

Preparing for War with China, 2025–2032

MARTY J. REEP



With intensifying great-power competition between China and the United States, all four aspects of VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) are often highlighted in US strategic leadership in the Indo-Pacific region.¹ Beijing's actions and Washington's reactions will cause volatility and uncertainty in Southeast Asia and Oceania. This power play in the region also entails risks of other nations being caught in the crossfire and forcing them to choose a side. It will be a painful struggle for those who try to be amicable toward both Beijing and Washington. Either way, tensions and armed conflicts in the region would undermine stability that had previously supported the regional economic prosperity.

Since 2013, China has been promoting its own version of *manifest destiny* through the development of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).² Part of its long-term plan includes construction and management of key shipping ports and militarily strategic cities throughout the South China Sea (SCS), the East China Sea (ECS), the South Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean, and the Mediterranean Sea. The BRI also includes building highways, railways, and airports across South-

east Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.³ With that infrastructural support, China plans to expand its sphere of influence by controlling the flow of goods to and from more than half of the globe as well as by positioning itself as a stakeholder for local governments. Through these initiatives, China has made it clear that it is working to become the world's preeminent superpower.⁴

Over the past few decades, China has been building up its armed forces, specifically its Navy and Coast Guard.⁵ From 2013–2018, China built up coral reefs and uninhabited islands in the SCS—including Fiery Cross Reef, Woody Reef, Mischief Reef, and Subi Reef—increasing their land mass by 3,200 acres through reclamation and dredging. Satellite images clearly show the drastic, militarized changes to those islands between 2015–2018.⁶ In December 2020, China changed its maritime laws and put the Coast Guard under direct control of the People's Liberation Navy (PLAN)—the first time ever for the PLAN. Two months later, in February 2021, China updated its maritime law and gave its Coast Guard the authority to fire on foreign vessels it considered were posing a danger to Chinese territory.⁷ During the past 20 years, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has invested heavily in building a digital information network for cyber exploitation training thousands of cyber specialists to maximize the reach and control of the World Wide Web.⁸ With the advent of the Internet, access to data in other countries has become easier. Relatedly, while the development and transfer of information has become faster and simpler, it also has become more vulnerable to the exploits of Chinese hackers.⁹

A tremendous amount of complexity is involved in a war and in the events leading up to a war. One can easily spot this in the trade sector. Since trade agreements already exist between the two nations, this adds more complexity and ambiguity in relationships between companies, politicians, and families in the two nations. This complex nature of relationship, in turn, creates a far-reaching, perfect storm. In addition to key US stakeholders and leaders, the organizational processes and policies relevant to the discussion involve trade agreements, military buildup, occupying foreign lands, interagency cooperation, and international logistics. Although the US cannot presume that a war *will* happen, policy makers in Washington can anticipate that it *may* happen – and prepare for various scenarios by using organizational memory and its strength of being a learning system.¹⁰ Updating Operation Plans (OPLAN) would be a wise thing to do, so as to be prepared for pending conflicts in the INDOPACOM area of responsibility.

However, if deterrence can prevail, then that would be better than going to war. Deterrence would cost less in human lives, international economic impacts, and damage to national infrastructure. Likewise, it would reduce the potential sec-

ond- and third-order effects from nuclear destruction that could result during a war with another superpower.

Areas of Concern and Possible Innovation

There are areas of concern and possible innovation US leadership must consider in preparing for war with China under recent and ongoing developments. To begin with, the US Air Force (here in after USAF) would need to reapportion assets from current mission sets to areas near China to handle the situation in the SCS and in the ECS. Reapportioned assets include aircraft, equipment, materials, funding, and personnel. All the personnel who move to the region will need housing. Military construction (MilCon) funding may need to be cut from new projects in the United States and/or locations in other theatres to fund the building of bases and temporary facilities in partner nations surrounding China. Another logistical constraint would be supporting war efforts 6,000 miles from mainland United States.

