

## Defensive Defense: A Better Way to Protect US Allies in Asia

US strategy in East Asia is defensive—seeking to maintain the territorial status quo and to preserve open trade and investment. The military component of that strategy largely involves helping allies defend their territories against China as the PRC grows richer and spends more on its military. But current US military operational plans in service of that strategy are largely offensive: in case of war, they would send US military assets close to China and launch conventional strikes against the Chinese homeland.<sup>1</sup> This “offensive defense” is more expensive, more dangerous, and less effective than an alternative: “defensive defense.”<sup>2</sup>

In principle, either offensive or defensive military operations can support a defensive strategy such as the one employed by the United States. Defensive operations aim to keep adversaries out while acting from areas controlled by friendly forces, while offensive operations aim to disarm or punish adversaries by forcibly entering areas controlled by those adversaries. Defensive defense combines defensive strategy with defensive operations to fend off attacks; offensive defense combines defensive strategy with offensive operations to prevent or punish enemy attacks.<sup>3</sup>

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Eugene Gholz (egholz@alum.mit.edu) is an associate professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame. Benjamin Friedman is the policy director at Defense Priorities, and Enea Gjoza (enea.gjoza@defensepriorities.org) is a senior fellow at Defense Priorities.

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By adopting the defensive defense approach, the United States would harmonize its defensive strategy in Asia with its operational plans there. It would no longer plan to defend its Asian allies with offensive measures. This shift would avoid forcing the US military to operate in the teeth of China's key defensive capabilities—the surveillance systems and missiles that have greatly improved lately and now provide it with robust anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) capability.<sup>4</sup> In turn, this new operational approach would rely more on improving the A2/AD capabilities of US allies to deter Chinese aggression in Asia. To be clear, we are not advocating here for an alternative strategy such as reducing US alliance commitments to Asia; we are suggesting a better execution of the current strategy by changing the operational concepts with which the United States military implements it.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Current “Offensive Defense”**

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The current US operational approach is an example of offensive defense called the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JAM-GC). Under this doctrine, US forces operate near Chinese territory, and in the case of a military conflict, they would deploy near China's coast to stop Chinese forces from moving outward. These US forces would be well within range of Chinese sensors and weapons located on land, sea, and air. The US forces would protect themselves both by carrying countermeasures such as anti-missile missiles and by striking China directly, launching missiles and air strikes to destroy thousands of Chinese military sites relevant to the successful operation of China's air defenses and anti-ship missiles. To enable these planned wartime operations, should they be necessary, the United States has spent heavily on technology intended to jam or spoof Chinese sensors and intercept Chinese munitions aimed at American assets operating within Chinese range.<sup>6</sup> The United States has also invested in new strike capabilities

**The current offensive defense approach leads to two key problems.**

intended to increase the speed and range of possible US attacks on Chinese military sites.<sup>7</sup>

The current offensive defense approach leads to two key problems. First, China can match US efforts by spending less, weapons system for weapons system, than the United States must spend. China can use land-based forces, operating at home, that can take advantage of recent decades' technological

advances to enhance their effectiveness, while JAM-GC means that the United States has to pay for power-projection forces operating far from home. To

protect its offensive operational forces, the United States is spending a growing pile of dollars for every yuan China spends on defense.

Second, the current operational approach intensifies a dynamic that international relations theorist Robert Jervis called “the security dilemma.”<sup>8</sup> In general, one state’s efforts to defend itself can seem threatening to another state, leading the second state to increase its military investment—which, in turn, may be perceived by the first state as threatening, renewing the spiral of suspicion and investment in arms. In the current US-China case, JAM-GC operations seem defensive to US planners, who view them as preemptive plans to defend US military platforms from Chinese weapons. But to China, the same capabilities look offensive, potentially to be used for preventive strikes meant to destroy or coerce Chinese leadership. Fear of those US capabilities encourages China to heighten its defenses, which in turn alarms US planners into more measures that seem offensive, deepening the spiral of mutual alarm. Intense security dilemmas often result in arms racing, a perceived advantage in striking first that makes war more likely in a crisis, and a poisonous tenor of relations that prevents cooperation in other areas.<sup>9</sup>

The current offensive operational concept results from Washington’s tendency to confuse its security needs with total military dominance of adversaries. The US military is working hard to maintain its dominance despite China’s growing military investment. China’s investment has focused on A2/AD capability, adding to Chinese defenders’ ability to inflict heavy costs on enemy militaries approaching their coast. These capabilities support a defensive operational concept—meaning that China’s gains in military capability need not undermine America’s strategic goal of deterring Chinese aggression, because those Chinese gains do little to aid advancing forces once they venture outside the well-protected area near China’s coast.<sup>10</sup> Instead of attempting strategic defense of US allies with offensive operations that include trying to eliminate Chinese A2/AD capabilities and restore total US military domination in a potential conflict in East Asia, US defensive strategy could defend US allies by deploying the same sort of defensive A2/AD capabilities that China is already using. The United States would change its operational plans to de-emphasize power projection, instead aiming to keep potential attackers off allies’ shores.<sup>11</sup>

