

The Wire *China*

Q & A

Andrew S. Erickson on the ‘Decade of Greatest Danger’

The naval expert explains China’s ‘maritime gray zone operations,’ why the Biden administration needs to accept some friction, and when he thinks calmer seas will arrive.

BY EYCK FREYMAN – APRIL 25, 2021

Dr. Andrew S. Erickson (<http://www.andrewerickson.com>) is a professor of strategy at the U.S. Naval War College’s China Maritime Studies Institute (CMSI) and a visiting scholar at Harvard University’s John King Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies. He is the author and editor of numerous papers and books on China’s military and security matters in the Indo-Pacific, including the “Studies in Chinese Maritime Development” series. Erickson’s latest publications include the Foreign Affairs essay, [“Competition with China Can Save the Planet”](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-04-13/competition-china-can-save-planet) (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-04-13/competition-china-can-save-planet>),” and [Hold The Line through 2035: A Strategy to Offset China’s Revisionist Actions and Sustain a Rules-Based Order in the Asia-Pacific](https://www.bakerinstitute.org/media/files/files/1e07d836/ces-pub-asiapacific-111120.pdf) (<https://www.bakerinstitute.org/media/files/files/1e07d836/ces-pub-asiapacific-111120.pdf>). He also runs the research website [China Analysis from Original Sources](http://www.andrewerickson.com) (<http://www.andrewerickson.com>). What follows is a lightly edited Q&A. Please note, the views expressed are his own and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Navy or any other organization of the U.S. government.



Andrew Erickson.

Illustration by Lauren Crow

Q: Your recent work has focused on China’s “maritime gray zone operations.” Can you explain what these are and why they matter to U.S. national security?

A: Fortunately, the United States and its allies and partners can likely avoid great power war with China. It’s not in the American interest; it’s also not in the Chinese interest. That’s part of what’s at stake in

managing U.S.-China competition, and the onus is as much on China as it is on the United States. Instead, the situation we're likely to face over the next few years — in what might be called a “decade of danger” — are periods of friction, tension, and even crisis.

Generally, it won't be a “wartime” dynamic. But in this so-called “peacetime,” Beijing continues to advance its disputed claims and undermine its neighbors' rights and interests, together with the rules and norms underwriting the international system. It's doing so in part through maritime gray zone operations (<https://www.amazon.com/Maritime-Operations-Studies-Chinese-Development/dp/1591146933>). These are state-sponsored efforts carefully calibrated not to escalate to the level of actual protracted armed conflict. In many cases, they take the form of international sea incidents between China and its neighbors, and sometimes with U.S. government vessels. Sometimes, these incidents are diffused without very much happening. At other times, China acquires control of additional physical territory or maritime zones in the process.

A key example involving the U.S. was the Scarborough Shoal seizure of 2012. In that unfortunate occurrence, China successfully used Coast Guard and Maritime Militia vessels

([http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Maritime-Militia_Chinas_CIMSEC-Series_4_Tanmen_Part-1_Scarborough-Shoal_Kennedy-](http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Maritime-Militia_Chinas_CIMSEC-Series_4_Tanmen_Part-1_Scarborough-Shoal_Kennedy-Erickson_20160421.pdf)

[Erickson_20160421.pdf](http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Maritime-Militia_Chinas_CIMSEC-Series_4_Tanmen_Part-1_Scarborough-Shoal_Kennedy-Erickson_20160421.pdf)) to prevent the Philippines from enforcing environmental regulations within its own Exclusive Economic Zone. China eventually emerged from the incident in complete control of Scarborough Shoal, in violation of a reported U.S.-brokered agreement to return to the *status quo ex ante*. Apparently, the U.S. never imposed a cost on the PRC. And so, Chinese sources started promoting a “Scarborough Shoal model

(<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/as/as28/20160921/105309/hhrg-114-as28-wstate-ericksonphda-20160921.pdf>)” for how China could further its disputed sovereignty claims. The focus here is in what Chinese

strategists term the “Near Seas” — the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea — where all of China’s unresolved island/smaller feature and maritime claims are located.

There have been other incidents in which U.S. government vessels have been harassed. Among the most flagrant was the 2009 encounter in which USNS *Impeccable* (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233359857_Signaling_and_Military_operating_in_international_waters_in_the_South_China_Sea, was harassed by a group of five PRC government vessels. The *Impeccable* was forced to come to a full stop, cease its operations, and leave the area. Again, unfortunately, the U.S. apparently never imposed a cost for this unlawful, unacceptable PRC behavior. Nor did the U.S. government even publicly state that China’s Maritime Militia had been involved (http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Maritime-Militia_Chinas_CIMSEC-Series_4_Tanmen_Part-1_Scarborough-Shoal_Kennedy-Erickson_20160421.pdf).

