

MH-60S Seahawk helicopter assigned to "Swamp Foxes" of Maritime Helicopter Combat Squadron 74 departs USS *Mason* during U.S.-China cross-deck landing exercise with People's Liberation Army Navy destroyer *Harbin* (U.S. Navy/Rob Aylward)



Refocusing the U.S. Strategic Security Perspective

By Linnea Y. Duvall and Evan O. Renfro

Since the early days of Cold War rivalry between the United States and Soviet Union, policymakers have recognized that low-intensity conflict and limited wars often occur in spite of *deterrence*—that is, using the threat of military force or coercion to change an adversary's behavior. Because of this shortcoming and risk of

escalation, the United States has applied deterrence haphazardly in its relationship with China. Yet U.S. policymakers have failed to identify an alternative approach for chronic disputes that are not readily shaped by military posturing. This deficiency is overlooked at the expense of muddling through commonplace confrontations with China over fishing

rights, maritime borders, and cyberspace rather than establishing consistent mechanisms to reduce tension and prevent escalation. Some analysts, such as Richard K. Betts, see only two stark choices to address this dilemma: "accept China's full claims as a superpower when it becomes one or draw clear redlines before a crisis comes."¹ However, we do not need to limit our options to deterrence or acceptance. Rather, we should complement deterrence with a more flexible, strategic framework focused on conflict management.

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While deterrence has been an essential component of its military strategy, the United States requires the addition of a conflict management framework to address China's violations of international norms that underpin regional stability. China has demonstrated its assertiveness by taking control of the Scarborough Reef in the South China Sea, entering Japan's airspace over the Senkaku Islands (called the Diaoyu Islands by China), and infiltrating U.S. military and public cyber networks. This unlawful behavior is likely to continue in the absence of a coercive response from the United States or its allies. But the United States, and to a lesser extent Japan, have little appetite to escalate such nonviolent disputes into open military or diplomatic crises. An effective strategic approach must therefore mitigate the destabilizing impacts of China's behavior without militarizing the disputes.

The objective of conflict management is to minimize the negative political, economic, and military impacts of disputes and avoid escalation. *Conflict* is here defined as a dispute with the potential to draw nations into war. A conflict often escalates into a crisis, a critical decision point at which military action is imminent or limited to less than the 1,000 deaths that normally define a war. In the case of the U.S.-China relationship, managing chronic conflict requires a greater emphasis on local information and awareness, law enforcement, and coordinated political-military responses to crises. This approach is similar to preventative diplomacy, but with the key distinction that conflict management implies a resolution is not possible either under current conditions or in any reasonable amount of time. Mediation and negotiation over specific claims are therefore less central to conflict management than conflict resolution. This is not to say that resolution is not desirable: by reducing tension in the near term, conflict management leaves open the option for a more permanent solution in the future. While deterrence will continue to underpin the prevention of war, dealing with China's nonmilitary assertiveness requires a coherent conflict management framework to strengthen

situational awareness, bilateral communication, and law enforcement while mitigating the risk of escalation and miscalculation.

How to Start Worrying and Loathe the Bomb

U.S. policymakers recognized the limitations of deterrence early in the Cold War. Even as Washington and Moscow assembled massive stockpiles of nuclear and conventional weapons that prohibitively raised the cost of war, they also competed for influence in proxy conflicts across the globe. Deterrence theorist B.H. Liddell Hart warned in 1954 that the threat of nuclear war reduced the likelihood for direct aggression but simultaneously increased the possibility of limited, peripheral conflict. As fictional character Dr. Strangelove commented, the reason deterrence is not practical in such contexts "must be all too obvious" as it fails when threats are not "completely credible and convincing."

To mitigate the limitations of strategic deterrence during the Cold War, the United States developed flexible response options that prepared for military action across the spectrum of warfare. This approach complemented and was used in conjunction with strategic deterrence. It expanded the military options for limited war and therefore made deterrence more credible at the lower end of the conflict spectrum. Yet while the flexible response doctrine enabled more nuanced military action, it was still at its core a means to better deter the Soviet Union. It did not require policymakers to develop a more sophisticated political and social understanding of the conflicts they faced.