The United States should make two policy changes to implement an improved, “defensive defense” approach to protecting its East Asian allies—here meaning states like Japan that the United States is bound by treaty to defend and like Taiwan, which the United States is committed to aid by law, though not by treaty. First, US policy should push its wealthy allies in Asia to more energetically improve their own A2/AD capabilities, rather than trying to emulate the US military’s strike capability. This change would be worthwhile even if the United States had to partly finance allies’ spending on A2/AD

systems. The shift to defensive defense would allow the United States to purchase fewer of the expensive, vulnerable assets that underpin its current offensive defense approach (for example, carrier strike groups and hypersonic land-attack missiles). Second, the United States should reconfigure its military plans to rely more on allies' defenses, aid them from outside the range of China's main A2/

**The United States should rely more on allies' defenses.**

AD systems, and prepare to fight with weapons that impede an adversary's advance rather than pre-emptively striking the adversary's forces in the adversary's home territory. Forcing allies to take the lead in their own defense is how military alliances traditionally work, with the stronger power backing its weaker partner in its own defense.

This approach would contain US costs while improving security in East Asia and reducing the risk of unwanted escalatory spirals. Our allies' defensive measures would be more distinguishable as purely defensive than ongoing US military efforts, so this change in approach would mitigate security dilemma dynamics. Because allied A2/AD works with technological trends rather than against them, these investments would also be able to blunt potential Chinese aggression without such an unfavorable ratio of US-to-Chinese investment.

### **America's Limited Military Aims**

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The United States has a variety of diplomatic and economic goals in East Asia, which creates a complex set of relationships, especially with China. Healthy great power competition has diplomatic, economic, and military aspects, and sometimes the US-China relationship must combine both cooperation and rivalry. But militarily, the US goal is fairly simple: to preserve allies' territorial integrity by maintaining a stable balance of power among regional states. The United States is not using the allies as proxies to combat China but rather augmenting their defensive capabilities in the event that they are the victims of Chinese aggression.

East Asia's geography and the distribution of wealth across its states makes this goal easier to achieve than is often appreciated, even as China makes large strides in military capability. China is ringed by great powers (Russia, India, Japan) and prosperous, technologically advanced US allies (South Korea, Japan, Taiwan), limiting its ability to operate freely in the region. By assisting American partners in hardening their defenses against potential Chinese aggression, the United States can neutralize potential Chinese expansionism without the need to

sustain increasingly costly US military operations in range of improving Chinese territorial defenses.

The challenge is to break an American habit. Over the past several decades, the US military has grown used to being able to (relatively) cheaply attack other countries. Tremendous US military capability allowed American strategy to obscure the difference between the global commons—open seas; airspace over most countries, at least above a certain height; and space—and “contested zones,” the parts of the globe where other countries, close to their home territory, challenge US supremacy.<sup>12</sup> In its recent wars, costly as they have been, the United States has only fought weaker adversaries like Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and ISIS in Syria, helping American leaders forget that things will be different against a great-power opponent that has made recent, relatively high-tech military investments.

US defense planners tend to see any diminution of US military advantage as a disaster. But a rival’s heightened ability to defend itself against the United States only marginally shifts the balance of power without upsetting US security, unless US security depends on being able to cheaply attack or conquer the rival state. Hardly anyone thinks that the United States has or should want that capability vis-a-vis a populous, rich, nuclear-armed China. Accommodating China’s ability to defend its territory—which is necessary for it to believe it is secure and thus act less aggressively—does not meaningfully damage US ability to deter potential attacks on US allies, let alone attacks on US territory.

## China’s A2/AD Investment

In recent years, China has significantly increased its military spending, focusing on buying A2/AD systems and training its military forces to be able to threaten US military forces operating close to China’s coast. In doing so, China has raised the cost to the United States of maintaining its current offensive defense. States have always sought to keep threatening forces away from their coasts.

In the twentieth century, aircraft, surface ships, and submarines were the key anti-access technologies. They could attack enemy forces that reached a state’s area, fighting alongside coastal artillery, ground and anti-ship mines, and anti-aircraft artillery. A2/AD forces also used transport systems to amass defending forces at invasion points. What distinguishes modern A2/AD, then, is not its operational goal but its combination of several newer technologies that improve surveillance (to locate enemy assets operating within range of adversary defenses) and strike (to target and destroy those assets).

Today, the core components are radar and other sensors that track rival forces, the computer processing and communications technologies that fuse and

disseminate surveillance data, and the weapons systems that receive that data and accurately target enemy forces.<sup>13</sup> The key modern A2/AD weapons systems are surface-to-air missiles for targeting aircraft and anti-ship missiles—fired on land or by ships, submarines, or aircraft—for targeting ships. However, other weapons are still useful for A2/AD missions, including air-to-air missiles on fighter aircraft, torpedoes on submarines and small ships, and mines.

