

CHINA, THE GRAY ZONE, AND CONTINGENCY PLANNING AT THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE AND BEYOND

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SEPTEMBER 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

By strong and deep bipartisan agreement, America's national security community is now focused on the risks of war against Russia or China as the top priorities for defense policy and resource allocation. Thirty years after the Berlin Wall fell, this is a remarkable and sobering development, provoked by China's rise and Russia's revanchism.

But over what issues, and in what ways, could war pitting the United States and allies against Russia or China really happen? To date, this question has been largely unaddressed. If we are to optimize defense investments, bolster deterrence, and also figure out how to deescalate any conflict that might happen despite our best efforts to prevent it, then we need good answers. The prospects of a head-on and large-scale Chinese assault on Japan, or a Russian seizure of an entire Baltic state, need to be considered — even if they do not seem particularly likely given the inevitability of a major U.S. or NATO response to any such blatant assault on a treaty ally.

More likely, it would seem, is a small-scale Russian or Chinese attack against a sliver of allied territory, designed less to seize land than to flex national muscles and challenge the U.S.-led global order. Such an attack would be an attempt by Beijing or Moscow to weaken a major bilateral alliance or NATO. What should the United States and its allies do if China or Russia undertakes an aggressive action that is at once both minor in its physical scale and yet strategic in potential consequences? The cases in point could include a Chinese seizure of a Senkaku island, a violent Chinese attack against an uninhabited island rightfully owned

by the Philippines, or a limited Russian land-grab in the Baltic states, which Moscow might justify by claiming Russian speakers there were somehow under threat. Other scenarios are easy to imagine as well.

Today, Washington might well overreact to such a scenario. Today's American military establishment and national security community tend to hold the view that being able to defeat China or Russia in combat wherever an ally might be attacked is a realistic and essential goal. Direct defense, and prompt reversal of an aggression, are the foundational principles of current strategy. Article 5 of the NATO treaty and related mutual defense commitments are seen as allowing little flexibility or room for interpretation. In a given crisis, a specific president might disregard this prevalent strategic culture, but it is deeply rooted in the modern American defense community.



The United States and allies need to develop strategies of asymmetric defense and counterattack.

But such an escalation, while it should be kept as an option, would almost surely not be the right initial response. It would be too strategically and militarily fraught. Instead, the United States and allies need to develop strategies of asymmetric defense and counterattack. An asymmetric defense would combine and interweave the economic instruments of statecraft and warfare into combat plans. Indeed, the active elements of the strategy would center on economic

warfare. Military responses would be important but would often function in a support role, to create a defensive line against any further enemy advance and perhaps to support the enforcement of economic sanctions.

INTRODUCTION

The 2018 National Defense Strategy restored great power competition to the top tier of U.S. defense planning priorities. Deterring China and Russia through preparation for possible war against them has become the preeminent concern of military planners. But where and how could war really erupt in a way that would pit nuclear-armed nations against each other in lethal combat? The stakes seem too high for leaders in Beijing, Moscow, Washington, or other key capitals to risk war over the kinds of matters that great powers have historically contested, like conquest of an entire nation. Surely, we do not expect to see Chinese tanks disembarking on one of Japan's four main islands or moving southward on the Korean Peninsula towards Seoul.

Indeed, the dangers of great power war seem greatest in regard to a different category of problem altogether, one that is often captured by the term gray-zone conflict. In this space, small skirmishes over small stakes, perhaps carried out by paramilitaries rather than national armed forces, could lead to exchanges of fire. Then, great uncertainty about what would happen next might prevail. Such a situation could be very dangerous, given the escalatory risks that are inherent in most wars and the ways in which many military establishments seem to plan for rapid escalation in the event of war. (Such planning does not heed the lessons of conflicts like World War I, when dependence on rapid mobilization and escalation through concepts like the Schlieffen Plan plunged the world into unspeakable horrors.) Indeed, even nuclear escalation could result. For example, a country that saw itself losing a conventional conflict that could have larger ramifications for its future role in the western Pacific might be highly tempted to use a nuclear weapon against large ships in the adversary's navy or large but isolated bases on Pacific islands in an attempt to change the momentum of battle and favorably influence the ultimate outcome of the war. Once such nuclear use began, however, it might not

remain so "surgical" or limited, given the proclivities of many human leaders for risk-prone behavior, combined with their deep aversions to accepting defeat.