These are examples of how, through limited but concerted efforts, China can continue to erode the situation in maritime East Asia. It’s a gradual process. But, over the course of years, combined with the fortification of the PRC’s South China Sea outposts (<https://www.andrewerickson.com/2020/08/south-china-sea-military-capabilities-series-unique-penetrating-insights-from-capt-j-michael-dahm-usn-ret-former-assistant-u-s-naval-attache-in-beijing/>), something very significant is happening over time.

BIO AT A GLANCE

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**What is China's "Maritime Militia," and how is it related to the
People's Liberation Army?**

China has three major armed services: the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the People's Armed Police (PAP), and the Militia. Each of these three armed services has its own maritime component. The PLA has the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). That's widely known. The PAP in 2018 assumed control of the China Coast Guard (<https://www.andrewerickson.com/2021/03/the-ryan-martinson-bookshelf-unique-insights-on-chinas-maritime-policies-forces-ops-whitsun-reef-spratlys/>). Finally, the People's Armed Forces Militia has long had a maritime component (<https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c200r2cr>). My colleague Conor Kennedy and I have termed this the "People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (<https://www.andrewerickson.com/2021/04/the-china-maritime-militia-bookshelf-latest-news-statements-analysis-fleet-estimates-trilingual-wikipedia-entry/>)" (PAFMM), a designation the U.S. government has adopted.

To understand what China's doing at sea, particularly in the contested Near Seas, it's vital to understand all three of China's sea forces, which work in increasingly close coordination. This was well documented in the Pentagon's 2020 annual report to Congress (<https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>). I'd recommend that anyone interested consult this report, which is the best yet in the two decades that the Pentagon's been issuing it.

Why does it matter to U.S. national security if China is violating other countries' territorial claims on the margin? China may be gaining ground in the South China Sea, but couldn't the United States interdict Chinese ships in the Indian Ocean? If so, isn't there a strategic stalemate?

I don't think, as you suggest, we can enjoy the benefit of a strategic equilibrium. A lot is being contested, and China is determined to push forward.

You alluded to the possibility of putting pressure on China's sea lane access — for example, energy shipments from the Middle East through the Indian Ocean. That's potentially difficult and problematic (<https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1735&context=nwc-review>) to do in practice. Some oil cargoes can be bought and sold up to 30 times as they make the trip between the Middle East and China. Consider the multinational nature of many crews and the ambiguous ownership and flagging practices of many tankers. I don't think the threat to interdict commercial vessels is an all-purpose source of leverage for the United States. It doesn't counterbalance the negative things that China is doing continually along its maritime periphery.

A tremendous amount is at stake. Consider, for example, the contested status of Taiwan, a vibrant capitalist democracy of 24 million people of great importance to global technology supply chains (http://www.chinainpost.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Hong-Kong-Policy-Options_Impose-Costs-on-Beijing-Coercive-Envelopment_Version-1.0_20200630-1.pdf), public health, and more. Taiwan is at the center of mainland China's military crosshairs. The PRC is directing erosive gray zone operations (<https://graphics.reuters.com/TAIWAN-CHINA/SECURITY/jbyvrnzerve/index.html>) at Taiwan. Offshore islands held by Taiwan and connected with its security are vulnerable (<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3105930/hong-kong-blocks-taiwan-reaching->

disputed-pratas-islands). Nearby in the East China Sea are the Japanese-administered Senkaku Islands. These are covered under Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty — very explicitly, under the Biden administration (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/01/27/readout-of-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-call-with-prime-minister-yoshihide-suga-of-japan/>), as under its predecessors — but China strongly claims them and is continuously dispatching Coast Guard vessels to the vicinity, and also potentially Maritime Militia forces. And all regional nations, like much of the world, depend on free access to the South China Sea.

Worryingly, China is trying to carve out this immediate region as a zone of exceptionalism (<https://www.19fortyfive.com/2021/01/how-president-biden-should-support-the-u-s-japan-alliance/>). China's unilateral approach is threatening long-established international rules and norms that the U.S. and its allies expended so much blood and treasure to establish and nurture. These are things that keep this vital but vulnerable region so dynamic and prosperous.

The more power and influence the Chinese Communist Party accrues, the more ruthlessly Leninist it becomes in its efforts to subvert the international order and its laws and norms. Sometimes the PRC uses patient incremental methods, like maritime gray zone operations. But the continuing erosive effect on rules that help keep the peace, that help ensure that nations have fair access to their own claimed resources in their water column and seabed, like the nature of the global commons as something that all may use without fear or favor — this is all under threat. Just because the PRC sometimes uses subtler, more persistent, more whole-of-government efforts than the Soviet Union ever pursued or was able to master, doesn't mean that it's not equally important and damaging overall.

