Anticipating Chinese Reactions to U.S. Posture Enhancements

Kristen Gunness, Bryan Frederick, Timothy R. Heath, Emily Ellinger, Christian Curriden,
Nathan Chandler, Bonny Lin, James Benkowski, Bryan Rooney, Cortez A. Cooper III,
Cristina L. Garafola, Paul Orner, Karl P. Mueller, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Erik E. Mueller

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The dramatic increase in Chinese power and military capabilities over the past two decades has prompted calls for U.S. policymakers, and the U.S. Department of Defense in particular, to reevaluate their approach to the Indo-Pacific region, including changes to U.S. military posture. This report provides a framework of key factors that U.S. policymakers should consider in assessing how China may react to shifting U.S. posture in the region.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

• What are the key factors that U.S. policymakers and military planners should consider when assessing how China is likely to react to planned or proposed U.S. posture enhancements in the Indo-Pacific region?
• How do U.S. posture enhancements have the potential to affect those key factors?
• What are the ways in which U.S. posture enhancements may affect Chinese perceptions and thinking through these key factors, and how might these factors motivate China to pursue different responses?

KEY FINDINGS

• China assumes that most U.S. military activities in the region are hostile to China.
• China’s level of concern for a posture enhancement does not directly correlate with the aggressiveness of its responses.
• U.S. posture enhancements or activities that pose acute concerns for China are more likely to trigger consequential changes in longer-term PRC policies.
• The bilateral nature of U.S. alliance relationships in the region may limit whether U.S. posture enhancements in a particular country would deter China from more aggressive behavior elsewhere in the region. The deterrence value of the posture enhancement may depend on whether China believes that the host nation will allow the United States to employ the posture or capabilities in a regional conflict.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- Decisions on the location of U.S. posture enhancements should consider the possibility that China may be able to pressure the host nation to limit or deny access in certain contingencies.

- For the most robust U.S. alliance relationships (e.g., Japan, Australia), the United States should try to establish clear political understandings regarding the contingencies for which U.S. forces or bases on its allies’ territories could be used and signal those understandings to China where advantageous.

- The U.S. government should prepare for Chinese responses to be multilayered across domains by coordinating whole-of-government response plans before executing U.S. posture enhancements.

- Short- to medium-range intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities that augment local states’ abilities to detect Chinese forces in disputed areas and enabling agreements likely combine the greatest deterrent value with the lowest likelihood of a near-term PRC aggressive response for most locations.

- U.S. capabilities that can target PRC command and control, including in ways that affect its nuclear forces or regime continuity, have perhaps the highest risk of producing a disproportionally aggressive PRC response.