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## A War Between the U.S. and China Would Be World War III (And Might Be Hard to Shut Off)

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2/2/2017



What series of events could lead to war in East Asia, and how would that war play out?

*The window for war between the United States and China will, in all likelihood, last for a long time. Preventing war will require tremendous skill and acumen from diplomats and policymakers. Similarly, the demands of positioning either side for victory will continue to tax diplomatic, military, and technological resources for the foreseeable future. At the moment,*

*however, we shouldn't forget that China and the United States constitute the heart of one of the most productive economic regions the world has ever seen.*

How does the unthinkable happen? As historians continue to contemplate the various historic anniversaries around World War I through next year, the question of unexpected wars looms large. What series of events could lead to war in East Asia, and how would that war play out?

The United States and China are inextricably locked in the Pacific Rim's system of international trade. Some argue that this makes war impossible, but then while some believed World War I inevitable, but others similarly thought it impossible.

In this article I concentrate less on the operational and tactical details of a US-China war, and more on the strategic objectives of the major combatants before, during, and after the conflict. A war between the United States and China would transform some aspects of the geopolitics of East Asia, but would also leave many crucial factors unchanged. Tragically, a conflict between China and the US might be remembered only as "The First Sino-American War."

### **How the War Would Start:**

Fifteen years ago, the only answers to "How would a war between the People's Republic of China and the United States start?" involved disputes over Taiwan or North Korea. A Taiwanese declaration of independence, a North Korean attack on South Korea, or some similar triggering event would force the PRC and the US reluctantly into war.

This has changed. The expansion of Chinese interests and capabilities means that we can envision several different scenarios in which direct military conflict between China and the United States might begin. These still include a Taiwan scenario and North Korea scenario, but now also involve disputes in the East and South China Seas [3], as well as potential conflict with India along the Tibetan border.

The underlying factors are the growth of Chinese power, Chinese dissatisfaction with the US-led regional security system, and US alliance commitments to a variety of regional states. As long as these factors hold, the possibility for war will endure.

Whatever the trigger, the war does not begin with a US pre-emptive attack against Chinese fleet, air, and land-based installations [4]. Although the US military would prefer to engage and destroy Chinese anti-access assets before they can target US planes, bases, and ships, it is extremely difficult to envisage a scenario in which the United States decides to pay the political costs associated with climbing the ladder of escalation.

Instead, the United States needs to prepare to absorb the first blow. This doesn't necessarily mean that the U.S. Navy (USN) and U.S. Air Force (USAF) have to wait for Chinese missiles to rain down upon them, but the United States will almost certainly require some clear, public signal of Chinese intent to escalate to high-intensity, conventional military combat before it can begin engaging Chinese forces.

If the history of World War I gives any indication, the PLA will not allow the United States to fully mobilize in order to either launch a first strike, or properly prepare to receive a first blow [5]. At the same time, a “bolt from the blue” strike is unlikely. Instead, a brewing crisis will steadily escalate over a few incidents, finally triggering a set of steps on the part of the US military that indicate to Beijing that Washington is genuinely prepared for war. These steps will include surging carrier groups, shifting deployment to Asia from Europe and the Middle East, and moving fighter squadrons towards the Pacific. At this moment, China will need to decide whether to push forward or back down.

On the economic side, Beijing and Washington will both press for sanctions (the US effort will likely involve a multilateral effort), and will freeze each others assets, as well as those of any co-belligerents. This will begin the economic pain for capital and consumers across the Pacific Rim, and the rest of the world. The threat of high intensity combat will also disrupt global shipping patterns, causing potentially severe bottlenecks in industrial production.

### **How do the Allies Respond:**

Whether US allies support American efforts against China depends on how the war begins. If war breaks out over a collapse of the DPRK, the United States can likely count on the support of South Korea and Japan. Any war stemming from disputes in the East China Sea will necessarily involve Japan. If events in the South China Sea lead to war, the US can probably rely on some of the ASEAN states, as well as possibly Japan. Australia may also support the US over a wide range of potential circumstances.

