to the region, further undermining Chinese efforts to establish itself as the key player in the region outside of India. These concerns would be heightened by India's recent support for the Quad, itself a substantial concern for Chinese efforts to expand its regional influence.

Finally, U.S.-India joint statements that signal closer alignment of the United States and India as regional defense partners and messages signaling that the access agreements were intended to better defend India from Chinese border aggression would likely affect Chinese perceptions of U.S. willingness to defend its allies and, in this case, partners. Such perceptions would in turn likely be affected by the steady increase in U.S.-India defense ties over the past two decades.

We did not assess that the profile of these agreements would be relevant to China's perceptions or concerns about its regime legitimacy, because none of the messaging would touch on Taiwan, Tibet, or other related issues, or to China's perceptions of threats to its economic development, because the messaging accompanying the agreements would not focus on capabilities to disrupt China's shipping or its ability to access maritime chokepoints.

We assessed that China would have notable (level 2 of 5) concerns about the profile of this posture enhancement. China would likely view the public nature of the agreements and eventual exercises as provocative, particularly given India's support of the Quad and other U.S. efforts to counter China's regional influence. However, the statements would avoid other sensitive areas for China and would further highlight a stronger U.S.-India defense relationship through the public deployment of ISR capabilities to counter China's actions along the border that could also help to deter more directly aggressive PRC responses against India.

## Summary of Effects on Chinese Thinking and Possible Responses

In aggregate, we assessed that expanding military access agreements with India in the manner described would likely have an elevated (level 3 of 5) effect on China's reactions. The main PRC concerns would include the location of U.S. ISR capabilities and personnel along the China-India border, which could be used to detect and target PRC forces in a border crisis; the increase in ISR interoperability and information sharing between the United States and India and what it could imply for their broader relationship; and the reorientation of U.S.-India defense cooperation to focus more on the disputed border areas and what that could suggest for U.S. willingness to become involved in those disputes. In addition, Chinese concerns reflect worries about the threat to its regional influence as expanded military access agreements, including greater Indian naval access to Seventh Fleet resources, could signal a stronger anti-China stance by India and a desire for a closer defense relationship with the United States. China would also likely assess increased risks from any direct attack on India in response to this posture enhancement because of the signals of a stronger U.S.-India defense relationship and the apparent increased willingness of the United States to come to India's defense, particularly on the disputed border issue.

The typology of potential PRC reactions (shown in Tables 4.2 and 4.3 in Chapter Four) illustrates some of the specific actions that China could take at an elevated level of concern. China's potential short-term responses could include increased PLA incursions, patrols, or surveillance across the LAC along the China-India border, along with large-scale PLA exercises near disputed border areas. In addition, China might decide to increase PLAN patrols in the Indian Ocean in response to India's agreement to provide access to a larger U.S. naval presence in the Bay of Bengal. China could also engage in a concerted diplomatic and media campaign to push back on the optics of increased U.S. regional influence, by branding greater U.S. military presence as destabilizing and meant to contain China. It is also possible that China would engage in limited economic retaliation against India, although this would seem less likely because Beijing has previously sought to preserve China-India economic ties despite tensions in the bilateral relationship.

China's long-term responses to this posture enhancement could consist of accelerating efforts to develop infrastructure, ISR capabilities, and deploy-

ments of the PLA to broader swaths of the China-India border. In addition, the PLAN could expand its operations to encompass more of the Indian Ocean region, including allocating more surface ships and submarines to conduct patrols, as well as potentially establishing a naval base or logistics hubs in South Asia or along Africa's East Coast. Table 5.7 summarizes the posture characteristics, level of Chinese concern, and key effects on Chinese perceptions and reactions stemming from this posture enhancement.

TABLE 5.7

### Summary of Effects of Expanding Military Access with India on Chinese Thinking

Posture Characteristic	Level of PRC Concern	Key Effects
Location	Elevated (3/5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased PRC motivation for aggressive response because of               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>U.S. forces operating near disputed border and Tibet</li> <li>increased U.S. involvement in Indian Ocean region</li> <li>China-India border clashes, India's support for the Quad, hosting of Dalai Lama, and expansion of U.S.-India defense cooperation.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
U.S. allies/partners involved	Elevated (3/5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased PRC motivation for aggressive response because of               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased U.S.-Indian military interoperability illustrated by UAS deployment</li> <li>U.S.-India defense cooperation reorientation to border areas</li> <li>U.S. recruitment of India to anti-China coalition and push back on China's regional influence</li> <li>India's role in the Quad, the Quad's naval activities, and India's influence-building in Southeast Asia.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Decreased PRC motivation for aggressive response because of               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>greater U.S. willingness to come to India's defense.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

**Table 5.7—Continued**

Posture Characteristic	Level of PRC Concern	Key Effects
Capabilities	Notable (2/5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased PRC motivation for aggressive response because of               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>potential to undermine PRC information superiority in event of China-India border clash</li> <li>improved ISR for India in border regions that could be employed against China</li> <li>prior China-India border clashes and the expansion of U.S.-India defense cooperation.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Decreased PRC motivation for aggressive response because of               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>demonstrated ISR capabilities that could be used in the event of a PRC attack on Indian border regions</li> <li>more visibility of PRC forces whose actions could be viewed as escalatory.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Profile	Notable (2/5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased PRC motivation for aggressive response because of               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>highly visible exercise in vicinity of disputed border and Tibet</li> <li>accompanying U.S.-India messaging that demonstrates U.S. staying power and commitment to the region</li> <li>U.S. messaging contains some anti-China statements</li> <li>India's support for the Quad and increased U.S.-India defense ties.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Decreased PRC motivation for aggressive response because of               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>messaging that emphasizes the posture enhancement is meant to better defend India, particularly along the border</li> <li>statements that signal alignment of the United States and India on security issues.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>



## Conclusion

As the U.S. military considers potential posture enhancements in the Indo-Pacific region to counter China's rise, understanding how China is likely to react to these enhancements is critical. The framework presented in this report is designed to assist U.S. analysts and policymakers in this task by helping to ensure consideration of the key issues and dynamics likely to shape Chinese thinking and reactions. Thus, the framework, application instructions, and illustrative examples represent the primary value of this study. However, the research that we undertook to construct this framework also highlighted several broader insights whose implications extend beyond for U.S. policymakers' considerations of any particular U.S. posture enhancement. In this chapter, we summarize these implications and recommendations for U.S. policymakers in general and for the U.S. Army in particular.

### Insights for U.S. Policy in the Indo-Pacific Region

Our research highlights six broader insights for U.S. policymakers' consideration.

- **China assumes that most U.S. military activities in the region are aggressive and hostile to China.** China is likely to perceive most U.S. posture enhancements in the Indo-Pacific region as aggressive actions by the United States that are intended to counter or target China's military capabilities and, more broadly, hinder China's regional ambitions. The Chinese leadership's assessments of U.S. objectives and intentions toward China have come to assume a high level of U.S. hostility.

ity toward the CCP. This will likely continue to be the case, particularly as DoD increasingly turns its attention to countering China in the Indo-Pacific region. However, although U.S. planners should be aware of China's perceptions that most U.S. posture enhancements, and indeed most U.S. military activities in the region in general, are meant to threaten Chinese forces, there is still a wide range in the level of threat, or concern, that China may perceive from a given posture enhancement. Therefore, although U.S. policymakers can likely assume a negative Chinese reaction to most U.S. military activities in the region, the more-important questions to answer are the degree or intensity of those reactions rather than just their direction (i.e., more or less aggressive).

- **China's level of concern for a U.S. military activity does not translate directly into the aggressiveness of its response.** Our evaluation of recent Chinese behavior highlights that China's level of concern about a posture enhancement does not directly correlate with the aggressiveness of its responses. Rather, China will assess the leverage and capabilities that it has against a specific country and the escalatory potential of a response in deciding how to react. In some cases, China may be highly concerned by a U.S. posture enhancement but deterred from taking aggressive actions in response given the location or U.S. ally or partner involved. U.S. posture enhancements that occur on U.S. territory would present, perhaps, the highest barriers to Chinese consideration of a direct military response given China's perceptions of the risk of direct military confrontation with the United States. Posture enhancements that occur on U.S.-allied or partner territory, however, may provide more opportunities for Chinese pressure or coercion if China believes that the likelihood of direct U.S. involvement would be reduced or the U.S. ally or partner involved lacks native capabilities to credibly escalate a conflict or crisis that may result.

China's responses to posture enhancements that it finds particularly concerning tend to involve a multilayered mixture of political, economic, and military policy changes that Beijing calibrates—and integrates—depending on the situation and the leverage that it assesses it has over a host nation. For example, U.S. allies and partners that are economically closer to China and that agree to host U.S. posture



enhancements would be likely to face more pressure from China in various domains because Beijing might view its ability to coerce those countries into changing course as plausible given its economic leverage. This was the case with the THAAD deployment in which China used primarily diplomatic, political, and economic levers to punish South Korea in its attempt to prevent the deployment of the capability. Where U.S. capabilities are less directly threatening to China, Beijing might consider a combination of carrots and sticks to alter the willingness of U.S. allies and partners to host U.S. capabilities, until such point where the posture enhancement directly impinges on China's redlines or core objectives. Several cases involving the Philippines that are discussed in Chapter Two also show how China may continue to use inducements in the diplomatic or economic realms while it simultaneously applies military pressure where core interests, such as its territorial integrity, are at stake.

