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The Pentagon's Spoiling for a Fight - But with China, not Iran

The recent White House decision to speed the deployment of an aircraft carrier battle group and other military assets to the Persian Gulf has led many in Washington and elsewhere to assume that the U.S. is gearing up for war with Iran. As in the lead-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, U.S. officials have cited suspect intelligence data to justify elaborate war preparations. On May 13th, acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan even
 presented
top White House officials with plans to send as many as 120,000 troops to the Middle East for possible future combat with Iran and its proxies. Later reports
 indicated
that the Pentagon might be making plans to send even more soldiers than that.

Hawks in the White House, led by National Security Advisor John Bolton, see a war aimed at eliminating Iran's clerical leadership as a potentially big win for Washington. Many top officials in the U.S. military, however, see the matter quite differently -- as potentially a giant step backward into exactly the kind of low-tech ground war they've been unsuccessfully enmeshed in   across the Greater Middle East and northern Africa for years and would prefer to leave behind.

Make no mistake: if President Trump ordered the U.S. military to attack Iran, it would do so and, were that to happen, there can be little doubt about the ultimate negative outcome for Iran. Its moth-eaten military machine is simply no match for the American one. Almost 18 years after Washington's war on terror was launched, however, there can be little doubt that any U.S. assault on Iran would also stir up yet more chaos across the region, displace more people, create more refugees, and leave behind more dead civilians, more ruined cities and infrastructure, and more angry souls ready to join the next terror group to pop up. It would surely lead to another quagmire set of ongoing conflicts for American soldiers. Think: Iraq and Afghanistan, exactly the type of no-win scenarios that many top Pentagon officials now seek to flee. But don't chalk such feelings up only to a reluctance to get bogged down in yet one more

war-on-terror quagmire. These days, the Pentagon is also increasingly obsessed with preparations for another type of war in another locale entirely: a high-intensity conflict with China, possibly in the South China Sea.

After years of slogging it out with guerrillas and jihadists across the Greater Middle East, the U.S. military is increasingly keen on preparing to combat "peer" competitors China and Russia, countries that pose what's called a "multi-domain" challenge to the United States. This new outlook is only bolstered by a belief that America's never-ending war on terror has severely depleted its military, something obvious to both Chinese and Russian leaders who have taken advantage of Washington's extended preoccupation with counterterrorism to modernize their forces and equip them with advanced weaponry.

For the United States to remain a paramount power -- so Pentagon thinking now goes -- it must turn away from counterterrorism and focus instead on developing the wherewithal to decisively defeat its great-power rivals. This outlook was made crystal clear by then-Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee in April 2018. "The negative impact on military readiness resulting from the longest continuous period of combat in our nation's history [has] created an overstretched and under-resourced military," he insisted . Our rivals, he added, used those same years to invest in military capabilities meant to significantly erode America's advantage in advanced technology. China, he assured the senators, is "modernizing its conventional military forces to a degree that will challenge U.S. military superiority." In response, the United States had but one choice: to reorient its own forces for great-power competition. "Long-term strategic competition -- not terrorism -- is now the primary focus of U.S. national security."

This outlook was, in fact, already enshrined in the *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*   , the Pentagon's overarching blueprint governing all aspects of military planning. Its $750 billion budget proposal for fiscal year 2020, unveiled on March 12th, was said to be fully aligned with this approach. "The operations and capabilities supported by this budget will strongly position the U.S. military for great-power competition for decades to come," acting Secretary of Defense Shanahan said at the time.

In fact, in that budget proposal, the Pentagon made sharp distinctions between the types of wars it sought to leave behind and those it sees in its future. "Deterring or defeating great-power aggression is a fundamentally different challenge than the regional conflicts involving rogue states and violent extremist organizations we faced over the last 25 years," it

noted. "The FY 2020 Budget is a major milestone in meeting this challenge," by financing the more capable force America needs "to compete, deter, and win in any high-end potential fight of the future."