I do not believe that either the U.S. or China is seeking a war. Beijing would clearly prefer to "win without fighting" (<https://project2049.net/2015/04/10/special-sun-tzu-simplified-an-approach-to-analyzing-chinas-regional-military-strategies/>). I do believe that over time, the current system will be upheld and that'll be

to the greater good of all, including China. But nevertheless, this pressure's not going away anytime soon. In fact, it could further intensify.



Erickson with Admiral Wu Shengli at Harvard in 2014.
Courtesy of Andrew Erickson

The Philippines, Malaysia, and Vietnam are three countries that are concerned about Chinese power projection in their backyards, but individually too small to deter China from aggressing. How can the United States prevent them from resigning themselves to Chinese maritime hegemony, as they seem to be already doing to Chinese economic hegemony?

That's a question that the Biden administration and American allies and partners are grappling with. It's not easy.

Vietnam, for example, is in a very difficult position. It will always have a long land border with China. In recent decades it's been invaded through that land border. But given the hand that Vietnam's been dealt, and the fact that it's not a U.S. treaty ally, it's done a very sophisticated, determined job of standing up for its interests and resisting PRC pressure.

Take the 2014 [HYSY 981 oil rig incident](http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Maritime-Militia_Chinas_CIMSEC-Series_5_Tanmen_Part-2_Leading-Role_Kennedy-Erickson_20160517.pdf)

([http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-](http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Maritime-Militia_Chinas_CIMSEC-Series_5_Tanmen_Part-2_Leading-Role_Kennedy-Erickson_20160517.pdf)

[content/uploads/2016/06/Maritime-Militia_Chinas_CIMSEC-](http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Maritime-Militia_Chinas_CIMSEC-Series_5_Tanmen_Part-2_Leading-Role_Kennedy-Erickson_20160517.pdf)

[Series_5_Tanmen_Part-2_Leading-Role_Kennedy-](http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Maritime-Militia_Chinas_CIMSEC-Series_5_Tanmen_Part-2_Leading-Role_Kennedy-Erickson_20160517.pdf)

[Erickson_20160517.pdf](http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Maritime-Militia_Chinas_CIMSEC-Series_5_Tanmen_Part-2_Leading-Role_Kennedy-Erickson_20160517.pdf)). China was very assertive and Vietnam paid a price in that altercation. But, ultimately, Hanoi apparently succeeded in preventing Beijing from pushing further. I think that's pretty impressive given how Vietnam's maritime forces were outnumbered.

Vietnam is perhaps the one other country that has a [maritime militia similar to China's](https://nationalinterest.org/feature/numbers-matter-chinas-three-navies-each-have-the-worlds-most-24653) (<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/numbers-matter-chinas-three-navies-each-have-the-worlds-most-24653>), in that it is actively used for the promotion of sovereignty claims.

Ironically, the fact that Vietnam also has a Leninist system with domestic controls (albeit less severe ones) buffers it from some PRC infiltrations that plague its neighbors.

The broader picture, of course, is that the countries that are subject to China's predations need to have their own resolve to stand up for their own interests. America can help, but a certain degree of resolve must come from within. Regional states like the Philippines and Malaysia must resist PRC influence into their domestic politics that encourages stasis and inaction [harming their national interests](https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2021/01/30/2074170/illegal-chinese-dredging-vessel-spotted-pcg-was-zambales-2019-bayan-muna)

([https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2021/01/30/2074170/illegal-](https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2021/01/30/2074170/illegal-chinese-dredging-vessel-spotted-pcg-was-zambales-2019-bayan-muna)

[chinese-dredging-vessel-spotted-pcg-was-zambales-2019-bayan-](https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2021/01/30/2074170/illegal-chinese-dredging-vessel-spotted-pcg-was-zambales-2019-bayan-muna)

[muna](https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2021/01/30/2074170/illegal-chinese-dredging-vessel-spotted-pcg-was-zambales-2019-bayan-muna)). What we can and must do is to inspire their confidence and

attract their cooperation by demonstrating leadership, resolve, and

superior stamina throughout the region. As part of this, the Biden

administration will have to accept some friction — and assume some

risks — when it comes to interactions with China.

Do you reject the assumption that China is a juggernaut that will keep growing wealthier and more powerful?