The Gulf of Tonkin incident illustrates the risk involved with this strategic framework. When North Vietnamese vessels fired on U.S. Navy ships in 1964, President Lyndon Johnson favored an increase in the American presence in South Vietnam to deter Soviet expansionism. In this mindset, the U.S. security architecture was limited in the courses of action it allowed itself: to respond with nuclear weapons to deter Russia, through the proxy of North Vietnam, or

through a limited war. Yet the incident in the Gulf of Tonkin was a sideshow to the real conflict occurring within Vietnam between an illegitimate government and an ideological insurgency. While a deterrence strategy kept the United States focused on adversaries outside Vietnam, a conflict management approach would have emphasized preventing the spread of the discontent within Vietnam that was undermining the country's stability. Such a view would have prioritized minimizing the negative fallout of Tonkin by focusing on the political and domestic context beforehand and allowing for a proportionate political and military response afterward.

This is not to say that Cold War leaders failed to consider conflict management. In crises that avoided hostile action, fear of escalation helped the United States and Soviet Union develop bilateral conflict management mechanisms, albeit in an ad hoc manner. A breakthrough in crisis management followed the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 when Washington and Moscow established a "red phone" hotline for leadership consultations. The two superpowers also signed an agreement for handling incidents at sea in 1972. Yet conflict management never became a strategic framework on par with deterrence or embedded as part of a multifaceted spectrum of response options.

Moving Up, Moving On

Today, the United States addresses disputes with China with a mindset stuck in the Cold War. Washington continues to rely on deterrence and flexible response options with too little appreciation for expanding its ad hoc approach to minor, nonmilitarized disputes and crises. Just as it developed flexible response options to complement strategic deterrence during the Cold War, the United States needs a coherent approach to conflict management to address incidents, such as cyber crime and incursions into sovereign territory, that remain below its threshold for a military response.

This is especially clear in the South China Sea, where the drivers of China's

excessive sovereignty claims—including access to fishing and hydrocarbon resources as well as resurgent national pride—have increased in recent years. Yet with each new incident, the United States seems taken aback, scrambling for an effective show of force but ultimately failing to curb the illicit actions. This confusion arises in part because diplomatic and military officials have approached the sovereignty disputes from opposite directions: the Department of State has focused on resolving the disputes while the Department of Defense talks in terms of deterring adversaries, even as both resort to conflict management in practice.

The State Department has approached the disputes through a lens of conflict resolution, arguing that stronger international codes of behavior, military posturing, and strategic dialogue will eventually convince China to abandon its excessive maritime claims. Yet this approach overlooks the intractability of the disputes, causing diplomats to scramble for ad hoc responses as each new incident occurs. A dialogue focused on resolution also misses the point that U.S. interests primarily lie in staying out of the conflicts, not in solving them. While Washington stands willing to back its allies in the event of an armed attack, it has been equally clear that it does not take sides in the South China Sea sovereignty disputes.

U.S. efforts to shape China's behavior without getting drawn into specific disputes have led diplomats to pursue conflict management without clearly admitting they are doing so. For example, the United States has been supportive of a robust and enforceable Code of Conduct on the South China Sea. Such a document could significantly reduce tensions and inspire joint development of disputed waters. While China's resistance and the need for consensus in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) make it unlikely that a Code of Conduct would be an enforceable document, it would at the least defuse tension by establishing norms of behavior for all claimants. Describing this effort as an element of a conflict management framework would set realistic expectations

about the region's ability to manage, but not necessarily solve, disagreements. It would also clarify that Washington's underlying interest is in stability, whether that involves the repeal of excessive claims.

