



Alliance Requirements Roadmap Series

Flashpoints, Escalation, and A2/AD

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Dr. Mira Rapp-Hooper

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Mira Rapp-Hooper is a Senior Fellow with the Asia-Pacific Security Program at the Center for a New American Security.

The views expressed in this report are personal and the author's alone. They are solely responsible for any errors in fact, analysis, or omission.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

To build a foundation of subject matter expertise for our study, "Dynamic Balance: An Alliance Requirements Roadmap for the Asia-Pacific Region," CNAS commissioned this Alliance Requirements Roadmap essay series from experts in third offset strategic thinking, Asian-Pacific maritime security issues, and on partner countries in Asia. These essays were the focus of a December 2015 experts' workshop, where CNAS investigators and leaders in the field discussed in depth the tools the United States, Japan, and its regional partners would need to best shape the future security environment of the Asia-Pacific. These conference papers were crucial to our analysis and have done much to shape the study's findings.

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ABOUT THE ASIA-PACIFIC SECURITY PROGRAM

The Asia-Pacific Security program seeks to inform the exercise of U.S. leadership in Asia by analyzing how the United States can rebalance its priorities; shape a rules-based regional order; modernize traditional alliances; build the capacity of new partners; and strengthen multilateral institutions. From exploring rising maritime tensions in the region to crafting ways to renew key alliances and partnerships to articulating strategies to extend and enhance America's influence, the program leverages the diverse experience and background of its team, deep relationships in the region and in Washington, and CNAS' convening power to shape and elevate the conversation on U.S. policy across a changing Asia.

United States and its regional allies contemplate the emerging challenges posed by China's anti access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy, they must consider three prominent escalation scenarios. The first is a contingency in the East China Sea, in which China takes the Senkaku Islands or the entire Southwest Island Chain. The second is a South China Sea scenario, in which China seizes one or more Spratly Island features held by the Philippines. The third is an invasion of Taiwan. There are, of course, other potential regional catalysts, but for the purposes of this paper, this article is concerned with the three most likely flashpoints.

DEFINING ESCALATION IN AN A2/AD CONTEXT

For the purposes of this paper, escalation is defined as an increase in the intensity or scope of a conflict that crosses thresholds that are considered significant by one or more participants.¹ In assessing the alliance requirements for meeting A2/AD challenges around specific flashpoints, we must ask not only *where* these contingencies are likely to arise, but *how*. That is, what are the mechanisms by which escalation may take place in the East China Sea, South China Sea, and over Taiwan?

Conflict escalation can take at least three forms. When *deliberate escalation* occurs, a combatant purposefully increases the intensity or scope of a conflict to gain advantage, send signals to an adversary, or avoid defeat. *Inadvertent escalation* occurs when one or more combatants deliberately takes an action that is interpreted as escalatory by the adversary even though the actor does not perceive it to be so. This mechanism recognizes that escalation thresholds are inherently subjective and can be fluid. *Accidental escalation* occurs when one or more combatants makes an operational mistake. This may include an unintended clash between vessels or aircraft, or one combatant bombing the wrong target.²

It is important to clarify the most likely escalation mechanisms around each potential flashpoint because each type of escalation requires a different form of management. If the United States and its allies hope to avoid accidental escalation, they will focus on clarifying their rules of engagement and on appropriate force management. If they hope to avoid inadvertent escalation, they will manage risk by clarifying escalation thresholds on all sides of a potential conflict. And if they hope to avert deliberate escalation, they will focus on deterrence by punishment and deterrence by denial, in an effort to change their adversary's risk calculus.

In the context of emerging A2/AD challenges in Asia, we must also be cognizant of the fact that an opponent – namely, China – may aim to achieve escalation dominance by exploiting asymmetric vulnerabilities. This makes it all the more important for the United States and its allies to contemplate the plausible pathways to escalation around relevant flashpoints and seek to shore up attendant vulnerabilities.

¹ This definition and escalation typology is drawn from a RAND study, which is the most comprehensive contemporary study of escalation mechanisms of which this author is aware. Forrest E. Morgan, Karl P. Mueller, Evan S. Medeiros, Kevin L. Pollpeter, and Roger Cliff, *Dangerous Thresholds: Managing Escalation in the 21st Century* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008), xi.

