

# Projecting Strategy: The Myth of Chinese Counter-intervention

In analyses of China's military modernization, it has become increasingly common to describe China as pursuing a "counter-intervention" strategy in East Asia. Such a strategy aims to push the United States away from China's littoral, forestalling the United States' ability to intervene in a conflict over Taiwan or in disputes in the East and South China Seas. Moreover, such a military strategy is consistent with a purported broader Chinese goal to displace the United States from its traditional regional role, including Washington's support for global norms such as freedom of navigation in Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) and partnerships with long-standing treaty allies.

Characterizations of China's military strategy as counter-intervention are attributed not to the assessments of outside observers but instead to the actual writings of Chinese strategists themselves. Put simply, China is said to characterize its military strategy as counter-intervention. According to the 2012 edition of the Pentagon's annual report on Chinese military power, "For China, 'counter-intervention' refers to a set of operationally-defined tasks designed to prevent foreign (e.g., U.S.) military forces from intervening in a conflict...China employs anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) weapons in support of this *broader counter-intervention strategy*—a strategy not bound by a set geographic area or domain" (emphasis added).<sup>1</sup> Likewise, a noted defense

---

M. Taylor Fravel is an Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Security Studies Program, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Follow him on Twitter via @fravel. Christopher P. Twomey is an Associate Professor, Department of National Security Affairs, Naval Postgraduate School and intends to tweet more often via @ctwomey68. This article represents the authors' personal views, and not necessarily those of any institution with which they are affiliated. The authors thank Dennis Blasko, Michael Glosny, and Alastair Iain Johnston for their constructive comments on earlier drafts.

---

Copyright © 2015 The Elliott School of International Affairs  
*The Washington Quarterly* • 37:4 pp. 171–187  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2014.1002164>

journalist describes China's naval modernization as part of "a strategy China calls 'counter-intervention' and we call 'anti-access/area denial.'"<sup>2</sup> According to prominent defense analyst Jim Thomas, "China has been able to focus its defense effort almost entirely on its immediate maritime perimeter in support of its 'counter-intervention' strategy."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, many other scholars and analysts of Chinese military affairs have increasingly described China's strategy in this way.<sup>4</sup> Others go further and see counter-intervention as something approaching a grand strategy guiding China's goals to challenge the United States throughout the Asian littoral.<sup>5</sup>

**C**hinese writings rarely if ever mention the concept of counter-intervention.

Yet, although China is certainly developing military capabilities that would complicate U.S. intervention in a major conflict in the region involving China, Chinese writings on military strategy and operations rarely if ever mention the concept of counter-intervention. Despite the frequent use of the term by outside observers—who attribute the concept to Chinese sources—the Chinese military does *not* use the term to describe its own strategy. When it does discuss

related concepts of "dealing with" or "resisting" a third party's military intervention, it mentions them as a sub-component of one of the core campaigns or scenarios that drive Chinese planning, such as an armed conflict over Taiwan, not as an overarching strategy. The absence of the term and infrequent use of related ideas in authoritative Chinese military writings does not appear to reflect a larger denial-and-deception campaign, since this literature often involves much more sensitive subjects.

This omission matters for several reasons. Identifying "counter-intervention" as the focus of China's military strategy, and attributing it to Chinese sources, sustains a flawed assessment of China's military modernization, mistaking an operational concept for a military strategy or even a grand strategy aimed at pushing the United States out of the Asian littoral. China's military modernization pursues several different goals, some of which might require dealing with potential U.S. military intervention, while others do not. Even within a Taiwan scenario, countering U.S. intervention is only one of a set of operations that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) believes it would need to undertake in such a campaign. More generally, the focus on "counter-intervention" overstates the role of the United States in Chinese military planning and contributes to the security dilemma as well as growing security competition in the region.

## Military Capabilities and Strategy in China

To be sure, China is deploying a range of military systems that could deny the use of what is termed the “near seas” (*jinhai*, 近海) to potential adversaries. Most prominent among these is the DF-21D, a mobile, solid-fueled missile that can maneuver in its terminal stage to target moving ships; it is often deemed a “carrier-killer.”<sup>6</sup> Arguably more important are dozens of modern, quiet diesel submarines. Of relatively limited range given their propulsion, they are capable of fielding a mix of wake-homing torpedoes and high-speed, long-range, anti-ship cruise missiles (YJ-82). The newest *Yuan*-class submarines are thought to possess better, air-independent propulsion and an even quieter acoustic signature. Similar missiles can be launched from a range of air platforms, including navalized versions of the SU-27 variants (the J-11B today, and the J-16 in the near future) and the older but longer-legged Tu-16 bombers (H-6, in Chinese parlance, launching DH-10s). These can be complemented by significant holdings of shore-based anti-ship cruise missiles and coastal artillery. A final component of a force optimized for near sea denial is a sizable fleet of *Houbei*/Type-22 small missile boats. These coastal craft number over sixty in the PLA Navy fleet and again can wield potent anti-ship cruise missiles.