For cross-cultural competency, helping Airmen gain a better understanding of China's culture, history, perspective, and future global plans will pay dividends. With that knowledge, Airmen will be able to make better decisions when real world scenarios catch up with the planning process that the USAF will have gone through in the near future. Cultural information and awareness can be communicated and trained via briefings, classes, online presentations, videos, role-playing, and scenario enactment. Beyond individual enhancement of knowledge, inter-agency collaboration on details regarding mission sets will help each of the agencies and services understand rules of engagement, expectations, roles, and responsibilities. By communicating up front and sharing what each agency understands about a potential adversary, all US parties involved will be better off.

Likewise, communications and negotiations with stakeholders will be vital for success. In a practical context, the USAF needs to not only maintain but invest more in cyber networks, broadcasting towers, and satellite communication radars to ensure secure complete communications between front line commanders and higher headquarters (HHQ). Crosstalk with stakeholders (i.e., partner nations) in SE Asia and within the US government will also assist during the Joint Planning Process (JPP).¹¹

Other factors for consideration are areas where innovation is possible such as missions, organizations, and processes. As China expands its stronghold in the SCS and the ECS, it is creating a buffer zone between itself and the outside world. To help contain Chinese expansion and exploitation of the neighboring countries, the USAF will need to station more strategic assets and strengthen its cyber capabilities in the theatre. This will allow the USAF to monitor Chinese

military activities, as well as respond to any acts of aggression that they may display leading up to and during the years of 2025–2032. In addition to enhancing monitoring and aircraft response capacities, the USAF will need to deploy more satellites to detect potentially threatening activities and defend US access to its own satellite networks, including Global Positioning Satellites (GPS), MilSTAR, DSCS, and SBIRS.¹²

Politically, the US and the USAF will need to establish and maintain solid ties with strategic partners who present geostrategic value for the United States and who may be caught in the crossfire. This kind of adjustment will not happen by itself. Decisionmakers will have to shift manpower, materials, equipment, and funding from current lines of effort to the future concern of China.

By looking at the same patterns that made themselves apparent to the author 12 years ago, the USAF can anticipate China's next moves and get out in front of them. Ignoring the long-term threat will not serve the ideals of sustainability for the United States. Likewise, the USAF must do more than merely acknowledge the threat. It must take conscientious, proactive steps to help maintain a healthy balance in that region, because the US is not the only country that will be affected by Beijing's attempts to expand its influence.

Areas for leadership development within the USAF, as related to this strategic issue, are broad. There are many opportunities for professional and leadership growth within the efforts needed to accomplish a successful outcome. All Airmen, ranging in rank and experience from Airman Basic (AB) to general officer will ample opportunities to develop their self-awareness, strategic vision, and ability to represent organizations as they grow as leaders.¹³ Likewise, units, squadrons, groups, and wings would have plenty of chances to develop team cohesiveness and unite efforts in accomplishing each of their teams' missions.

Among the various aspects of successfully preparing for and executing a war, the USAF must continuously weigh plans against ethical considerations.¹⁴ In this context, although the USAF would be at war with an opposing military and an opposing government, it must remember that it still represents the Core Values of (1) Integrity First, (2) Service Before Self, and (3) Excellence in All We Do.¹⁵ Just because it would be at war with opposing people does not relieve it of the responsibility to comport itself with the ethical standards expected of the US military.

Policy Recommendations for the USAF

The course of action that the USAF needs to take to deal with this include the following. First, it can increase aircraft presence in the SCS and in the ECS. By increasing the number of aircraft (fixed and rotary wing) in the East and SE Pacific regions, the USAF has a better chance of winning a war against China than

if the number of USAF assets in the region stays low. Staging them at bases located within SE Asia and Oceania partner nations' territories would be better for the USAF than having to continuously transport aircraft from the US mainland during a war.

Second, it needs to conduct joint training exercises with allies and partner nations in that region: Japan, Taiwan, Philippines, South Korea, Australia, Vanuatu, Thailand, Singapore, and Palau. Conducting joint training exercises will show China that the US has the resolve to see potential conflict through to a successful end. Joint training exercises not only provide up-to-date exposure of current elements of war to inexperienced soldiers and Airmen; they also provide refresher training to seasoned veterans in the context of the emerging fight.