I believe that we're witnessing the tail end of a golden era of Chinese economic growth and growth in national power. That rate of growth is now slowing very significantly. To some extent, this is part of a lifecycle

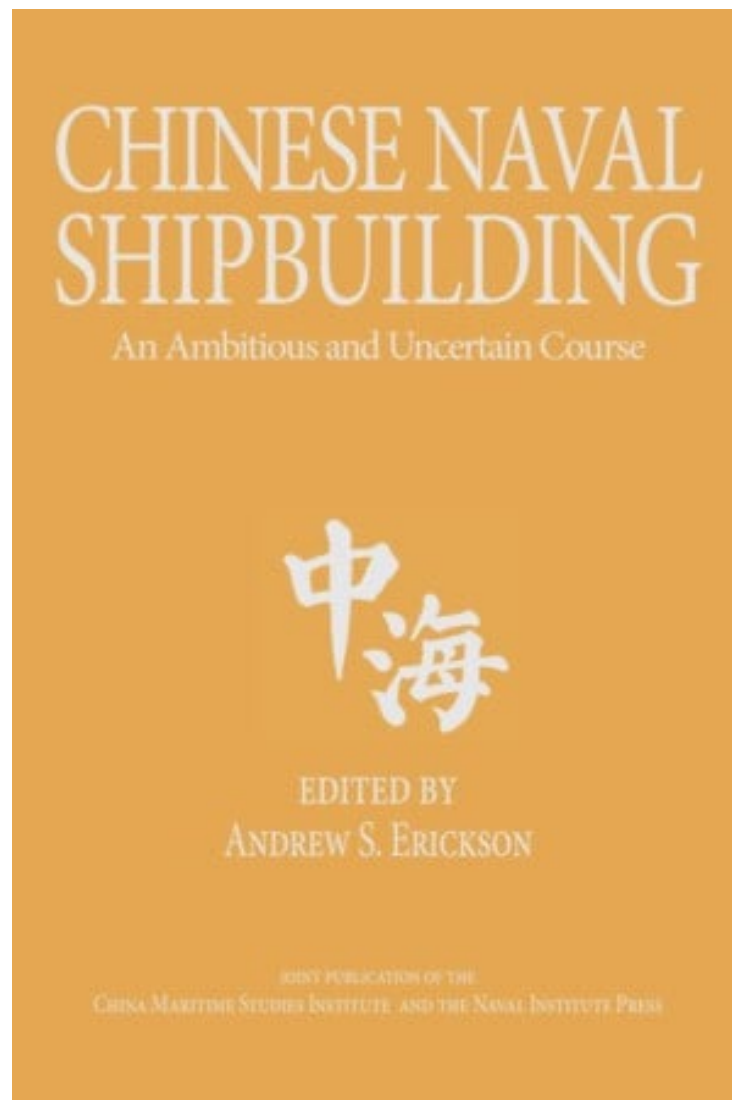
pattern that all great powers go through. My former Naval War College colleague, Gabe Collins, and I have written extensively about this (<https://www.andrewerickson.com/2015/07/china-signposts-for-prc-economy-and-broader-prospects-short-run-stock-market-volatility-limited-reforms-long-run-overall-s-curve-trajectory/>).

We argue that successful great powers tend to follow an “S-curved (<https://thediplomat.com/2011/09/chinas-s-shaped-threat/>)” trajectory. First, there’s an early period of national consolidation and development, marshalling collective resources to key strategic ends. For a period, a relatively young, hardworking, sacrifice-accepting population supports rapid economic growth, determined military operations, and other things that mark a great power’s arrival on the international scene. Yet these very successes eventually sow the seeds of their own slowdown. People’s expectations, both of what they can hope for in life and what their government should prioritize and help with, changes significantly. A welfare state tends to develop that may be morally desirable but creates headwinds on productivity and economic growth. Throughout history, in society after society, birth rates tend to fall as GDP per capita rises.

China’s recent three-plus decades of rapid growth represents a catch-up period after three decades of ruinous Maoist malpractice. But most important is demographics.

Ultimately, all of these things cause a slowdown in the rate of economic growth and the rate of development of national power. I think that, explicitly or implicitly, people tend to understand this. That understanding is already priced into understandings of Japan, Western Europe, and even the United States.

I would argue that these notions are applied excessively to forecasts of the United States and its future capabilities, including through insufficient appreciation of its unique ability to mitigate societal aging with immigration. And I think that the same dynamics remain underappreciated, generally speaking, when it comes to China. China's undergoing an unprecedentedly extreme version of this S-curved slowdown (http://www.chinasignpost.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/China-SignPost_44_S-Curves_Slowing-Chinese-Econ-Natl-Power-Growth_20110815.pdf). There are multiple reasons why, but they mostly stem from the Chinese Communist Party and its policies. First of all, China's recent three-plus decades of rapid growth represents a catch-up period after three decades of ruinous Maoist malpractice. But most important is demographics. China's birth rate has been low for decades. If it continues to plummet (<http://en.people.cn/n3/2021/0209/c90000-9817768.html>), China will follow an S-Curved slowdown faster than the great powers that preceded it. Artificially distorted gender ratios compound the problem. As China ages rapidly (<https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3120236/china-population-tumbling-regional-birth-rates-signal-scale>), an already-shrinking workforce must support what is becoming history's largest elderly population (<https://www.ntaccounts.org/doc/repository/Demographic%20Research%202018>), undermining nationalistic priorities.