The existence of these capabilities and the threat they pose to U.S. naval assets is undeniable. Any U.S. task force commander in the region, theater chief in Hawaii at PACOM, or strategist in the Pentagon must treat these as capabilities that must be dealt with cautiously. U.S. strategists describe these as “anti-access/area denial” capabilities. The term anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) is part of the U.S. military’s official lexicon and refers to an opponent’s military operations either to slow the deployment of forces to a theater of operations—anti-access—or to disrupt the ability to conduct operations within the theater if the forces arrive—area denial.<sup>7</sup> It is widely recognized that the PLA does not refer to their capabilities in such terms. This, then, puts a premium on understanding exactly how China does plan to use these capabilities in the service of which specific operational goals. That is, in the classic ways-means-ends formation of strategy, these systems are potent “means”; but in what “ways” will they serve which “ends” for China?

China’s approach to military affairs generally includes three levels: military strategy, campaigns, and tactics. In China, military strategy provides general guidance about the conduct of future wars. In particular, military strategy at any

**The existence of these capabilities and the threat they pose is undeniable.**

point in time is contained in the “military strategic guidelines” (*junshi zhanlue fangzhen*, 军事战略方针) that are issued by the Central Military Commission, the party’s military decision-making body.<sup>8</sup> The last adjustment to the guidelines occurred in 2004, which called on the PLA to be prepared to fight and win local wars on its periphery that would be characterized by “informationalized conditions,” or the application of information-technology to all aspects of warfare.

Within this general approach to strategy, the PLA plans to prepare for a range of wars or armed conflicts. The 2013 edition of *The Science of Military Strategy*, authored by scholars from the PLA’s influential Academy of Military Science (AMS), outlines four kinds of wars that China might face in the future, including the scope, intensity, risk, and probability that each might occur.<sup>9</sup> Importantly, none of these could be labeled as “counter-intervention.” They include: 1) a large-scale, high-intensity defensive war on the Chinese mainland (low probability and high risk); 2) a relatively large-scale and relatively high-intensity “anti-secessionist war” over Taiwan (relatively high probability and high risk); 3) medium- and small-scale wars over disputed territories and waters (medium probability and risk); and 4) small-scale and low-intensity counter-terror, stability maintenance, and rights defense actions (no probability or risk assigned to these actions). The first can only be viewed as “counter-intervention” if there is an expectation that the United States might invade China. Even the Chinese source views the likelihood of such a scenario as “minuscule.”<sup>10</sup> Instead, as this section of the book concludes, “the most likely threat of war is a limited military conflict in the maritime direction, while a relatively large-scale and relatively high-intensity local war in the maritime direction under conditions of nuclear deterrence is the most important war to prepare for.”<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, none of these potential conflicts is aimed principally to serve “counter-intervention” as a primary goal, though as discussed below, dealing with the United States is a key part of a war over Taiwan, and possibly in conflicts over maritime disputes for the PLA.<sup>12</sup>

At the campaign and operational level of war, the PLA’s professional military literature describes types of operations that the PLA would be required to conduct in scenario-specific kinds of campaigns. Writings on campaigns and operations approximate operational doctrine in a U.S. context, namely a description of how to undertake specific tasks to achieve a specific military objective. Six major types of campaigns tend to appear consistently in PLA writings. For instance, a 2012 AMS textbook included a firepower attack campaign, an island blockade campaign, an island assault campaign, an air defense campaign, a border defense campaign, and an anti-landing campaign.<sup>13</sup> Loosely speaking, these refer to scenarios involving conflicts over Taiwan or on the border with India in addition to the defense of the mainland itself.<sup>14</sup> None

of these is best conceptualized as serving a broad “counter-intervention” strategy either, although the weapons described above might well be used for tactical purposes of attacking U.S. forces in some cases. In most of these scenarios, the primary military objective is not countering potential U.S. intervention. Rather, these scenarios have distinct operational goals, such as defending offshore islands or land borders as well as threatening Taiwan or the Senkaku Islands. (One might reasonably view the “air defense” campaign as facing the United States, but equally it could address Japan, Russia, or India.) What is notable is that operational tasks such as “sea denial” and “attacking distant airbases,” which would be critical components for a broader counter-intervention strategy, are not part of this list.

### **The Curious Absence of “Counter-Intervention”**

Despite the prominence of the term “counter-intervention” in Western analysis of the PLA, Chinese military writings rarely use the term and never use it to describe a strategy. When it does appear, it usually refers to one of a number of operations that the PLA would need to undertake in a potential conflict over Taiwan. It does not appear in writings on the other campaigns that currently make up PLA plans. Moreover, the absence of the term does not reflect a deliberate effort to conceal China’s strategy. Topics that would be equally sensitive in a Chinese context are frequently discussed in the PLA’s professional military literature.

If counter-intervention were a core or dominant element of Chinese military strategy today, one would expect the term to appear frequently in a range of publications published by the PLA. The concept of counter-intervention could be expressed in Chinese in three ways: “*fan ganyu*” (反干预), “*fan ganshe*” (反干涉), and “*fan jieru*” (反介入) could all translate as anti- or counter-intervention.<sup>15</sup> Yet, most authoritative writings on defense policy, military strategy, and military operations by Chinese strategists do not use any of these terms.<sup>16</sup> They do not appear in any of the white papers on national defense, which are authored by AMS for the Ministry of National Defense and have been published biannually since 1998. The 2011 edition of the PLA’s official glossary of military terms does not contain an entry for any of these terms.<sup>17</sup> The prominent 2013 edition of the AMS’s *Science of Military Strategy* does not use any of these terms either, despite engaging with sensitive topics such as integrated joint operations, asymmetric strategy, and military competition in the cyber domain.<sup>18</sup> Even other prominent books authored by officers from the Second Artillery Force (SAF)—*Deterrence and Warfare* and *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*—make no mention of counter-intervention.<sup>19</sup> This is particularly interesting given that, in most U.S. recounting of this supposed Chinese strategy, missile strikes play a central role, and both books are