² *Ibid.*, xii–xiv.

EAST CHINA SEA ESCALATION

In the East China Sea, conflict could break out or escalate accidentally, inadvertently, or deliberately. Accidental escalation could occur if Chinese and Japanese coast guard ships, naval vessels, or aircraft collided around the islands. Inadvertent escalation could take place if Chinese activists or other local actors landed on the islands in an effort to take a nationalist stand. This could force Tokyo and Beijing into a standoff as Japan sought to dislodge the intruders, and China struggled to manage the crises while saving face. In all likelihood, careful crisis management by Tokyo could keep either one of these scenarios from seriously escalating into war, however. The most worrisome scenario would be a deliberate escalation scenario, in which the Senkaku Islands were attacked, either as a discrete object, or as part of a broader invasion of the Southwest Islands.

It seems unlikely that China would choose to launch a deliberate invasion of the Senkakus or the broader Southwest Island Chain in the near term; nonetheless, the scenario must be given careful consideration as China's A2/AD capabilities grow. If China restricted its operations to the Senkakus, it would effectively position its forces as sitting ducks in a Japanese counterinvasion. In addition to landing on and holding the islands, Beijing would need to deny the Japanese Coast Guard and Maritime Self Defense Forces the ability to operate nearby and to sustain denial over a long period of time. The United States' Article V commitment to Japan and 2013 declaratory policy on Senkakus defense also mean that Washington would almost certainly join Tokyo to retake the islands. These factors suggest that it would be difficult for China to use the islands even if it did succeed in seizing them in a Senkakus-only campaign.

Beijing could also attempt to invade and hold all of the Southwest Islands in a broader campaign. This would require China to neutralize Japanese forces across the Ryukyus, including at Ishigaki and Yonaguni. This contingency would most certainly trigger the United States' Article V commitment to Japan, so it would also require China to have high confidence that it could keep the United States from entering the fray and launching a counterinvasion alongside Japan. This is difficult to envision for the foreseeable future.

It is also worth pondering the relationship between a Southwest Islands invasion scenario and a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. Assuming that Chinese forces attacked the Southwest Islands from the mainland (that is, they did not already hold Taiwan), the requirements for this campaign bear similarities to an invasion of Taiwan. The campaign would require a massive amphibious invasion, a struggle for air superiority involving both Japan and the United States, and would require China to hold the island chain despite a robust allied response, and until the U.S. and Japan capitulated. Given the massive costs that this would impose on China's military, one wonders if Beijing would not prefer to take Taiwan itself. If China already held Taiwan, however, the operation would be less costly.

ALLIED PREPAREDNESS IN THE EAST CHINA SEA

The 2015 U.S.-Japan Defense guidelines make clear that Japan has the responsibility of first response to an attack on the Southwest Islands.³ As noted, however, the United States' Article V commitment and Senkakus declaratory policy also make it implausible that the United States would decline to aid its ally in either a Senkakus-only or a Southwest Island invasion scenario.

During the last several years, Japan has invested in equipment, platforms, and plans to bolster its ability to defend the Southwest Islands. This includes allocations for and construction of a radar station on Yonaguni Island, 100 miles away from the Senkakus, which is now operational. It also includes weapons platforms that may help to forestall invasions and enable amphibious counterinvasions, including Global Hawks, Ospreys, CH-47JA helicopters, amphibious assault vehicles, and Hyunga-class destroyers.⁴ Also relevant is Japan's transition away from a static defense posture to a "dynamic defense" that envisions an increased operational level and tempo for the Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF) as a whole.⁵

Another significant investment has been Japan's establishment of an amphibious rapid deployment brigade (ARDB) – a Marines-like unit housed within the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF), whose primary mission is the defense of the island chain. The JGSDF currently has approximately 700 troops in service of this mission, and the initial ARDB deployment raises this to 2,000 troops and 90 specialists.⁶ If the ARDB is fully funded and resourced and conducts regular training with the U.S. Marines, this could add meaningfully to Southwest Island defense. Japan's overall defense spending remains low, however. Although it has increased slightly in the last few years, this follows a substantial period of decline.⁷ Japan also faces significant hurdles when it comes to jointness. Amphibious operations are necessarily joint operations and require that all three services cooperate, which is not a strength of the JSDF.⁸ Additionally, this contingency calls for more joint training with U.S. forces on amphibious operations, and more seamless coordination between the two militaries. Some experts have advocated for the establishment of a Southwest Regional Joint Command.⁹ This option should remain on the table, but the most obvious first steps are for Japan to fully resource the JSDF's amphibious investments, and to emphasize jointness in the service of that mission.