Erickson edited *Chinese Naval Shipbuilding: An Ambitious and Uncertain Course* (<https://www.usni.org/press/books/chinese-naval-shipbuilding>), a 2017 anthology assessing China's shipbuilding prowess.

Help me understand the debate about how important fleet size is. Is it still a useful metric for measuring how the balance of power is moving in relative terms? Or, as former President Barack Obama put it, is it as irrelevant a statistic as our number of “horses and bayonets”?

Fleet size is still a key metric of naval and maritime power. It's poised to remain so for the foreseeable future. We talked about China's three sea forces. Each of those three sea forces has the largest number of ships in the world (http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Maritime-Numbers-Game-Understanding-Responding-to-Chinas-Three-Sea-Forces_Indo-Pacific-Defense-Forum-Magazine_December-2018.pdf) in its category, by a large margin. China's three sea forces are all focused primarily on the Near Seas, the location of all of China's unresolved island/feature and maritime claims disputes. For the Maritime Militia, that is really the sole major area of operations as far as open sources can reveal. For the Coast Guard, it's the core area of operations. The PLAN's ranging globally now, but remains significantly focused on the Near Seas. So, you can bet that if there were some sort of important near-sea scenario, either premeditated by Beijing or otherwise occurring, China could concentrate several times more vessels in the theater than the globally-tasked U.S. Navy ever could.

I cringed when the phrase “horses and bayonets” came up during the 2012 presidential debate. One of the best political science books I ever read in graduate school — and I would recommend to anyone interested — is *Analogies at War* (<https://www.amazon.com/Analogies-War-Munich-Vietnam-Decisions/dp/0691025355>) by Yuen Foong Khong. The takeaway is that bad analogies can undermine analysis fundamentally. The U.S. military hasn't employed horses and bayonets since around World War I. The horses and bayonets analogy would only hold if sea power advocates today wanted to field a fleet of coal-fired ships with large-caliber deck guns, as was no longer the case by the time of WWII. I challenge anyone to name a single advocate of coal-fired ships and large-caliber deck guns for today's U.S. Navy.

Fleet size remains a vital subject to discuss, as are the ideas of networked high technology that Christian Brose advocates in his book, *The Kill Chain* (<https://www.hachettebooks.com/titles/christian-brose/the-kill-chain/9780316533362/>). Decisions have been made that

ensure modern surface warships and submarines will be the U.S. Navy's core platforms for decades to come. There's no substitute in sight for achieving versatile, persistent power projection into maritime East Asia in peace and war. This is a long-distance effort for the U.S., whereas China enjoys a geographical home-field advantage.

Technology is not favoring defense over offense — quite the reverse. For the warships that the U.S. is going to be relying on, defense must be 100 percent or you lose the ship. This means that we need continued investment in so-called “hard-kill capabilities”: Aegis, SM-6, Evolved SeaSparrow, etc. Software-based electronic warfare defenses are less costly, but they can't solve the problem alone. For the foreseeable future, therefore, we'll need a substantial fleet of U.S. Navy ships to project power into the region. A “Broseian” supplemental layer of defense *on top of* that will help, but it's nowhere close to being able to replace it.

Some other high-tech solutions proposed, even if fully feasible in practice, are bespoke systems to accomplish certain things in wartime. But they can't necessarily support effective presence and deterrence in peacetime; which is, of course, the best way to avoid war in the first place.

How many ships is enough?

I support the target recommended by multiple official studies: a 355+ ship U.S. Navy by 2030. Fewer vessels would struggle to cover worldwide missions without unsustainable strain in peacetime and unacceptable risk of being overwhelmed should war erupt. Force multipliers to make the most of include development and sales involving allies and partners; and a growing variety of unmanned and autonomous vehicles in increasing supplemental roles.

Bottom line: We'll have to find a way to fund shipbuilding as well as possible. It's not going to be easy and there'll be debates about how many ships we can afford. Warships are extremely expensive to build, crew, and maintain; and China's shipbuilding industry.

[\(https://www.amazon.com/Chinese-Naval-Shipbuilding-Ambitious-Development/dp/1682470814/\)](https://www.amazon.com/Chinese-Naval-Shipbuilding-Ambitious-Development/dp/1682470814/), currently enjoys cost advantages that America's lacks. It's partly because China has a commercial shipbuilding infrastructure (the world's largest) that the U.S. lacks almost entirely, which effectively subsidizes [China's military shipbuilding \(https://www.andrewerickson.com/2021/02/the-chinese-naval-shipbuilding-bookshelf/\)](https://www.andrewerickson.com/2021/02/the-chinese-naval-shipbuilding-bookshelf/).