“classified” documents within China that are available for reproduction in Taiwan and the West.<sup>20</sup> More broadly, a survey of a dozen books on doctrine and strategy from AMS and the PLA’s National Defense University (and related military and security presses) also finds almost no mention of the most prominent two terms (反干涉 and 反介入).<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, the terms do not appear in media sources with any great frequency, even in China’s own military media. The *People’s Liberation Daily* is the official (daily) newspaper of the Chinese military. No term for counter-intervention appears with any frequency on its online database archive. A moderate number of references use one of the three variants of the term to characterize U.S. (and Japanese) perceptions of Chinese strategy. Retired Maj. General Luo Yuan, for example, uses the term “*fan jieru*” (反介入), but only as a way to characterize the U.S. view on China.<sup>22</sup> That same term (反介入) is also becoming the preferred way for Chinese strategists to translate the U.S. concept of “anti-access/area denial” (A2/AD), but only as a way to describe U.S. views. Ironically, some U.S. analysts then attribute “*fan jieru*” to Chinese sources even though it is a translation of the U.S. concept and not part of the Chinese military’s lexicon.<sup>23</sup> Another useful media database is the U.S. government-run “Open Source Center,” which translates scores of Chinese media articles every day (formerly known as the Foreign Broadcast Information Service). One would expect, given that the intelligence community maintains that database, articles that address this imputed Chinese strategy would be more likely to receive translation than others. Yet from 2004 to September 2014, the term appears in only a handful of articles.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, a survey of academic and scholarly Chinese publications contains few instances of these terms. The China National Knowledge Index is a widely used scholarly archive for nearly all openly published journal articles in China. That database yields approximately twenty articles, most of which are not strategic in focus. Another sixteen use the term to describe historical events. One apparent

**“Counter-intervention” originated in the West to describe Chinese strategy.**

exception—by retired Major General Peng Guangqian of AMS—evaporates under more thorough analysis because it centered on foreign political intervention in China’s domestic politics and not military strategy.<sup>25</sup> The only other relevant example dates from 1996 and focuses narrowly on the Taiwan issue.

In general then, the term “counter-intervention” and similar strategic terms do not have wide currency in China. It is striking that several of the relatively rare instances of their use in semi-authoritative sources come from military officials who interact most commonly with foreigners. Retired generals

Luo Yuan and Peng Guangqian are familiar faces on the conference circuit, trusted by the Party to engage internationally. It is not surprising that they would be most prone to use terms that originate in the West to describe Chinese strategy.

## A Deception Game?

Could it be that “counter-intervention” really *is* a central Chinese military strategy, but that—given its sensitivity—it is kept out of the public eye and highly classified? Although this is impossible to completely rule out, it is highly unlikely for several reasons.

First, as noted above, some classified Chinese materials do leak out and they do not use the term. There is a steady drip of documents available through Taiwan and Hong Kong, which are then disseminated through university libraries. U.S. scholars (and others) meticulously mine such publications for insights into Chinese strategic thought. It is odd that these sorts of documents also contain no reference to these concepts.

Second, discussion occurs on plenty of other topics with similar sensitivity. For instance, one can find discussion of informationalized warfare, system of systems in military affairs, joint firepower strikes, and complex electromagnetic environments in a range of media and academic sources in China.<sup>26</sup> The steady evolution of Chinese strategic concepts at a broad level has been well documented including people’s war, active defense, and local wars under modern conditions.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, a military organization needs the broad parameters of its primary operational doctrine to be relatively public so as to align a wide range of choices and policies it must make. Training must be conducted to serve that goal. Procurement and even organizational changes should also mesh up with the strategic goal. Even for an authoritarian country, aligning the military with leadership goals can prove challenging (see the ongoing corruption scandals in China that have repeatedly involved military leaders). Of course, some integration of strategy, training, procurement, and organization can be done confidentially. But given the voluminous literature published in China on exactly those issues, much should be apparent to the wider world. As a result, it is unlikely that counter-intervention has been deliberately concealed as a military strategy.

## Select Exceptions: Superficial, Narrow, and Rare

In a few Chinese military publications, one can find references to something related to counter-intervention. These refer to “resisting” (*diyū*, 抵御), “guarding against” (*fāngyù*, 防御), or “dealing with” (*yìngduì*, 应对) an

imagined enemy's military intervention (*junshi ganyu*, 军事干预). In nearly all cases, the references occur narrowly within the context of military operations against Taiwan. For example, a 2009 book from the PLA's National Defense University discussed offensive operations against a "large island" and identified "resisting a foreign enemy's military intervention" (*diyū waidì junshì ganyū*, 抵御外敌军事干预) as one of many tasks that the PLA would need to undertake.<sup>28</sup> But resisting intervention was part of a long list of other tasks that included joint information attacks and defense, joint fire power attacks, maritime blockade, air and sea raids joint landing, island joint assault, joint anti-air raid, joint anti-landing operational actions. The list did not emphasize resisting intervention over these other actions. Likewise, the 2013 edition of *Science of Military Strategy* highlighted the need to "be prepared for a foreign enemy's military intervention" (*fangbèi waidì junshì ganyū*, 防备外敌军事干预) as part of the "anti-secessionist war" over Taiwan.<sup>29</sup>

A single speech announced in July 2014 by General Secretary Xi Jinping contains the only high-level reference to counter-intervention. As part of the broader theme of building a "strong army," Xi called on the PLA to increase the focus and effectiveness of strategic guidance (*zhanlue zhidao*, 战略指导) by strengthening research on strategic guidance for all strategic directions, identifying potential adversaries, and "being rooted in the most difficult and complicated circumstances to make strategy planning and preparations for dealing with a powerful enemy's military intervention."<sup>30</sup> Note, however, that the context of Xi's remark was strengthening the PLA's overall combat effectiveness, not specific emphasis on this particular mission.