- **China is now more likely to use lower-level military responses to signal disapproval or apply pressure than in the past because of better-developed capabilities.** China's recent development of less escalatory military options—such as paramilitary forces or other gray zone capabilities—increases the likelihood that China would incorporate a lower-level military action into its response to a concerning U.S. posture enhancement. For the past decade, Chinese leaders have directed the PLA to develop a greater range of military options that fall below the threshold of armed conflict. As a result, a U.S. posture enhancement that generates a heightened level of Chinese concern would be less likely to present China with a choice between escalating to conflict or essentially backing down, as it did in the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis. Instead, China is now more able to pursue a combination of lower-level responses, including military, to signal its concerns and resolve in its own efforts to deter further U.S. action.
- **U.S. posture enhancements or activities that pose acute concerns for China are more likely to trigger consequential changes in longer-term PRC policies.** Another point to consider when assessing likely PRC reactions to posture enhancements is that China may also respond with longer-term changes to Chinese policy, including economic initiatives and military investments. These responses may

not be immediately visible, because they take place over a longer time horizon and are meant to address larger issues in the regional military balance or the U.S.-China strategic competition; they would be more likely in response to U.S. posture enhancements or other military activities that pose acute concerns for Beijing. In the past, China's longer-term military responses have generally focused on addressing key capabilities gaps vis-à-vis the U.S. military. These shifts have also included significant changes to China's military doctrine and operational concepts—such as revising the military strategic guidelines—and far-reaching changes to the PLA's structure and institutions, as is visible with the current PLA reform effort and investments to counter specific U.S. capabilities, such as China's development of LRHWs. U.S. analysts and policymakers should therefore be mindful that the immediately observable set of Chinese reactions to U.S. posture enhancements may not be the end of the story, and indeed, the longer-term changes may prove to be more consequential.

- **Posture enhancements can be an important tool in helping to deter a direct attack on the host nation, depending on local circumstances.** Although the risks of a potentially escalatory Chinese response to U.S. posture enhancements are central to assessing the merits of those enhancements, so too is the deterrent value that they may provide. Our framework and illustrative applications highlight that the addition of substantial posture enhancements in a U.S.-allied or partner territory is likely to strengthen PRC perceptions of U.S. commitment and, potentially, capabilities to defend that ally or partner from direct Chinese aggression. In most cases, this would likely, in turn, enhance deterrence and reduce the risk of a Chinese attack.

However, this general pattern may vary widely across states. For close U.S. allies that may be most interested in hosting U.S. posture enhancements, such as Japan or Australia, U.S. commitment to the defense of that country would likely be already quite clear to China. Furthermore, these states tend to have more-capable militaries themselves and already host substantial U.S. military capabilities, so additional enhancements would be likely to have more limited direct deterrent value. Posture enhancements in countries in which the United States has an existing defensive commitment but no current

troop presence, such as the Philippines, may be where U.S. posture enhancements could have the most direct deterrent value because such enhancements may signal both an increase in the strength of the U.S. defense relationship with the host state and, potentially, an increase in capabilities with which to defend the host nation.

Taiwan, however, presents the greatest challenge for U.S. efforts to deter China in the region. Although adding substantial U.S. posture enhancements directly in Taiwan would likely enhance Chinese perceptions of U.S. willingness to fight to defend the island, the political and strategic challenge to Chinese interests and regime legitimacy that such a move would represent could also quite plausibly precipitate the very Chinese attack that the United States had intended to deter. For this reason, the United States has typically sought posture enhancements elsewhere in the region that can be of use for the defense of Taiwan. However, this approach brings its own set of challenges given the complexity of local state relationships with China, the limits on U.S. access, and the desire for states to balance between deterrence and maintaining an economic and political relationship with the PRC, as discussed in the next insight.

- **The nature of U.S. alliance relationships in the region may limit the wider deterrent value of U.S. posture enhancements.** Our framework and case studies highlight how enhanced posture in U.S.-allied or partner territory can help deter China from pursuing aggressive responses against the host state. The presence of U.S. forces in particular appears to be a strong signal of the willingness of the United States to defend the country in question, and it is likely that many countries in the region would support the use of these forces or bases for their own defense. However, whether U.S. posture enhancements in a particular country may help to deter China from more aggressive behavior in the region in general may depend on the specific ally or partner involved and whether China believes that the partner will allow the United States to employ the posture or capabilities in a conflict that does not involve the host nation. U.S. alliances in the Indo-Pacific lack the multilateral character of U.S. alliances in Europe, for example, such that most U.S. allies have undertaken no obligations to help defend other U.S. allies or partners in the region. In the case of the

Philippines, for example, placing ISR hubs or other capabilities in locations that might be useful in a Taiwan scenario would have only the potential to help deter China from attacking Taiwan if Beijing assesses that the Philippine leadership were to allow those capabilities to be used in such a conflict. Beijing's assessment will likely vary widely for each country hosting a U.S. posture enhancement. For example, Japan has publicly communicated perhaps the most credible commitment to allowing its territory to be used by U.S. forces for operations to protect other states. But China's assessment of the likelihood that a host government will allow such operations under pressure, including the pressure that China itself could bring to bear on that country, are vital considerations for U.S. planners when assessing the potential deterrent value of a U.S. posture enhancement for regional contingencies.

## Recommendations for U.S. Policymakers and the Army

- **Decisions on the location of posture enhancements should account for the risk that China may be able to pressure the host nation to limit or deny U.S. access in certain contingencies.** U.S. military planners seeking to expand the presence of U.S. forces in the region will naturally wish to consider the possibility of gaining access or bases in novel locations for U.S. forces. However, as discussed above, the deterrent value that a posture enhancement would have in such locations will be contingent on Chinese assessments of whether Beijing could pressure the host nation to withdraw or limit U.S. access in the event of a conflict. States that lack a clear political commitment to their military relationships with the United States or are balancing that relationship with a similar relationship with China may be encouraged to accede to U.S. requests for access or basing—an apparent political win for the United States in the region. But unless that access is accompanied by an established political understanding of support for U.S. operations in the event of a conflict that involves other states in the region, the deterrent effect of such enhancements on Chinese calculations may be substantially more limited.

- **For the most robust U.S. alliance relationships, the United States should establish clear political understandings of the contingencies for which U.S. forces or bases in allied territory could be used and signal those understandings to China when advantageous.** As a corollary to the first recommendation, posture enhancements that involve Japan and Australia, the strongest U.S. alliance relationships, should be accompanied by discussions that focus on clarifying political understandings for when and how U.S. forces located in allied territory could be used in a regional conflict that does not involve Chinese attacks on the host nation. Such discussions would also likely be useful to conduct regarding any posture enhancements in the Republic of Korea, even if Seoul's likelihood of supporting such contingencies were more limited. More broadly, these discussions should include determining when it would be most advantageous for the United States and its allies to signal those political understandings to China. This signaling could greatly enhance China's perceptions of the posture enhancement's deterrent value.
- **The U.S. government should coordinate whole-of-government response plans before executing U.S. posture enhancements.** Chinese reactions are likely to involve a mixture of political, economic, and military responses, particularly to posture enhancements that generate a higher level of concern for China. The likelihood of a Chinese whole-of-government approach suggests that U.S. policymakers should anticipate this type of response and adopt similar planning. DoD plans to announce or execute a posture enhancement in the Indo-Pacific region should be accompanied by DoD plans regarding how to support allies and partners that may face Chinese retaliation, Department of Treasury plans regarding steps that may be needed to counter Chinese efforts at economic coercion, or other actions across the U.S. government that may be warranted by the circumstances. In particular, expanding the options for support to regional host nations that might be on the receiving end of economic retaliation from China would be helpful, as well as clarifying the U.S. military's role in such support. China's use of a wide range of tools to respond to U.S. military actions are at this point predictable, and the U.S. government can therefore prepare across departments and agencies on how best to coordinate.

- **Short- to medium-range ISR capabilities and enabling agreements likely combine a higher deterrent value with a lower likelihood of a near-term PRC aggressive response for many locations.** U.S. posture enhancements that increase the capabilities that the United States may be able to bring to bear in the event of a conflict have the potential to deter China from initiating an attack against a U.S. ally or partner, but they also have the potential to prompt an aggressive response from Beijing as a means of stopping their ultimate deployment or discouraging further, similar enhancements. Therefore, U.S. decisions regarding force posture often face a trade-off between how effective they may be in enhancing deterrence and how escalatory they may be in prompting an aggressive PRC reaction. The framework outlined in this report highlights several key factors that policymakers should consider when assessing this trade-off.

With regard to specific U.S. posture enhancements, however, we wish to highlight that enhancements with short- to medium-range ISR capabilities and access agreements, in many circumstances, would be likely to provide substantial deterrent value alongside more limited risk of a precipitously aggressive PRC response. Local improvements in ISR capabilities in the SCS, for example, that result in a clearer common operating picture for regional countries whose responses to China's coercive actions around territorial disputes have been hampered by a lack of ability to detect Chinese forces, can help to both deter China from exploiting its own ISR advantage and provide regional countries and the United States more time to determine whether and how to respond. Augmenting local ISR would hamper China's ability to send its forces into disputed territory with impunity and would allow U.S. allies and partners to publicize China's actions. This would help to deter China from aggressive actions without substantially enhancing the risk of offensive operations by China against those allies and partners. Similarly, access agreements on their own may have long-term consequence for U.S. (and Chinese) military planners if they enable future changes in posture and capabilities, but absent the presence of U.S. forces, they are unlikely to trigger substantial PRC military responses, although they may still lead to intensive Chinese economic or political actions. Even if U.S. military planners

were to assess that other, more kinetic capabilities were essential to place in the region, all else being equal, such enhancements would likely result in PRC responses that may be more concerning for the United States.

- **U.S. military planners should consider de-escalatory steps to accompany the introduction of any capabilities that can target Chinese C2, particularly in ways that affect China's nuclear forces or regime continuity.** Perhaps most notable among the U.S. military capabilities that could induce a highly aggressive PRC response are those that China assesses could be used to target Chinese C2. These concerns appear to have been a key element behind China's elevated response to the announcement of the deployment of THAAD and, particularly, its accompanying long-range radars to the Republic of Korea in 2016. If China were to assess that these U.S. capabilities could hold at risk its nuclear C2 or threaten regime targets, its response may be particularly aggressive. This may present a challenge for U.S. military planners, because some capabilities that could threaten China in this manner could also be highly useful for the United States in purely conventional scenarios; the United States may not intend to hold these targets at risk by exploring their deployment to the region. In this event, the United States may wish to consider de-escalatory steps to accompany posture enhancements that may raise these concerns for China. These steps could include back-channel discussions with China to clarify U.S. intent or joint statements with the host nation regarding any limitations to be placed on the U.S. presence. They could also include signals from the United States that it appreciates Chinese concerns in other domains that may help reduce Chinese perceptions of U.S. hostile intent, including in economic or political areas.





