

The Impact of China's Expansionism on the Region and Global Security

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Key Points

- China has tried to expand its influence not only regionally but globally.
- Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has influenced many countries, notoriously, as a “debt trap” making them vulnerable to exploitation by China.
- The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has broadened to include countries that do not share borders with China.
- The U.S. might consider the implementation of an adjusted integrated deterrence strategy against China.
- To reduce the dangers of antagonistic strategic competition, the U.S. and China should work together in a cooperative manner.
- The U.S. should continue to maintain and/or strengthen its military alliances with regional partners.

Introduction

Many argue China has become one of the world's superpowers. However, China appears unwilling to fully assume responsibility for issues facing the world. Simply put, China seems more concerned with furthering its own interests than addressing the problems raging outside its boundaries. China promotes itself as neutral and appears to be weighing the threats and opportunities to its standing on events like the Israel-Hamas war, the Ukraine war, and Houthi strikes in the Red Sea. That said, China has continuously exerted its influence on global economic security over the decades with its rapid economic growth. In particular, it is obvious China is imposing its presence and expanding its influence in numerous forms such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the BRICS. In addition, it is improving its military capabilities funded by continuous economic growth and is exerting global influence by actively engaging in the provision of aid and arms sales. Furthermore, China has had serious impacts on matters related to sovereignty and the territorial integrity of neighboring countries such as the South China Sea countries, Taiwan, and Japan. This is concerning not just because it is an expansion of influence for a revisionist China, but also because their rapid rise is accelerating confusion and conflicts in the global security order.

This paper aims to highlight what China has been focusing on and explore possible future risks to the U.S. and USCENTCOM in China's rapid expansionism. It also recommends actions that may be crucial to handle these disputes and difficulties.

Current Perspective on China

China is in economic competition with the U.S. China's expansion of its political, military, and diplomatic influence along with its economic power that is attracting the world's attention. It is firmly establishing itself as one of the world's most powerful countries. China expands its influence through the BRI and the SCO, signaling clear intent of advancement in security in all realms going forward.^{1 2} Moreover, this influence is reinforced through the "One China Policy," an expansion of influence (through hard and soft power) in South China Sea countries, and weapons support to allies such as Russia and North Korea.

Current conflicts involving the Houthis, Israel-Hamas, and Russia-Ukraine have offered opportunities to improve China's standing in the international community. China is exerting significant influence even in the absence of any practical intervention, thanks to its position in the UN. China is also developing stronger ties with Iran, which covertly supports the Houthis and Hamas, and could eventually play a significant role in the Gaza conflict, as evidence by their brokering of a deal purporting to unite 14 Palestinian parties including longtime rivals Fatah and Hamas in July 2024.³ By harboring precious national resources, China can grow stronger while the U.S. and other Western countries expend theirs while engaged decisively in prolonged conflicts. China thus improves its soft and hard power advantage against the U.S., its partners and allies, and affords improved opportunity to impose its will on Taiwan and South Korea.

In history, the U.S. has modified its own defense-planning model calibrating its capabilities for overmatch of its opponents' capabilities. This comes at a cost, and the current conflicts across the globe might have a negative impact on the U.S.' strategic sustainability. To this end, the U.S. should consider taking decisive steps to ensure ongoing military conflicts are concluded as quickly as possible, be more assertive in Europe and the Middle East in pursuit of this, and where appropriate, increase engagement with China, pressuring them to actively intervene in ongoing conflicts. Furthermore, steps should be taken to establish or strengthen cooperative relationships with partners and allies to contain further expansion of China's influence.

Economic Expansionism (BRI)

The BRI has also sparked concerns about its increase of China's influence abroad. Despite Beijing's insistence that the BRI is not motivated by geopolitical calculations, the initiative's scope has raised questions about its potential impact. According to some analysts, China is using the BRI to expand its export markets, forge new economic relationships, and increase its political clout and soft power in recipient nations. Observers have also noted that in an effort to affect how other nations perceive the BRI, China is improving the initiative's transparency and honing its communications tactics. Nonetheless, certain studies indicate substantial political clout has not always resulted from the BRI's massive infrastructural initiatives. Some countries see the BRI as very favorable, while others see it as neutral, bad, or very negative. As a result, while the BRI is regarded as a key component of Chinese foreign policy