The only detailed reference that we have found to something approximating counter-intervention comes from a 2012 master's degree textbook on joint campaigns command published by AMS. In addition to describing the characteristics of joint campaign command in the six main types of campaigns, the book also examined four types of "campaign actions" (*zhanyi xingdong*, 战役行动). Campaign actions are subordinate to campaign scenarios, since they occur in the context of a campaign. One of the four campaign actions is "responding to a powerful enemy's military intervention actions" (*yingdui qiangdi junshì ganyū xingdong*, 应对强敌军事干预行动).<sup>31</sup> Although much of the discussion characterized the range of possible "intervention" by a powerful adversary, there is some specific consideration given to countering it as well. According to the textbook, the main tasks are blocking (*zuzhi*, 阻滞) or counter-attacking (*fanji*, 反击) a powerful enemy's military intervention, containing (*ezhi*, 遏制) escalation of enemy's intervention, reducing the effect of the enemy's intervention, ensuring the overall situation of China's strategic stability, and implementing the joint campaign. Actions to achieve these tasks include deterrence, information attack and defense, chasing and confining (*qubi*

*xianzhi*, 驱逼限制), attacking the enemy's individual operational platforms and small formations on the water and in the air, attacking large formations and overseas bases, defending against precision strike, etc.

Although this textbook certainly aligns with the sort of discussion one would expect under a counter-intervention strategy, even here it plays a distinctly minor role: it is one campaign action out of four, and those four in turn serve a subset of scenarios that are deemed likely possible future conflicts. Furthermore, dealing with, responding to, or preparing for intervention are all much more passive approaches than proactively engaging in denial of the western Pacific to U.S. forces. It suggests an acceptance that military intervention by a third country in a conflict involving China has already occurred, and a need to manage it thereafter. This is in contrast with U.S. discussions of A2/AD, which emphasize actions that prevent an adversary from getting involved in the first place.

**Any discussion suggests that military intervention has occurred, not preventing it proactively.**

### **Mirror-Imaging, Blind Spots, and Security Dilemmas**

Overemphasizing the role of counter-intervention in China's approach to military affairs is dangerous for three reasons. First, Chinese military writings usually use "counter-intervention" only to describe the United States A2/AD concept in Chinese terms. In this way, the use of "counter-intervention" sustains a form of mirror-imaging by casting China's modernization in terms familiar to U.S. defense planners. In the 2013 Pentagon report on China's military power, for example, China is described as having "sustained investment in...capabilities that appear designed to enable anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) missions (what PLA strategists refer to as 'counter-intervention operations')." <sup>32</sup> Since the United States had previously faced an adversary (the Soviet Union) who developed an advanced A2/AD capability, it is easy—but inaccurate—for U.S. strategists to use that same frame of reference or mistaken analogy.

Yet, in what limited writings do appear on the subject, such as the textbook mentioned earlier, China's military strategists appear to accept that intervention would have already occurred, implying that denying access in the first place is not a key focus. Rather, there is an acknowledgement that the United States would be military involved in one of China's conflicts, and an expression of a need to manage or deal with such involvement. This is a fundamentally different strategic perspective than the way it is often cast in U.S. analysis.

To understand China's military modernization, analysts should focus more on *how China* identifies and approaches what it views as its challenges, and less on examining China through the prism of familiar concepts. Even though China would strive to limit the role of the United States in a conflict over Taiwan, China's strategy, at least for now, does not seek to prevent U.S. intervention much more broadly in the Western Pacific.

Second, an excessive focus on "counter-intervention" can also impede U.S. consideration of other important aspects of China's ongoing military modernization. Beyond significant attention on humanitarian and disaster relief efforts, signs point to a growing Chinese focus on blue water-capable naval forces for operations in the "far seas" (*yuanhai*, 远海). The production of the 224-ton *Houbei* class coastal patrol boat concluded in 2009, earlier than many observers expected, and attention has shifted to larger (1500 ton) Type-056 corvettes, which began construction in 2010.<sup>33</sup> With their longer range and greater ability to sail in worse sea states, these are more useful (in relative terms) for sea control in deeper waters than sea denial in shallower, littoral waters. Given the limitations of the Chinese fleet, however, such sea control would be relevant against middle powers (Japan, India, Taiwan, or smaller nations surrounding the South China Sea) but acutely vulnerable to the United States.<sup>34</sup>

Even more capable in that regard are the Type-052 series guided-missile destroyers (DDGs). The newest of these are the largest ships China has produced to date, displacing 7500 tons and designed for fleet air defense. The replacement of older nuclear-powered attack submarines with a newer variant (Type-93 *Shang* class), and expansion of that fleet from three to six boats, also suggests Chinese naval interests far afield. Likewise, the *Liaoning* and any subsequent aircraft carriers signal ambitions other than counter-intervention.