## Expanded Data on U.S. Defense Posture History in the Indo-Pacific, 1949–2020

This appendix provides additional data and other supplementary evidence supporting the brief analysis of the evolution of the U.S. defense posture in the Indo-Pacific presented in Chapter One. Table A.1 provides details on the 23 countries within INDOPACOM in which the United States has regularly deployed soldiers, sailors, and airmen over the past 70 years, such as access start and end dates, annual peak number of U.S. military personnel overall and by service, and annual average number of U.S. military personnel deployed.

**TABLE A.1**  
**U.S. Military Forces in INDOPACOM, 1950–2020**

Country	Access Start	Access End	Annual Avg. No. U.S. Personnel	Peak No. U.S. Personnel (Year)	Annual Peak Number of Deployed Personnel, by Service			
					Army	Marine Corps	Air Force	Navy
Australia	1942	Ongoing	500	2,700 (2020)	30	2,500	320	460
Bangladesh	1978	Ongoing	<10	30 (2003)	<10	30	<10	—
Cambodia	1955	1975	50	100 (1959)	60	<10	20	20
	1992	Ongoing	<10	20 (2011)	<10	<10	—	<10
China (mainland)	1979	Ongoing	40	80 (2011)	10	40	10	20
China (Taiwan)	1949	1978	4,600	9,200 (1969)	2,400	2,100	7,600	800
	2011	Ongoing	<10	20 (2015)	<10	<10	<10	<10
Diego Garcia (UK)	1966	Ongoing	900	1,800 (1992)	20	100	470	1,800
Fiji	1981	Ongoing	<10	20 (1994)	20	<10	<10	<10
Hong Kong (UK)	Pre-1950?	1996	50	740 (1964)	20	20	10	720
Hong Kong (PRC)	2012	Ongoing	10	20 (2012)	<10	—	<10	10
India	1942	Ongoing	40	200 (1965)	80	40	70	70
Indonesia	Pre-1950?	Ongoing	40	90 (1975)	30	20	40	30

Table A.1—Continued

Country	Access Start	Access End	Annual Avg. No. U.S. Personnel	Peak No. U.S. Personnel (Year)	Annual Peak Number of Deployed Personnel, by Service			
					Army	Marine Corps	Air Force	Navy
Japan	1945	Ongoing	66,000	209,000 (1953)	121,000	3,000	71,000	15,000
Laos	1955	1975	60	300 (1962)	240	20	70	<10
	1991	Ongoing	<10	20 (1992)	20	<10	<10	<10
Malaysia	Pre-1950?	Ongoing	120	500 (1960)	20	480	70	<10
Mongolia	2002	Ongoing	<10	10 (2007)	<10	<10	<10	—
Myanmar	1944	Ongoing	10	30 (1960)	20	10	<10	<10
Nepal	1960	Ongoing	<10	10 (2011)	<10	<10	—	—
New Zealand	1942	Ongoing	100	700 (1965)	200	<10	100	640
Philippines	1898	Ongoing	9,100	28,000 (1968)	2,000	10	19,000	9,000
Singapore	1957	Ongoing	80	400 (2000)	20	280	50	240
South Korea	1945	Ongoing	57,000	327,000 (1953)	247,000	34,000	45,000	2,000
South Vietnam	1955	1975	110,000	538,000 (1968)	354,000	84,000	61,000	38,000
Vietnam	1992	Ongoing	10	20 (2004)	<10	13	<10	<10

**Table A.1—Continued**

Country	Access Start	Access End	Annual Avg. No. U.S. Personnel	Peak No. U.S. Personnel (Year)	Annual Peak Number of Deployed Personnel, by Service			
					Army	Marine Corps	Air Force	Navy
Sri Lanka	Pre-1950?	Ongoing	<10	10 (1972)	<10	10	—	<10
Thailand	Pre-1950?	Ongoing	5,800	48,000 (1969)	12,000	2,500	36,000	400

SOURCE: DMD CRS, undated; Lane et al., 2022; Pettyjohn, 2012; Lostumbo et al., 2013; Barbara Salazar Torreon and Sofia Plagakis, *Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798–2022*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, March 8, 2022; Critchlow, 2005.

NOTE: This table excludes U.S. forces in INDOPACOM deployed to Hawaii and the three U.S. territories in the Pacific Ocean (Guam, American Samoa, and Northern Marianas). The data in this table begin in 1950 (rather than 1949) because that is the first year for which DMDC data on overseas troop levels are available. Avg. = average; No. = number.

Table A.2 summarizes key security agreements and defense treaties governing U.S. basing and access rights in the AOR.

**TABLE A.2**  
**Major Security and Enabling Agreements Governing U.S. Troop Presence in INDOPACOM, 1949–2020**

Country	Major Historical Security and Enabling Agreements
Australia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1951 mutual defense treaty (ANZUS)</li> <li>• 1954 mutual defense treaty (SEATO)</li> <li>• 1963 SOFA (amended in 2011)</li> <li>• 2014 force posture agreement</li> </ul>
Bangladesh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1954 mutual defense treaty (SEATO, as part of Pakistan)</li> <li>• 1998 SOFA</li> </ul>
Cambodia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1950 mutual defense assistance agreement in Indochina</li> <li>• 1996 SOFA</li> </ul>
China (mainland)	—
China (Taiwan)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1954 mutual defense treaty (bilateral)</li> <li>• 1965 SOFA</li> <li>• 1979 Taiwan Relations Act</li> </ul>
Diego Garcia (UK)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1966 50-year secret access agreement (revealed in 1975)</li> <li>• 1972 and 1976 military construction (MILCON) agreements</li> </ul>
Fiji	—
Hong Kong (UK)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1954 mutual defense treaty (SEATO, as a British colony)</li> </ul>
India	—
Indonesia	—
Japan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1954 mutual defense agreement</li> <li>• 1960 mutual defense treaty (bilateral)</li> <li>• 1960 SOFA (amended in 2016)</li> </ul>
Laos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1950 mutual defense assistance agreement in Indochina</li> </ul>
Malaysia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1990 SOFA (text classified)</li> </ul>
Mongolia	—
Myanmar	—
Nepal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2000 SOFA</li> </ul>

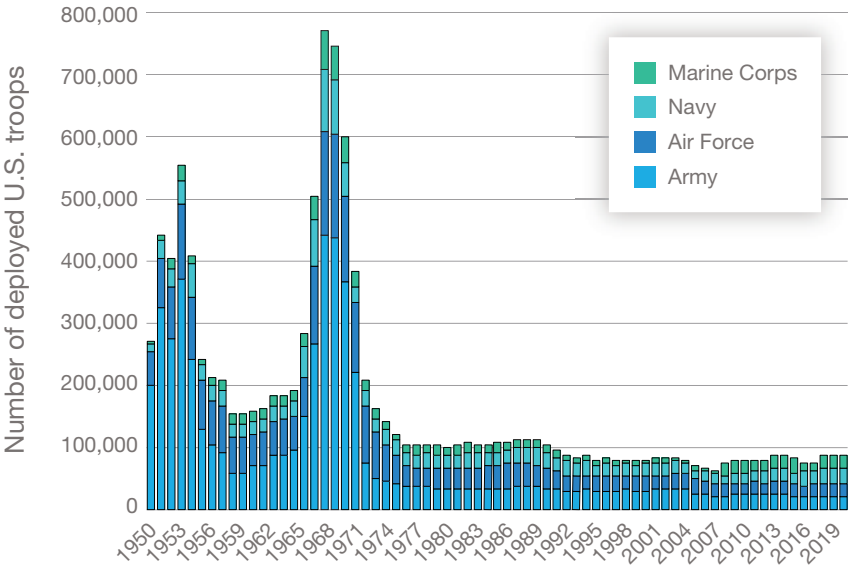
**Table A.2—Continued**

Country	Major Historical Security and Enabling Agreements
New Zealand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1951 mutual defense treaty (ANZUS)</li> <li>• 1952 mutual defense agreement</li> <li>• 1954 mutual defense treaty (SEATO)</li> </ul>
Philippines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1947 military base agreement</li> <li>• 1951 mutual defense treaty (bilateral)</li> <li>• 1954 mutual defense treaty (SEATO)</li> <li>• 1998 visiting forces agreement</li> </ul>
Singapore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1990 SOFA/defense memorandum of understanding</li> </ul>
South Korea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1950 mutual defense agreement</li> <li>• 1953 mutual defense treaty</li> <li>• 1966 SOFA (amended in 1991, 2001, 2014, and 2019)</li> </ul>
South Vietnam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1950 mutual defense assistance agreement in Indochina</li> </ul>
Vietnam	—
Sri Lanka	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1995 SOFA</li> </ul>
Thailand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1954 mutual defense treaty (SEATO)</li> </ul>

SOURCE: Treaty Affairs Staff, Office of the Legal Adviser, *Treaties in Force: A List of Treaties and Other International Agreements of the United States in Force on January 1, 2020*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, 2020; Critchlow, 2005; Salazar Torreon and Plagakis, 2022.