¹ Niyun Xie et al, "Does the BRI contribute to poverty reduction in countries along the BRI? A DID-based empirical test" *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications*, Nov 25, 2023, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-023-02365-8> (accessed on Mar 26, 2024)

² James McBride, Noah Berman, Andrw Chatzky, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative" *Council on Foreign Relations*, Feb 2, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative> (accessed on Mar 26, 2024)

³ Aljazeera, "The Take: Why a China-brokered Deal is Uniting Palestinians" Jul 29, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/podcasts/2024/7/29/the-take-why-a-china-brokered-deal-is-uniting-palestinians> (accessed July 30)

and a way for China to increase its economic security, the degree of its political effect on other nations is still up for debate and more research.⁴

China's BRI projects even extend to the CENTCOM AOR. China, the biggest energy-consuming country, is heavily reliant on crude oil imports from the Middle East, including Iran. The three largest oil suppliers to China are Russia, Saudi Arabia, and (unofficially) Iran.⁵ To facilitate oil imports from the Middle East, China has invested billions of dollars in developing ports in the region, including Iran's Chabahar Port as part of the BRI which provides alternative routes for oil transportation, circumventing the Strait of Hormuz if necessary. The 25-year comprehensive strategic partnership agreement signed by China and Iran in March 2021 involves sales of discounted Iranian oil to China in return for Chinese investment in Iran. This agreement has widened Beijing's economic footprint in the region and paved the way for deeper Chinese influence, while securing oil supplies.⁶

On one hand, the BRI has had various positive effects on some of the countries involved. According to a report by Kevin P. Gallagher et al., the BRI has delivered significant benefits to host countries, providing new and additional resources for the Global South, and contributing to the resource mobilization needs of the world economy.⁷ Additionally, the BRI has facilitated considerable investment, infrastructure, and loans to host countries, leading to improved connectivity, economic integration, growth, and cooperation across the globe. For example, the BRI has helped turn land-locked countries into land-linked hubs, connecting countries through trade and investment partnerships, and providing opportunities for economic expansion and further globalization. These developments have contributed to the positive impact of the BRI on the global economy and the participating countries.⁸

Unfortunately, BRI has brought several negative consequences as well. While perhaps unintentional, several nations are already experiencing financial default and China is claiming its operational authority over infrastructure in some nations such as Sri Lanka as a result of China's involvement in the Hambantota port. The primary beneficiary of these massive construction projects is China itself and the economic stimulus impact for the local population is falling short of expectations due to the use of Chinese construction companies and labor in national-level construction projects. The phrase "debt trap" has emerged as a result of the host country's benefits diminishing and loan interest costs rising. China's influence on nations caught in the debt trap will likely rise sharply as they wrestle with repayment of debt. Given the extremely limited financial support the country will receive from Western nations or international financial organizations, there is an increasing likelihood it will continue to be dependent on China. This sets the conditions for a more complex relationship encompassing economic reliance, weapons transfers, and security advice. Moreover, China's growing influence in the region might potentially negatively affect U.S. freedom of navigation, particularly through strategic chokepoints such as the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, the Strait of Malacca, and other maritime lines of communication to and from the Middle East. Key nations with direct influence of these lines of communication are China-influenced Djibouti, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives and are at risk of being pawns in the strategic rivalry with China.

⁴ Kevin P. Gallagher et al, "The BRI at Ten: Maximizing the Benefits and Minimizing the Risks of China's Belt and Road Initiative" *Global Development Policy Center*, Oct 9, 2023, <https://www.bu.edu/gdp/2023/10/09/the-bri-at-ten-maximizing-the-benefits-and-minimizing-the-risks-of-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative/> (accessed Mar 24, 2024)

⁵ Abdullah Baabood, "Why China is Emerging as a Main Promoter of Stability in the Strait of Hormuz" *Carnegie Middle East Center*, May 24, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/06/why-china-is-emerging-as-a-main-promoter-of-stability-in-the-strait-of-hormuz?lang=en¢er=middle-east> (accessed June 7, 2024)

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Kevin P. Gallagher et al, "The BRI at Ten: Maximizing the Benefits and Minimizing the Risks of China's Belt and Road Initiative" *Global Development Policy Center*, Oct 9, 2023, <https://www.bu.edu/gdp/2023/10/09/the-bri-at-ten-maximizing-the-benefits-and-minimizing-the-risks-of-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative/> (accessed Mar 24, 2024)