**An undue focus on counter-intervention neglects an important shift in China's naval force structure.**

All of these platforms are optimized for use further away from China's shores—for power projection. They are more survivable, have longer ranges, and have an ability to defend themselves from attack against regional navies and air forces. All of these factors would be superfluous for a force focused on deploying near Chinese shores, where it would benefit from defensive combat air patrols from the PLA-Air Force and surface-to-air missile envelopes.

An undue focus on counter-intervention neglects this important shift in the force structure of China's navy. Developing an understanding of how China sees these newer forces supporting its traditional capabilities in the near seas will prove critical to anticipating Chinese strategy in areas like the South China

Sea. More distinctly, however, they also serve Beijing's growing interests in "far seas defense" (*yuanhai fangwei*, 远海防卫) such as in the Indian Ocean and beyond.<sup>35</sup> Even if Chinese capabilities further from shore do not match those of the United States, other regional actors such as Japan, India, or Vietnam will view them differently. Finding ways to support such states will require an understanding of how China might threaten them. Various forms of power projection or naval presence missions are plausible, and important to anticipate and prepare for.

Third, casting counter-intervention as China's strategy reduces the objective of China's military modernization to one primary mission, thereby overlooking that much broader range of goals that actually motivate China's defense policy. In this way, emphasizing counter-intervention tends to reduce China's broad-based military modernization as pursuing a narrower goal of prevailing against the United States in specific scenarios. To be sure, core elements of PLA modernization—especially in the cyber, air, and naval domains—target the United States in East Asia. But other parts of the modernization effort have much more general goals, while even those that could be used against the United States would also feature in other conflicts with India or Japan. Even when examining only traditional combat operations and not newer "non-combat" functions, the PLA seeks to build a force capable of conducting a range of operations in different theaters and domains with varied potential opponents.

Viewing China's military strategy as principally designed to counter the United States is particularly worrisome because it can intensify the effects of the security dilemma between the two countries. According to this concept, the dilemma exists because one state's efforts to increase its own security usually decrease the security of other states.<sup>36</sup> Given the uncertainty created by anarchy in the international system, even if one state enhances its military power for what it sees as defensive reasons, other states are likely to see the same actions as offensive and threatening, resulting in security competition characterized by mistrust, suspicion, and spirals of tension. Such spirals are especially likely when offensive and defensive capabilities are not easily distinguished—a reasonable characterization of the state of naval warfare technologies today.<sup>37</sup>

From a U.S. perspective, China's modernization over the past decade poses an increasing threat to its previously unchallenged position of military dominance in maritime East Asia. Casting China's strategy as an attempt to deny U.S. access to areas where it has enjoyed access, often unfettered, for decades presents China as posing a clear military challenge—one that needs addressing. Elevating counter-intervention as a Chinese strategy, as many analysts seem to do, likewise increases the perceived threat that China's military rise poses to the United States. The recent development of the Air-Sea Battle concept reflects such a concern, as it is designed "to address the anti-access/area denial (A2/AD)

military problem set.”<sup>38</sup> Although many of details related to the concept are vague, it envisions “networked, integrated attacks in-depth” against Chinese systems that could threaten U.S. forces, including those based on mainland China.

From China’s perspective, the development of naval power is part of a long-standing effort to overcome decades of weakness. Although the PLA with its large infantry was able to reach a stalemate with the United States in the 1950–1953 Korea War, it was unable to prevent U.S. ships from sailing to within three nautical miles of its shores during the 1954 and 1958 Taiwan Straits crises. Although China views its efforts to increase naval power in the region as largely defensive, the United States views such efforts as offensive because they challenge the preeminent position that it has enjoyed for decades. More concretely, China views the completion of Taiwan’s unification with the mainland as a defensive goal that U.S. intervention could threaten. But the capabilities China views as necessary for “dealing with” such an intervention, the United States views as threatening—which results in the United States developing doctrines and systems to focus on overcoming anti-access challenges.

**M**ischaracterizing Chinese strategy exacerbates security dilemmas.

Thus, mischaracterizing Chinese strategy has deeply negative effects. It can lead to a deepening of tensions between the two largest powers on the globe by exacerbating security dilemmas and characterizing the Chinese strategy as aimed at the United States more than it actually is. It can also divert attentions from other effects of China’s military modernization, specifically the challenge posed to regional actors and out of area operations.

---

## Conclusion

In Chinese military writings, counter-intervention is not a military strategy, much less a broader grand strategic goal to oppose the role of the United States in regional affairs. To be sure, China is developing new capabilities that could be used against the United States if it intervened in a regional conflict involving China. Nevertheless, when Chinese sources do refer to related concepts such as “dealing with” or “resisting” intervention, they are describing it as one of the many components of campaigns and contingencies that have more narrow and specific goals, especially a conflict over Taiwan.

This analysis suggests three conclusions. First, it is important to engage deeply with the military writings and concepts of potential security rivals on their own terms rather than projecting U.S. strategic views on to them.<sup>39</sup> Assessing the balance of power is key to successful diplomacy in the security

realm, whether for coercive aims or more pacific ones. Doing this well requires understanding how the other side views military affairs and plans to use its forces. History has shown—both in general and in previous U.S.–China cases specifically—that countries tend to evaluate their opponents through a “military lens” that is heavily shaped by their own traditions and doctrines.<sup>40</sup> It is critical for the United States to avoid this making this mistake (again).