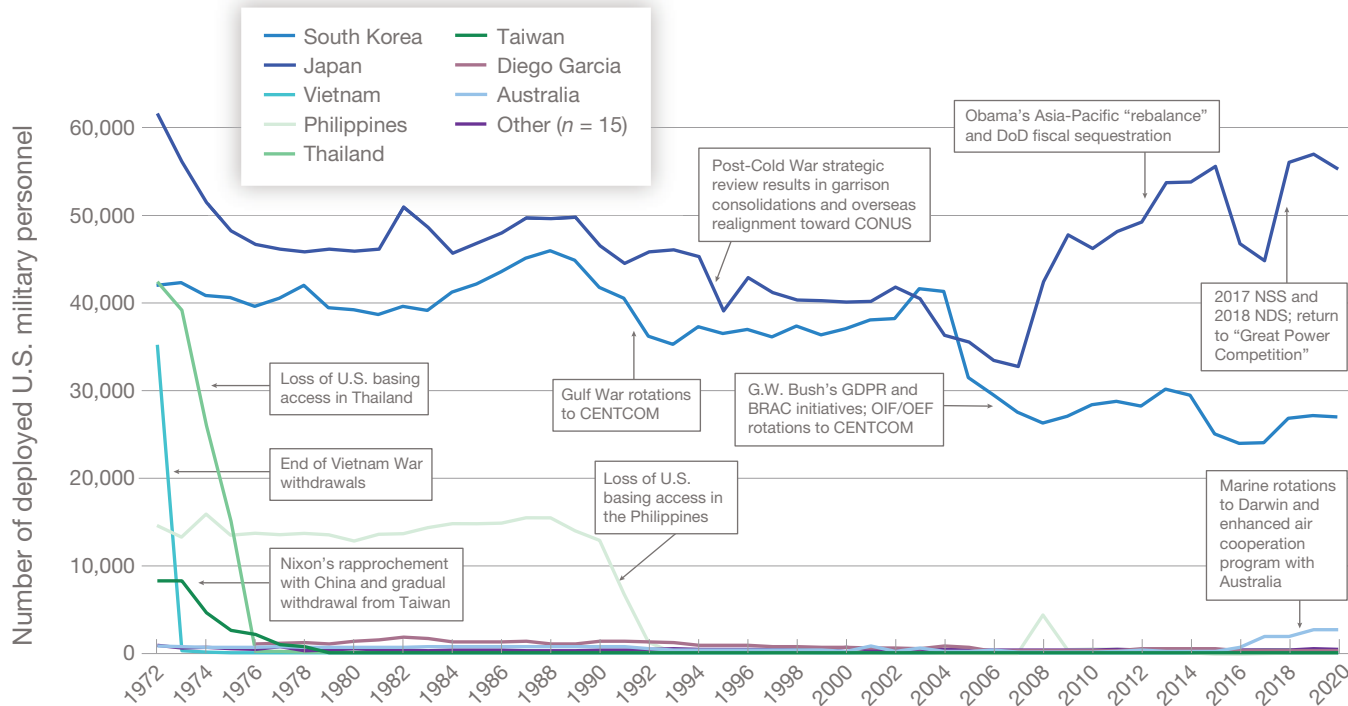
Finally, in Figures A.1–A.4, we provide defense planners and policymakers with supplemental data describing the evolution of U.S. capabilities and posture in INDOPACOM between 1949–2020, such as information on their locations, differences across services, and changes in the presence of CSGs and strategic bombers.

**FIGURE A.1**  
**U.S. Posture Evolution in INDOPACOM, by Service Branch, 1950–2020**



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of DMDC data (DMDCRS, undated) with additional RAND Arroyo Center analysis.

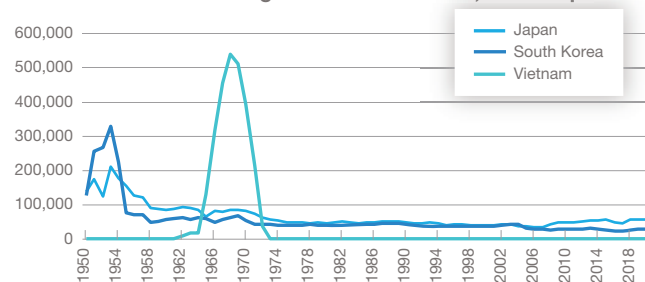
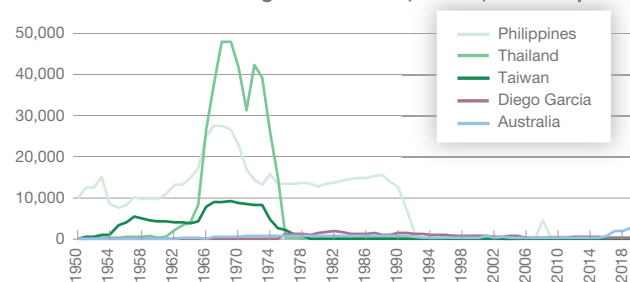
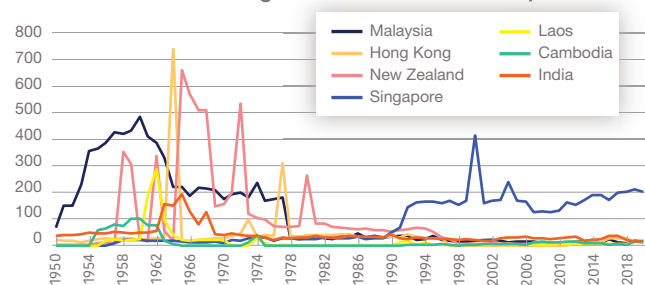
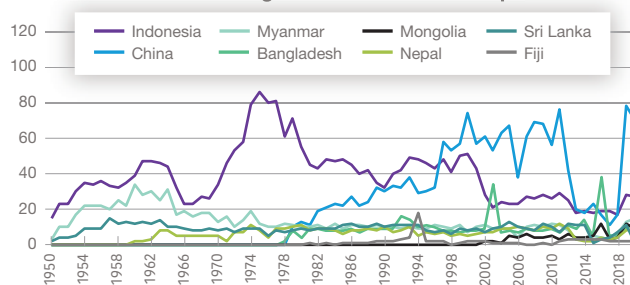
**FIGURE A.2**  
**Main Drivers of U.S. Posture Change in INDOPACOM, 1972–2020**



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of DMDC data (DMDCRS, undated) with additional RAND Arroyo Center analysis.

NOTE: GDPR = Global Defense Posture Review; NDS = National Defense Strategy; NSS = National Security Strategy; OEF = Operation Enduring Freedom; OIF = Operation Iraqi Freedom.



**FIGURE A.3****Total U.S. Military Personnel Deployed Annually in INDOPACOM, by Host Tier, 1949–2020****Tier 1 Hosts: Peak Strength Greater Than 100,000 Troops****Tier 2 Hosts: Peak Strength Between 1,000-99,999 Troops****Tier 3 Hosts: Peak Strength Between 100-999 Troops****Tier 4 Hosts: Peak Strength Less Than 100 Troops**

SOURCE: Authors' analysis of DMDC data (DMDCRS, undated) with additional RAND Arroyo Center analysis.

NOTE: These plots exclude U.S. territories in the Indo-Pacific (Guam, American Samoa, Northern Marianas).

SOURCE: Updated from Frederick et al., 2020, with uscarriers.net data accessed on July 30, 2021 (uscarriers.net, undated).

## Bomber Aircraft

Unlike fighter aircraft, the U.S. Air Force and Strategic Air Command (SAC) have not maintained a continuous heavy bomber posture at overseas bases in the Indo-Pacific over the past 75-plus years. The basing location of the strategic fleet is generally sensitive, however, and reliable historical data on the number of heavy bombers at specific sites are often not available in the unclassified domain. Thus, we have not attempted to track the estimated annual number of heavy bombers in the AOR by country over time. Instead, in this section and in Table A.3, we summarize the major (unclassified) muscle movements of the USAF bomber fleet in the Indo-Pacific since 1946.

**TABLE A.3**  
**Major Muscle Movements in U.S. Heavy Bomber Posture in INDOPACOM, 1946–2021**

Location	Heavy or Medium Bombers Since WWII?	Significant Periods of Heavy Bomber Assignments in INDOPACOM Since World War II
Diego Garcia	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• B-52s deployed during 1990–1991 Gulf War and in 1996 and 1998 to conduct airstrikes against Iraq.</li><li>• From 2001 to 2006, heavy bombers conducted airstrikes and close air support (CAS) missions over Afghanistan and Iraq from Diego Garcia.</li><li>• Bomber task force rotations resumed in October 2021.</li></ul>
Guam	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Heavy bombardment units assigned throughout Cold War.</li><li>• B-52 combat sorties flown from Guam during the Vietnam War and 1996 airstrikes against Iraq.</li><li>• Continuous bomber presence from 2004–2020.</li><li>• Bomber task force rotations resumed in July 2021.</li></ul>
Japan	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Heavy bombardment units assigned to both mainland Japan and Okinawa in post-WWII period through the Korean War.</li><li>• During the Vietnam War, heavy bomber units were again assigned to Okinawa.</li></ul>
Philippines	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Heavy bombardment units were assigned to the Philippines in early post-WWII period, but only light bomber and fighter-bomber units have been assigned after 1950.</li></ul>

**Table A.3—Continued**

Location	Heavy or Medium Bombers Since WWII?	Significant Periods of Heavy Bomber Assignments in INDOPACOM Since World War II
South Korea	Yes	Heavy bomber presence in South Korea during the Korean War, but only light bomber and fighter-bomber units have been assigned since the mid-1950s.
South Vietnam	No	Only light bomber and fighter-bomber units were assigned to South Vietnam during the Vietnam War.
Taiwan	No	Only light bomber and fighter-bomber units were assigned to Taiwan during the U.S. Air Force's Cold War presence (1955–1976).
Thailand	Yes	Heavy and light bomber units were deployed to Thailand in combat during the Vietnam War.

NOTE: This table excludes short (unassigned) rotational deployments for training exercises and deployments of naval tactical bombers.

After World War II, heavy bombardment wings and squadrons were retained at three locations in the Indo-Pacific theater until the onset of the Korean War: Guam, Japan, and the Philippines.<sup>1</sup> Beginning in July 1950, additional bombardment and fighter-bomber units surged to Japan,<sup>2</sup> and by year's end, some were assigned to South Korea. Heavy bombardment wings and squadrons remained in Korea and Japan until 1954, but by the mid-1950s, USAF leaders had determined that many U.S. heavy and medium bombers at overseas bases were now vulnerable to direct attack and should be redeployed because of the Soviets' progress in developing their own strategic air force and ballistic missile force. As Reardon, 1998, explains:<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Fletcher, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Generally speaking, fighter-bombers (or tactical fighters with ground-attack capabilities) are smaller, carry lighter payloads, and cannot travel as far or loiter as long as heavy or medium bombers.

<sup>3</sup> Steven L. Rearden, "U.S. Strategic Bombardment Doctrine Since 1945," in R. Cargill Hall, ed., *Case Studies in Strategic Bombardment*, Washington, D.C.: Air Force History and Museum Program, 1998, p. 389.