⁸ Huaxia, "A glimpse of key infrastructure projects under BRI" *Xinhqanet*, Sep 28, 2023, <https://english.news.cn/20230928/41df3176c0c6451db0b62c06a579013b/c.html> (accessed Apr 26, 2024)

To better inform participating nations, the World Bank had carried out an analysis of the risks and opportunities associated with the BRI.⁹ Such analysis will assist each country to properly evaluate and manage the risks involved regarding future development leveraging the BRI.

Diplomatic Expansionism

- Territorial Claims

- One China Policy

China's goal of annexing Taiwan is transparently stated, and the One China Policy has been announced to the outside world and is actively being propagated. President Xi has stated Taiwan's reunification with China is inevitable. A map released by the Chinese government in August 2023 changed the 9-dash line used to indicate the South China Sea to a 10-dash line, indicating Taiwan as if it were already under Chinese control.¹⁰ This can be seen as a clear expression of China's will to integrate the island state into its territory as a kind of "de facto reunification" and its intention to expand its influence over neighboring countries.¹¹

Other analysts claim that under President Xi, China has expedited the construction of the forces required to seize the island of 23 million people, making this goal the nation's top military priority.¹² ¹³ This implies that, given the right circumstances, China could attack Taiwan at any time. The volatility of the region and specifically a challenge to Taiwan's security is one of the U.S.' main concerns.

China has publicly not ruled out the use of force to achieve this reunification, but President Xi has not set a specific deadline.¹⁴ At the Chinese Communist Party Congress in 2023, President Xi also stated publicly that China would attack Taiwan militarily if it declares independence with foreign support. Many experts believe that China would attack Taiwan by 2025 or 2027. On the other hand, some experts doubt China would attack Taiwan given President Xi has set a goal of doubling the Chinese economy by 2035, saying, "we must continue to pursue economic development as our central task." It could be inferred China would not attack Taiwan unless it declares independence because a military conflict would likely prevent Beijing from reaching its economic goals.¹⁵ The conflict would be very expensive, long, and result in considerable casualties on both sides, especially if the U.S. intervenes.¹⁶

⁹ Michele Ruta, "Three Opportunities and Three Risks of the Belt and Road Initiative" *World Bank*, May 4, 2018, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/trade/three-opportunities-and-three-risks-belt-and-road-initiative> (accessed on Apr 5 2024)

¹⁰ Colin Clark, "New Chinese 10-dash map sparks furor across Indo-Pacific: Vietnam, India, Philippines, Malaysia" *Breaking Defense*, Sep 01, 2023, <https://breakingdefense.com/2023/09/new-chinese-10-dash-map-sparks-furor-across-indo-pacific-vietnam-india-philippines-malaysia/> (accessed Mar 20, 2024)

¹¹ Troy Clayman, "China's New Map: The 10-dash Line" *The Boston Political Review*, Dec 22, 2023, <https://www.bostonpoliticalreview.org/post/china-s-new-map-the-10-dash-line> (accessed Mar 20, 2024)

¹² Kyle Amonson, Dane Egli, "The Ambitious Dragon" *The Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 6. No. 3 Marth-April 2023, https://media.defense.gov/2023/Apr/24/2003205860/-1/-1/1/JIPA_MARCH-APRIL%202023.PDF/JIPA_MARCH-APRIL%202023.PDF (accessed Feb 3, 2024)

¹³ Mark Cozad, "Factors Shaping China's Use of Force Calculations Against Taiwan" *Rand Corporation*, Feb 18, 2021, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CTA1100/CTA1195-1/RAND_CTA1195-1.pdf (accessed Feb 4, 2024)

¹⁴ Yimou Lee, et al, "China Launches Grey-zone Warfare to Subdue Taiwan" *Reuters*, Dec 10, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/hongkong-taiwan-military/> (accessed Apr 4, 2024)

¹⁵ Kristen Welker, et al, "Xi Warned Biden during Summit that Beijing Will Reunify Taiwan" *NBC News*, Dec 20, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/china/xi-warned-biden-summit-beijing-will-reunify-taiwan-china-rcna130087> (accessed Apr 4, 2024)

