

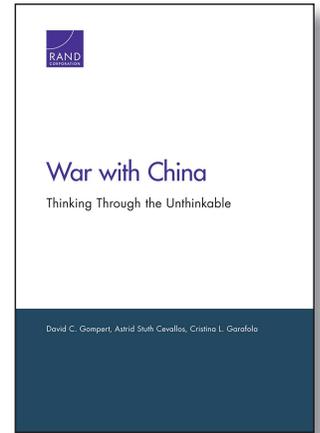


War with China

Thinking Through the Unthinkable

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A Sino-U.S. war could take various, and unintended, paths. Intense, reciprocal conventional counterforce attacks could inflict heavy losses and costs on both sides, so leaders need options and channels to contain and terminate fighting. As it reduces reliance on and automaticity of an intense, severe war, the United States must prepare for one by reducing vulnerability capabilities and using economic and international effects to its advantage.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the alternative paths that China and the United States might take before and during a war?
- What are the effects on both countries of each path?
- What preparations should the United States make?
- How should the United States balance its war aims against costs, should war occur?



KEY FINDINGS

Unless Both U.S. and Chinese Political Leaders Decline to Carry Out Counterforce Strategies, the Ability of Either State to Control the Ensuing Conflict Would Be Greatly Impaired

- Both sides would suffer large military losses in a severe conflict. In 2015, U.S. losses could be a relatively small fraction of forces committed, but still significant; Chinese losses could be much heavier than U.S. losses and a substantial fraction of forces committed.
- This gap in losses will shrink as Chinese A2AD improves. By 2025, U.S. losses could range from significant to heavy; Chinese losses, while still very heavy, could be somewhat less than in 2015, owing to increased degradation of U.S. strike capabilities.
- China's A2AD will make it increasingly difficult for the United States to gain military-operational dominance and victory, even in a long war.

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Conflict Could Be Decided by Domestic Political, International, and Economic Factors, All of Which Would Favor the United States in a Long, Severe War

- Although a war would harm both economies, damage to China's would be far worse.
- Because much of the Western Pacific would become a war zone, China's trade with the region and the rest of the world would decline substantially.
- China's loss of seaborne energy supplies would be especially damaging.
- A long conflict could expose China to internal political divisions.
- Japan's entry into the region could have a considerable influence on military operations.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure that U.S. and Chinese political leaders alike have military options other than immediate strikes to destroy opposing forces.
- U.S. leaders should have the means to confer and contain a conflict before it gets out of hand.
- The United States should guard against automaticity in implementing immediate attacks on Chinese A2AD and have plans and means to prevent hostilities from becoming severe. Establishing “fail safe” arrangements will guarantee definitive, informed political approval for military operations.
- The United States should reduce the effect of Chinese A2AD.
- Invest in more-survivable force platforms (e.g., submarines) and in counter-A2AD (e.g., theater missiles).
- The United States should conduct contingency planning with key allies, especially Japan.
- The United States should ensure that the Chinese are specifically aware of the potential for catastrophic results even if a war is not lost militarily.
- The United States should improve its ability to sustain severely intense military operations.
- The United States should shift toward more-survivable platforms.
- U.S. and allied forces should exploit more strategically the technologies that China is exploiting in its A2AD.
- U.S. leaders should develop options to deny China access to war-critical commodities and technologies in the event of war.
- The United States should undertake measures to mitigate the interruption of critical products from China.
- Additionally, the U.S. Army should invest in land-based A2AD capabilities, encourage and enable East Asian partners to mount strong defense, improve interoperability with partners (especially Japan), and contribute to the expansion and deepening of Sino-U.S. military-to-military understanding and cooperation to reduce dangers of misperception and miscalculation.