China faces a less complicated situation with respect to allies. Beijing could probably expect benevolent neutrality, including shipments of arms and spares, from Russia, but little more. The primary challenge for Chinese diplomats would be establishing and maintaining the neutrality of potential US allies. This would involve an exceedingly complex dance, including reassurances about Chinese long-term intentions, as well as displays of confidence about the prospects of Chinese victory (which would carry the implicit threat of retribution for support of the United States).

North Korea presents an even more difficult problem. Any intervention on the part of the DPRK runs the risk of triggering Japanese and South Korean counter-intervention, and that math doesn't work out for China. Unless Beijing is certain that Seoul and Tokyo will both throw in for the United States (a doubtful prospect given their hostility to one another), it may spend more time restraining Pyongyang than pushing it into the conflict.

### *War Aims*

The US will pursue the following war aims:

1. Defeat the affirmative expeditionary purpose of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN).
2. Destroy the offensive capability of the PLAN and People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF).

### 3. Potentially destabilize the control of the CCP government over mainland China.

Except in the case of a war that breaks out on the Korean Peninsula, the first task involves either defeating a Chinese attempt to land forces, or preventing the reinforcement and resupply of those troops before forcing their surrender. The second task will require a wide range of attacks against deployed Chinese air and naval units, as well as ships and aircraft held in reserve. We can expect, for example, that the USN and USAF will target Chinese airbases, naval bases, and potentially missile bases in an effort to maximize damage to the PLAN and PLAAF. The third task probably depends on the successful execution of the first two. The defeat of Chinese expeditionary forces, and the destruction of a large percentage of the PLAN and the PLAAF, *may* cause domestic turmoil in the *medium to long term*. US military planners would be well-advised to concentrate the strategic campaign on the first two objectives and hope that success has a political effect, rather than roll the dice on a broader “strategic” campaign against CCP political targets. The latter would waste resources, run the risk of escalation, and have unpredictable effects on the Chinese political system.

The PLA will pursue these ends:

1. Achieve the affirmative expeditionary purpose.
2. Destroy as much of the expeditionary capability of the USAF and USN as possible.
3. Hurt America badly enough that future US governments will not contemplate intervention.
4. Disrupt the US-led alliance system in East Asia.

The first task requires the deployment of PLAN surface forces, possibly in combination with PLAAF airborne forces, to seize an objective. The second involves the use of submarines, aircraft, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles to destroy US and allied installations and warships across East Asia.

The third and fourth tasks rest upon the second. The PLA will attempt to inflict sufficient casualties on US forces that future US decision-makers will hesitate to use force against the PRC. Similarly, the survival of the US-led alliance system requires that the United States successfully defeat Chinese aggression; if it cannot, the alliance system could deteriorate and collapse.

The United States hasn't lost a fighter in action since the 1999 Kosovo War, and hasn't lost a major warship since World War II. The sinking of a warship would likely also result in the greatest loss of life of any single action for the US military in action since the Vietnam War. However, both US and Chinese strategists may overestimate US casualty aversion. The loss of a major warship and its crew might serve to solidify US commitment (at least in the short term) rather than undermine it.

### **The “Hold Your Breath” Moments:**

The biggest moment will come when the PLA makes an overt attack against a US aircraft carrier. This represents the most significant possible escalation against the United States short of a nuclear attack. If China decides to attack a US carrier, the war no longer involves posturing and message sending, but rather a full-scale commitment of capabilities designed to defeat and destroy enemy military forces.

The means for this attack matters. An attack launched from a ship or a submarine makes any PLAN military vessel fair game for the United States, but doesn't necessarily incur US attacks against PLAAF airbases, Second Artillery missile installations, or even naval installations.

The most dangerous form of attack would involve a ballistic missile volley against a carrier. This is true not simply because these missiles are difficult to intercept, but also because such missiles could carry nuclear warheads. The prospect of a nuclear state using a conventional ballistic missile against another nuclear state, especially one with a presumptive nuclear advantage, is laden with complexity.