The leading edge of China's A2/AD shield consists of radar surveillance systems; anti-ship cruise missiles deployed on mobile land-based launchers, coastal patrol boats, and submarines; and mobile surface-to-air missiles.<sup>14</sup> Because radar returns and heat emissions are more distinguishable from background clutter at sea or in the air than on the land, these A2/AD systems gain a relative advantage against American sea- and air-borne forces.<sup>15</sup> Forces at sea and in the air also cannot take cover behind terrain obstacles when they identify threats to their own survival, but China's land-based mobile A2/AD systems can.

These core A2/AD capabilities are hardly the extent of China's defenses. They are just where Chinese investments have paid the most dividends in recent years to complicate potential US military operations.<sup>16</sup> More traditional coastal and air defenses—guns on small coastal patrol ships, land-based artillery, and fighter aircraft—could still inflict substantial harm on any force attacking China from the sea. More exotic capabilities, like cyberattacks meant to disrupt enemy communications and anti-satellite missiles, also get a lot of press, but these would likely contribute only marginally to China's defenses today.<sup>17</sup> The same may be true for China's anti-ship ballistic missiles, a futuristic component of China's A2/AD investment—unproven but still a potential menace to ships due to their speed and ability to overwhelm ships' air defenses.<sup>18</sup>

Overall, as China has invested in its military in recent years, the difference to the US military between operating in the commons and in China's contested zone has grown. Enhanced Chinese defenses make the current American offensive operational concept more costly than it used to be. Because this shift is a function of geography and China's technological sophistication, it is not something that US military spending levels can much slow. Now-established A2/AD capabilities will continue to shift the military balance in favor of states defending their coasts, and they can mount that defense at significantly lower costs than those a potential aggressor must bear to challenge the defenses.<sup>19</sup> Offensive defense is becoming less and less tenable.

### **China's A2/AD is Not Offensive**

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Some US analysts suggest, often vaguely, that China's A2/AD investments work in tandem with its blue-water navy investments, including its aircraft carriers,

posing an offensive threat.<sup>20</sup> They contend that China's investments reveal an aggressive strategy, justifying greater US expenditure. However, whether or not China's strategy is aggressive in the long term, its current operational concept, which features A2/AD technologies, is primarily defensive and ill-suited to offensive goals.

A2/AD capabilities are good servants of defensive strategies such as the current stated US strategy. Defenses succeed, in principle, by driving up the costs an attacker would suffer in a war, degrading its will to fight or deterring its attack in the first place. Those costs include not only direct losses of troops and materiel, but also the expensive countermeasures taken to avoid such losses.

While A2/AD systems excel at defense, they are far less useful in supporting offensive military postures. Distance imposes the biggest limit on A2/AD capability. In coastal A2/AD's modern incarnation, islands obstruct radar, and the curvature of the earth limits it with a horizon, so A2/AD systems cannot locate and attack distant targets.<sup>21</sup> Missiles also lose effectiveness with distance, because their target can move and avoid being hit during the time it takes the missile to fly downrange.

China may be trying to extend its A2/AD range by building artificial islands. However, the man-made islands are too small to allow for the cover and mobility that real land offers, and supplies for Chinese forces on these islands would be limited, as they are for sea-based US forces. Any Chinese A2/AD forces based on tiny maritime features would not gain the same relative advantages that home-based A2/AD forces do. For these reasons, the effective range of China's A2/AD systems is the horizon of its missile-guiding radars on or near its coast.<sup>22</sup>

It is true that even the limited range of China's home-based A2/AD forces extends far enough to be relevant to some potential war scenarios. For example, some defense analysts warn about military threats to Taiwan or the Senkaku Islands, and China's improved A2/AD capabilities are often part of the warning.<sup>23</sup> The general claim is that A2/AD capabilities could knock US forces out of a war—or keep them out through deterrence—and then allow China to go on offense.<sup>24</sup> So these analysts argue that US forces must do whatever it takes to maintain their ability to operate within range of China's defenses.

That view overlooks the opportunity to deter Chinese aggression with a more defensive posture. China's A2/AD investments limit the US military's capability to promise to inflict punishment against the Chinese homeland in case of a

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Chinese offensive, but punishment is not the only way to deter an attack.<sup>25</sup> Countries are more likely to launch offensives when they perceive an opportunity to win quickly at modest cost.<sup>26</sup>

**Punishment is not the only way to deter an attack.**

And none of China's A2/AD investments would help Chinese attackers achieve a quick, decisive victory against US allies' defenses.

Enhancing US allies and partners' A2/AD capabilities would tip the balance even further in their favor. If China's East Asian adversaries can promise to inflict substantial casualties on an attacking Chinese force, then they can deter a Chinese attack without having US military forces threaten a counter-attack against China itself. The key is for the United States and its allies to adopt the most effective means to deny China the expectation of a quick, low-cost victory.

### **The Defensive Advantage**

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Projecting power over distance is difficult, especially when it means crossing substantial bodies of water and air. Attacking platforms need to carry much of the fuel and munitions their missions require onboard, making them larger and easier to detect in the sea and air where concealment is limited.<sup>27</sup> If an attacker contemplates conducting an amphibious assault, as would be required for China to attack many US allies, the attacker's problems multiply. Defending forces can target the large, vulnerable ships that transport troops and concentrate their firepower at the limited number of suitable landing spots.