¹⁶ Mark F. Cancian et al. "The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan" *CSIS*, Jan 9, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/first-battle-next-war-wargaming-chinese-invasion-taiwan> (accessed Apr 6, 2024)

- South China Sea

The South China Sea is important for China. It provides access for Chinese SSBN (nuclear ballistic missile submarine) to the West Pacific Ocean for power projection and nuclear deterrence against the U.S. and acts as a buffer zone against a U.S. military attack against mainland China.¹⁷ The South China Sea also provides China the resources required (fish, natural gas, etc.) to feed China's growth. For these reasons China is continuously increasing its influence in the South China Sea and is claiming sovereignty over the South China Sea area by building military bases in the Spratly Islands and the Paracel Islands. China has illegally occupied these islands under the pretext of a unilaterally declared 9-dash line (now 10-dash line). In July 2016, on the formal request by the Philippines for a ruling, the United Nations ruled under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) that China's territorial claims were groundless due to a lack of historical and legal precedent, but China ignored this and continued to claim territorial rights and take effective control.¹⁸ The ongoing South China Sea dispute has a high probability of being a future source of contention between China and the ASEAN nations. It certainly could bring China and the US into direct confrontation as part of the U.S.' long-standing commitment to preserving freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific region.

• Shanghai Cooperation Organization

China has increased its influence on the region through the SCO. The SCO is demographically and economically significant as its member countries contribute about 30 percent of global GDP and are home to about 40 percent of the world's population.¹⁹ China was one of the founding members of the SCO in 2001, designed to address regional security issues, terrorism, regional/international peace and stability, and promoting a new democratic, fair international political/economic order. Beginning with six countries in 2001, it has since expanded to nine member countries, three observer countries, 14 dialogue partners, and several guest attendees as well. The political leaders and analysts in the SCO member states, especially Russia and China, have repeatedly emphasized that the SCO is not a military alliance, with no common enemy.²⁰ However, in 2009 it expanded its collaborative activities, to include military cooperation, intelligence sharing, and counterterrorism. There have been some combined military exercises regularly conducted among member countries. China and Russia especially have teamed up for large-scale exercises since 2005. Moreover, there were 4,000 personnel who participated in the combined exercises in 2007.²¹ Iran is currently one of nine formal member countries and there are several "dialogue partners," including Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, that might also be future candidates for full membership.²² This suggests the SCO's sphere of influence is growing steadily.

• Military Expansionism (Strengthening Military Cooperation)

China seems to exploit the opportunities to make inroads by providing both weapons and economic support, to those countries which do not receive such support from the U.S. Moreover, there is circumstantial evidence

¹⁷ Riyas Ul Khaliq, "3 reasons China tries to Control South China Sea" *Anadolu Agency*, Feb 25 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/3-reasons-china-tries-to-control-south-china-sea/2157110> (accessed Jul 30)

¹⁸ Leszek Buszynski, "Why is the South China Sea so important to the US?" *The Conversation*, Jan 18, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/why-is-the-south-china-sea-so-important-to-the-us-71477> (accessed Feb 4, 2024)

¹⁹ *Aljazeera*, "Is the SCO Putin's escape from global isolation" Jul 4, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/4/is-the-sco-putins-escape-from-global-isolation> (accessed Mar 23, 2024)

²⁰ T. Tugsbilguun "Does the Shanghai Cooperation Represent an Example of a Military Alliance?" *The Mongolian Journal of International Affairs*, <https://www.mongolijol.info/index.php/MJIA/article/download/32/32> (accessed Mar 23, 2024)

²¹ Bin Yu, "Common exercise, different goals (Opinion)", *The New York Times*, Oct 17, 2007, https://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/17/opinion/17iht-edbin.1.7927841.html?_r=0 (accessed Mar 24, 2024)

²² Carla Freeman, "What Does Further Expansion Mean for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization?" *United States Institute of Peace*, May 30, 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/05/what-does-further-expansion-mean-shanghai-cooperation-organization> (accessed Jun 7, 2024)

that countries which regard the U.S. as a partner of choice also regard China as a partner of necessity. China is an excellent option for countries that do not receive support from the U.S. or do not have the financial ability to purchase American weapons. This may allow China to quickly fill the gap created by the U.S. FMS-related problems, which include lengthy processes, lack of communication and collaboration, and other complicated criteria for recipients.²³ The FMS process is broken into the five phases that may take up to 10+ years for execution.²⁴ Conversely, China is ready to deliver its weapon systems with express shipping and financial support to those countries. This is a significant challenge to the U.S. in the Middle East and beyond.²⁵