Studies in the early 1950s by civilian analysts at the RAND Corporation . . . indicated that just a small Soviet strategic air force could inflict heavy losses on U.S. bombers based abroad. As a result, the Air Force, acting on RAND's findings and studies of its own, began in 1955 to recall many of its bombers to dispersed bases in the continental United States and to plan on using overseas bases mainly for prestrike and poststrike refueling and arming. The advantages of overseas operations were thus retained, but with a substantially reduced risk to the bomber fleet.

From the mid-1950s until the end of the Cold War, the Air Force thus maintained a continuous tactical/fighter-bomber presence in Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines—as well as in Taiwan from 1955 to 1976.<sup>4</sup> However, its heavy bomber presence in the Indo-Pacific theater (excluding Alaska and Hawaii) was essentially limited to rotational units on Guam,<sup>5</sup> except during the Vietnam War when B-52 Stratofortresses also rotated to Thailand and Okinawa.<sup>6</sup> During the Vietnam war, the Air Force also deployed light bombers and fighter-bombers to South Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines.<sup>7</sup>

As the Reagan administration's post-Vietnam defense buildup progressed, in 1986 "SAC began to practice deployments to project its conventionally armed B-52s in support of overseas theater commanders," a secondary benefit of which was—in the findings of one 1994 RAND study—the

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<sup>4</sup> We note that in the late 1950s, fighter-bomber units were redesignated as tactical fighter units, even though they continued to operate the same aircraft with ground-attack capabilities. For instance, in 1958, the 12th Fighter-Bomber Squadron stationed at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, was redesignated as the 12th Tactical Fighter Squadron.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Meyer, "Happy 60th Birthday B-52, and 48 Years of History at Andersen AFB," Anderson Air Force Base, press release, April 25, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Heavy bomber units were not assigned to airfields in South Vietnam during the war in Southeast Asia but instead were based elsewhere in the region. Altogether, B-52 bombers operating out of Guam, Okinawa, and Thailand conducted thousands of long-range bombing sorties from 1965–1973, primarily during Operations Arc Light and Linebacker II (Air Force Magazine Staff, *The Air Force in the Vietnam War*, Arlington, Va.: Air Force Association, December 2004, p. 14; Walter J. Boyne, "Fifty Years of the B-52," *Air Force Magazine*, December 1, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Fletcher, 1993.

Air Force's "desensitization of B-52 aircraft movements outside the United States."<sup>8</sup> According to the same RAND assessment, these B-52 rotations in the Pacific circa the late 1980s included "exercise deployments to Hawaii, Alaska, Guam, Australia, Japan, Thailand, and Diego Garcia"—training deployments credited with preparing the heavy bomber fleet for eventual rapid responses to conventional contingencies in the Middle East.<sup>9</sup>

Following the end of the Cold War, SAC B-52s were deployed to Diego Garcia in 1990–1991 to conduct bombing sorties during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm.<sup>10</sup> During Operation Desert Strike in 1996, B-52s conducted combat sorties over Iraq from both Diego Garcia and Guam, and they again returned to Diego Garcia in response to provocations by Saddam Hussein in 1998 as part of Operation Desert Fox.<sup>11</sup> From 2001 to 2006, this outpost on the western edge of the (current) INDOPACOM AOR was again used to fly B-1, B-2, and B-52 combat sorties and close air support missions over Afghanistan and Iraq.

On the eastern side of the post-Cold War theater, heavy bombers returned to Guam in 2004. The Air Force maintained a Continuous Bomber Presence Mission at Andersen AFB until late 2020, when the program was terminated. In 2021, the Pacific Air Forces marked its shift to a new bomber task force model with the periodic deployment of "smaller, less predictable rotations" of heavy bombers to both Guam and Diego Garcia.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> James A. Winnefeld, Preston Niblack, and Dana J. Johnson, *A League of Airmen: U.S. Air Power in the Gulf War*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MR-343-AF, 1994, p. 46.

<sup>9</sup> Winnefeld, Niblack, and Johnson, 1994, p. 46.

<sup>10</sup> Air Force Magazine Staff, 2004, p. 35.

<sup>11</sup> James Kitfield, "The Long Deployment," *Air Force Magazine*, July 1, 2000; Meyer, 2012; Mark J. Conversino, "Operation DESERT FOX: Effectiveness with Unintended Effects," *Chronicles Online Journal*, Air University, July 13, 2005; "2nd Bomb Wing," GlobalSecurity.org, webpage, last updated July 24, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Brian W. Everstine, "Minot B-52s Head to Guam for Bomber Task Force Deployment," *Air Force Magazine*, July 15, 2021; Thomas Newdick, "B-1 Bombers Deploy to Diego Garcia For the First Time in over 15 Years," *The WarZone*, October 20, 2021.

## Excluded Factors

In addition to the six key factors included in our framework, discussed in Chapter Two, we carefully considered two other factors for potential inclusion: China's internal instability and Chinese perceptions of whether the United States and its allies and partners doubt Chinese resolve. Each offers a plausible hypothesis regarding the drivers of Chinese thinking and responses to U.S., allied, and partner activities. After assessing these two factors in detail, however, we found insufficient support to include either one in our framework.

It is often argued that China would be more likely to respond aggressively to U.S., allied, and partner actions when it may be experiencing greater domestic political unrest or turmoil. Certainly, the CCP is highly sensitive to public opinion and uses nationalism to strengthen its grip on power. There is significant evidence, moreover, that governments occasionally use diversionary external aggression to boost their domestic popularity. Nonetheless, a careful analysis of both the historical record and more contemporary events finds little support for this factor. Since 1949, China has not systematically behaved more aggressively abroad during periods of acute internal instability than in periods of relative domestic tranquility. During the 1980s and into the early 1990s, for example—the most politically unstable period in China's post-Cultural Revolution history—the CCP exhibited significant restraint in its foreign policy. In more-recent crises in the past three years during a period of intense unrest in Hong Kong, including China's reaction to Vietnamese-Russian oil exploration in waters claimed by China in 2019, the evidence suggests that domestic unrest may have actually motivated China to adopt *less* aggressive policies, as China did not want to encourage foreign support for or exploitation of its protest movements. Under different internal and external circumstances in the future, Chinese leaders may

respond to internal unrest aggressively. However, our analysis clarified that other factors are currently much more useful predictors of the likelihood of aggressive Chinese responses.

Similarly, we examined whether China would be more likely to behave aggressively if it believed that its competitors questioned its willingness to defend its interests, because aggressive responses may help establish a reputation for resolve that could deter future challenges. However, we found inadequate evidence to include this factor in our framework. China has historically paid careful attention to its reputation for resolve—and to this day it devotes considerable attention to managing foreign perceptions of China’s willingness to defend its core interests—but the salience of reputational concerns to the aggressiveness of China’s policy responses appears to have decreased over time. In particular, its burgeoning capabilities and power have reduced its need to respond to perceived challenges to its resolve to act aggressively. Moreover, even in cases in which reputational concerns appear most likely to have influenced the aggressiveness of Chinese behavior, it is not clear that they did so. This reflects, in part, the challenge of information gaps. Fully analyzing and applying this factor requires a depth of knowledge regarding Chinese leaders’ beliefs and decisionmaking processes that is rarely attainable. The available evidence, which is for the most part indirect or circumstantial, provides moderate support for the conclusion that Chinese concern over its reputation for resolve can influence Chinese policy. However, it is insufficient to conclude that reputational concerns are a core driver of the aggressiveness of Chinese responses to U.S., allied, and partner actions.

Although we therefore decided against including these factors in our framework, we nonetheless present our assessment of them here in full, as these factors are often cited in other works as being important determinants of Chinese behavior, and we wish to contribute to debates regarding their importance.

## Excluded Factor: Chinese Internal Unrest

“Winning or losing public support,” Xi Jinping remarked in 2013, concerns “the survival or extinction” of the CCP and is thus a central consideration



in CCP decisionmaking.<sup>1</sup> Historically, however, China has often responded to domestic unrest by adopting conciliatory approaches in its disputes in order to focus on domestic problems. There are also few clear connections between domestic political unrest and China's aggression abroad in recent crises. We therefore found insufficient evidence to conclude that China would be more likely to respond aggressively to U.S., allied, and partner actions in the future if it were experiencing greater domestic political unrest or turmoil.

A significant body of research has examined whether regimes use external aggression or even start so-called diversionary wars to buttress their popularity when they face heightened levels of internal unrest. Some studies find that the risk of diversionary aggression is greater under personalistic or military regimes than under single-party regime states and under a range of conditions, including during economic troubles and when states can exploit territorial disputes or long-standing rivalries.<sup>2</sup> However, other work has found that the connections between domestic unrest and a state's aggressiveness are tenuous or nonexistent.<sup>3</sup> As one review concludes, it is likely that internal instability influences states' foreign policies but does not

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<sup>1</sup> Chun-yue Chang, "Study History, Be Close to the People," *China Daily*, July 9, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Relevant literature includes George W. Downs and David M. Rocke, "Conflict, Agency, and Gambling for Resurrection: The Principal-Agent Problem Goes to War," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 38, No. 2, May 1994; Lai and Slater, 2006; Jaroslav Tir, "Territorial Diversion: Diversionary Theory of War and Territorial Conflict," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 72, No. 2, April 2010; Jeffrey Pickering and Emizet F. Kisangani, "Diversionary Despots? Comparing Autocracies' Propensities to Use and to Benefit from Military Force," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 54, No. 2, April 2010; and Sara McLaughlin Mitchell and Brandon C. Prins, "Rivalry and Diversionary Uses of Force," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 48, No. 6, December 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Giacomo Chiozza and H. E. Goemans, "Peace Through Insecurity: Tenure and International Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 47, No. 4, August 2003; Brett Ashley Leeds and David R. Davis, "Domestic Political Vulnerability and International Disputes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 6, December 1997; James Meernik and Peter Waterman, "The Myth of the Diversionary Use of Force by American Presidents," *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 3, September 1996; M. Taylor Fravel, "The Limits of Diversion: Rethinking Internal and External Conflict," *Security Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2, May 2010.

do so “in the same way in every instance and not in every state in the international system.”<sup>4</sup>