Defenders have less ground to cover than attackers to get to fights, so they can mass forces more easily than attackers and reinforce troops faster. Defenders on land have more space to deploy surveillance as well as strike systems and more ability to conceal them among the terrain's features than air- and sea-based attackers have. With nearby supply, surveillance systems and weapons have less need to carry fuel or munitions, which allows them to be smaller, more mobile, and thus harder for an enemy to target.<sup>28</sup> Familiarity with local geography and conditions—and with what is normal background clutter—helps sensors and their operators pick out attacking forces in nearby skies and seas.<sup>29</sup> And operating radar is easier on defense because defenders have greater opportunity to employ self-defense techniques like decoys and intermittent emissions from dispersed platforms.

Political advantages of defense buttress these technical ones.<sup>30</sup> Defensive wars are easier to justify, for one. That is useful in maintaining public support at home

and credibility with rivals. Defensive military operations, in service of defensive strategic aims, fit within the political framework that has been sold to the public in the United States and its allies and within the legal terms of the mutual defense pacts that make up the existing US alliance network.

### **Pitfalls of an Offensive Defense Strategy**

Unfortunately, the United States has not yet moved to capitalize on the growing advantages of defensive operations. Instead, it has labored to overcome China's A2/AD gains, seeking to maintain military dominance in China's near abroad in the name of defending Asian allies, spending heavily on technology intended to aid US military operations within the range of A2/AD defenses.<sup>31</sup> Specifically, the Trump administration's *National Defense Strategy* recognized the return of great power competition and the potential challenge of fighting China, and it concluded that the United States must spend vastly more on speculative and risky offensive systems to try to keep doing, operationally, what the US military has been doing for the past couple of decades.<sup>32</sup>

Planning to fight inside China's A2/AD envelope entails significant costs, both in terms of money and reduced military effectiveness. The US military is developing capabilities to jam or spoof radar that would guide Chinese missiles and attack aircraft, to improve fleet missile defenses, and to build a more survivable long-range bomber. These are all expensive projects. Moreover, even the best tactical defenses for ships have limited capability. Multiple attacking missiles can overwhelm the number of defensive missiles on a ship, and the ship's limited size means it can only carry so many ship-defense munitions.<sup>33</sup> Worse, every ship-defense munition loaded onto a ship takes space away from other systems and munitions that the ship needs to conduct its (potentially offensive) mission.

The other element of the US effort to maintain its offensive operational concept involves preparing to directly attack China's defenses—launching air strikes to destroy thousands of Chinese military sites like missile launchers, communications systems, fixed radar and other sensors, and various other targets relevant to the successful operation of China's air defenses and anti-ship missiles.<sup>34</sup> To Beijing, these plans may look like a US capability to destroy China's defenses with a US first strike, perhaps aimed at overthrowing Communist party rule. Chinese leaders may reasonably fear that the United States has offensive strategic intentions, despite US leaders' claims

**To Beijing, existing plans may look like a US capability to destroy China's defenses with a first strike.**

to be only interested in defending US allies. In response, China might well arm more heavily, especially with nuclear weapons, which would drive up US spending without achieving relative gains for the United States.<sup>35</sup> These are the fruits of exacerbating the security dilemma by implementing an offensive operational concept.

Beyond the risk of an arms race, US plans for operations that include conventional strikes against the Chinese mainland are downright dangerous. As Georgetown University political scientist Caitlin Talmadge points out, such strikes might push the Chinese government to escalate a conflict to the nuclear level.<sup>36</sup> Chinese nuclear early warning and command-and-control systems may be intermixed with the A2/AD systems that the United States plans to destroy or blind, putting Chinese leadership in a “use it or lose it” situation regarding their nuclear deterrent: if they are not sure that they will be able to use their nuclear systems later, because they fear that they may be disabled or destroyed in an American first strike, Chinese leaders may decide to launch a first strike of their own, while they still control their weapons. It is also possible that Chinese leaders, in the early chaos and high stress of a major conventional war, might mistake a US attack on A2/AD systems for one on China’s nuclear arsenal, leading to nuclear escalation in response to what was intended as only a conventional war.

Even if that scenario were avoided, China might consider any bomb exploding on its home territory to be unacceptable, and such an attack might inflame Chinese nationalism, leading China to escalate what the United States thought of as a limited conflict. It might seem reasonable to the Chinese to retaliate against US territories or even the US mainland.

Fears and suppositions about these escalation scenarios also reduce the credibility of current US guarantees to its allies and increase the risk of strategic miscalculation, making war more likely. The Chinese government may see the danger of escalation as a reason that the United States would back down from intervening to stop Chinese aggression. And as long as US allies’ primary defense strategy is to rely on US forces, their relative defensive weakness could tempt China to launch an attack based on the belief that the United States would self-deter.