Like the State Department, the U.S. military is already conducting conflict management, but in ad hoc ways and without the benefit of a clearly articulated strategic framework. Many of these actions look like diplomacy: supporting cooperative security mechanisms through ASEAN, talking frankly to Chinese leadership in military-to-military dialogues, and encouraging U.S. allies to maintain a cool-headed response to aggression. A conflict management framework would connect these activities in an approach that is separate from, but complementary to, deterrence.

A clear framework would also help the military balance its priorities for conflict management and deterrence, particularly as resources are reduced. Guidance published in *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership* in 2012 stated that the U.S. military would "continue to promote a rules-based international order that ensures underlying stability and encourages the peaceful rise of new powers, economic dynamism, and constructive defense cooperation."² However, the priority missions articulated in the guidance include deterring adversary aggression and countering adversary antiaccess capabilities, while military efforts to "provide a stabilizing presence"³ are to be carefully examined in light of shrinking budgets.

Differentiating the military's conflict management activities from deterrence would help to bring it in line with the diplomatic discourse by addressing the behavior of all parties in the dispute. In the South China Sea, nearly all parties have made excessive maritime claims and engaged in provocations. As the United States attempts to reduce tensions without taking sides, it is more useful to think in terms of managing a complex situation than deterring a potential adversary. Establishing a discourse about conflict management would moderate the expectations of allies and alter the "us versus them" dynamic inherent in deterrence,

which is by definition directed against a specific adversary. By eliminating an implied adversary, conflict management builds a more inclusive narrative consistent with the view that productive bilateral cooperation is possible despite inevitable points of friction around China's periphery.

Sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea and Senkaku Islands are not the only aspect of the U.S.-China relationship that would benefit from a conflict management framework. Cyber security also falls within the category of confrontations that deterrence is not designed to prevent. As Betts correctly points out, retaliation in response to cyber attacks is rarely credible because of the difficulty of identifying the perpetrator.⁴ Conflict management, with its emphasis on mitigating the consequences of recurring attacks, provides a more flexible perspective. Such a framework would encourage open communication, publicly revealing perpetrators rather than fighting back, demonstrating one's own commitment to cyber norms, and galvanizing multilateral support for enforcing those norms. This approach is broad enough to address the myriad cyber criminals who attack government and private-sector systems, while also being more agile than an adversary-focused deterrence strategic framework that risks escalation through retribution.

While its flexibility is ideal for multi-party disputes, conflict management also has a role in cases where there is a clear adversarial relationship. The stalemate with China over Taiwan illustrates the potential benefits of conflict management when an effective military deterrent is in place. Since rapprochement with China in the 1970s, Washington has politically prioritized conflict management in the Taiwan issue, warning Taipei against independence and acknowledging that China has a claim to the island. At the same time, the United States has maintained a deterrent capability through its forward presence in the western Pacific. While various administrations have waffled about whether deterrence or conflict management is more effective, as demonstrated by regular changes in



U.S.-China combined visit, board, search, and seizure team, comprised of Sailors from USS *Winston S. Churchill* and Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy frigate *Yi Yang*, holds briefing aboard *Winston S. Churchill* during bilateral counterpiracy exercise (U.S. Navy/Aaron Chase)

arms sales policies to Taiwan, it is the two approaches working in concert that has provided the greatest stability. This two-pronged approach does not “undermine Washington’s readiness for a crisis,” as some argue.⁵ Rather, it mitigates the likelihood of a crisis while maintaining military readiness.

Easier Said Than Done

Conflict management makes sense for two powerful countries that recognize the costs of war, but a critical shortcoming of conflict management compared to deterrence is that it requires both countries to play along. While deterrence qua mutually assured destruction forced a process of conflict management with the Soviet Union, it fails with China. As the likelihood of an exchange of intercontinental ballistic missiles between Beijing and Washington today has decreased relative to Moscow and

Washington in 1962, the influence of deterrence has dissipated, and with it the impetus for robust escalation controls. China often refuses to communicate at moments of high tensions. It has not established a “red phone” with Japan and at times does not respond to its crisis hotline with Washington. Beijing also actively works to undermine ASEAN unity on security issues, recognizing that a united ASEAN can counterbalance its own interests. Michael Swaine maintains that although China understands the dangers of miscalculation, it tends to view conflict in zero-sum terms and has a low threshold for the use of force, possibly to compensate for its perception of relative weakness.⁶