China's military expansion and modernization efforts are contributing to a shifting balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. Of concern, these are not just one-time transactions. Once China begins to provide its weapons to others, it often comes with Life Cycle Management; that is, China provides not only the weapons itself but also its parts and maintenance as well. In the end, China might ultimately be one of those nations' primary suppliers, thereby creating long-term dependencies.

- **China's Military Cooperation with Russia and North Korea**

Russia and China are strengthening military ties. The two leaders, President Xi and Putin, visited each country to bolster the strategic partnership and military linkages as they both face soaring tensions with the West. Russia shared highly sensitive military technologies with China that significantly helped its defense capability, including an early warning system for detecting ballistic missile launches which was possessed only by Russia and the U.S. previously.²⁶ Both countries have continued denying they were a NATO-like military bloc ; however, they have deepened their strategic partnership and cooperation through various areas such as artificial intelligence (AI), space technology, and quantum computer science, a sensitive and emerging technology with dual-use potential.²⁷ Some experts said that while their relationship in the domain "falls short of a traditional military alliance," the two countries are cooperating in militarily significant ways that could pose major national security threats for the U.S. and its partners and allies.^{28 29}

China and North Korea have also enjoyed very special relations during the last few decades, with China considered North Korea's closest ally. China and North Korea signed the pact, "Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea" in 1961. This treaty is the only defense treaty China has with other countries. In one of its most important clauses, Article II, the Sino-North Korean Treaty says China is obliged to intervene against unprovoked aggression.^{30 31} However, China has a complex stance on North Korea. For example, even though China has shown its worries

²³ Lynndy Smith, "US foreign military sales process needs better communication" *C4ISRNET*, Mar 27, 2023, <https://www.c4isrnet.com/industry/2023/01/27/us-foreign-military-sales-process-needs-better-communication/> (accessed Jan 24, 2024)

²⁴ The Foreign Military Sales (FMS) Wall Walk, *Defense Security Cooperation University*, Feb 2024, <https://dscu.mil/fms-wall-walk/> (accessed Aug 19, 2024)

²⁵ USCENTCOM, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/3332606/senate-armed-services-committee-hearing-on-posture-of-uscentcom-and-usafricom-i/> (accessed Aug 19, 2024)

²⁶ AP, "Putin calls for closer Russia-China cooperation on military satellites and prospective weapons" Nov 8, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-china-military-cooperation-d4fedabf86d88e2cc0074159294026f9> (accessed Jun 5, 2024)

²⁷ Goods, software, and technology that can be utilized for both civilian and military purposes.

²⁸ Casey E. Babb, "A Match Made in Heaven: China-Russia Tech Cooperation and Canada's National Security" *Canadian Global Affairs Institute*, Mar 2024, https://www.cgai.ca/a_match_made_in_heaven_china_russia_tech_co_operation_and_canadas_national_security (accessed Jun 5, 2024)

²⁹ Andrea Kendal-Taylor, David Shullman, "Navigating the Deepening Russia China Partnership" *Center for a New American Security*, Jan 14, 2021, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/navigating-the-deepening-russia-china-partnership> (accessed Jun 5, 2024)

³⁰ Clara Fong, Eleanor Albert, "The China-North Korea Relationship" *Council on Foreign Relations*, Mar 7, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-north-korea-relationship> (accessed Jun 6, 2024)

³¹ Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance Between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Jul 11, 1961, https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/china_dprk.htm (accessed Jun 6, 2024)

- Article II: The Contracting Parties undertake jointly to adopt all measures to prevent aggression against either of the Contracting Parties by any state. In the event of one of the Contracting Parties being subjected to the armed attack by any state or several states jointly and thus being involved in a state of war, the other Contracting Party shall immediately render military and other assistance by all means at its disposal.

about the North Korean nuclear program and agreed to UN Security Council Resolution 1718, which imposed sanctions on Pyongyang because of the nuclear program, Beijing sought to weaken those sanctions and vetoed new restrictions on Pyongyang in 2022.³² It can be said that China’s ambiguous stance ultimately contributed to the development of North Korea’s military ambition and capabilities, and it is obvious that China’s influence on North Korea will not diminish in the near future.