China's taken a just-good-enough approach, where they're building different ships than is the U.S. Navy. A lot of these ships appear to have less complexity and battle-damage survivability in certain areas. China's choosing to accept some risk here in qualitative sophistication and safety, which allows it to impose risk on us quantitatively — primarily in numbers of ships and weapons to fire from them. But because of the sheer rapidity and scale of China's naval and other national ship buildout, it will have to deal with an enormous [mid-life maintenance and overhaul \(https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1009&context=cmsi-maritime-reports\)](https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1009&context=cmsi-maritime-reports) challenge. The fleet that China's building now resembles a goat making its way through a python. The goat tasted great at the beginning and its initial digestion was incredibly impressive, but the task is far from over, and, in some ways, it can get a lot more difficult. In terms of China's "S-curved" slowdown and U.S. national priorities in approaching this challenge, this suggests to me that we're already in the decade of greatest danger. If we can [weather this window of vulnerability](#).

[\(https://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS28/20131211/101579/HHRG-113-AS28-Wstate-EricksonA-20131211.pdf\)](https://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS28/20131211/101579/HHRG-113-AS28-Wstate-EricksonA-20131211.pdf) effectively, China's going to slow down sufficiently, and its national priorities are going to be redirected to citizens' welfare sufficiently, that it will probably become a much more sustainable challenge. So, I'd advocate the devotion of resources and the acceptance of friction and risk upfront, in order to weather these storms and to get to calmer seas.

Every great sea power in history has struggled with sea power's costs. In that lifecycle of great powers that I described before, there's a sweet spot when the country tends to be just well enough organized and

capable to make major achievements with a concerted national focus and a very competitive cost structure in terms of labor and other factors. That's the sweet spot for naval shipbuilding (<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/chinas-naval-shipbuilding-sets-sail-19371>). In the later part of the great power cycle, the cost of sea power becomes an unforgiving treadmill. Philip Pugh documented this well in *The Cost of Sea Power* (<https://www.abebooks.co.uk/Cost-Sea-Power-Influence-Money-Naval/30144523389/bd>). Countries struggle to keep their ship numbers up. They tend to pursue every adjustment they can think of, but they ultimately tend to suffer a decline in ship numbers. Here America's alliances and partnerships offer the ultimate saving grace: linking with friendly forces (as in, coordinating long-range fires and missile defense) allows U.S. Navy ships to both do more themselves and operate as part of a larger force with division of labor leveraging comparative advantages (for convoy escort, anti-submarine warfare, mine clearing, etc.).



Erickson with then-Senator Joe Biden at the Great Wall of China in 2001.
Courtesy of Andrew Erickson

If I understand you right, it sounds like you're advocating an all-of-the-above strategy. That would probably be effective, but also expensive, particularly given where the U.S. is in the great power cycle you referenced. Is there a shortcut that would be less expensive, but achieve similar ends? For example, China has invested in anti-access, area-denial (A2/AD) systems and expanded the PLA Rocket Force to deter foreign naval vessels from approaching China's shores in conflict. Is there a solution whereby the U.S. helps its allies and rolls out similar systems to deter China from offending on their territorial claims?

The offense-dominant, A2/AD approach that you've rightly emphasized is extremely potent (https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1162/ISEC_c_00278). But it's available, in some form, to anyone. That's one reason why I'm much more optimistic about Taiwan's prospects and defensibility than some people have been.

The U.S. needs to emphasize missile capabilities. China's long been focused intensely on this. In 1987, Washington and Moscow tied their hands with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty (<https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/trty/102360.htm>). But Moscow didn't keep its hands fully tied in practice. And China, completely unbound, made maximum progress precisely there: with a staggering range of systems, both nuclear and conventional, placing particular emphasis on conventional ballistic and cruise missiles (<https://www.andrewerickson.com/2015/10/chinas-new-yj-18-antiship-cruise-missile-capabilities-and-implications-for-u-s-forces-in-the-western-pacific/>) and anti-ship ballistic missiles (<https://www.andrewerickson.com/2020/11/the-china-anti-ship-ballistic-missile-asbm-bookshelf-3/>).

I've long argued that the U.S. should take a page out of China's own playbook (<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA05/20150723/103787/HHRG-114-FA05-Wstate-EricksonA-20150723.pdf>) and do more with

missiles. Fortunately, Washington's finally starting to do that, albeit much later than would have been ideal. A key aspect: exiting the INF Treaty (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-08-29/good-riddance-inf-treaty>). I take arms control treaties very seriously. I was sad that that one had fundamentally stopped working. But the fact is, Russia wouldn't fully honor the treaty and China wouldn't enter the treaty. Period. Meanwhile, that straitjacket was limiting the United States and its deterrence. This is not a panacea; it has to be part of a much larger portfolio of efforts. But current U.S. initiatives to develop ballistic and cruise missiles unencumbered by the INF Treaty are very promising. Even by starting this process, U.S. planners are putting another thing on the table that their PRC counterparts must factor in. That is enhancing deterrence.