Even in areas where it recognizes the value of strategic dialogue, China has a different approach than the Soviet Union to its relationship with the United States. In testimony before Congress, former

Commander of U.S. Pacific Command Admiral Robert Willard pointed to “differences in philosophy regarding the purpose of military-to-military relations in which China emphasizes strategic dialogue and the U.S. seeks comprehensive military contact from the strategic to tactical levels as a way to build confidence.”⁷

Optimists hope that gradual military modernization and experience as a world power will help China recognize the importance of tactical military contact for preventing crisis escalation. For example, it was reported on January 19, 2013, that a Chinese warship aimed its fire control radar at a Japanese military helicopter, an action that indicates either a careless radar operator or a precursor to locking on a gun or missile system. Greater military-to-military contact would help to normalize such accidents and clarify intentions. Yet China’s willingness to risk its relationship with the United States, in

spite of, or perhaps because of, a strong bilateral strategic dialogue, suggests that China's political maturity alone would not lead to better conflict management. Unilateral U.S. actions to limit the political, economic, and military consequences of enduring disputes would be essential for enduring what promises to be a rocky road ahead.

If It's Broke, Fix It

To progress from a strategic framework based primarily on deterrence to one that integrates requirements for conflict management, the United States should focus on three critical areas: altering the definition of success for longstanding disputes, refocusing U.S. objectives on whole-of-government conflict management activities rather than flexible response options, and encouraging a broader dialogue on security issues and their economic and political impacts.

Perhaps the most significant impact of adding a conflict management framework is that it establishes feasible metrics for success. Deterrence is notoriously difficult to assess. The failure of deterrence to prevent war is readily apparent, but how does one know if a given absence of conflict is caused by a given policy of deterrence? Metrics for conflict management, however, could assess progress even if—or when—an incident occurs. Progress might include implementation of crisis communication mechanisms, incident response procedures, and institutionalized consultations on issues of concern. In addition, success would involve establishing realistic expectations among parties, and identifying “off-ramps” rather than “redlines” to ensure incidents do not escalate to crises. An ideal endstate need not include conflict resolution.

A few examples of moderate successes are already available in the South China Sea. Brunei and Malaysia are jointly developing their overlapping South China Sea maritime claims, and several other parties have shown an interest in multilateral exploration. This approach provides robust conflict management without solving the underlying sovereignty disagreement. The decision of

the Philippines to send its claims to an arbitration tribunal is also a success for conflict management. Even if China rejects the findings of the tribunal, the Philippine effort represents a nonmilitary approach to the problem.

With a conflict management mindset, the Intelligence Community should reassess its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) in order to address issues before they escalate. While ISR supports both deterrence and conflict management, conflict management prioritizes political and social factors that influence disputes. Tracking fishing boats in the South China Sea may seem a low priority from the classical deterrence perspective, but through the lens of conflict management, its strategic importance is made clear. Twenty-four hours can make the difference in whether Washington is involved in managing a dispute or reacting to a crisis, and imagery of incidents helps clarify who is acting contrary to international norms and galvanizes opinions against the aggressor. As data are disseminated, the United States should also improve coordination across the Intelligence Community and with nongovernmental organizations. Unlike strategic deterrence, the indications and warnings for escalation to crisis go beyond movements of military assets and require a detailed understanding of the broader environment, with special emphasis on both domestic and international political relationships.

In terms of military planning, a conflict management framework would restructure military peacetime objectives. Realistic objectives should acknowledge the limitations of deterrence while focusing attention on preventing escalation of inevitable incidents. The military might come to view disagreements over disputed islands in much the same way it views natural disasters: as detrimental to regional stability but addressed through consistent engagement and capacity-building that supports the work of other governmental agencies. While the Department of Defense must maintain its primary objective of deterring adversary militaries, it should reorient its approach to problems such as cyber security that

are not suited to deterrence and address them more as issues of law enforcement.