Historically, even though China, Russia, and North Korea applied slightly different ideologies, as they developed into communist countries, they all strengthened military exchanges and cooperation with each other, building a strong military cooperative system which could rival the U.S. and its partners and allies. Based on Chinese military capabilities, a worst-case scenario is China's support prolongs the war between Russia and Ukraine while North Korea invades South Korea and re-ignites war on the Korean Peninsula. If China takes advantage of this confusion and invades Taiwan, this would likely overmatch the U.S. ability to respond effectively in Taiwan’s defense. China could mobilize five theater commands to create and execute a war scenario in which one theater command supports North Korea, one theater command supports Russia, and two theater commands and a reserve theater command focus on attacking Taiwan.³³ The U.S. and its partners and allies may find themselves in a crucial situation to respond to multiple battlefields simultaneously. Forced to fight in multiple theaters at the same time, the U.S. would find its resources stretched or exhausted.

While such a scenario may be unlikely, few military analysts predicted recent military events, to include Afghanistan’s collapse and the U.S.’ withdrawal, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Ukraine's successful defense and counteroffensive, and the Hamas attack on Israel. We are living in a time of increased instability and uncertainty.

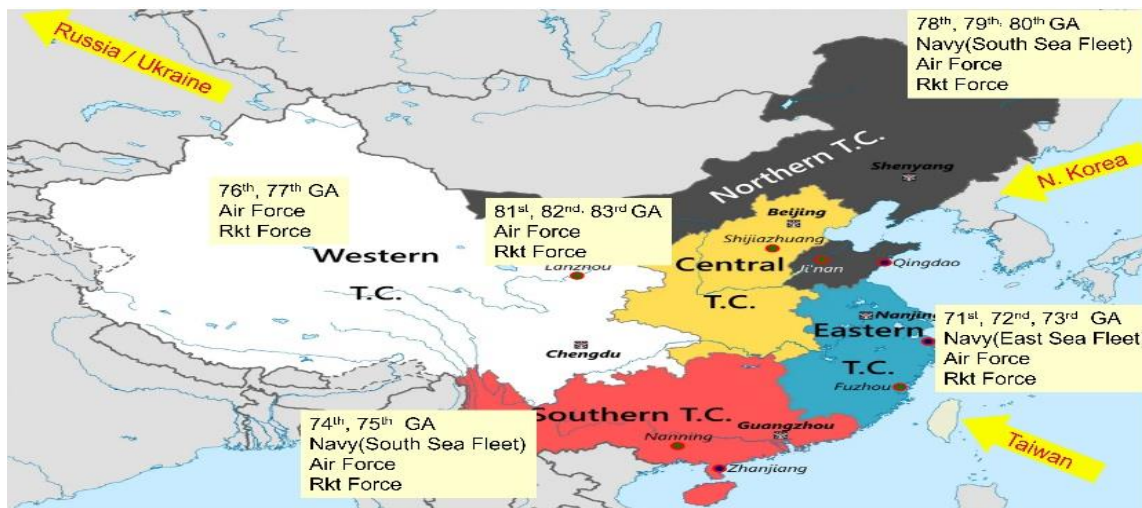


Figure.1 Chinese Theater Command (by CSAG)³⁴

³² Alan Suderman, “China Supported Sanctions on North Korea’s Nuclear Program. It’s also behind Their Failure” AP, Nov 3, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/china-north-korea-sanctions-6e69cd6c0c17fba261f62ea8e5bc25c5> (accessed Jun 6, 2024)

³³ GlobalSecurity.org – Theater Command, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/china/mr.htm> (accessed Mar 28, 2024)

³⁴ Ziyu Zhang, “Explainer: China’s military structure: what are the theatre commands and service branches?” *South China Morning Post*, Aug 15, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3144921/chinas-military-structure-what-are-theatre-commands-and-service> (accessed Mar 28, 2024)