Furthermore, to counteract that potential Chinese line of thinking, the United States might itself engage in risky behavior trying to convince the world that it is willing to intervene despite escalation risks. That strong US commitment to constantly reinforce the credibility of its alliance guarantees could itself precipitate crises.<sup>37</sup>

As long as the United States maintains potent conventional forces capable of attacking deep into China, these capabilities will seem offensive to the Chinese, triggering security dilemma dynamics, regardless of US doctrine. But the

problem would be less severe if US forces stayed further from Chinese waters in plans and exercises.<sup>38</sup> Shifting US and allied procurement to favor A2/AD systems of their own, which are much more easily identified as defensively oriented, would also help.

Finally, the current US offensive posture risks creating political tension with allies during a future crisis. In their treaties and diplomatic engagements with the United States, Japan, South Korea, and other Asian countries signed on for defense. In the past, these allies have expressed concerns about being dragged into offensive activities by the United States.<sup>39</sup> The allies worry that offense poses untenable risks when directed at a nuclear-armed near-peer, like China—something that Washington should recognize, too.

### **Toward Allied A2/AD**

Fortunately, there is an alternative to the costly, ineffective, and dangerous approach currently used to protect America's Asian allies.<sup>40</sup> By meeting allies' defense needs with clearly defensive weaponry, and without the present forward-deployed, offensively-oriented US force structure, the United States can preserve the territorial integrity of allies while de-escalating tensions in the region.

China's capability has vastly increased, but its ability to conquer states across water remains limited. If the United States and its allies invest in their own A2/AD capabilities—counterparts to the Chinese capabilities that the US military itself says are extremely effective against US sophisticated weapons—China's offensive potential will remain limited for many years to come.<sup>41</sup>

Japan, Korea, and Taiwan are wealthy and technologically proficient states perfectly placed to capitalize on A2/AD technology to defend against any attempted Chinese conquest. As islands or peninsulas that must defend coastlines, East Asian states get special utility out of defensive military technology. These states do not need forces and weapons that mimic the US military. Their forces simply have to make the cost of aggression prohibitive for China and other potential rivals.

Japan already maintains a qualitatively superior force that far outstrips China in submarine, anti-submarine, mining, and missile capabilities, backed up by a sophisticated network of sensors and a geographical position that allows it to straddle major chokepoints for the Chinese navy.<sup>42</sup> It has long invested heavily in naval assets to defend its coast. And its GDP per capita remains about four times larger than China's, providing it considerable capacity to ramp up spending in the event of a massive emergency, like a Chinese campaign of territorial aggression.<sup>43</sup>

Japan has recently increased its investment in mobile missile systems deployed in the Ryukyu Islands in the East China Sea, a nascent modern A2/AD capability.<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, as MIT experts Eric Heginbotham and Richard Samuels explain, much of Japan's defense budget is still devoted to a "forward defense strategy" built on fighter aircraft, destroyers, and ground forces.<sup>45</sup> Japan has also begun exploring a greater long-range missile strike capability as a means of preemptively threatening North Korea's ability to launch ballistic missiles or retaliating against China—an investment that potentially looks like offensive defense.<sup>46</sup> Finally, Japan has not fully stocked the munitions needed to use its anti-ship, anti-missile, and anti-aircraft systems in an extended campaign.<sup>47</sup>

Taiwan is more vulnerable.<sup>48</sup> As an island, Taiwan has defensive advantages that make conquest difficult, but if China attacked Taiwan, its nearness to the island would enable China's weapons to enjoy the benefit of home—larger ammunition stores, protection from strikes, better coordination, and short flight times.<sup>49</sup> China's missiles could destroy most fixed targets in Taiwan, including search radars, and seriously impede the operation of Taiwan's air force.

On the other hand, Taiwan is large enough to drive mobile missile systems around and rugged enough to hide weapons from enemy surveillance and strike systems.<sup>50</sup> Taiwan also produces a modern anti-ship missile deployable on trucks or small ships that can likely evade Chinese attacks on fixed targets.

Even while its defense budget has remained flat in recent years, Taiwan has developed, with some US encouragement, a sea-control strategy centered on expensive ships and aircraft meant to win battles with China off and above Taiwan's shores—mirroring the United States' offensive-defense posture rather than emphasizing a more prudent defensive defense.<sup>51</sup> This strategy is not an

**The US military could contribute to Taiwan's defense through a more operationally defensive posture.**

efficient way to spend a limited defense budget. Instead, Taiwan could spend its money on relatively inexpensive, high-quality A2/AD capabilities, including ones of indigenous design and manufacture. Taiwan could also significantly expand its deployments of radar decoys and other inexpensive equipment to make it harder for Chinese stand-off weapons to weaken Taiwan's contested zone.

The US military could contribute to Taiwan's wartime defense through a more operationally defensive posture that would limit exposure to China's A2/AD systems. In a potential war, seaborne American anti-ship and anti-aircraft systems could cover Taiwan from locations east of the island—and out of China's A2/AD envelope. More important, in peacetime, the United States'

backstop would help ensure that Taiwan, which is much smaller economically than China, would not be overwhelmed in a conventional arms race.

