War between the United States and China

Several China analysts at RAND have recently published a study that tries to think through some of the indications for war between United States and its allies in East Asia against China.¹ A number of interesting findings and policy recommendations emerge from the study.

First, the authors assess that both sides would suffer significant military losses in a major conflict between the two nations. In the near-term, they project that Chinese losses would be significantly heavier than those of the United States, and would represent a major portion of Chinese forces committed to the conflict. Unsurprisingly, the authors find that this gap in losses would shrink over time as Chinese anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategies and capabilities improve.² By 2025, the RAND study assesses that U.S. losses could be significantly higher than in 2016, perhaps reaching unacceptably high levels, with the number of Chinese losses shrinking over time, mostly due to the projected growth in Chinese capabilities to degrade U.S. strike forces. Now, and especially over time, Chinese A2/AD capabilities would make it very difficult for the U.S. to achieve military victory in either short or long war.

Unsurprisingly the RAND study finds that the war between the two states would do significant harm to both economies, though China’s economy would be far more significantly damaged (losing perhaps 25-35% of GDP) than that of the United States (projected to lose 5-10% of GDP after a year-long conflict). War between the two states would undoubtedly shut down most Chinese trade within Asia and the rest the world. China’s loss of seaborne energy supplies (i.e., oil and natural gas imports not transported by pipeline) would be especially damaging for China. This suggests an obvious strategy for the United States in the war against China: explicitly seeking to cut China seaborne energy imports. The study suggests that a long conflict would surface a number of internal political divisions within China. The role of Japan in the conflict may prove to be a decisive factor; if, over time, Japan comes to build even more robust military capabilities and participates in such a conflict in a serious kind of way, that could be decisive factor in eventual U.S. victory.

This study finds, again unsurprisingly, that there is a premium on U.S. forces’ ability to survive in the face of China’s robust A2/AD capability. This certainly suggests a series of changes to U.S. overall force structure if it is to operate in a future high threat environment in East Asia; clearly, more survivable platforms—submarines, for example—are needed, as are a host of counter-A2/AD capabilities, like high-precision, survivable cruise missiles and theater ballistic missiles with conventional warheads, among many others. U.S. ability to sustain its operations in this high threat environment over a significant period time will create a host of difficulties for the U.S. military. Developing a robust network of East Asian partners and allies that can provide basing access in the region as well as contribute military forces in meaningful way in the event of a Sino-American conflict is one clear way to offset these anticipated difficulties.

While the findings of any such study are necessarily speculative in nature, it is worth mentioning some criticisms that have emerged regarding this study’s assumptions. Crispin Rovere has raised a number of criticisms worthy of note. First, the RAND study does not assess the escalation of a high-intensity conventional conflict to a nuclear one to be particularly high. While that low probability assessment may be accurate, the Chinese regime—facing a major defeat—could choose to escalate, especially against concentrations of U.S. forces in the region or even by detonating a strategic warhead in space over the United States to disrupt the U.S. economy and power projection capabilities, or perhaps as a demonstration of resolve. While such a move would likely be undertaken only in extremis, is clearly not out of the question. Second, the study assumes that the U.S. economy will be resilient in the face of a prolonged war with China, and that simply may not be the case. The U.S. economy depends very heavily on maintaining global trade networks, especially those originating in Asia, and in China in particular. Chinese cyber attack capabilities are already significant and likely to grow in capability over time, and Chinese investment in these capabilities suggests that in the event of a more serious conflict with the United States they would unleash even more cyber attacks against U.S. critical infrastructure than they already do during peacetime. Third, the study also projects that the probability of a land war in Asia as low during a conflict between the United States and China, but that assumption does not take into account the possibility of North Korea taking advantage of the larger distraction to invade the South in the midst of a broader East Asian war. This represents a particularly dangerous possibility because the United States would be obliged to commit significant forces to the defense of South Korea in such an event, and it is likely that China would also feel obliged to commit significant numbers of forces to prevent North Korea from being overwhelmed by the combined American-South Korean forces. That scenario would considerably widen the conflict and, as in the Korean War, risk a massive ground war between the United States and China.

It is always easy to criticize the assumptions made by studies of this nature, but this discussion is certainly not meant to suggest that RAND study is without value. Quite the contrary, the study itself represents a very worthwhile effort to think through some of the issues involved in near-term and long-term conflicts with China. As always, more and larger studies are certainly called for to begin assessing some of the possibilities and opportunities surfaced by this study.

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