Second, a broader appreciation of the direction of Chinese maritime and grand strategy would likely emerge from such unfiltered analysis, which would suggest both challenges but also opportunities for the United States. On one hand, the broad-based nature of China’s military modernization has important implications for its potential to contribute to policing global commons (such as anti-piracy and supporting the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons at sea). On the other hand, there are possibilities for projecting power against smaller U.S. friends. The United States is well placed to address these challenges individually, but deeper understanding of how China expects to project power would facilitate building the appropriate capacity in Washington’s allies and partners.

Finally, the tendency of ‘memes’ to reverberate in a charged domestic political echo chamber in the United States is large and counterproductive. One recent example concerns the purported rise in anti-foreign propaganda in China, which Harvard University professor Iain Johnston has recently debunked.<sup>41</sup> There is appropriate attention paid to the rise of China and the attendant military challenges that poses. However, to avoid unnecessary conflicts between the two great powers, it is vital to ensure that the analytic community grounds its conclusions in empirical evidence. China publishes a massive amount of materials on security issues. Accurately mining these sources will be more enlightening than recycling invalid tropes like “counter-intervention.”

**Counter-intervention is not a military strategy, much less a broader grand strategic goal**

## Notes

1. Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* (Washington: Department of Defense, 2012), p. 21. Also see the 2011 and 2013 editions of these reports. The 2014 edition removes the specific attribution of counter-intervention.
2. Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., “Rep. Forbes: Make China Bleed \$\$\$; Budget Deal Stops ‘Hemorrhaging’,” *Breaking Defense*, December 12, 2013, <http://breakingdefense.com/2013/12/rep-forbes-make-china-bleed-budget-deal-stops-hemorrhaging/>. Also,

- Christopher Stone, "Re-thinking the National Security Space Strategy: Chinese vs. American perceptions of space deterrence," *The Space Review*, November 4, 2013.
3. Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment, "U.S. Asia-Pacific Strategic Considerations Related to P.L.A. Naval Forces Modernization," testimony by Jim Thomas before the House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Seapower and Projection Forces, December 11, 2013, <http://www.csbaonline.org/publications/2013/12/u-s-asia-pacific-strategic-considerations-related-to-p-l-a-naval-forces-modernization/>.
  4. For example, Larry M. Wortzel, "Eight Questions: Larry M. Wortzel, 'Chinese Military Power Goes Global,'" *Wall Street Journal*, China Real Time, September 20, 2013; Philip Saunders, "Forward," in Dennis M. Gormley, Andrew S. Erickson, and Jingdong Yuan, *A Low-Visibility Force Multiplier: Assessing China's Cruise Missile Ambitions*, (Washington DC: National Defense University, 2014); Andrew S. Erickson, "China's Modernization of its Air and Naval Capabilities," in Ashely J. Tellis and Travis Tanner, eds., *Strategic Asia 2012–13: China's Military Challenge* (Seattle: NBR, 2013), pp. 61–126; Bryan McGrath, Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Seapower and Projection Forces, July 16, 2014; Toshi Yoshihara, "Anti-access Lessons From the Past," *Proceedings* 139, no. 12 (December 2013), p. 330; Dean Cheng, "Countering China's A2/AD Challenge," *The National Interest*, September 20, 2013; Evan Braden Montgomery, "'Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China's Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection,'" *International Security* 38, no. 4 (Spring 2014), pp. 115–149; Cortez Cooper, "Joint Anti-Access Operations China's 'System-of-Systems' Approach," Testimony presented before the U.S. China Economic and Security Review Commission, January 27, 2011, available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT356.html>. Indeed, one of us has done the same in a narrow Taiwan context: Christopher P. Twomey, "The Security Dynamic," in Nina Hachigian, ed., *Debating China: The U.S.–China Relationship in Ten Conversations*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 156.
  5. Jacqueline Newmeyer-Deal, "The Revolution in Military Affairs with Chinese Characteristics," in Dima Adamsky and Kjell Inge Bjerga, eds., *Contemporary Military Innovation: Between Anticipation and Adaption*, (New York: Routledge, 2012) p. 66; Dan Blumenthal, "The U.S. Response to China's Military Modernization," in Ashley J. Tellis and Travis Tanner, eds., *Strategic Asia 2012–13: China's Military Challenge*, (Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2012): p. 317; and Andrew S. Erickson, "Rising Tide, Dispersing Waves: Opportunities and Challenges for Chinese Seapower Development," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 3 (April 16, 2014): 373.
  6. Andrew Erickson and Gabe Collins, "China Deploys World's First Long-Range, Land-Based 'Carrier Killer': DF-21D Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile (ASBM)," *China SignPost*, no. 14 (December 26, 2010), pp. 1–27. More precisely, one might conceive of the DF-21D as a "carrier mission-killer," as it is more likely to damage a carrier so much so that it cannot conduct flight operations, rather than actually sinking it. The authors thank Dennis Blasko for emphasizing this point.
  7. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Operational Access Concept*, (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, January 17, 2012), [www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/JOAC\\_Jan%202012\\_Signed.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/JOAC_Jan%202012_Signed.pdf).
  8. M. Taylor Fravel, "The Evolution of China's Military Strategy: Comparing the 1987 and 1999 Editions of *Zhanlue Xue*," in David M. Finkelstein and James Mulvenon, eds., *The Revolution in Doctrinal Affairs: Emerging Trends in the Operational Art of the Chinese People's Liberation Army*, (Alexandria, Va.: Center for Naval Analyses, 2005), pp. 79–100;