Washington needs better answers than it now has to this challenge. The United States and allies, I argue here and in my recent book *The Senkaku Paradox*, from which some of this essay is drawn, need a more comprehensive and integrated toolkit for the gray-zone problem.¹ Increased attention to alliances may well be a part of the solution, and fortunately, even the somewhat alliance-allergic Trump administration recognizes this, with nearly half of its 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report focusing directly on formal alliances and security partnerships.² And yet, this strategy is still too military-oriented, though perhaps inevitable when the government's top strategy document towards the region is still a Pentagon publication, and in the context of a U.S. military establishment accustomed to achieving maximalist goals in recent war planning as well.

Instead, to cope with China's gray-zone challenge, economic warfare needs to play a larger role in an overall approach I term asymmetric defense. Although I focus here, as in the book, on the "Senkaku challenge" — the dispute between Japan and China over islands administered by the former and claimed by the latter — the logic of asymmetric and integrated deterrence and defense is widely applicable to the broader problem of gray-zone conflict.

CHINA AND THE GRAY ZONE

Gray-zone conflicts could take a number of forms in the case of China, particularly in the East and South China Seas. Indeed, they are not matters of conjecture; they are already incipient, and evident. In the East China Sea, Chinese ships — generally not naval vessels but law enforcement or paramilitary hulls — routinely operate in the territorial waters of the Senkaku islands; in 2018, China routinely had four Coast Guard ships in those waters.³ The islands, called Diaoyu by Beijing, are claimed by both Japan and China. Because they are administered by Japan, the U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty covers them even though the United States takes no position on whose islands they should rightfully be. China also declared an Air Defense Identification Zone in the region in 2013 that includes the Senkakus. As a

result of ensuing changes in Chinese military aircraft behavior, Japanese Air Self-Defense Forces planes have dramatically increased their rate of “scrambles” against Chinese aircraft, from less than 100 per year through 2010 to at least 500 annually since 2015.

Outside of the East China Sea, China has built up and militarized seven artificial islands in the South China Sea, creating 3,000-meter military runways on three of them: Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, and Mischief Reef. It has used cunning, deceit, and force to establish its claims to the Scarborough Shoal in that same area, at the expense of the Philippines and in violation of a 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague. It even lays claim, through its so-called “Nine-Dash Line,” to the waters of virtually the entire South China Sea and seeks to back up that claim through occasional harassment of U.S. Navy ships exercising their freedom of navigation rights in these important international waters. Indeed, on this latter point, the issue may rise above the gray zone to a first-order international security problem, if China ups the ante.⁴



Wondering why China is behaving assertively now may be like asking why a baby tiger grows teeth.

China’s exact goals in behaving in this fashion remain conjectural — and perhaps even uncertain or undetermined in the minds of the country’s top leaders. They probably include historical motives, such as settling scores with Japan over past wrongs. They also may include more offensive motivations, akin to how rising powers have often conducted themselves historically, with their ambitions expanding as their power grows. To paraphrase Robert Kagan, wondering why China is behaving assertively now may be like asking why a baby tiger grows teeth.⁵ There may be economic interests involved, as with seabed and fishing resources in the South China Sea and East China Sea. Finally, there may exist defensive military motives. American military forces often now operate close to China in the region. Beijing may wish to push such potentially hostile capabilities beyond the region’s so-called first and second island chains at

some future point. It may also hope to guarantee its access to crucial resources such as oil coming from the Persian Gulf region and Africa.

To some extent, President Xi Jinping and cohorts may be opportunistic, seeing what they can get away with short of war. However, the danger of miscalculation leading to violence and then escalation remains real regardless. And one thing seems certain: assertive Chinese behavior is overdetermined by the list of above motivations. China may not want war, but Beijing certainly seems to want *more* — however that is ultimately defined. Gray-zone competition provides a means for pursuing it, without necessarily or consciously pulling the trigger on direct conflict against a major country. Given traditional American commitment to allies and to defense of today’s global order — not to mention the uncertain future behavior of key countries like Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Australia — the dye may be set for ongoing rivalry in the western Pacific region, with a constant risk of war.

THE RISK OF CONFLICT

What should the United States and allies do if China undertakes an aggressive action that is at once both limited, and yet strategic in potential consequences? The cases in point, among others, could include a Chinese seizure of a Senkaku island, a violent Chinese attack against an uninhabited island rightfully owned by the Philippines, or a Chinese blockade of Taiwan.