A big challenge is where to base mobile missiles. The U.S. still needs to emphasize naval ship numbers partly because maritime East Asia, by dint of geography, is a long-distance, sea-centric theater for the United States; whereas it's a close-in, land-supported theater for China. Beijing will keep pressuring U.S. allies and partners that might consider hosting such missiles.

I think there's a solution to that: the U.S. negotiating various agreements and understandings (<https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/chinas-massive-military-parade-shows-beijing-missile-superpower-84731>) with regional partners that, in certain contingencies, such missiles could be introduced, even if not permanently based there. If — God forbid — the situation got to a point where such a scenario was actually unfolding, host-nation and host-partner cost-benefit calculus would rapidly evolve, and there wouldn't be the same inhibition. However, there's no substitute for that naval force backbone.

U.S. assurance and demonstration of the value of its presence across all scenarios may be key to countering a growing threat: PRC interference in regional countries' domestic politics to change their calculus for extending support to the U.S. in an emergency.

When we're talking about offloading responsibility to allies and partners, Japan immediately comes to mind. But what's the natural limit here? What if, to take a provocative example, the U.S. encouraged Japan to acquire nuclear weapons?

The U.S. and Japan have a shared history of nuclear tragedy. I don't think this is the right way to propose the strengthening of Japanese capabilities. And I think we need to be very, very mindful of that painful history.

That said, I firmly believe that the U.S. should encourage Japan to keep enhancing its conventional defenses. I believe — and this is a widely shared belief — that this is best done within the context of the U.S.-Japan alliance, which has evolved over decades into a tremendous partnership.

President Biden and his team have a great opportunity to grow that partnership (<https://jpsi.indiana.edu/news-events/news/2021-01-19-recap-brookings-two-part-webinar-series-us-japan-relations.html>).

This administration has no shortage of compassion, idealism, or desire to reach out to allies and friends around the world. But a dispassionate analysis shows that the U.S.-Japan alliance has unique potential. If one were to attempt to custom design a set of friendly islands that would be ideally placed to maximize awareness of what was going on in maritime East Asia, and to station forces capable of addressing what was going on region-wide, some of the 6,000-plus Japanese islands, extending all the way to Yonaguni Island, less than 100 miles from Taiwan's main island, would come awfully close to offering precisely that. Japan's unique in straddling both the first and the second island chains. If the U.S., by some unfathomable setback, were to be significantly compromised in its ability to use those islands in partnership with Japan, the ability of the U.S. to project power into maritime East Asia would be fundamentally compromised.

There's a lot more that can be done. For example, in Japan's southwest island chain, the Ryukyus, there are more capabilities that the U.S. can deploy in cooperation with Japan, or encourage Japan to deploy by

itself. Then there's the potential for comprehensiveness and collaborative partnership: sometimes doing things with a great degree of integration, sometimes cooperating in parallel. For example, we talked about China's maritime gray zone operations. In addition to its world-class Maritime Self-Defense Force (<https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/News-Stories/Article/2496199/us-naval-forces-and-japan-maritime-self-defense-forces-conduct-bilateral-mine-w/>), Japan has one of the world's largest, most sophisticated coast guards (<https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/how-abe-remade-the-japan-coast-guard/>). And Japan's shown excellent initiative and leadership in collaborative partnerships with regional coast guards (<https://www.bworldonline.com/japans-coast-guard-diplomacy-in-southeast-asia/>); including education and training in best practices emphasizing restraint and the rule of law at sea (https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2019_94.pdf); as well as material support, particularly in the area of maritime domain awareness. All this should be encouraged and further developed.

Then there is also potential for deeper synergies and integration of our forces. The longtime stationing of U.S. Marines in Okinawa has allowed for tremendous training opportunities. The migration of some of those efforts to Guam, while preserving deep Japanese involvement, has been excellent. Many more things can be done in this area because, from the political leadership and national command authority all the way down to the deck plates, there is now such a robust history of partnership, communication, and cooperation. Japan has so much to offer in terms of personnel sophistication, of technological sophistication, of shipyard sophistication.

MISCELLANEA

BOOK REC	<i><u>The Education of a College President: A Memoir</u></i> (https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/education-college-president) by James R. Killian, Jr.
FAVORITE FILM	<i>To Live (活着)</i> by Zhang Yimou
PERSONAL HERO	I've been greatly inspired by my late grandfather, Joseph Gavin, Jr. He made pioneering aerospace engineering contributions and convinced me of China's military-technological potential.