The imperative to maintain public support has consistently shaped the CCP’s approach to foreign affairs. In the 1958 Taiwan Strait crisis, for example, Mao Zedong used the threat of war to mobilize the Chinese people behind the Great Leap Forward’s ultimately disastrous economic and social policies.<sup>5</sup> This is not an example of internal instability leading to external aggression, because Mao sought to build elite and popular support for his revolutionary program rather than to distract from ongoing domestic unrest, but it demonstrates the close connection between the CCP’s foreign and domestic policies. That the CCP remains highly sensitive to public opinion and internal stability today is clear in the amount of effort that it dedicates to internal security and population management.<sup>6</sup> Many analysts argue that China’s efforts to manage public unrest intensify during crises. Moreover, some suspect that the rising nationalism or hawkishness of the Chinese people will shape these efforts in the future as the CCP employs

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<sup>4</sup> Benjamin O. Fordham, “More Than Mixed Results: What We Have Learned from Quantitative Research on the Diversionary Hypothesis,” Oxford Research Encyclopedia: Politics, May 24, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> China established the People’s Armed Police in 1982 as a paramilitary force tasked with protecting the CCP and ensuring domestic stability, and it has subsequently built a sophisticated system to regulate information flows and monitor citizens’ behavior. China has nonetheless experienced considerable instability, including in Tibet in 2008 and in Xinjiang in 2009. Controlling more ubiquitous acts of unrest, such as the 180,000 cases of domestic “mass incidents” that “disturbed” social stability in 2010, according to the Chinese government, is also a fixation of the CCP (Joel Wuthnow, *China’s Other Army: The People’s Armed Police in an Era of Reform*, Washington, D.C.: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, China Strategic Perspectives No. 14, August 2019; Frank Langfitt, “In China, Beware: A Camera May Be Watching You,” NPR, January 29, 2013; Simon Denyer, “China’s Scary Lesson to the World: Censoring the Internet Works,” *Washington Post*, March 23, 2016; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, “Section 3: China’s Domestic Stability,” in *2014 Report to Congress of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, Washington, D.C., November 2014; Greitens, Lee, and Yazici, 2019/2020).

nationalism to bolster domestic support for its foreign policy goals.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, there are thus far no examples of rising nationalism pushing Beijing into a more aggressive stance abroad.

It is also not clear that China's propensity for external aggression increases in periods of heightened internal instability. The period from the inflationary late 1980s through the Tiananmen Square protests was the most politically unstable in China's post-Cultural Revolution history, for example, but even so, the CCP did not behave more aggressively abroad during or immediately afterward.<sup>8</sup> This does not appear to have been a historical aberration. One review of China's conflicts between 1949 and 1992 identifies no systematic relationship between domestic instability and Chinese adventurism abroad.<sup>9</sup> Another analysis concludes that, with rare exceptions, Chinese leaders have actually been *less* likely to escalate crises when they confront heightened internal instability, because their desire to focus on resolving internal threats creates the "conditions for cooperation, producing a 'diversionary peace' instead of war."<sup>10</sup> A follow-on study of China's border disputes finds that although internal unrest may "exacerbate perceptions of [China's] declining bargaining power" in interstate disputes and encourage Chinese aggression as a result, it has not "provided an independent incentive for escalation."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Scholars have argued that increasing hawkishness or nationalism will shape China's foreign policy (Weiss, 2019; Suisheng Zhao, "Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Nationalism Revisited: The Strident Turn," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 22, No. 82, 2013), China's political instability may increase pressure on the regime to adopt a more nationalist and aggressive foreign policy to win public support (Kai Sun, "Book Review: Rosemary Foot, ed., *China Across the Divide: The Domestic and Global in Politics and Society*," *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 21, March 2016), and Chinese use of popular nationalism to strengthen their bargaining positions in crises may also constrain China's ability to compromise in foreign policy disputes (Jessica Chen Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China's Foreign Relations*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> There is also little evidence that China's political instability in the late 1980s had any direct influence on Chinese decisionmaking during the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait crisis.

<sup>9</sup> Johnston, 1998.

<sup>10</sup> Fravel, 2005, p. 49.

<sup>11</sup> Fravel, 2007/2008, p. 80.

Two recent cases cast additional doubt on whether China's internal unrest is a predictor of its external aggressiveness. Both occurred in the shadow of recent instability in Hong Kong. From March 2019 into 2020, resistance to a proposed law that would allow the extradition of criminal suspects to the mainland coalesced into mass public protests. Because China's leadership expressed heightened concern over internal unrest during these protests, we would expect to find evidence of heightened Chinese external aggression if this factor's hypothesis were correct.<sup>12</sup>

The first case occurred from mid-May to October 2019 after the Russian oil firm Rosneft, with Vietnamese support, began drilling in maritime territory claimed by China near Vanguard Bank, about 230 miles south-east of Vietnam.<sup>13</sup> Even though the 2019 standoff happened during intense unrest in Hong Kong, China's response was more restrained than it had been in 2014. It reiterated its territorial claims but did not dispatch ships to challenge or disrupt Vietnamese activities for approximately a month. Chinese paramilitary vessels gradually concentrated near Vanguard Bank to escort Chinese survey ships and harass Vietnamese vessels, and many stayed until the conclusion of the standoff in late October.<sup>14</sup> Although the

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<sup>12</sup> A communique drafted during the fourth plenary session of the 19th CCP Central Committee in late October 2019 noted that China faced "complicated situations marked by increasing risks and challenges at home and abroad" and highlighted the importance of "maintaining lasting prosperity and stability in Hong Kong." Chinese leaders may have also been worried about increased unrest in Xinjiang ("19th CPC Central Committee Concludes Fourth Plenary Session, Releases Communique," *Xinhua*, October 31, 2019; Hua Chunying, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on July 30, 2019," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, July 30, 2019; Mamatjan Juma, Shohret Hoshur, Kurban Niyaz, and Ekrem Hezim, "10th Anniversary of Urumqi Unrest Brings Protests over Internment Camps, Accountability Demands," *Radio Free Asia*, July 5, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> China viewed this as just the latest in a string of Vietnamese challenges to its claims. It also followed a 2014 standoff near the Paracel Islands triggered by Chinese oil exploration in Vietnam's EEZ. That earlier crisis, which had occurred during Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement protests, had rapidly escalated as Vietnam and China massed forces and took coercive economic and diplomatic measures against one another (Green et al., 2017a, pp. 202–223).

<sup>14</sup> Each side's deployed maritime forces varied. Vietnamese Major General Nguyen Minh Hoang claimed that there were 40 Chinese and 50 Vietnamese vessels operating in the vicinity of Block 06-01; other sources estimate that 80 Chinese vessels simulta-

PLA conducted drills around the Paracel Islands in both early June and early August, and test-fired anti-ship ballistic missiles from the mainland into the SCS for the first time even as the United States signaled its direct and indirect support for Vietnamese claims, neither China nor Vietnam took punitive diplomatic or economic measures against the other.<sup>15</sup> Indirect evidence suggests that one reason for this may have been China's desire to discourage Vietnam and ethnic Vietnamese living in Hong Kong from supporting the Hong Kong protest movement.<sup>16</sup> It therefore appears that internal instability may, if anything, have reduced China's appetite for external aggression during the Vanguard Bank standoff.

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neously operated in the area (Laura Zhou, "As Coastguard Boats Circle, Vietnam Prepares for Bigger Challenge in South China Sea," *South China Morning Post*, October 12, 2019b; Carlyle A. Thayer, "Will Vanguard Bank Ignite Vietnamese Nationalism?" Australian Naval Institute, August 4, 2019).

<sup>15</sup> Laura Zhou, "Beijing Starts Military Exercise in Disputed South China Sea as Tensions with Vietnam Rise," *South China Morning Post*, August 15, 2019a; Jim Gomez, "U.S. Carrier Sails into Disputed South China Sea Waters amid New Flare-Ups," Associated Press, August 6, 2019; Jesse Johnson, "Japan-Based U.S. Aircraft Carrier in South China Sea Ahead of Key Chinese Anniversary," *Japan Times*, September 29, 2019. U.S. FONOPs are reported in O'Rourke, 2022, p. 35. Chinese experts tracked U.S. activities in the SCS during this crisis and noted exercises and exchanges involving the Vietnamese military (South China Sea Probing Initiative [南海战略态势感知], *Incomplete Report on U.S. Military Activities in the South China Sea in 2019* [2019 年美军南海军事活动不完全报告], March 28, 2020, pp. 7 and 16–23).

<sup>16</sup> In 2014 and 2019, ethnic Vietnamese living in Hong Kong had protested there, and many Vietnamese citizens supported the protest movement. In 2019, however, the Chinese government worked to suppress or contradict public blame on Vietnam for Hong Kong's unrest. This suggests a desire by China to focus popular attention on the threat posed by the United States, which Beijing claimed to be behind the protests, while decoupling territorial disputes with Vietnam from China's internal instability (Marianne Brown, "Hong Kong Protesters 'Inspire' Vietnam Activists," *Voice of America*, October 2, 2014; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Consul General Wu Jun Engage in Discussions and Exchanges with Hong Kong Police Wanchai District Junior Youth Call" ["吴骏总领事与香港警务处湾仔警区少年警讯代表团座谈交流"], Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in Ho Chi Minh City, July 30, 2019; Ling De [凌德] and Fengxiang Li [李风向], "Forgetting Family and Ethnic History, Leading Hong Kong Troublemakers Bring in External Forces" ["忘祖籍抛民族身份, 乱港头目成外部势力 '带路党'"], *Global Times*, August 21, 2019; "The Worst [Hong Kong] Troublemakers Are Ethnic Vietnamese? Media Refute Allegations" ["香港闹得最凶的是越南裔? 媒体驳斥"], Sina News, August 21, 2019).