One important conflict management objective is strengthening partner nation interoperability and combined exercises to reduce the political-military consequences of incidents—an area in which the U.S. military has already made significant progress. The U.S. invitation to China to join the Rim of the Pacific exercises in 2014, for example, contributes to conflict management efforts and should be prioritized accordingly. These activities will be even more important (and should be expanded) as greater military activity in disputed regions increases the risk of escalation. Indonesia, Vietnam, and Singapore are investing in new submarines, and defense spending is on the rise across the region. China has also been more visible since conducting a series of naval exercises in the South China Sea in 2008. A primary mission for the U.S. military in a period of fiscal austerity is to ensure these new forces learn to work and play together—and with the People's Liberation Army Navy. A conflict management framework would prioritize these value-added engagements.

Differentiating deterrence and conflict management as two distinct efforts might generate cost savings by reorienting the military's capability requirements. Whereas a credible military deterrent includes rapidly deployable bombers, aircraft carriers, and ballistic missiles, China used paramilitary vessels and fishing boats to gain control of Scarborough Reef. A U.S. aircraft carrier in Subic Bay is unlikely to dissuade these fishing vessels if its threat of force is not credible. Deterrence still requires an assured conventional response, but at the lower end of the conflict spectrum, destroyers could be as effective as carrier strike groups at demonstrating U.S. resolve to enforce international law, and F-16s are as obvious as F-35s at flying by disputed territories to show the flag. Only by clearly articulating distinct missions in support of conflict management can the military identify the right assets and partners to support non-military confrontation.

However, military activities in conflict management will always be only a small



Pilots from the United States and other nations attend flight deck familiarization tour while onboard U.S. Navy *Oliver Hazard Perry*-class frigate USS *Gary* as part of Rim of the Pacific Exercise 2014 (Royal Australian Navy/Chantell Bianchi)

part of the solution. China's civil and paramilitary aggression requires a civil and paramilitary response. Therefore, more important than expanding the military's role in conflict management is expanding the ability of U.S. law enforcement agencies to conduct capacity-building abroad. The best U.S. interlocutors to develop partner nation capabilities to patrol their exclusive economic zones and manage intrusions during the fishing season are the U.S. Coast Guard and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which leads scientific exploration and fisheries management. Unfortunately, their international reach and blue-water resources are limited, so these organizations must rely on military assets to support their engagement and conflict management activities.

This does not mean that Coast Guard ships should be patrolling the islands

in the South China Sea, but rather that nonmilitary agencies should be provided with extensive new resources to do international engagements and capacity-building missions with other partners. The Coast Guard, which primarily operates domestically, has one-sixteenth of the Navy's budget, at just under \$10 billion, while NOAA has half that amount. If the United States intends to build regional capabilities to counter China's nonmilitary approach, Congress must ensure other agencies have the bandwidth to engage more internationally. As these resources increase, it might be possible to create a joint task force, similar to U.S. Pacific Command's Joint Interagency Task Force-West for counternarcotics, and to establish truly cooperative approaches to domestic maritime issues, including patrolling exclusive economic zones, managing fisheries, and supporting other law enforcement activities.

This professional maritime law enforcement capability would make it more difficult for China to establish and hold its excessive claims. A greater local law enforcement presence would also provide a clearer distinction between military and nonmilitary confrontation compared to a naval vessel operating with law enforcement authorities.

To ensure that partner nation military and law enforcement assets contribute to regional stability rather than undermine it, the United States must continue to support multilateral forums such as ASEAN and the annual China-Japan-Republic of Korea trilateral summit. These forums strengthen relationships among senior leaders, and when tensions are high, they work as a venue for claimants to voice their frustration without resorting to military coercion. During periods of cooperation, the forums could promote agreements on joint resource

development and establish procedures for post-incident investigations. Focusing on institution-building by leveraging international governmental bodies would simultaneously ameliorate pathologies that spread political disagreements and empower multilateral cooperation toward conflict management. The extent to which China undermines these organizations would highlight its disruptive behavior. While this is consistent with the current U.S. approach, a conflict management framework would clarify the intent and purpose of multilateral engagements, particularly for defense cooperation, beyond just reinforcing international norms.