Why would Beijing do anything as risky as I postulate here, especially when the likely payoff of even a successful aggression would be modest? Alas, history tells us that aggressors may be risk-prone rather than risk-averse.⁶ They may think of their initial actions as low in immediate danger. They may reason that there is no inevitability to escalation, and that they will have time to pull back from the brink if the crisis they have caused starts to seem too perilous. They may also believe they can engage in brinkmanship more successfully than the United States. Their calculations might be foolhardy, but they would not be unprecedented. That kind of thinking could help the would-be aggressor avoid cognitive dissonance in a situation where the potential benefits of going to war did not justify the risks of civilizational annihilation.⁷ Human beings are often gamblers. They are also capable of making big mistakes.⁸

So an aggressor could choose to roll the dice. And then Washington could elect to escalate. The post-World War II American strategic culture tends to incline the country toward resolute response in defense of allies and interests. That has generally been a good thing for global order. But it can bias the United States toward stronger or less well-prepared actions than might have been advisable. This tendency was arguably at work with the Vietnam and Iraq wars, and perhaps with aspects of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion, too.⁹ One need not take a jaundiced view of American foreign policy to believe that it is quite assertive — much more so than many Americans seem to believe.¹⁰ Put differently, modern U.S. strategic culture has learned the lessons of Munich 1938 — that is, the dangers of appeasement and inaction — very thoroughly; it has internalized less well the lessons of Sarajevo 1914, namely, that overreaction by multiple parties can lead to a war that no one really wanted or even believed possible.

My colleague Thomas Wright is probably correct when he argues, in his excellent 2017 book, that Russia and China seek to challenge the international order through “all measures short of war.” But he is also right that war could occur anyway.¹¹ It could happen through inadvertence, miscalculation, or the belief that it could be contained and effectively won. An unintended war is especially plausible if Beijing believes it has a disproportionately greater interest in a conflict’s outcome than Washington does. There are other ways the great powers could arrive at the brink of general war over limited stakes. For example, if China interfered with a U.S. Navy ship conducting a freedom-of-navigation operation in the South China Sea and an accident resulted that killed 50 American sailors, the situation would be highly fraught. If the perpetrator did not relent but instead doubled down and even intensified its interference in future U.S. naval operations, what would the United States do? Presumably it would continue its naval deployments as before, perhaps with reinforced capabilities and an announced willingness to shoot at any threatening object that got close. But that might not be the end of it. At some point, in an escalating crisis, Washington might need options that were severe and highly punitive in one sense, yet as non-escalatory as possible in another.

China poses unique reasons for concern. China is arguably the fastest-rising power in world history. Such rapid rise is usually a prelude to increased power, influence, confidence, and risky behavior.

ASYMMETRIC DEFENSE

Washington needs better, less escalatory, and thus more credible options for limited but serious gray-zone scenarios involving China. The general concept could be described as asymmetric defense. It should not formally displace existing policy, under which there is a strong implication of prompt U.S.-led military action to defend or liberate any allied territory that might be attacked by an aggressor. This current policy may have deterrence benefits, as well as reassurance benefits for allies, so it should not be formally scrapped. But it also may well prove inadequate for deterrence. It may not give U.S. and allied policymakers sufficient options in the event of deterrence failure. And it may be quite dangerous. Thus, the new strategy of asymmetric defense that I propose here is intended to complement rather than replace existing concepts and plans. Under the new paradigm, the United States and its allies would not be obliged to fire the first shot or to quickly escalate after a hypothetical Russian or Chinese aggression. They would have indirect and asymmetric options that avoided rapid escalation to serious hostilities.

My proposed strategy of asymmetric defense may sound like common sense to some, but it is at loggerheads with prevailing U.S. policy. Today’s American military establishment and national security community tend to hold the view that being able to defeat China or Russia in combat whenever an ally might be attacked is a realistic and essential goal. Relatedly, they believe “deterrence by denial” in which American and allied military actions of one type or another prevent China or Russia from attaining their territorial aims is also achievable. Direct defense, and prompt reversal of an aggression, are at the core of current strategy. Article 5 of the NATO treaty and related mutual defense commitments are seen as allowing little flexibility or room for interpretation. In a given crisis, a specific president might disregard this prevalent strategic culture, but it is deeply rooted.