- David M. Finkelstein, “China’s National Military Strategy: An Overview of the ‘Military Strategic Guidelines,’” in Andrew Scobell and Roy Kamphausen, eds., *Right Sizing the People’s Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China’s Military*, (Carlisle: Army War College, 2007), pp. 69–140.
9. 寿晓松 [Shou Xiaosong], ed., *战略学 [The Science of Military Strategy]* (北京: 军事科学出版社 [Beijing: Military Science Press], 2013), p. 99.
  10. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
  11. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
  12. On the latter, see, Michael Glosny, “Getting Beyond Taiwan? Chinese Foreign Policy and PLA Modernization,” *Strategic Forum*, no. 261 (January 2011).
  13. 李有升 [Li Yousheng], ed., *联合战役学教程 [The Science of Joint Campaigns Textbook]* (北京: 军事科学出版社 [Beijing: Military Science Press], 2012), pp. 201–203, 242–243.
  14. Although the list of campaigns has varied overtime, these six appear in almost every PLA book on campaigns and operations. See, for example, 党崇民 and 张羽 [Dang Chongming and Zhang Yu], eds., *联合作战学 [The Science of Joint Operations]* (北京: 解放军出版社 [Beijing: PLA Press], 2009).
  15. For earlier discussions, see Christopher P. Twomey “What’s in a Name? Building Anti-Access/Area Denial Capabilities without Anti-Access/Area Denial Doctrine” in David Lai, Roy Kamphausen, Travis Tanner, eds., *Assessing the PLA under Hu Jintao*, (Carlisle, Penn.: Strategic Studies Institute Book, 2014), pp. 129–71.
  16. “Active Strategic Counterattacks on Exterior Lines” is another term that would seem to resonate with Maoist strategic thought, but it only appears in a very small number of authoritative documents. Introducing that term to a Western audience is: Anton L. Wishik II, “An Anti-Access Approximation: The PLA’s Active Strategic Counterattacks on Exterior Lines,” *China Security*, no. 19 (2011), p. 37. Again, see Twomey, “What’s in a Name?” for further discussion of the rarity of this term and a few others.
  17. *中国人民解放军军语 [Military Terms of the PLA]*, (北京: 军事科学出版社 [Beijing: Military Science Press], 2011).
  18. Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*.
  19. 于际训 [Yu Jixun], ed., *第二炮兵战役学 [The Science of Second Artillery Campaigns]*, (北京: 解放军出版社 [Beijing: PLA Press], 2004) and 赵锡君 [Lt. Gen. Zhao Xijun], ed., *慑战: 导弹威慑纵横谈 [Deterrence and Warfare: A Comprehensive Discussion on Missile Deterrence]* (北京: 国防大学出版社 [Beijing: National Defense University Press], 2003). The latter is authored by a former deputy commander of the SAF.
  20. Note that the SAF has responsibility for both China’s conventional- and nuclear-armed missiles. On the former point, see, e.g., Dennis M. Gormley, Andrew S. Erickson, and Jingdong Yuan, “A Potent Vector: Assessing Chinese Cruise Missile Developments,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 75 (September 30, 2014): 98–105.
  21. Books surveyed include: 王军 and 杨柳青 [Wang Jun and Yang Liuqing], eds., *信息化作战规律 [Rules of Informationalized Combat]*, (北京: 国防大学出版社 [Beijing: National Defense University Press], 2006; 姜道洪 and 刘会民 [Jiang Daohe and Liu Huimin], eds., *作战协同概论 [An Introduction to Operations Coordination]*, (北京: 国防大学出版社 [Beijing: National Defense University Press], 2004); 刘显尧 等著 [Liu Xianyao, et al], *信息战争 [Information War]*, (北京: 解放军出版社 [Beijing: PLA Press], 1998); 王士强 and 高新生 等著 [Wang Shiqiang and Gao Xincheng, et al], *中海海防发展比较研究 [Comparative Study of Chinese and Foreign Maritime Defense]*,