The second case began in May 2020, when a series of skirmishes broke out in disputed territory along the Sino-Indian border's LAC. These reached an apex in the middle of June, when fighting claimed the lives of at least 20 Indian and four Chinese troops and wounded significantly more.<sup>17</sup> Indian and Chinese troops also fired on one another on September 7, 2020, marking this crisis as both the most intense and the first to claim life on the LAC in more than four decades.<sup>18</sup> Notably, however, it happened as China's internal unrest appeared to be declining. By June 2020, COVID-19 restrictions and tightening security measures had largely suppressed protests in Hong Kong and suffocated opposition in Xinjiang.<sup>19</sup> China also did little to enflame or exploit popular nationalism around the border clash. Its early interest in de-escalating the crisis suggests that it was more interested in refocusing on higher-priority challenges, such as unrest linked to Hong Kong and COVID-19, than exploiting a foreign crisis to build additional popular support for the regime.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, across the broader literature and in both older and more recent cases, we found insufficient evidence to conclude that China would be

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<sup>17</sup> These numbers reflect official statements of losses from each side. Other estimates have ranged much higher. India, for example, claims that China suffered at least 20 fatalities (Steven Lee Myers, "China Acknowledges 4 Deaths in Last Year's Border Clash with India," *New York Times*, March 1, 2021).

<sup>18</sup> The escalation followed years of rising tensions between China and India caused in part by each state's construction on disputed territory, burgeoning security partnerships (between China and Pakistan and between India and the United States), and competition for influence across much of Asia. Chinese statements and commentaries tend to blame the crisis on Indian incursions into Chinese territory, but some also highlight India's cooperation with the United States and its competition with the BRI. See Sun, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Polling data suggests that the central government had weathered the worst of both internal challenges with its general popularity largely intact (Ken Moritsugu, "AP Interview: China Signals Shift but No Letup in Xinjiang," Associated Press, December 21, 2020; Primrose Riordan and Nicolle Liu, "Hong Kong Protesters Defy Ban to Show Support for Detained Leaders," *Financial Times*, March 1, 2021; Edward Cunningham, Tony Saich, and Jessie Turiel, *Understanding CCP Resilience: Surveying Chinese Public Opinion Through Time*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Kennedy School, Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, July 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Tian, Yew Lun, and Sanjeev Miglani, "China-India Border Clash Stokes Contrasting Domestic Responses," Reuters, June 23, 2020.

more likely to respond aggressively to U.S., allied, and partner actions when faced with domestic political unrest or turmoil. Indeed, to the extent that it has had any effect at all, since 2019, it appears that internal instability may have had a de-escalatory effect on China's external use of force. Although Chinese leaders could potentially respond to domestic unrest with external aggression in the future under a different set of circumstances or different leadership, at present other factors are more reliable and useful predictors of the likelihood of aggressive Chinese responses.

## Excluded Factor: Chinese Perceptions That the United States and Its Allies or Partners Doubt Chinese Resolve

A state's concerns over its reputation for resolve—that is, whether it thinks that other states see it as willing to pay costs, whether in blood or treasure, to defend its interests—can be an important driver of its behavior.<sup>21</sup> However, we found insufficient support to conclude that China would be more likely to respond to U.S., allied, and partner actions aggressively when it believes that its reputation for resolve could be or had been undermined. The available evidence suggests that China has become less sensitive to reputational concerns as it has grown more powerful. Moreover, there are few recent cases in which Chinese concerns over whether other states view its past actions as lacking resolve played a clear role in shaping the aggressiveness of China's policy responses.

Many scholars argue that states are very concerned over their reputations—for resolve, risk acceptance, sensitivity to threats, commit-

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<sup>21</sup> *Reputation* refers to the subjective beliefs about a state's behavior held by other states; *resolve* refers to a state's willingness to bear costs, and even to risk or initiate wars, in order to achieve its objectives (Allan Dafoe, Jonathan Renshon, and Paul Huth, "Reputation and Status as Motives for War," *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 17, May 2014; Danielle L. Lupton, *Reputation for Resolve: How Leaders Signal Determination in International Politics*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2020, pp. 2–3).

ment, and other characteristics—and modify their behavior accordingly.<sup>22</sup> All states have an incentive to develop reputations for being willing to defend their interests against future challenges. States worry that without such a reputation, or if they were to acquire a reputation for irresoluteness, they could appear more vulnerable to foreign coercion and thus more likely to face attempts at coercion in the future.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, states that have reputations for resolve may be able to more easily deter or compel others.<sup>24</sup> Evidence suggests that states tend to be more sensitive to their perceived reputations if they think that they have failed in previous disputes or judge the future to be increasingly dangerous.<sup>25</sup> In such situations they may become more likely to engage in signaling behaviors that they think will demonstrate their resolve to other states, ranging from externally focused public statements and internally focused propaganda efforts to military mobilizations and even initiating or escalating conflicts.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Work on this topic includes Mark J. C. Crescenzi, Jacob D. Kathman, Katja B. Kleinberg, and Reed M. Wood, “Reliability, Reputation, and Alliance Formation,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 2, June 2012; Gregory D. Miller, *The Shadow of the Past: Reputation and Military Alliances Before the First World War*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011; Barbara F. Walter, *Reputation and Civil War: Why Separatist Conflicts Are So Violent*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009; Anne E. Sartori, *Deterrence by Diplomacy*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005; Robert Jervis, “Signaling and Perception: Drawing Inferences and Projecting Images,” in K. R. Monroe, ed., *Political Psychology*, Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2002; Paul K. Huth, “Reputations and Deterrence: A Theoretical and Empirical Assessment,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1997; Scott Wolford, “The Turnover Trap: New Leaders, Reputation, and International Conflict,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 51, No. 4, October 2007; and Joe Clare and Vesna Danilovic, “Multiple Audiences and Reputation Building in International Conflicts,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 54, No. 6, December 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Alex Weisiger and Keren Yarhi-Milo, “Revisiting Reputation: How Past Actions Matter in International Politics,” *International Organization*, Vol. 69, No. 2, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> One way of winning a contest of expectations is to establish a reputation for having a greater risk tolerance than an opponent. As Thomas Schelling argued, reputation might be “one of the few things worth fighting over” (Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966, p. 124).

<sup>25</sup> Sechser, 2018.

<sup>26</sup> James D. Fearon, “Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands Versus Sinking Costs,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 1, February 1997; Clare and



Certainly, China has historically paid close attention to what it perceives as its reputation for resolve, particularly among its neighbors and potential adversaries.<sup>27</sup> There is evidence that China has employed this tactic in its territorial disputes. For example, in the midst of tensions over its border with India in 1959, China crushed armed resistance in Tibet and deployed military forces against Nepal, Burma, and India itself in part to demonstrate its resolve.<sup>28</sup> Reputational concerns also informed China's use of force following major failures of deterrence or coercive diplomacy since 1949, including its wars in Korea, against India, against the Soviet Union, and against Vietnam. In each, evidence suggests that China escalated not only to achieve its proximate political objectives but also to establish a reputation for resolve in order to deter adversaries in the future.<sup>29</sup> Because Beijing has favorably assessed its conflict-termination strategies in these conflicts, there is reason to believe that its behavior in a future conflict may be similar.<sup>30</sup>

A variety of Chinese sources suggest that China remains committed to managing foreign perceptions of China's resolve. Official government

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Danilovic, 2010; Kai Quek, "Four Costly Signaling Mechanisms," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 115, No. 2, May 2021; Alexandre Debs and Jessica Chen Weiss, "Circumstances, Domestic Audiences, and Reputational Incentives in International Crisis Bargaining," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 60, No. 3, 2016).

<sup>27</sup> Indeed, China has leveraged reputational concerns to influence its competitors' behaviors since at least the early Warring States period (475–221 BC); an old Chinese idiom, to "kill the chicken to warn the monkeys" [杀鸡儆猴], refers in contemporary Chinese strategic discourse to the targeted use of aggression against a weaker state in order to shape other states' future actions by changing their perceptions of Chinese behavior (Zhang Ketian, 2019; Liu Jifeng [刘戟锋], "Being in a Period of Nonphysical Warfare Is Far from Secure" ["身处非物理战时期远未居安"], *Guangming Daily* [光明日报], March 11, 2015; Shiping Tang, "Reputation, Cult of Reputation, and International Conflict," *Security Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2005, p. 47).

<sup>28</sup> Krista E. Wiegand, " Militarized Territorial Disputes: States' Attempts to Transfer Reputation for Resolve," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 48, No. 1, January 2011, p. 105.

<sup>29</sup> Korea and the Sino-Soviet border conflict are especially salient examples of this behavior (Sijin Cheng, *Fighting for Reputation: China's Deterrence Policy and Concerns About Credibility*, dissertation, Boston: Boston University, 2014; Michael S. Gerson, *The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict: Deterrence, Escalation, and the Threat of Nuclear War in 1969*, Arlington, Va.: CNA, CRM D0022974.A2/Final, November 2010).

<sup>30</sup> Oriana Skylar Mastro, "How China Ends Wars: Implications for East Asian and U.S. Security," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2018, p. 47.

statements and expert commentary frequently declare China's willingness and ability to use force in order to defend its core interests and comprise a form of reputation management.<sup>31</sup> Chinese professional military writings on escalation management, or "war control," emphasize the use of different forms of signaling to demonstrate the credibility of China's coercive threats, including use of propaganda; raising military readiness levels; and "displaying strength" by publicizing capabilities, deploying forces, and conducting exercises.<sup>32</sup> Although much of this work indicates a preference for resolving crises using nonmilitary means, there is a common understanding in PLA literature that China must demonstrate not just its capability but also its willingness to employ force in order to deter adversaries.<sup>33</sup>

Two post-Cold War cases suggest that perceptions of China's reputation for resolve played at least a minor role in China's decisions to behave more aggressively in the relatively recent past. The first is the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait crisis. By the mid-1990s, Beijing feared that U.S. actions had embold-

<sup>31</sup> A *Global Times* editorial states that China "needs to make the U.S. be increasingly sure that if the U.S. launches a war with the People's Liberation Army in China's adjacent waters, it will be defeated. . . . And China has a strong will to use these [military] forces to defend its core interests" ("Chinese Mainland to Firmly Handle Chaos at Sea: Global Times Editorial," *Global Times*, May 12, 2021), and the 2019 defense white paper states that "China has the firm resolve and the ability to safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity" and the "determination, confidence, and capability to prevail over all threats and challenges," and Chinese military experts have stressed the need for either resolve or the reputation for resolve for deterrence to be effective (Wang Xixin [王西欣], "A Further Discussion on War Control" ["再论控制战"], *China Military Science* [中国军事科学], Vol. 64, 2014; Chen Hu [陈虎], "China Needs to Have the Ability to 'Resist' Wars," Tencent [腾讯网], 2010).