SOUTH CHINA SEA ESCALATION

³ The Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation, April 27, 2015, www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/anpo/shishin_20150427e.html. See especially "Operations to Defend Maritime Areas."

⁴ Franz-Stefan Gady, "Japan's Defense Ministry Wants Record Military Budget for 2016," *The Diplomat*, September 1, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/09/japans-defense-ministry-wants-record-military-budget-for-2016>.

⁵ Tetsuo Kotani, "U.S.-Japan Allied Maritime Strategy: Balancing the Rise of Maritime China," *Strategic Japan*, (Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 2014), http://csis.org/files/publication/140422_Kotani_USJapanAlliance.pdf.

⁶ Paul Kallender-Umezū, "Japan's Amphibious Capabilities Struggle with Rivalries, Budget," *Defense News*, October 11, 2015, www.defensenews.com/story/defense/naval/marines/2015/10/07/japans-amphib-capabilities-stuggle-rivalries-budgets/73482062.

⁷ Gavin Blair, "With China Bristling, Is Japan Upping Its Military Game?" *Christian Science Monitor*, September 10, 2015, www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2015/0910/With-China-bristling-is-Japan-upping-its-military-game-Some-say-no.

⁸ Paul Kallender-Umezū.

⁹ Kotani, "U.S.-Japan Allied Maritime Strategy."

Escalation could occur in the South China Sea through any of the three mechanisms. Accidental escalation could take place if Chinese and Philippines vessels or aircraft clashed in the Spratly Islands. Inadvertent escalation could transpire if China attempted to seize one or more Philippines-held features, believing it could do so without U.S. intervention, and Washington opted to intervene. Deliberate escalation would occur if Beijing launched a campaign to seize multiple South China Sea features, aiming to present the United States with a *fait accompli*. As in the East China Sea case, careful crisis management could prevent an accidental clash from escalating into armed conflict. The United States and the Philippines should therefore be primarily concerned with inadvertent and deliberate conflict escalation in the South China Sea.

According to recent scholarship, Chinese military studies describe an approach for “offensive campaigns against coral islands and reefs.”¹⁰ These operations require the PLA to find and destroy an enemy’s main sea and air forces, cut off lines of communications, attack enemy forces on islands, and seal off landing areas. If China bases primarily out of Hainan for these operations and the United States bases out of the Philippines, both militaries would need to project power approximately 500–1,000 miles. China might also employ an aircraft carrier, but would probably rely only on those aircraft that could operate in unrefueled range.¹¹ If it did not have access to bases in the Philippines, the United States would operate primarily from Japan or Guam, at a distance of 800–1,300 miles.¹² The Philippines can be assumed to have scant naval capabilities with which to mount an independent response.

China’s recent island-building spree may have some implications for the alliance response around this flashpoint. Beijing’s new island bases may increase the number of vessels and aircraft that are within range of Philippines-held features to begin with, making it easier for China to seize islands opportunistically. China could also deploy missile systems to the islands, including surface-to-air missiles and medium-range DF-21D missiles. Its bases would be unlikely to be able to accommodate more than a handful of fighters at any given time, however. China’s Spratly Island outposts are unlikely to be deterministic in a high-intensity conflict, but they may still require some diversion of U.S. assets to neutralize if a crisis escalated.

If a South China Sea scenario developed rapidly and without much prior warning, the forces available to the United States would be those deployed to the region under steady state conditions. This includes Japan, Guam, Singapore, Pearl Harbor, and the Philippines. If an island campaign began after a period of heightened tensions, and Washington was able to detect Chinese vessels leaving port, it could also deploy an aircraft carrier from Japan.¹³ Either way, the United States is unlikely to have trouble seizing and maintaining air superiority over the Spratlys, assuming it committed substantial forces to the campaign.¹⁴ Over time, the United States could flow more and more forces into the theater. If, however, the United States sought to restore the status quo ante, it

¹⁰ Roger Cliff, *China’s Military Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 232.