Third, it can continue to develop a strong diplomatic presence in the region. This will help ensure that the USAF will have access to land masses of strategic geographical importance when the time comes to deploy aircraft assets in the region. Resupplying and refueling is also a crucial consideration for carrying out warfare in foreign territories and over the open ocean.

Fourth, it needs to assist allies and partner nations in improving their cyber infrastructure and information communications systems. For actions regarding cyber infrastructure, exploiting the enemy's systems and protecting our own is paramount in controlling the digital battlespace and all the weapon systems that depend on Internet functionalities working correctly. Likewise, the USAF will need to help protect host nations' information communications networks. In addition to cyber networks, communications systems are the lifeblood to keeping senior leaders and decision makers up to speed on the status of the battlefield and troop movements.

Fifth, it will need to enhance the satellite surveillance of the People's Republic of China and the PLA. The USAF will need to work with US Space Force to increase satellite surveillance on China and on the PLA. Fidelity in the details of the PLA's actions will allow Department of Defense planners and decision makers to stay ahead of the enemy. Being able to anticipate what the Chinese military is going to do next will tilt the scales of victory toward to the US.

In summary, the US needs to prepare for potential war with China in the 2025–2032 timeframe. Some leaders may choose to ignore the signs of China's designs for altering the world's balance of power. However, that does not erase China's aggressive behavior in the SCS and ECS over the past 5–10 years. Likewise, the USAF has been monitoring China's activities in that region and in other regions. Thus, it is well aware of Beijing's intentions and desires. The road to war can be long, and the drumbeats may currently sound far off in the distance, but they are steadily beating, nonetheless. Based on this analysis, the USAF can im-

plement needed preparations. Future successes hinge on its willingness to do so.



Marty J. Reep

Mr. Reep manages Special Operations training at Pope Army Airfield, North Carolina. In February 2019, he published a forecast of the pending drop in US gross domestic product—one year before it occurred in February 2020. He completed Air War College in 2021.

Notes

1. Stephen J. Gerras, ed., *Strategic Leadership Primer*, 3rd ed. (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, 2010), 1.
2. “Belt and Road Initiative,” *Belt and Road Initiative*, 2021, <https://www.beltroad-initiative.com/>.
3. Roland Rajah, Alexandre Dayant, and Jonathan Pryke, “Ocean of debt? Belt and Road and debt diplomacy in the Pacific,” Lowy Institute, 21 October 2019, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/>.
4. Frederick Kempe, “China is making a global power play, and the US response is coming up short,” *CNBC*, 27 April 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/>.
5. Christian Bedford, “The View from the West: Chinese Naval Power in the 21st Century,” *Canadian Naval Review* 5, no. 2 (Summer 2009), 1–2, <https://www.navalreview.ca/>.
6. Luis Martinez, “Why the U.S. Navy sails past disputed artificial islands claimed by China,” *ABC News*, 6 May 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/>.
7. Kawashima Shin, “China’s Worrying New Coast Guard Law,” *The Diplomat*, 17 March 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/>.
8. Meredith Roaten, “Mumbai Incident Spotlights China’s Cyber Capabilities,” *National Defense*, 3 March 2021, <https://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/>.
9. Ryan Lucas, “Chinese Hackers Charged in Alleged Cyber-Theft Of 145 Million Americans’ Data,” *NPR*, 10 February 2020, <https://www.npr.org/>.
10. *Strategic Leadership and Decision Making*, Washington, DC: National Defense University, n.d., 5–8.
11. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Planning*, 16 June 2017, V-4.
12. *Military Space Operations: Common Problems and Their Effects on Satellite and Related Acquisitions*, GAO-03-825R, 2 June 2003, Washington, DC: United States General Accounting Office, <https://www.govinfo.gov/>.
13. Craig Bullis, “The NFP Strategic Leader,” *Parameters* 39, no. 4 (Winter 2009–2010), 33–34.
14. Martin L. Cook, *The Moral Warrior: Ethics and Service in the US Military* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), 81, 84.
15. US Air Force, “Core Values,” 2021, <https://www.airforce.com/>.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed or implied in *JIPA* are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government or their international equivalents.