To develop these tools, a serious dialogue about conflict management requires experts from the fields of negotiation, mediation, and arbitration, while incorporating and expanding the tools of preventative diplomacy. Unlike deterrence, this broader dialogue offers an opportunity to better address historical and cultural factors vis-à-vis the most intractable problems in the region.

All of the above initiatives also require that the security dialogue be broadened domestically across the U.S. Government. Twenty-first-century security strategy must be built around the understanding that the domestic affects the international—an understanding which is acknowledged, but not fully implemented. The contemporary geopolitical landscape demands that diplomatic efforts blend with those of the military and vice versa. The crucial strategic move involves a reorientation, not a reallocation, of human and financial capital. Functioning interagency partnerships could be developed by instituting the type of cross-cultural pollination that already exists between the branches of the U.S. military, each of which has its own educational and training systems, while also ensuring that seats are given to officers of other Services. A feasible step to ensure a wide breadth of shared expertise and contacts throughout U.S. and allied public and private organizations is to design an educational system wherein this more eclectic crowd can work and learn together. Few things allow for enduring cooperation like time spent getting to

know a comrade in the classroom, coffee shop, and pub.

Such cultural changes needed for a strategic reorientation are not as difficult to execute as they may at first appear, and they could effectively be instituted by congressional legislation. In 1986, Congress passed the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act, which ensures officers gain experience in joint Service positions as a prerequisite for promotion to senior ranks. A similar action would cause a much broader inter-Service outlook by mandating not only joint military Service positions, but also experience working in other nonmilitary departments and organizations entirely. This interagency development would operationalize Joseph Nye's concept of "smart power" and ensure that all elements of national power are brought to bear on the intractable disputes of the Asia-Pacific.

It's a Conflicted World after All

Conflict is endemic and will continue to occur. It is fortunate that, in some ways, we live in a safer world than that of the Cold War. No longer are we routinely forced to duck and cover under our desks to practice protecting ourselves from a nuclear blast. What we are faced with today, however, is hardly a halcyon international environment. If big wars are rare, smaller crises are not. A security strategy focused almost entirely on the rare, at the expense of serious thought and action regarding the common, is not the most useful framework to live with. A coherent security strategy must be both agile and predictable enough to deal with dangerous incidents while also preventing war.

Differentiating conflict management from deterrence would have a tangible impact on the U.S. approach to chronic conflicts in the Asia-Pacific and beyond. A focus on conflict management would improve military support of U.S. national interests by better reflecting the current diplomatic priorities and by refocusing military peacetime planning on new tools and objectives. It would modernize the current security dialogue from one focused on Cold War hard power

approaches to one that better leverages civil-military power and the best practices of negotiation. Moving to such a strategic framework would also allow resources of time, money, and talent to be used more effectively to manage the unavoidable, while deterrence would be used to avoid the unthinkable. There is no reason why we should forget about deterrence, but it should not continue to monopolize our strategic thinking. The Cold War is long over, and it is time to implement what is already widely acknowledged but not acted on. Ultimately, by reducing tension and the risk of escalation in the near term, conflict management leaves open the possibility of a more permanent and secure solution in the future. JFQ

Notes

¹ Richard K. Betts, "The Lost Logic of Deterrence," *Foreign Affairs* (March–April 2013), 99.

² *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, January 2012), 2, available at <www.defense.gov/news/defense_strategic_guidance.pdf>.

³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴ Betts, 88.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁶ Michael D. Swaine, *passim*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Latest Analysis, available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/experts/index.cfm?fa=expert_view&expert_id=119>.

⁷ Robert F. Willard, "Statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee on U.S. Pacific Command Posture," February 28, 2012, 8.