There has been discussion for well over a decade now that China would like to build a “string of pearls” to dominate, or at least better supervise, lines of communication in the Indian Ocean. There is a rumor — though not yet substantiated — that China may be seeking a naval base in Vanuatu (<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-risks-of-chinas-ambitions-in-the-south-pacific/>), in the South Pacific. How concerned should Americans be about China's Far Seas capabilities?

There's certainly some cause for concern. But from a broader perspective, there's an extreme geographic gradient to China's national security priorities (<https://warontherocks.com/2019/10/make-china-great-again-xis-truly-grand-strategy/>) and its ability to advance them. Beyond a certain distance from China, there are no more disputed or even implausibly claimed territories. I want to underscore what I said before about the fundamental centrality (<https://www.nbr.org/publication/power-vs-distance-chinas-global-maritime-interests-and-investments-in-the-far-seas/>) of Near Seas disputes and scenarios.

At the same time, China already has the world's second-largest economy by the conservative metric of market exchange rates. It already has the world's second-largest defense budget by any measure. And it already has the world's largest navy by number of ships, by a substantial margin. A great power of China's level of capability can "do it all" — to some extent

(https://s3.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/CNAS_ChinaMoreWilling

So what's the nature of China's challenge in the Indian Ocean region? My colleague, former CMSI director, Peter Dutton, demarcates China's spheres of emphasis and capability into three progressively-radiating layers: control, influence, and reach (<https://www.andrewerickson.com/2020/04/the-complete-peter-dutton-bookshelf-chinas-law-of-the-sea-approaches-maritime-sovereignty-claims-and-operations-geostrategy/>). The Near Seas are an area that China aspires to *control*, at least by imposing risk on U.S. access in key scenarios. China can already *reach* all around the world and across every domain: space, electromagnetic spectrum, cyber. In the Indian Ocean region, the primary purpose and capability currently is influence (<https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1010&context=cmsi-maritime-reports>). Some of this influence comes at great expense (<https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=cmsi-maritime-reports>). The Belt and Road Initiative (<https://www.cfr.org/background/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>), in many ways, is extremely inefficient and challenging to secure (<https://www.nbr.org/publication/securing-the-belt-and-road-initiative-chinas-evolving-military-engagement-along-the-silk-roads/>).

While we must keep a close eye on the military operations in which China will increasingly be engaged in the Indian Ocean region, I think it's more of a geopolitical influence challenge. The United States and its allies and partners need to prioritize making sure that China doesn't succeed in geopolitically reorienting the Indian Ocean in a way that's more closed off, that undercuts international rules and norms. For

example, seeking to undermine U.S. access to bases like Diego Garcia (<https://www.andrewerickson.com/2019/02/just-out-in-time-for-the-geopolitical-issue-of-the-day-the-diego-garcia-bookshelf/>). These are all things that China can attempt to do without developing a robust network of traditional military bases, which it may well never be able to find the prioritization and resources to do.

So far, the only Chinese overseas military base is in Djibouti (http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CMSI_China-Maritime-Report_6_Djibouti-Chinas-First-Overseas-Strategic-Strongpoint_Dutton-Kardon-Kennedy_20200401.pdf). Cambodia may be the next place to watch (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/secret-deal-for-chinese-naval-outpost-in-cambodia-raises-u-s-fears-of-beijings-ambitions-11563732482>). But certainly, China's far from being on track to having anything close to the robust set of overseas U.S. facilities. As with the cost of sea power, that's something that's incredibly hard to achieve, let alone sustain. It's the province of only a select group of great powers. They typically struggle to maintain it, given all the challenges. For a variety of historical and political reasons, China's limited its own ability to develop alliances in the first place.

Furthermore, India's an enormous great power bulwark against PRC expansionism. India will pursue its own national interests, as ultimately, any country's inclined to do. Even India's most open, U.S.-friendly thinkers don't envision a traditional alliance. But that's not necessary. A positive partnership is really what's in our mutual interest, and we have a promising foundation to build on. Moving forward, India faces three-plus decades of excellent demographic growth. It will be a dynamo generating momentum that can be applied to the greater good. India is the quintessential resident Indian Ocean power, astride key sea lanes with great diplomatic and military influence across a constellation of regional countries. Combined with growing Indo-U.S. cooperation (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/12/30/china-united-states-great-game-cold-war/>), some in "Quad" coordination with Japan and

Australia, this will help limit the PRC's ability (<https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/rising-to-the-china-challenge>) to exclude U.S., allied, and partner operations and compromise international rules and norms in the Indian Ocean.



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