Girding for "High-End" Combat

If such a high-intensity war were to break out, Pentagon leaders suggest, it would be likely to take place simultaneously in every domain of combat -- air, sea, ground, space, and cyberspace -- and would feature the widespread utilization of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, and cyberwarfare. To prepare for such multi-domain engagements, the 2020 budget includes $58 billion for advanced aircraft, $35 billion for new warships -- the biggest shipbuilding request in more than 20 years -- along with $14 billion for space systems, $10 billion for cyberwar, $4.6 billion for AI and autonomous systems, and $2.6 billion for hypersonic weapons. You can safely assume, moreover, that each of those amounts will be increased in the years to come.

Planning for such a future, Pentagon officials envision clashes first erupting on the peripheries of China and/or Russia, only to later extend to their heartland expanses (but not, of course, America's). As those countries already possess robust defensive capabilities, any conflict would undoubtedly quickly involve the use of front-line air and naval forces to breach their defensive systems -- which means the acquisition and deployment of advanced stealth aircraft, autonomous weapons, hypersonic cruise missiles, and other sophisticated weaponry. In Pentagon-speak, these are called anti-access/area-defense (A2/AD) systems.

As it proceeds down this path, the Department of Defense is already considering future war scenarios. A clash with Russian forces in the Baltic region of the former Soviet Union is, for instance, considered a distinct possibility. So the U.S. and allied NATO countries have been bolstering their forces in that very region and seeking weaponry suitable for attacks on Russian defenses along that country's western border.

Still, the Pentagon's main focus is a rising China, the power believed to pose the greatest threat to America's long-term strategic interests. "China's historically unprecedented economic development has enabled an impressive military buildup that could soon challenge the U.S. across almost all domains," Admiral Harry Harris Jr., commander of the U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) and now the U.S. ambassador to South Korea, typically testified in March 2018.

"China's ongoing military modernization is a core element of China's stated strategy to supplant the U.S. as the security partner of choice for countries in the Indo-Pacific."

As Harris made clear, any conflict with China would probably first erupt in the waters off its eastern coastline and would involve an intense U.S. drive to destroy China's A2/AD capabilities, rendering that country's vast interior essentially defenseless. Harris's successor, Admiral Philip Davidson, as commander of what is now known as the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, or USINDOPACOM, described such a scenario this way in testimony before Congress in February 2019: "Our adversaries are fielding advanced anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) systems, advanced aircraft, ships, space, and cyber capabilities that threaten the U.S. ability to project power and influence into the region." To overcome such capabilities, he added, the U.S. must develop and deploy an array of attack systems for "long-range strike[s]" along with "advanced missile defense systems capable of detecting, tracking, and engaging advanced air, cruise, ballistic, and hypersonic threats from all azimuths."

If you read through the testimony of both commanders, you'll soon grasp one thing: that the U.S. military -- or at least the Navy and Air Force -- are focused on a future war-scape in which American forces are no longer focused on terrorism or the Middle East, but on employing their most sophisticated weaponry to overpower the modernized forces of China (or Russia) in a relatively brief spasm of violence, lasting just days or weeks. These would be wars in which the mastery of technology, not counterinsurgency or nation building, would -- so, at least, top military officials believe -- prove the decisive factor.

The Pentagon's Preferred Battleground

Such Pentagon scenarios essentially assume that a conflict with China would initially erupt in the waters of the South China Sea or in the East China Sea near Japan and Taiwan. U.S. strategists have considered these two maritime areas America's "first line of defense" in the Pacific since Admiral George Dewey defeated the Spanish fleet in 1898 and the U.S. seized the Philippines. Today, USINDOPACOM remains the most powerful force in the region with major bases in Japan, Okinawa, and South Korea. China, however, has visibly been working to erode American regional dominance somewhat by modernizing its navy and installing along its coastlines short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, presumably aimed at those U.S. bases.

By far its most obvious threat to U.S. dominance in the region, however, has been its occupation and militarization of tiny islands in the South China Sea, a busy maritime thoroughfare bounded by China and Vietnam on one side, Indonesia and the Philippines on the other. In recent years, the Chinese have used sand dredged from the ocean bottom to expand some of those islets, then setting up military facilities on them, including airstrips, radar systems, and communications gear. In 2015, China's President Xi Jinping promised President Obama that his country wouldn't take such action, but satellite imagery clearly shows
that it has done so. While not yet heavily fortified, those islets provide Beijing with a platform from which to potentially foil U.S. efforts to further project its power in the region.