We must face reality. Already today, a direct defense or liberation of land near Chinese borders would be very difficult, even if the conflict remained conventional and weapons of mass destruction were not employed. The dominance that the American military held in precision-strike assets in the 1990s and early 2000s — not just the weapons themselves but, even more importantly, the advanced and survivable targeting and communications systems that the U.S. armed forces alone possessed — is long gone. Indeed, it is probably gone for good, even if the United States faithfully follows the concepts and executes the plans inherent in Secretary of Defense James Mattis’s 2018 National Defense Strategy and related documents. Advanced weapons have proliferated. Sensor and communications systems, including those of the United States and its allies, are vulnerable to everything from antisatellite weapons to cyberattacks to the cutting of undersea cables. Some of the vulnerabilities can be partially remedied, but not all of them. At the same time, the United States will not have confidence that it can prevent a Russia or a China from targeting its own large assets as it attempts to reach and then operate within a forward theater. What the late Charles Krauthammer called the unipolar moment in the 1990s was indeed a moment, and that moment is now over, including in military terms. The U.S. armed forces can and should strive for excellence and superiority, but the notion that they can again effectively turn the western Pacific Ocean or the Baltic Sea region into the military equivalent of an American lake is implausible.

Trends in technology seem likely to exacerbate these dilemmas between now and 2030 or 2040. The major contributions will come from expected developments in robotics and hypersonic weapons, as well as the ongoing spread of advanced submarine technology and precision-guided weapons. Potentially countervailing trends in areas such as sonar and other types of antisubmarine warfare, directed-energy missile defense, stealthier ships, and much faster and more fuel-efficient ships and vehicles do not seem likely to change this basic trendline. Power projection will remain hard, and probably get harder, between now and 2040, especially near an adversary’s home territory. Long-range strikes will become more potent, but long-range power projection with large numbers of troops to liberate or defend allied territory will be a different matter. These trends may continue to complicate

severely any possible People’s Republic of China (PRC) invasion of Taiwan — but they will not necessarily preclude a *fait accompli* quick attack against small islands in the East China Sea or South China Sea, and they will not prevent China from denying safe access for ships and planes in many of its neighboring waters.



An asymmetric defense would combine and interweave the economic instruments of statecraft and warfare into combat plans.

A strategy of asymmetric defense would avoid many of these problems. At a minimum, it would give U.S. leaders options that may prove more useful and more credible than the sledgehammer approach implied by current policy. An asymmetric defense would combine and interweave the economic instruments of statecraft and warfare into combat plans. Indeed, the active elements of the strategy would center on economic warfare; military responses would be important but would often function in a support role. The tools of economic warfare would include punitive sanctions against specific targets that could be expanded over time; sectoral sanctions designed to affect a larger part of an adversary’s economy and the basic trajectory of its GDP; asset seizures designed to be proportionate in some sense to the consequences of the original transgression; limits on access to the American or global financial system; and export controls designed to limit an adversary’s technological advancement over a longer time period. Just as central would be various measures to improve the economic resilience of the United States and its allies so that they could outlast China in what could easily become a reciprocal economic war. These measures should include expanding strategic stockpiles of key materials, diversifying global value chains away from primary dependence on China for key goods, and planning on how to prepare for an economic war of some duration.

A strategy of asymmetric defense, and specific contingency plans that might flow from it, should probably be overseen largely by the Department of Defense since it is in the realm of war planning.

Because of its multiregional dimensions, this kind of strategy should be viewed as a global challenge that should ultimately be managed at the level of the Joint Staff and the Office of the Secretary of Defense. Much of the specific planning would occur at the combatant command level, but a scenario involving China might require especially close collaboration between Central Command and Indo-Pacific Command, for example. Thus the Pentagon would be the natural coordinator.

Other U.S. government agencies would have crucial roles as well, and they should not be completely subservient to the Department of Defense if they believe its priorities or approaches are wrong. War is too important to be left to the generals, or the sanctions experts, or any other specific community within the broader American government and national security establishment. In practice, this strategy would require embedding experts from the Department of State, the Department of the Treasury, the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States, the National Science and Technology Council (with its specialization in strategic materials), and other key agencies into the normal, ongoing war-planning process. These agencies should also separately improve their own internal abilities to understand economic warfare. Various parts of the defense and nondefense industries should be involved in an ongoing way too, to take advantage of industry's knowledge of global supply chains and other matters of international economics.¹² This approach would not wait for a crisis and only then bring economics into the war strategy, through belated National Security Council (NSC) crisis management mechanisms, as would likely be the case today. That moment is too late, and the NSC is too small and overworked to have adequate capacity in this domain. Nor should legislative remedies await an actual crisis; broader authorities for the president to impose sanctions in the event of an attack on America or its allies could be written into law now, as a preparatory and deterrent measure.