The next "hold your breath" moment will come when the first US missiles strike Chinese targets. Given the overwhelming nuclear advantage that the United States holds over China, the first wave of US attacks will prove deeply stressful to the PRC's military and civilian leadership. This is particularly the case if the Chinese believe that they can win at the conventional level of escalation; they will worry that the United States will bump to nuclear in order to retain its advantage.

We can expect that China will deploy its submarines in advance of the onset of hostilities. The surface fleet is a different story, however. In any high intensity combat scenario, the U.S. Navy (USN) and U.S. Air Force will see Chinese warships as legitimate targets for destruction, and will attack with air and subsurface assets. Indeed, even hiding in port probably won't prevent attacks on the PLAN's largest ships, including the carrier *Liaoning* and the big new amphibious transport docks.

China will only sortie the PLAN under two circumstances; if it feels it has sufficient force protection to allow a task force to operate relatively unmolested, or if China's position has become desperate. In either situation, US submarines will pose the most immediate threat to the surface forces.

Under most war scenarios, China needs to fight for some affirmative purpose, not simply the destruction of US or Japanese military forces. This means that the PLAN must invade, capture, supply, and defend some geographical point, most likely either Taiwan or an outpost in the East or South China Sea. The PLA will need to establish the conditions under which the PLAN can conduct surface support missions.

### **Who Will Win?:**

The most difficult question to judge is "who will win?" because that question involves assessing a wide variety of unknowns. We don't know how well Chinese anti-ship ballistic missiles will function, or how destructive US cyber-attacks against the PLAN will prove, or how dangerous

the F-22 Raptor will be to conventional Chinese fighters, or how effectively the different elements of the PLAN will cooperate in actual combat. Finally, we don't know when the war will start; both the PLA and the US military will look much different in 2020 than they do in 2014.

However, in general terms the battle will turn on these questions:

### **1. Electronic Warfare:**

How severely will the United States disrupt Chinese communications, electronic, and surveillance capabilities? Attacking US forces will depend on communication between seers and shooters. To the extent that the US can disrupt this communication, it can defang the PLA. Conversely, Chinese cyber-warfare against the United States could raise the domestic stakes for American policymakers.

### **2. Missiles vs. Missile Defenses:**

How well will the USN and USAF be able to defeat Chinese ballistic and cruise missiles? The PLAN, PLAAF, and Second Artillery have a bewildering array of missile options [6] for attacking deployed and deploying US forces in depth. The American capacity to survive the onslaught depends in part on the effectiveness of defenses against cruise and ballistic missiles, as well as the ability to strike and destroy launchers within and around China.

### **3. Joint Operations:**

How well will the disparate elements of the PLA operate together [7] in context of high intensity, disruptive military operations? Unlike the US military, the PLA has little relevant combat experience from the last three decades. On the flipside, how well will US "Air-Sea Battle" work prepare the USN and the USAF for working together?

### **4. Quality vs. Quantity:**

Chinese forces are highly likely to achieve local numerical superiority in some types of assets, primarily aircraft and submarines. The (narrowing) gap between US and Chinese technology and training will determine how well American forces can survive and prevail in such situations.

### **How the War Would End:**

This war doesn't end with a surrender signed on a battleship. Instead, it ends with one participant beaten, embittered, and likely preparing for the next round.

The best case scenario for an American victory would be a result akin to the collapse of the Imperial German government at the end of World War I, or the collapse of Leopoldo Galtieri's military government after the Falklands conflict. Humiliating defeat in war, including the destruction of a significant portion of the PLAN and the PLAAF, as well as severe economic

distress, could undermine the grip of the CCP on Chinese governance. This is an extremely iffy prospect, however, and the United States shouldn't count on victory leading to a new revolution.

What if China wins? China can claim victory by either forcing the United States into an accommodation to US goals, or by removing the alliance framework that motivates and legitimates US action. The United States cannot continue the war if South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines no longer have an interest in fighting. Either of these require doing significant damage to US military forces and, potentially, to the US economy.