<sup>32</sup> Recent analyses of Chinese thinking on deterrence and escalation management include Beauchamp-Mustafaga et al., 2021; Laird, 2017; Alison A. Kaufman and Danie M. Hartnett, *Managing Conflict: Examining Recent PLA Writings on Escalation Control*, Arlington, Va.: CNA, February 2016; and David C. Gompert, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, and Cristina L. Garafola, *War with China: Thinking Through the Unthinkable*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1140-A, 2016.

<sup>33</sup> As the 2013 edition of *The Science of Military Strategy* states, "When crises, especially major military crises erupt, we should . . . show a strong resolve of willingness to fight and powerful real strength to force an opponent to promptly reverse course" (Shou Xiaosong [寿晓松], ed., *The Science of Military Strategy* [战略学], 3rd ed., Beijing: Military Science Press [军事科学出版社], 2013, p. 119).

ened Taiwan's pro-independence forces, and some Chinese officials began to argue that China should use more-forceful measures to demonstrate its determination to prevent Taiwanese independence.<sup>34</sup> In this context, Chinese leaders interpreted Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui's 1995 visit to the United States to mean that the United States and Taiwan saw China's previously restrained approach to signaling resolve regarding unification—which emphasized the use of economic and diplomatic tools—as a sign of weakness.<sup>35</sup> To demonstrate its ability and resolve to prevent Taiwanese independence, Beijing began a series of military demonstrations. These climaxed in large-scale exercises and missile tests in March 1996, even as the United States deployed two CSGs to the western Pacific and threatened grave consequences for Chinese aggression.<sup>36</sup> The seriousness of the U.S. response may have inadvertently encouraged China to continue its military exercises in order to demonstrate its resolve, although the evidence is not conclusive.<sup>37</sup> China's aggressive military activity during the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, therefore, appears to have been motivated in part by a desire to correct what it perceived as a lack of Taiwanese and U.S. respect for its resolve to prevent Taiwanese independence.

The second case is the 2012 standoff over Scarborough Shoal. Beginning around 2009, China perceived the United States and the Philippines as more

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<sup>34</sup> The most significant U.S. actions in shaping Chinese perceptions were probably the George H. W. Bush administration's 1992 sale of 150 F-16 multirole fighters to Taiwan, and the Clinton administration's 1994 elevation of diplomatic contacts with Taiwan. Many Chinese leaders and experts interpreted these two events as signaling greater U.S. support for Taiwanese independence (Robert S. Ross, "The 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Confrontation: Coercion, Credibility, and the Use of Force," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Fall 2000, p. 92; Zhang Hongyi, 2019, pp. 136–137).

<sup>35</sup> Andrew Scobell, "Show of Force: Chinese Soldiers, Statesmen, and the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 115, No. 2, Summer 2000.

<sup>36</sup> Arthur S. Ding, "The Lessons of the 1995–1996 Military Taiwan Strait Crisis: Developing a New Strategy Toward the United States and Taiwan," in Laurie Burkitt, Andrew Scobell, and Larry M. Wortzel, eds., *The Lessons of History: The Chinese People's Liberation Army at 75*, Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, July 2003, pp. 381–383.

<sup>37</sup> Note that China reduced the risk of escalation by warning Taiwan ahead of its activities, tailoring its deployments and exercises so that they did not suggest an imminent invasion, and avoiding U.S. assets (Garver, 1997, pp. 109–110; Ross, 2000, p. 111).

actively challenging China's claims in the SCS.<sup>38</sup> A standoff between China and the Philippines over Scarborough Shoal escalated in April 2012 after a Philippine naval ship attempted to arrest the crew of a Chinese fishing boat. In response, China used a variety of political, economic, and military tools to coerce the Philippines, and evidence suggests that China sought to use the crisis to signal to other states its commitment to defending its maritime claims.<sup>39</sup> A settlement reached between China, the Philippines, and the United States resulted in China effectively controlling the waters around the shoal. There is relatively weak indirect evidence that China escalated the standoff in part because it thought that the United States and its allies and partners perceived China as lacking resolve because of its comparative restraint in the 2000s. In the run-up to the Scarborough Shoal crisis, for example, Chinese governmental mouthpieces had begun to express concern that the Philippines did not find China's warning credible.<sup>40</sup> Beginning in 2012, some Chinese experts also began to argue that China had not sufficiently signaled its resolve on maritime territorial issues prior to the Scarborough Shoal standoff and embraced China's new assertiveness.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Authoritative sources suggest that China grew more sensitive to challenges to its maritime claims between 2008 and 2012. A 2010 defense white paper, for example, warned that "pressure builds up in preserving China's territorial integrity and maritime rights and interests"—sharper language than that employed previously (Government of the People's Republic of China, "China's National Defense in 2010," Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, March 31, 2011).

<sup>39</sup> Chinese coercive actions included reducing fruit imports from and tourism to the Philippines, as well as deploying PLAN and paramilitary ships to support its maritime militia vessels. Evidence that Beijing sought to influence not just the Philippines but also other regional actors through these measures is supported by interviews with Chinese officials and experts conducted by U.S. scholars, including Zhang Ketian, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> A 2011 *People's Daily* editorial had even warned that the Philippines should not interpret China's interest in cooperation as a "sign of weakness" (Zhang Ketian, 2019, pp. 147–149).

<sup>41</sup> A Chinese National Defense University-affiliated researcher argued in 2013 that other states had seen China as "trading territory for peace" and that the shift to a "tough approach" had helped China "clearly state to the international community that . . . China will never compromise and retreat" on its core interests (Huang Yingying [黄莹莹], "Meng Xiaoxing: Large Breakthroughs Have Already Been Made in Crisis Management and Control on China's Periphery" ["孟祥青: 中国周边危机管控已有大突破"], *International Herald Tribune* [国际先驱导报], November 6, 2012). Also see Long

A pattern emerges from these cases and Chinese behavior since 2013. Reputational concerns appear to have played a larger role in shaping Chinese behavior in the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait crisis (during which China’s military capabilities were relatively weak compared with Taiwan’s and the United States’) than during the Scarborough Shoal crisis, when China’s military capabilities were relatively more powerful. Since then, in the shadow of China’s growing strength, there has been even less evidence that reputational concerns have played a major role in driving the aggressiveness of Chinese reactions. What evidence does exist, moreover, is largely indirect or circumstantial.

Examples from the literature and the cases therefore provide limited evidence that this factor influenced Chinese behavior in the past. However, there is insufficient support to conclude with any confidence that reputational concerns play a key role in shaping the aggressiveness of Chinese responses to U.S., allied, and partner actions today or would be likely to do so in the near future. China appears to have grown less sensitive to whether other states see it as lacking commitment or resolve as it has grown more powerful. It is worth acknowledging that this factor may become more important as the result of adverse shocks to what China perceives as the threats facing it—which suggests that the degree to which reputational concerns influence the aggressiveness of China’s responses therefore depends in large part on the interaction of the framework factors discussed in this report.

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# Abbreviations

A2/AD	anti-access/area denial
ADIZ	Air Defense Identification Zone
AFB	Air Force Base
ANZUS	Australia, New Zealand, United States
AOR	area of responsibility
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRAC	base realignment and closure
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BUR	bottom-up review
C2	command and control
CCG	China Coast Guard
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CENTCOM	Central Command
CONUS	continental United States
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
CSG	carrier strike group
DMDC	Defense Manpower Data Center
DoD	U.S. Department of Defense
DPP	Democratic People's Party
ECS	East China Sea
EEZ	exclusive economic zone
EUCOM	European Command
FONOP	freedom of navigation operation
GPR	global posture review
ICBM	intercontinental ballistic missile
IGPBS	integrated global presence and basing strategy
IISS	International Institute for Strategic Studies
INDOPACOM	Indo-Pacific Command
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance

LAC	line of actual control
LRHW	long-range hypersonic weapon
NFU	no first use
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAAF	People's Liberation Army Air Force
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PRC	People's Republic of China
QDR	Quadrennial Defense Review
SAC	Strategic Air Command
SCS	South China Sea
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
SLOC	sea line of communication
SOFA	status of forces agreement
SSBN	ballistic missile submarine (hull classification)
THAAD	U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense
UAS	unmanned aircraft system
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
USAF	U.S. Air Force
USAREUR	U.S. Army Europe
USARPAC	U.S. Army Pacific
USMC	U.S. Marine Corps
USN	U.S. Navy
VFA	Visiting Forces Agreement



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*Unless otherwise indicated, the authors have provided translations of bibliographic details for the non-English sources included in this report. To support conventions for alphabetizing, sources in Chinese are introduced with and organized according to their English translations. The original rendering in Chinese appears in brackets after the English translation.*

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**T**he dramatic increase in Chinese power and military capabilities over the past two decades has prompted numerous calls for U.S. policymakers, and the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) in particular, to reevaluate their approach to the Indo-Pacific region, including changes to U.S. military posture. This report provides a framework for assessing likely Chinese reactions to planned or proposed posture enhancements in the Indo-Pacific region. The authors demonstrate how U.S. Army and other military planners can apply the framework to assess an enhancement's likely deterrent value and whether it may induce aggressive People's Republic of China (PRC) responses. Although the framework cannot provide definitive predictions regarding specific Chinese reactions, it helps to ensure consideration of the factors and characteristics most directly linked with Chinese perceptions and behavior.

The framework contains three main components. First, it identifies the key factors that appear to drive Chinese thinking and reactions. Second, it assesses how the characteristics of U.S. posture enhancements—their location, the U.S. allies or partners involved, their military capabilities, and the public profile or messaging that accompanies them—may affect Chinese reactions through each key factor. Third, the framework provides a typology of potential Chinese reactions, organized by their level of intensity. The authors apply the framework to three hypothetical U.S. posture enhancements to demonstrate its use and offer insights and recommendations for DoD and Army planners and policymakers.

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