The role of U.S. allies and security partners would be equally crucial. This would be true to some extent for coordinating military responses. It would be even more important for coordinating the offensive and defensive dimensions of economic warfare. Most of all, countries need to know how they could survive various types of economic sanctions that they might apply to an aggressor and that an aggressor might then use against them.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

The specific policy changes that a strategy of asymmetric defense should feature include the following. Some of them, by their very nature, should be implemented right away, *before* any crisis might occur. That is because they are designed to deter potential adversaries from creating such crises in the first place, and to ensure that Western nations are ready and capable should a crisis erupt nonetheless. Other policy recommendations are more conceptual and need to be understood now but invoked only if and when a scenario of the type addressed here actually occurs.

- **Overhaul research and planning.** War planners should reassess the viability of direct, immediate, and comprehensive defense or liberation of allied territory against limited attacks. Such concepts are largely baked into the strategic DNA of American national security thinking and may seem obligatory under common readings of the Washington (NATO) Treaty and the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty. But in fact, they are not so obligatory, quite often would not be wise, and in some cases may not even be feasible.

As such, the Department of Defense, under the guidance of the national security adviser and at the direction of the president, should reach out to other agencies for assistance and expertise in developing integrated economic-military war plans. Among other steps, personnel from the Department of the Treasury, the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States, and the National Science and Technology Council, as well as the Department of Energy, should be routinely seconded to military commands for purposes of planning. Although the National Security Council should be involved, too, I hesitate to recommend that a small coordinating group like the NSC be given even more analytical work; the main agencies and departments of the executive branch are probably more appropriate homes for this kind of detailed substantive research and planning.

These non-military agencies of the government need broader mandates of their own, partly to think through integrated economic and military operations of the type noted above and partly to monitor the potential vulnerability of the economies of the United States and its key allies to various kinds of reprisals that might be directed against them in an economic war with Russia or China. The allies should naturally be encouraged to do such planning themselves.

- **Strengthen economic warfare education.** The United States needs multi-agency education and doctrine on how to think about economic warfare, and the U.S. military needs to emphasize these matters much more in its war colleges and other key internal intellectual institutions. Already today, defense colleges tend to recognize the importance of “whole-of-government” approaches to security problems, but the language of many texts and manuals is hortatory, not specific or technical. Taxonomies of different types of economic sanctions should be developed. Basic knowledge of the workings and interdependencies of the modern global economy should be expanded throughout military and other government ranks. Recent experience with the use of U.S. and multilateral sanctions as applied to Iran, North Korea, Russia, and other countries should be widely studied. War-games should imagine various applications of sanctions and then play out possible adversarial retaliatory responses. Allies should undertake similar efforts, of course.
- **Secure energy and mineral stockpiles.** Among the necessary steps that can be identified without further study to remediate existing American economic vulnerabilities is the restoration of the size and scale of the American strategic mineral reserve to Cold War-like levels, roughly 10 times greater in dollar value than is the case today (\$15 billion versus \$1.5 billion). In light of trends in North American energy production, increases in the size of the national petroleum stockpile may be less crucial. However, key U.S. allies and friends, including especially South Korea and Japan (and Taiwan), may need to take steps to ensure adequate fuel stocks for themselves.
- **Prioritize long-range strike platforms.** American military investments need to prioritize, among other assets, long-range strike platforms that could be relevant to protracted sanctions-reinforcing operations in places such as the broader Indian Ocean region, and various kinds of long-range stealthy sensor platforms and other backups to satellites. The U.S. military needs to be serious about defense against high-altitude nuclear-induced electromagnetic pulse (HEMP). It needs much better cyber defenses, and backups to undersea fiber-optic cables for core military functions. Such systems are likely to be attacked earlier rather than later in any future wars against other great powers. That the paradigm of asymmetric defense I propose is designed to avoid and limit conflict rather than to wage all-out war does not lessen the importance of preserving U.S. military superiority when and where possible. America and its allies need to preserve escalation dominance in both economic and military realms for the strategy proposed here to be most effective.
- **Innovate nonlethal weapons.** The U.S. armed forces also need to innovate much more seriously in the area of nonlethal weapons, with a particular eye toward weapons that could interrupt maritime shipping in some conflict scenarios. Smart mines and unmanned underwater systems that could also deliver such nonlethal weaponry are also important as complements to a robust attack submarine fleet. The guiding principle should be that, while explosive and kinetic attacks against ships cannot be ruled out, they should be avoided to the extent possible, to control escalation.