¹¹ Eric Heginbotham et al, *The U.S-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2015), 89.

¹² *Ibid.*, 88.

¹³ Cliff, *China’s Military Power*, 233–234.

¹⁴ Heginbotham et al., *The U.S-China Military Scorecard*, 92.

would have to launch a Spratly counterinvasion, support Philippines troops as they launched a counterinvasion, or blockade China on the islands it had seized.¹⁵

ALLIED PREPAREDNESS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

The South China Sea escalation scenario has a few prominent features when it comes to alliance requirements. First, at present time, the Philippines has almost no capabilities for defense against this type of invasion or the ability to launch an independent counterinvasion. A Chinese campaign therefore must result in U.S. involvement for the allies to restore the status quo in the South China Sea. If China launched a more discrete campaign to seize Philippines-held features and Washington did not intervene, it is highly probable that Beijing would succeed in shifting the territorial status quo in its favor. This risk could be diminished if the United States were to clarify its alliance declaratory policy for South China Sea contingencies, but there are several reasons Washington might hesitate to do this, including the possibility of increased risk-taking by Manila.

Second, the United States can flow significant forces into the theater over time and prevail in this campaign, but the allies would be much better off if they had some warning of the Chinese invasion. This may leave them able to defend against invasion, rather than requiring them to launch an amphibious counterinvasion. The alliance reaps great benefits from high-quality intelligence in the South China Sea.

This scenario also suggests that the U.S.-Philippines alliance must invest heavily in several areas it has already identified. This includes partner-capacity building, so that the Philippines may have some ability to defend against a limited Spratly invasion on its own, reducing the chances of a fait accompli seizure. They should continue to prioritize joint maritime domain awareness and work to improve intelligence sharing within the alliance, as well as with other claimant states. With rotational base access to the Philippines secured, the United States should increase the patrols and surveillance and reconnaissance activities it conducts over the South China Sea. The United States and the Philippines should also consider establishing a formal crisis coordination mechanism. Finally, if the United States grows increasingly concerned about the risk of a South China Sea contingency, it may choose to revisit its declaratory policy for how Philippines-held features are treated within the U.S.-Philippines alliance.

TAIWAN ESCALATION

Escalation is a Taiwan scenario most likely to occur through an inadvertent or deliberate mechanism. The scenario is likely to be triggered if Taiwan makes a move toward political independence. This could be a deliberate declaration or referendum, or a political event that inadvertently crosses a Chinese threshold. Either way, both the United States and Taiwan would likely have warning of seriously heightened political tensions and an invasion of Taiwan would be unlikely to come as a surprise attack.

PLA campaign writings indicate that an invasion of Taiwan would proceed in two initial phases. A campaign would likely begin with Chinese efforts to seize information superiority, air superiority, sea

¹⁵ Cliff, *China's Military Power*, 235.

control, and to neutralize Taiwan's defenses. PLA forces would then embark across the ocean for an amphibious invasion and reinforce with additional forces as the campaign unfolded.¹⁶

For Taiwan and the United States, defending Taiwan means gaining air superiority over China. An air campaign would aim to maintain an air presence around Taiwan to prevent China from surging strike across the country. Over time, it would also seek to destroy Chinese air forces so that Beijing abandoned its campaign before Taiwan capitulated.¹⁷ The critical question in assessing the alliance requirements of this contingency, then, is whether the United States has a sufficient number of aircraft within range of Taiwan.

ALLIED PREPAREDNESS AND TAIWAN

In a Taiwan contingency, China would use bases that are 200–600 miles from Taiwan. The U.S. range could span several hundred miles from some bases in Japan, to 2,500 miles from Guam. China can therefore be assumed to have a higher sortie rate than the United States in this scenario.¹⁸ The United States would be most heavily reliant on Kadena and Futenma air bases in Japan, and Andersen air base in Guam. It would also rely on Misawa, Yokota, and Marine Corps station Iwakuni, and would likely have two aircraft carriers at its disposal.¹⁹ It is worth noting, however, that the United States' closest bases to Taiwan are also within range of China's short-range ballistic missiles. This points to the need for both Taiwan and the United States to be able to undertake rapid runway repair while conflict is in progress.