The impact of a defeat on US domestic politics would be tough to predict. The United States has "lost" wars in the past, but these defeats have generally involved negotiated settlements of areas not particularly critical to US global interests. It's not clear how the US people would interpret a major military defeat at the hands of a peer competitor, especially a peer competitor that continues to grow in military and economic power. The President and political party that led the US into war would likely suffer dramatically at the polls, at least after the immediate shock of defeat wore off.

The biggest diplomatic and political challenge that both countries face will probably be finding a way for the other side to give up while maintaining its "honor." No one benefits if this war becomes a struggle for regime survival, or for national prestige.

### **How the Peace Begins:**

The prospect for US conflict with China in the Asia-Pacific depends on a basic appreciation of the changing balance of economic and military power. World War I could not change the fact that Germany would remain the largest and most powerful state in Central Europe. Similarly, war is unlikely to change the long-term trajectory of Chinese growth and assertiveness.

A key to peace involves the re-establishment of productive economic relations between China, the United States, and the rest of the Pacific Rim. Regardless of how the war plays out, it will almost certainly disrupt patterns of trade and investment around the world. If either side decides to attack (or, more likely, inter) commercial shipping, the impact could devastate firms and countries that have no direct stake in the war. However, the governments of both the US and China will face strong pressures to facilitate the resumption of full trade relations, at least in consumer goods.

China will not find it difficult to reconstruct war losses. Even if the United States effectively annihilates the PLAN and the PLAAF, we can expect that the Chinese shipbuilding and aviation industries will replace most losses within the decade, probably with substantial assistance from Russia. Indeed, significant Chinese war losses could reinvigorate both the Russian shipbuilding and aviation industries. Moreover, the war will, by necessity, "modernize" the PLA and PLAAF by destroying legacy capability. A new fleet of ships and planes will replace the legacy force.

War losses to trained personnel will hurt, but the experience gained in combat will produce a new, highly trained and effective corps of personnel. This will lead to better, more realistic

training for the next generations of PLA soldiers, sailors, and airmen. Win or lose, the Chinese military will likely be more lethal a decade after the war.

The United States may have a harder time replacing losses, and not only because US warships and aircraft cost more than their Chinese counterparts. The production lines for the F-15 and F-16 are near the end, and the US no longer produces F-22. Moreover, US shipbuilding has declined to the point that replacing significant war losses could take a very long time. This might prove particularly problematic if the war demonstrated severe problems with the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. Given US intention to arm the USAF, USN, and USMC with F-35 variants over the next decade, proof of inadequacy would wreck force planning for the foreseeable future.

The United States will have to face the “was it worth it?” question. In victory or defeat, the US will suffer substantial military and economic damage. Even if the US wins, it will not “solve” the problem of China; even in the unlikely event that the CCP collapses, a successor regime will still dispute China’s littoral.

Potentially, victory could cement the US-led alliance system, making the containment of China considerably less expensive. Assuming that the war began with an assertive Chinese move in the East or South China Sea, the United States could plausibly paint China as the aggressor, and establish itself as the focal point for balancing behavior in the region. Chinese aggression might also spur regional allies (especially Japan) to increase their defense expenditures.

A war could invigorate US government and society around the long-term project of containing China. The US could respond by redoubling its efforts to outpace the Chinese military, although this would provoke an arms race that could prove devastating to both sides. However, given the lack of ideological or territorial threats to the United States, this might be a tough sell.

Finally, the United States could respond by effectively removing itself from the East Asian political scene, at least in a military sense. This option would be hard for many in the US to swallow, given that generations of American foreign policy-makers have harbored hegemonic ambitions.

### **Conclusion:**

The window for war between the United States and China will, in all likelihood, last for a long time. Preventing war will require tremendous skill and acumen from diplomats and policymakers. Similarly, the demands of positioning either side for victory will continue to tax diplomatic, military, and technological resources for the foreseeable future. At the moment, however, we shouldn’t forget that China and the United States constitute the heart of one of the most productive economic regions the world has ever seen. That’s something to protect, and to build on.