Similarly, European allies should continue their ongoing efforts to further integrate European pipeline networks as a hedge against possible energy showdowns with Russia in the future. Indeed, because of the importance of such energy resilience and adaptability for alliance security, it might be worth considering subsidizing an increase in the number of liquid natural gas terminals and other related capabilities through an expanded NATO Infrastructure Program.

- **Retain traditional military capabilities.** The American military also needs to retain or even expand certain types of traditional military capabilities. Ample amounts of airlift and sealift, with an attrition reserve for each, are needed for the forward defense parts of an asymmetric defense strategy. NATO as a whole needs better logistics and transportation capabilities for deploying forces to the Baltic region and sustaining them there, along the lines suggested by Lieutenant General Ben Hodges (retired). Hardened, resilient airfields at multiple locations abroad (in the western Pacific, Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf, and Europe) are required as well. A blend of shorter-range systems with long-range assets operating from the homeland or other effective sanctuaries is the right goal; adding more of the latter should not lead to inattention to the former.

Allied improvements in such military capabilities would be welcome as well, including in the realms of long-range transport, sustainable logistics, and interoperable high-end weaponry. However, it is probably even more important that key allies prepare for protracted and painful economic warfare by implementing a combination of offensive and defensive measures that collectively improve their resilience.

- **Re-examine economic tools and economic vulnerabilities.** Many of the Trump administration's tougher policies against Chinese actors who are seeking access to American and allied technology, while often debatable in their specifics, are generally sound. Indeed, they should become more systematic, with agencies such as the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) going beyond traditional mandates on foreign investment (and now joint ventures) to include assessments of such matters as supply-chain vulnerabilities. Indeed, CFIUS might even be renamed the Committee on Foreign Investment and Economic Resilience in the United States, with an expanded mandate to accompany the name change. It could be given the authorities to incentivize, or even mandate, a degree of supply-chain diversification for key products with national security significance as a hedge against excessive reliance on Russia or China.¹³

As suggested by Ely Ratner of the Center for a New American Security, Congress might also mandate that the executive branch produce a national economic security strategy that, in addition to diagnosing the nation's economic vulnerabilities, would include recommendations to mitigate those vulnerabilities and track progress toward achieving those objectives.¹⁴

By contrast, Trump administration policies that invoke national security arguments to justify tariffs on aluminum, steel, and other such products in normal commerce with U.S. allies work at cross-purposes to true U.S. national security interests. They should be stopped. They risk poisoning the waters for allied cooperation when the chips are truly down. For example, they could complicate the application of sanctions in a future crisis with Russia or China since the credibility of the United States on such matters will have been seriously eroded.

The United States also needs to be careful about overusing sanctions on financial transactions, such as prohibitions on access to the SWIFT bank communications system, for lower-grade problems. Otherwise countries will have incentives to create alternatives to SWIFT that could weaken American financial leverage and reduce U.S. options in a major crisis.

CONCLUSION

The U.S. national security community has become riveted on the threats that could be posed by Russia or China. That is largely appropriate. But it also raises the question of how such threats could realistically manifest themselves. What might China or Russia really do that would risk war?

Outright invasions to occupy and possibly annex entire countries seem quite unlikely in an era of nuclear deterrence. It would be stunning to see aggression against the main islands of Japan, the main territories and capitals of Baltic nations, the inhabited islands of the Philippines, or the Korean Peninsula. American forward military deployments, military doctrines, and modernization activities should reinforce the clear message that the United States would fight alongside its allies to defend such interests, and that it has the

means to do so successfully. However, other dangers remain, especially in the realm of gray-zone threats. Beijing or Moscow could seek to chip away at the established U.S.-led order with limited aggressions designed to probe American and allied reactions and to weaken the Western world's collective will to uphold sworn treaty obligations. Historically and logically, it is through such local transgressions that an entire global order can come undone, as Tom Wright has astutely argued.

Yet it is also neither credible nor wise to promise a huge, Desert Storm-like operation to liberate a small slice of allied territory thousands of miles from

American shores and right next to Russia or China. The United States and its security partners need a more believable, and feasible, approach — both to strengthen deterrence and to provide pragmatic options should deterrence fail. A concept like asymmetric defense that blends forward defense deployments, the possible use of targeted military operations in other theaters, and a strategy for economic warfare is a much more realistic approach. It is at once resolute and commensurate with the seriousness of the postulated aggression, yet careful and relatively non-escalatory.

This strategy will work only if it is prepared in advance. So it's time we got on with it.

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