

US Pacific Deterrence Initiative too little, too late to counter China

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The US–China rivalry has many dimensions, but at its heart is a strategic contest over primacy in the Western Pacific. Although this contest is being waged on many fronts — including economic, diplomatic and ideological — it is essentially military. China seeks to challenge US leadership in the Western Pacific by opposing the US maritime military supremacy. The United States is trying to resist that challenge and preserve its military preponderance.

Neither side wants a war. Instead, both hope to win by convincing the other side to back off in the face of the other's evident military power and strategic resolve. In other words, they hope to deter one another.

The United States is in danger of losing this contest because its historically unassailable maritime power is being challenged by China's growing naval, air and missile forces. US forces remain more powerful overall, but China has many advantages in the Western Pacific — fighting a defensive campaign close to home bases. China's massive investment in maritime capabilities over the past 25 years has effectively exploited these advantages, so that today it has the potential to exact a heavy toll on US ships and aircraft projecting power towards China.

The United States can no longer expect a swift, cheap victory in a war with China in the Western Pacific. It must expect a long and very costly war — bigger than anything since Vietnam and probably bigger than any war since 1945 with no clear prospect of ultimate victory.

This has serious implications for US capacity to win its strategic contest with China. The harder it would be for the United States to win a war with China, the harder it is to convince Beijing that Washington would choose to fight. This undermines US deterrence and emboldens Beijing to stage provocations designed to demonstrate its new strength and new US weaknesses. This is what China has been doing in the South China Sea over the past decade. Next, it may try it on Taiwan.

The Pentagon understands this. With support from Congress, it is giving priority to regaining lost advantages through a program called the [Pacific Deterrence Initiative](#) (PDI). It aims to bolster US capacity to deter China by improving its capacity to win a war, making it more likely that the United States could choose to fight rather than fold in the face of Chinese provocations.

But it probably won't work. The PDI itself is far too small to reverse the long-term shift in China's military advantage. The US\$27.4 billion that the Pentagon requested is for a five-year program. This amounts to less than US\$6 billion a year and less than 1 per cent of the total defence budget for what should be its single highest priority. When China's US\$200 billion defence budget is primarily focussed on confronting the United States in the Western Pacific, there is just no chance that a program of this size will [rebuild US preponderance](#) and restore deterrence.

This conclusion is even clearer given how the money is to be spent. Much of it will go to missile defences in Guam and other US bases in the Western Pacific. That makes sense, of course, but it is hardly a war-winner. The United States needs to spend a lot more money on systems to destroy Chinese air and naval forces — not just defending its own. Advocates argue that the Pentagon has other programs to do that, which aim to exploit new and exotic technologies and operational concepts. But these are years, if not decades, from fruition, and [the contest with China](#) may well be lost by then.

There is still a deeper problem with the PDI. Even if the Pentagon does find a way to restore US maritime superiority and, in particular, could win an air and sea battle in the Western Pacific over Taiwan, would that deliver victory? On an issue as central to China as Taiwan, it is unlikely to concede defeat.

Yet there is no sign that the United States has a plan to win a war with China that goes beyond a maritime campaign. A land invasion that aims to seize substantial Chinese territory can be ruled out as beyond US capability. History also suggests that a conventional bombing campaign or a trade blockade is unlikely to work.

This leaves nuclear weapons. The United States' 'nuclear first use' doctrine envisages resorting to nuclear forces if conventional forces fail to deliver victory. But China has nuclear weapons too — which it could launch against US cities — and no president could afford to ignore the risk that they would be used to retaliate against any US nuclear attack on China.

Restoring credible deterrence of China is much harder than rebuilding US capabilities to fight and win a maritime campaign in the Western Pacific. It requires the United States to develop a credible military strategy that has a real chance of forcing China to concede on vital issues like Taiwan at a price that the United States is willing to pay. If that price includes a clear risk of nuclear attack

on the United States itself, then no such a military strategy might be possible. In this case, the United States will lose the contest with China.

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