- **Military cooperation with Iran**

China and Iran have engaged in various forms of military cooperation over the past few decades since the Iranian revolution in 1979. During the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, China was one of the main suppliers of weapons such as fighter jets, tanks, and missiles to Iran. Their arms trade fluctuated in the 1990s, and it plummeted to almost zero in the 21st century.³⁵

However, the military-to-military cooperation never decreased. Military ties emerged in different areas, such as joint military exercise and technology transactions. Between 2014 and 2023, Iran and China participated in at least six bilateral or multilateral military drills.³⁶ Furthermore, China, Iran, and Russia have conducted joint naval drills in strategic waters like the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Oman, known as “Marine Security Belt 2024.”³⁷ Through these drills, they show that they can coordinate military activities and even pose a challenge to the U.S. naval control in vital maritime chokepoints.

China has given Iran access to a number of cutting-edge dual-use technologies, including the Navigation Satellite System and nuclear technology. China's BeiDou2 navigation system went live in 2020, with Iran gaining access to it in 2021. Pakistan was the only other nation with access to it until that point.³⁸

In 2021, China and Iran inked a 25-year strategic agreement that included increased training and research collaboration as well as cooperative development of armaments.³⁹ This partnership may result in more sophisticated Iranian weapons, which might tip the scales of power in the region.

Conclusion

China has expanded its influence globally through BRI, SCO, BRICS, and by exerting pressure on neighboring states through challenges to sovereignty like the South China Sea's 10-dash line. China's foreign policies have demonstrated a disregard for the interests of other countries (e.g. debt trap), undermining global peace and stability, while prioritizing economic interests over other political values. Overall, China's assertive and self-interested foreign policy under President Xi is generating significant criticism and concern among its neighbors and Western countries about its intentions and impact on global stability.

China has been collaborating militarily more with nations like North Korea, Iran, and Russia, including advanced technology transfer and weapon development. This is a direct challenge to the balance of power in the region, and to redress this, the U.S. and its partners and allies should intensify their strategic collaboration, particularly with regional partners.

China has become one of the most powerful countries in the world and is imposing its influence over the global community. The U.S. and its partners and allies should establish long-term strategies to better leverage China as one of the most important stakeholders for global stability. A one-size-fits-all strategy, such as implementing sanctions to coerce China, shouldn't be the only avenue used to solve the problem. China grows too large, and the

³⁵ The Iran Primer, “Iran & China: Military Ties” United States Institutes of Peace, Jun 28, 2023, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/jun/28/iran-china-military-ties> (accessed Jun 9, 2024)

³⁶ *ibid*

³⁷ AP, “Iran, Russia and China Show off Their Ships in a Joint Naval Drill in the Gulf of Oman” Mar 12, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/iran-russia-china-joint-naval-drill-53a1b3a6f9fd2c4199d2ad7d8cd5a49e> (accessed Jun 9, 2024)

³⁸ The Iran Primer, “Iran & China: Military Ties” United States Institutes of Peace, Jun 28, 2023, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/jun/28/iran-china-military-ties> (accessed Jun 9, 2024)

³⁹ *ibid*

world situation is more complex and interdependent than ever for China to be contained with a single course of treatment.

From the analysis above, it appears evident that China wants to exert more military and economic power over the world. As China is posing a challenge to the U.S., the U.S. and its partners and allies need to act in appropriate manners to obtain the upper hand in upcoming strategic competition with China and other developing threats.

This paper would suggest a course of action for the U.S. to mitigate the threats posed by China's expansion to global security, specifically in the CENTCOM area of operations.

What the U.S. and USCENTCOM should do to mitigate the risks on Middle East regional security

To cover the threats in the Middle East, comprehensive approaches are needed. These approaches could be categorized by diplomatic, informational, military, and economic approaches to compete with China strategically. The possible USCENTCOM strategic approaches are below. Undoubtedly, all the elements work organically together, even though they are categorized separately.