The United States can use its weapons export policies and diplomatic sway over allies to push them to accelerate their adoption of A2/AD technologies. That push would involve shifting money out of programs focused on developing expeditionary or offensive military capability. Instead, the emphasis, which is most pressing for Taiwan, should be on having the allies buy redundant sensor capability that fully exploits decoys and other concealment techniques, robust data fusion capabilities that can maintain the ability to find and target Chinese attackers even when operating under wartime duress, plentiful mobile anti-ship cruise missile and surface-to-air missile systems, and hardened communications systems.

We are not the only defense analysts to push the idea that the United States should encourage Asian allies to improve their A2/AD capabilities. But few have advanced that goal as a way to shift US force posture in Asia, as we do here. One reason to insist on that second step is that it provides a major—perhaps even necessary—incentive for allies to overcome their bureaucratic resistance and make the needed shift in their defense procurement. Moreover, without a major change in its own defense posture, the United States would miss the opportunity to enjoy cost savings and to reduce tensions with China. Indeed, encouraging allied A2/AD investments without changing the way the US military operates could increase US defense spending, as a recent report from the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments advocates.<sup>52</sup>

## Restoring a Traditional Alliance Posture

To encourage US allies to transition to a more defensive defense posture in Asia, the United States should first convey its plans and reasoning to them. US diplomats should explain US interests in the region and the US desire to limit the cost of defending Asian states and to avoid conflict with China. Diplomats should press allies to invest in A2/AD technologies at the expense of force-projection capability. The United States can incentivize allies to make the transition by paying for some of their acquisition of A2/AD-compliant defensive capabilities. The dollars for this will come by reducing funding for US offensive capabilities in East Asia, whose utility will diminish as allies become better able to resist Chinese aggression.

US partners must step up to have a sustainable defense against a potential Chinese threat over the coming decades. This means restoring a more traditional alliance, where the burden is balanced: US power should back up junior partners that have the wealth and capability to hold their own front line,

while allies develop operational concepts that do not simply delay until more US troops arrive, but instead try to defend without them.<sup>53</sup> To spur change in the actions of Asian partners, the US military should shift away from a forward-defense doctrine that requires spending more and more to operate safely in the teeth of China's defenses. The goal should be to create a fortified A2/AD zone

**The goal should be to create a fortified A2/AD zone inside Asia's first island chain.**

on both sides of the seas inside Asia's first island chain—what would be a “no man's sea” in wartime. To contribute, the US military could develop advanced mobile anti-air and anti-ship missiles, which have not been emphasized in US acquisition planning for decades. These new weapons would be mostly aimed for export to Asian allies.

Concurrently, the defensive defense approach would reduce the need to invest so much in speculative technologies like hypersonic weapons that are intended to be able to strike targets—notably mobile Chinese A2/AD systems—before they can move out of the way. It would also alleviate some of the burden of developing high-end ship defense systems, freeing up funds to support the allies' A2/AD defenses.

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## A Safer World

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The great power advantages that the United States enjoyed against all rivals in the post-Cold War world were always bound to erode as other states grew wealthier and sought the ability to avoid being coerced. That is no great tragedy for US security, but the scramble to preserve dominance at all costs could be. By seeking total dominance over all states, even in the skies above them and in their territorial waters, the United States makes needless trouble for itself.

The quest for dominance surrenders the blessings that geography and status quo interests bestow on the United States. It makes the United States pay the growing cost of maintaining an offensive edge as the relative advantages of defense grow. The offensively-oriented dominance approach comes with a growing price tag, diminishing effectiveness, and rising tension with China.

Those ills are avoidable. The United States can secure its allies, partners, and interests in East Asia, even if no one dominates the contested zones between China and its island neighbors. Letting other states bear the cost of being their own first line of defense will not only lower US costs, it will limit tensions in East Asia. Washington should remember that its strategic goals are

defensive, and the United States should adjust its military posture to match that reality.