The United States would have much-improved operational capacity if it were also able to use JSDF bases in Japan. This is facilitated under the revised U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines, and although it would make Japan a belligerent, it seems highly unlikely that China would see fit to attack Japan with a conflict over Taiwan under way. The United States would also look to Australia to allow refueling and operations from its territory.

Several new U.S. capabilities will add to its ability to defend Taiwan, including the USS *Gerald Ford*, which accommodates 75 aircraft, SM-6 missiles, the *Zumwalt*-class destroyer, and the 24 littoral combat ships that will be deployed by 2020.²⁰ Nonetheless, trend lines are not heartening for the United States and Taiwan.

Just several years ago, the allies could be confident in their ability to establish air superiority over China in relatively short order. By 2020, there will be far more uncertainty as to who would prevail. China's rapid improvements in its air force and in ballistic and cruise missiles increasingly allow it to exploit its geographic position, and to hold U.S. bases at risk. As China continues to replace aircraft, the task of prevailing in this scenario will become even more difficult.²¹ The longer a Taiwan conflict

¹⁶ Ibid., 203.

¹⁷ Heginbotham et al., *The U.S-China Military Scorecard*, 72, 73.

¹⁸ Ibid., 80; 89,

¹⁹ Ibid., 79; Cliff, *China's Military Power*, 197–198.

²⁰ Cliff, *China's Military Power*, 190.

²¹ Heginbotham et al., *The U.S-China Military Scorecard*, 85.

draws on, the more forces the United States would be able to bring to bear, but neither China nor the U.S.-Taiwan alliance could count on being able to achieve their operational goals.²²

This scenario suggests a few different alliance requirements. First, the United States will be reliant on Japan, and to a lesser extent, Australia, to support its operations so that it can prevent China from establishing air superiority quickly. Second, as China is increasingly able to hold at risk bases in Japan, the United States will need to contemplate how it can achieve a sufficient operational tempo from greater distances. What will its force posture look like if it must confront this scenario based primarily out of Guam?

Third, as the United States contemplates how it can continue to bring sufficient air power to bear, Taiwan should seek to complement this by focusing on how it can best forestall an amphibious invasion. As the United States flows air forces into the theater over a period of days, it will be critical that Taiwan has the ability to resist attacks on its own defenses, as well as robust sea denial capabilities. Finally, given that there may be a period of years during which China cannot be sure whether or not it would prevail in a Taiwan campaign, Taiwan and the United States should aim to signal as clearly as they possibly can. Taiwan should do all that it can to avoid an inadvertent escalation scenario through high-level communications with the mainland, and the United States should support its partner politically as it acts with clear-eyed caution towards these mounting perils.

CONCLUSIONS

The East China Sea, South China Sea, and Taiwan escalation scenarios are all instructive on alliance requirements for emerging A2/AD challenges. On a broad level, serious escalation in all three scenarios is relatively unlikely to take place by accident; rather, deliberate (East China Sea, South China Sea, Taiwan) or inadvertent (South China Sea, Taiwan) escalation is most likely. Deliberate escalation risks require that the United States and its partners focus on tailored deterrence, while inadvertent risks suggest that the United States and its partners may also need to clarify escalation thresholds – if not in short order, then perhaps when a crisis appears to be mounting.

China has shown a historical preference for waging short, sharp operations that can be concluded quickly.²³ As we have seen in each of these scenarios, however, the United States' ability to achieve alliance goals tends to improve with time, as it is able to flow more forces into a given theater. Beyond the country-specific recommendations previously discussed, this suggests that the United States and its allies must focus on the requirements for prevailing in shorter, sharper amphibious campaigns that prevent Chinese *fait accomplis*.

Finally, these scenarios have underscored the fact that the A2/AD threat from China is not monolithic, but rather, highly variegated, and that it varies with distance. The threat posed by Chinese military modernization to U.S. alliance interests is most profound in the case of Taiwan. However, even despite the Philippines' scant indigenous capabilities, the United States can have confidence in its ability to prevail in the South China Sea, assuming it chooses to do so. As it constructs a roadmap for responding to A2/AD challenges in tandem with partners, the United

²² Cliff, *China's Military Power*, 218–219.

²³ Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard*, 93.

States should seek to leverage and extend its distributed force posture relative to China's mainland tether.