1. Diplomatic Approaches

- a. Strengthen military cooperation with regional partners: The nature of the U.S. military cooperation in the Middle East has changed over time. The U.S. should have embedded in its strategic plan comprehensive military coordination with regional partners to reduce the risk of concentrated or biased support. It is important to continue the mutual support and cooperation with the Middle East countries. USCENTCOM engages militarily with AOR nations in several ways, such as air and missile defense, military presence, and basing. While those activities are crucial to building mutual trust, understanding, and partnership in the region, long-standing frustrations like lengthy FMS processes risk creating space for China. Many countries might consider the U.S. as a partner of choice; however, China is still on the waiting list as a partner of necessity, watching for opportunity. The U.S. and USCENTCOM should consider building up its relationship with traditional partners such as Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Egypt had issues with the U.S. F-15 acquisition for 45 years and still has issues with their F-35 deal.⁴⁰ China is trying to take advantage of this gap to improve relations with Egypt by bringing its aircraft catalog to the first Egyptian airshow 2024. KSA is increasingly turning to China for military equipment, such as drones, missiles and anti-drone systems.⁴¹ Furthermore, Saudi Arabia resumed relations with Iran under the China's mediation on March 10, 2024, which enhanced China's diplomatic clout in the Middle East. The U.S. and USCENTCOM should take action to correct this situation so regional partners do not lean too much on China.
- b. Keep pressure on China to engage in Middle East issues: China has avoided accountability on its responsibilities as a regional and nascent world power. To mitigate China's influence and ensure its accountability in international affairs, the U.S. ought to devise a strategic partnership approach. Regional stability may be enhanced by China's involvement in regional conflict mediation, and by its expanding influence in the Middle East, which may lessen the pressure on the U.S. to uphold stability in the area.

⁴⁰ Aaron Spray, "Is Egypt Looking at Purchasing Chinese Jets after US stalls on F-35s?" Simple Flying, Aug 28, 2024, <https://simpleflying.com/egypt-looking-purchasing-chinese-fighter-jets-us-f-35-stalls/> (accessed Oct 2, 2024)

⁴¹ Stephanie L. Freid "Chinese military planes displayed at Egypt airshow, but demand is in question" VOA, Sep 6, 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/chinese-military-planes-displayed-at-egypt-airshow-but-demand-is-in-question-7774615.html> (accessed Sep 8, 2024)

Furthermore, the U.S. and China may continue to collaborate on the Israel-Hamas peace talks to bring both parties together and potentially negotiate a resolution.

2. Informational Approaches

- a. Develop solid strategic communications: Ensure messaging across all platforms are synched with partners and allies. In addition to USCENTCOM highlighting their work across the theater, they also should be quick to leverage any negative actions by China and amplify negative perceptions.

3. Military and Security Approaches

- a. Conduct Joint Military Operations with China: To reduce the dangers of antagonistic strategic competition, the U.S. and China should find fields of common interest and work together in a cooperative manner. Furthermore, the U.S. economic sanctions and rhetoric have had limited impact because China's economic size and power make it difficult to significantly impact through sanctions. In this regard, the U.S. and USCENTCOM should find cooperative opportunities with China. Although the U.S. National Security Strategy defined China as a "pacing challenge," strategic competition should not be automatically or necessarily an adversarial relationship.⁴² In this regard, it is worth considering that USCENTCOM conducts joint military operations with China in the Middle East. Conducting joint military operations as a part of freedom of navigation in the Red Sea with PLA Navy fleets could be a symbolic moment for the Middle East. It could send a strong message to Iran and its proxies. As a result, it supports securing vital maritime trade routes and choke points, such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. Furthermore, this would be a great opportunity for the U.S. to show off America's military might to China. It could be a show of force against a strategic competitor.

4. Economic Approaches

- a. Enforcing extant sanctions: Despite longstanding sanctions, Iran and China have used many sanction evasion tactics such as dark fleet tankers, rebranding oil, and small refineries.⁴³ These actions undermine international law and order, hinder the global community's efforts to combat terrorism, and obstruct initiatives to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. The U.S. and its partners and allies should work together to thwart oil smuggling, arms transfers, and financial system disruptions to uphold existing international security laws and regulations. Nevertheless, to halt illegal activities, more precise and targeted sanctions are necessary.

⁴² Paul Heer, "Understanding U.S.-China Strategic Competition" The National Interest, Oct 20, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/understanding-us-china-strategic-competition-171014> (accessed Sep 6, 2024)

⁴³ Kimberly Donovan, Maia Nikoladze, "The axis of evasion: Behind China's oil trade with Iran and Russia" *Atlantic Council*, Mar 28, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-axis-of-evasion-behind-chinas-oil-trade-with-iran-and-russia/> (accessed May 20, 2024)