## Notes

1. Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/ Area Denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and the Command of the Commons in East Asia," *International Security* 41, no. 1 (Summer 2016): 8–9, [https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00249](https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/ISEC_a_00249).
2. The argument in this paper relies heavily on an unpublished paper by Eugene Gholz, "No Man's Sea: Implications for Strategy and Theory." He presented the first version of that paper at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association in Atlanta, Georgia, March 2016.
3. Johan Galtung and others introduced the phrase "defensive defense" during the Cold War, and at that time, it was associated with the peace movement. We do not take any position here on whether it was an appropriate idea for the West during the Cold War. Instead, we seek to develop and clarify the concept and its application and desirability for the contemporary United States. Johan Galtung, "Transarmament: From Offensive to Defensive Defense," *Journal of Peace Research* 21, no. 2 (1984): 127–39, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002234338402100204>.
4. Evan Montgomery, "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China's Rise and Future of U.S. Power Projection," *International Security* 38, no. 4 (Spring 2014): 129, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00160](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00160). While the acronym has fallen out of favor in the Pentagon, it remains useful shorthand for this capability. Sam LaGrone, "CNO Richardson: Navy Shelving A2/AD Acronym," *USNI News* (blog), October 3, 2016, <https://news.usni.org/2016/10/03/cno-richardson-navy-shelving-a2ad-acronym>.
5. Elsewhere, two of us have advocated such strategies. See Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey M. Sapolsky, "Come Home America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation," *International Security* 21, no. 4 (Spring 1997): 5–48, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2539282>; Harvey M. Sapolsky, Benjamin H. Friedman, Daryl G. Press and Eugene Gholz, "Restraining Order: For Strategic Modesty," *World Affairs* 172, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 84–94, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20671448>; A. Trevor Thrall and Benjamin H. Friedman, eds., *U.S. Grand Strategy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Case for Restraint* (London: Routledge, 2018).
6. Michael E. Hutchens, et al., "Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons: A New Joint Operational Concept," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 84 (1st Quarter 2017): 134–39, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1038867/joint-concept-for-access-and-maneuver-in-the-global-commons-a-new-joint-operati/>.
7. Paul McLeary, "No More 'Playing Defense' for US Navy; Offensive Weapons Are the Play," *Breaking Defense*, February 14, 2019, <https://breakingdefense.com/2019/02/no-more-playing-defense-for-us-navy-offensive-weapons-are-the-play/>.
8. Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (Winter 1978): 167–214, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2009958>.
9. Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999). Security dilemmas are common in international politics but do

- not always erupt into war. Charles L. Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited," *World Politics* 50, no. 1 (Fall 1997): 171–201, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25054031>; Dan Reiter, "Exploding the Powder Keg Myth: Why Preemptive Wars Almost Never Happen," *International Security* 20, no. 2 (Fall 1995): 5–34, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2539227>. Security dilemma analysis may be especially relevant to the US-China case in which both sides view themselves as favoring the territorial status quo—but incompatible versions of the territorial status quo that lead them each to see the other as a potential revisionist. Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 219.
10. Charles L. Glaser and Chaim Kaufmann, "What Is the Offense-Defense Balance and Can We Measure It?" *International Security* 22, no. 4 (Spring 1998): 61, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2539240>.
  11. This proposed shift in defense policy is compatible with any of a range of U.S. grand strategy proposals debated in the academic literature that would maintain a defensive orientation for the United States. Steve Brooks and Bill Wohlforth have called the current US grand strategy "deep engagement," arguing that the United States should maintain its current alliance commitments and defense of the liberal order but not seek to expand those commitments or to spread democracy using military means. Elsewhere, we have criticized deep engagement as prone to shifting to the offensive, what Brooks and Wohlforth call "deep engagement plus," but it is possible to imagine deep engagement with a defensive operational concept (defensive defense) in contrast to the current situation of deep engagement with an offensive operational concept (offensive defense). Less aggressive grand strategy proposals like "offshore balancing" and "restraint" are also compatible with defensive defense. For the range of contemporary grand strategy proposals, see Paul C. Avey, Jonathan N. Markowitz, and Robert J. Reardon, "Disentangling Grand Strategy: International Relations Theory and U.S. Grand Strategy," *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 1 (November 2018), <https://doi.org/10.26153/tsw/869>. For debates involving specific proposals, see Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States Global Role in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); John J. Mearsheimer and Steven M. Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 4 (July/August 2016): 70–83; Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky, "Come Home America." For the argument that deep engagement is less compatible than restraint with defensive defense, see Gholz, "No Man's Sea."
  12. Barry Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony," *International Security* 28, no. 1 (Summer 2003): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228803322427965>.
  13. Terrence K. Kelly, David C. Gompert, and Duncan Long, *Smart Power, Stronger Partners, Vol. 1: Exploiting U.S. Advantages to Prevent Aggression* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), 28–35.
  14. Eric Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power 1996–2017* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2015).
  15. Gholz, "No Man's Sea," 11.
  16. Heginbotham et al., *U.S.-China Military Scorecard*.
  17. Jon R. Lindsay, "The Impact of China on Cybersecurity: Fiction and Friction," *International Security* 39, no. 3 (Winter 2014/2015): 7–47, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00189](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00189).