- (北京: 军事科学出版社 [Beijing: Military Science Press], 2011); 纪学仁 and 朱建新 [Ji Xueren and Zhu Jianxin], eds., 核化生防御战略问题研究 [Research Questions in Nuclear, Chemical and Biological Defense Strategy] (北京: 国防大学出版社 [Beijing: National Defense University Press], 2006); 董子峰 [Dong Zifeng], 战斗力生成模式转变 [The Changing Means of Producing War Fighting Strength] (北京: 军事科学出版社 [Beijing: Academy of Military Science Press], 2010); 刘兆忠 [Liu Zhaozheng], ed., 联合作战综合保障研究 [Research on Comprehensive Support for Joint Operations] (北京: 解放军出版社 [Beijing: PLA Press], 2011); 刘慧 and 赵晓吉 [Liu Hui and Zhao Xiaochun], eds., 中国国家安全研究报告 [Annual Report on China's National Security Studies] (北京: 社会科学文献出版社 [Beijing: Social Science Academic Press], 2014); 王厚卿 and 张兴业 [Wang Houqing and Zhang Xingye], eds., 战役学 [The Science of Campaigns] (北京: 国防大学出版社 [Beijing: National Defense University Press], 2000); 张玉良 [Zhang Yuliang], ed., 战役学 [The Science of Campaigns] (北京: 国防大学出版社 [Beijing: National Defense University Press], 2006); 范震江 and 马保安 [Fan Zhenjiang and Ma Baoan], eds., 军事战略论 [On Military Strategy] (北京: 国防大学出版社 [Beijing: National Defense University Press], 2007); and Dang Chongming and Zhang Yu, eds., *The Science of Joint Operations*.
22. “罗援少将: 从更深层次战略考虑钓鱼岛问题 [Major General Luo Yuan: Considering the Diaoyu Islands from a Deeper Strategic Perspective]” 参考消息网 [Reference News], May 2, 2014, [http://www.81.cn/jwzg/2014-05/02/content\\_5887943.htm](http://www.81.cn/jwzg/2014-05/02/content_5887943.htm).
  23. Larry M. Wortzel, “Eight Questions.”
  24. One of the fewer than a half-dozen mentions is a recycling of a U.S. analyst's use of the term. Others are much more political than military-strategic in nature. E.g., see Lang Yihuan, Wang Limao, and Gu Mengshen, “The New Situation in South China Sea Energy Geopolitics and Strategic Thinking in Response to It,” *Zhongguo Nengyuan [China's Energy]*, March 25, 2013, pp 4–10 (OSC: CHR2013080769305366).
  25. 彭光谦 [MGen (ret.) Peng Guangqian] “国防安全和平发展的强力保障 [Strongly Safeguard National Peaceful Development Strategy],” 世纪桥 [Century Bridge] 1 (2008).
  26. On the first four of these, see Twomey, “What's in a Name?”
  27. See discussion, for instance, in Dennis J. Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today: Tradition and Transformation for the 21st Century*, Second ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 115–147; Dennis J. Blasko, “The Evolution of Core Concepts: People's War, Active Defense, Offshore Defense,” in Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Travis Tanner, eds., *Assessing the People's Liberation Army in the Hu Jintao Era*, (Carlisle Barracks, Penn.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2014), pp. 81–128.
  28. 盖世金 and 张培忠 [Gai Shijin and Zhang Peizhong], 多样化军事任务论 [On Multiple Military Missions] (北京: 长征出版社 [Beijing: Long March Press], 2009), p. 65.
  29. Shou Xiaosong, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy*, p. 99.
  30. “建设一支听党指挥能打胜仗作风优良的人民军队” [Establishing Party Command Capable of Creating a Style of a Victorious Army] 人民网 [People's Daily Online], July 14, 2014, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n/2014/0714/c1003-25279852.html>.
  31. 张培高 [Zhang Peigao], ed., 联合战役指挥学教程 [The Science of Joint Campaign Command Textbook] (北京: 军事科学出版社 [Beijing: Military Science Press], 2012), pp. 212–217. The other three were information operations, special operations, and airborne operations. Lists of campaign actions are more varied than lists of the main types of campaigns. In one recent book on joint operations from the PLA's NDU, four

- main types of joint operational actions were identified: information operations, firepower operations, mobile operations, and special operations. See Dang Chongming and Zhang Yu, eds., *The Science of Joint Operations*.
32. Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (Washington: Department of Defense, 2013), p. I.
  33. "Houbei (Type 022) class," *Jane's Fighting Ships*, updated December 9, 2013.
  34. The PLAN remains acutely vulnerable to attack by submarines and aircraft (although some modest air defense improvements exist on a spare handful of the newest Chinese destroyers).
  35. Nan Li, "The Evolution of China's Naval Strategy and Capabilities: From 'Near Coast' and 'Near Seas' to 'Far Seas'" in Philip Saunders, Christopher Yung, Michael Swain and Andrew Yang, eds., *The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 2011), pp. 109–140.
  36. Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978), pp. 167–214.
  37. Illustrating the particular challenges of the precision missile age in maritime affairs, see Thomas T. G. Mahnken, "Weapons: The Growth & Spread of the Precision-Strike Regime," *Daedalus* 140, no. 3 (July 2011) and Wayne P. Hughes, *Fleet Tactics and Coastal Combat*, 2nd edition, (Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 2010). Highlighting the difficulty in straightforward application to offense-defense balance issues is Christian Le Mière, "The Spectre of An Asian Arms Race," *Survival* 56, no. 1 (February 2014), pp. 139–156.
  38. *AIR-SEA BATTLE: Service Collaboration to Address Anti-Access & Area Denial Challenges* (Department of Defense: Washington, DC, May 2013), <http://www.defense.gov/pubs/ASB-ConceptImplementation-Summary-May-2013.pdf>.
  39. Christopher P. Twomey, *The Military Lens: Doctrinal Differences and Deterrence Failure in Sino-American Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).
  40. See *ibid.*, and Wu Xinbo, *Managing Crisis and Sustaining Peace between China and the United States*, *Peaceworks* no. 61 (Washington DC: US Institute of Peace, April 2008), [http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/PW61\\_FinalApr16.pdf](http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/PW61_FinalApr16.pdf).
  41. Alastair Iain Johnston, "Anti-foreigner Propaganda is Not Spiking in China," *The Washington Post*, December 2, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/12/02/anti-foreigner-propaganda-is-not-spiking-in-china/>.