"These bases appear to be forward military outposts, built for the military, garrisoned by military forces, and designed to project Chinese military power and capability across the breadth of China's disputed South China Sea claims," Admiral Harris testified in 2018. "China has built a massive infrastructure specifically -- and solely -- to support advanced military capabilities that can deploy to the bases on short notice."

To be clear, U.S. officials have never declared that the Chinese must vacate those islets or even remove their military facilities from them. However, for some time now, they've been making obvious their displeasure over the buildup in the South China Sea. In May 2018, for instance, Secretary of Defense Mattis disinvited the Chinese navy from the biennial "Rim of the Pacific" exercises, the world's largest multinational naval maneuvers, saying
that "there are consequences" for that country's failure to abide by Xi's 2015 promise to Obama. "That's a relatively small consequence," he added. "I believe there are much larger consequences in the future."

What those consequences might be, Mattis never said. But there is no doubt that the U.S. military has given careful thought to a possible clash in those waters and has contingency plans in place to attack and destroy all the Chinese facilities there. American warships regularly sail provocatively within a few miles of those militarized islands in what are termed "freedom of navigation operations," or FRONOPS, while U.S. air and naval forces periodically conduct large-scale military exercises in the region. Such activities are, of course, closely monitored by the Chinese. Sometimes, they even attempt to impede
FRONOPS operations, leading more than once to near-collisions. In May 2018, Admiral Davidson caused consternation at the Pentagon by declaring
, "China is now capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of war with the United States" -- a comment presumably intended as a wake-up call, but also hinting at the

kinds of conflicts U.S. strategists foresee arising in the future.

The Navy's War vs. Bolton's War

The U.S. Navy sends a missile-armed destroyer close to one of those Chinese-occupied islands just about every few weeks. It's what the U.S. high command likes to call "showing the flag" or demonstrating America's resolve to remain a dominant power in that distant region (though were the Chinese to do something similar off the U.S. West Coast it would be considered the scandal of the century and a provocation beyond compare). Just about every time it happens, the Chinese authorities warn off those ships or send out their own vessels to shadow and harass them.

On May 6th, for example, the U.S. Navy sent two of its guided-missile destroyers, the USS *Pre
ble*
and the USS
Chung Hoon
, on a FRONOPS mission near some of those islands, provoking a fierce complaint from Chinese officials. This deadly game of chicken could, of course, go on for years without shots being fired or a major crisis erupting. The odds of avoiding such an incident are bound to drop over time, especially as, in the age of Trump, U.S.-China tensions over other matters -- including
 trade
,
 technology
, and
 human rights
-- continue to grow. American military leaders have clearly been strategizing about the possibility of a conflict erupting in this area for some time and, if Admiral Davidson's remark is any indication, would respond to such a possibility with considerably more relish than most of them do to a possible war with Iran.

Yes, they view Iran as a menace in the Middle East and no doubt would like to see the demise of that country's clerical regime. Yes, some Army commanders like General Kenneth McKenzie , head of the U.S. Central Command, still show a certain John Bolton-style relish for such a conflict. But Iran today --   weake
ned   by years of isolation and trade sanctions -- poses no unmanageable threat to America's core

strategic interests and, thanks in part to the nuclear deal negotiated by the Obama administration, possesses

 no nuclear weapons

. Still, can there be any doubt that a war with Iran would turn into a messy quagmire, as in Iraq after the invasion of 2003, with guerrilla uprisings, increased terrorism, and widespread chaos spreading through the region -- exactly the kind of "forever wars" much of the U.S. military (unlike John Bolton) would prefer to leave behind?

How this will all play out obviously can't be foreseen, but if the U.S. does not go to war with Iran, Pentagon reluctance may play a significant role in that decision. This does not mean, however, that Americans would be free of the prospect of major bloodshed in the future. The very next U.S. naval patrol in the South China Sea, or the one after that, could provide the spark for a major blowup of a very different kind against a far more powerful -- and nuclear-armed -- adversary. What could possibly go wrong?

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