18. Ankit Panda, "Did China Start Testing Anti-Ship Ballistic Missiles into the South China Sea?" *Diplomat*, July 2, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/did-china-start-testing-anti-ship-ballistic-missiles-into-the-south-china-sea/>; Otto Kreisher, "China's Carrier Killer: Threat and Theatrics," *Air Force Magazine* (December 2013), <http://www.airforcemag.com/MagazineArchive/Documents/2013/December%202013/1213china.pdf>.
19. Biddle and Oelrich, 10–11.
20. Steven Lee Myers, "With Ships and Missiles, China Is Ready to Challenge U.S. Navy in Pacific," *New York Times*, August 29, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/29/world/asia/china-navy-aircraft-carrier-pacific.html>.
21. On how Taiwan's mountains can screen naval forces defending it from Chinese radar and hence missile attack, see Andrew S. Erickson, et al., "Correspondence: How Good are China's Anti-Access Area Denial Capabilities?," *International Security* 41, no. 4 (Spring 2017): 202–13, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/657922>.
22. Because elevation increases horizon, aircraft will generally provide the furthest-looking defensible radar that can guide missiles, at least for states challenging the United States, which can degrade a challenger's attempt to use space-based radar. Over-the-horizon radar is not accurate enough for guidance. On the geographic reach of A2/AD systems, see Gholz, "No Man's Sea," 12; Biddle and Oelrich, 13–14.
23. For an example, see Michael E. O'Hanlon, *The Senkaku Paradox: Risking Great Power War over Small Stakes* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2019).
24. Thomas G. Mahnken, et al., *Tightening the Chain: Implementing a Strategy of Maritime Pressure in the Western Pacific* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019), <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/implementing-a-strategy-of-maritime-pressure-in-the-western-pacific>.
25. Robert Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Mike Gallagher, "State of (Deterrence by) Denial," *Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 31–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2019.1626687>.
26. John Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).
27. Gholz, "No Man's Sea," 11.
28. Gholz, "No Man's Sea," 11–12; Biddle and Oelrich, 19–20.
29. Gholz, "No Man's Sea," 11.
30. Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Great Britain and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 16–24.
31. On the tendency of military organizations to prefer offensive military doctrine, see Posen, *Sources of Military Doctrine*; Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).
32. *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, Department of Defense, 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.
33. William D. O'Neil, "The Cooperative Engagement Capability (CEC): Transforming Naval Anti-Air Warfare," *Case Studies in National Security Transformation*, no. 11 (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 2007).
34. Biddle and Oelrich, 8–9.
35. Avery Goldstein, "First Things First: The Pressing Danger of Crisis Instability in U.S.-China Relations," *International Security* 37, no. 4 (Spring 2013): 49–89, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00114](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00114).

36. Caitlin Talmadge, "Would China Go Nuclear? Assessing the Risk of Chinese Nuclear Escalation in a Conventional War with the United States," *International Security* 41, no. 4 (Spring 2017): 50–92, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00274](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00274).
37. Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 67–68.
38. As Barry Posen observes, states tend to "infer malign intent" from offensive doctrines. Posen, *Sources of Military Doctrine*, 17.
39. For example, Adam P. Liff, "Japan's Security Policy in the 'Abe Era': Radical Transformation or Evolutionary Shift?" *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 3 (May 2018): 28, <https://doi.org/10.15781/T29S1M35C>.
40. Arguments that the United States should encourage Asian allies to improve their A2/AD-related defenses include: William S. Murray, "Revisiting Taiwan's Defense Strategy," *Naval War College Review* 61, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 13–38, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol61/iss3/3>; Jim Thomas and Evan Braden Montgomery, "Developing a Strategy of Long-Term Sino-American Competition," in Thomas G. Manken, ed., *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History, and Practice* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 257–74; Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., "How to Deter China: The Case for Archipelagic Defense," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 2 (March/April 2015): 78–86, <https://csbaonline.org/about/news/how-to-deter-china-the-case-for-archipelagic-defense>; Eric Heginbotham and Jacob L. Heim, "Deterring without Dominance: Discouraging Chinese Adventurism under Austerity," *Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 185–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2015.1038189>; Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, "Asymmetric Warfare, American Style," *Proceedings* 138, no. 4 (April 2012): 24–29, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2012/april/asymmetric-warfare-american-style>; Toshi Yoshihara, "Sino-Japanese Rivalry at Sea: How Tokyo Can Go Anti-Access on China," *Orbis* 59, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 62–75, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2014.11.006>; Eric Heginbotham and Richard J. Samuels, "Active Denial: Redesigning Japan's Response to China's Military Challenge," *International Security* 42, no. 4 (Spring 2018): 128–69, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00313](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00313).
41. For example, Paul McLeary, "'Fight to Get to the Fight:' Marine Amphibs under the Gun," *Breaking Defense*, February 11, 2019, <https://breakingdefense.com/2019/02/marines-want-more-punch-on-amphibs-but-littorals-increasingly-risky/>.
42. Michael Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia," *International Security* 42, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 95–98, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00294](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00294).
43. Heginbotham and Samuels.
44. Beckley, 97.
45. Heginbotham and Samuels, 144–45.
46. Heginbotham and Samuels, 159–60.
47. Heginbotham and Samuels, 134–35.
48. One can debate the merits of how much Taiwan's conquest would affect US security, but here we focus on how to best execute the current US policy of maintaining credible extended deterrence and preventing Taiwan from being conquered by China.
49. Gholz, "No Man's Sea," 13–14.
50. Gholz, "No Man's Sea," 13.
51. Gholz, "No Man's Sea," 18–19.

52. A recent study that advocates a more defensive US naval and air approach in Asia to minimize exposure to China's A2/AD weapons actually calls for greater US spending because it envisions deploying US missile and surveillance systems on top of allied efforts. Mahnken et al.
53. The Nixon Doctrine is an example of this tradition in US alliance politics. Eugene Gholz, "The Nixon Doctrine in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *World Politics Review*, July 22, 2009; Robert Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine: American Foreign Policy and the Pursuit of Stability, 1969–1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).