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## SRAD Director's Corner: The People's Republic of China's Challenge to US Security

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# The People's Republic of China's Challenge to US Security

George Shatzer

## Review of

### The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order

By Rush Doshi

and

### The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict

By Elbridge A. Colby

This "SRAD Director's Corner" is the inaugural contribution by Colonel George Shatzer, director of the Strategy Research and Analysis Division of the Strategic Studies Institute at the US Army War College. In each contribution, Shatzer will discuss books of relevance to US Joint planners and strategists, as well as those of our allies and strategic partners. He will apply his experience and education as a US Army senior strategist to extract insights useful to anyone contemplating how to confront the challenges of today's strategic environment.

**Keywords:** China, great-power conflict, People's Liberation Army, grand strategy, Taiwan

**I**n 2008, I began my first joint tour of duty at then-United States Pacific Command (USPACOM). Returning from a deployment to Iraq during the Surge with the 25th Infantry Division, the assignment was my introduction to planning for the military challenge the People's Republic of China (PRC) presented to the United States, its allies, and its partners—especially Taiwan. For the next three years, the joint planning team I helped lead focused on studying the emerging capabilities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and what the appropriate responses ought to be should the PRC initiate military operations against the United States, Taiwan, and other countries.

During this time, among US military officers, the potential PLA military threat was not a settled matter. Even some senior leaders serving in the region questioned whether China could mount a credible threat to Taiwan or anyone else. Many of them still viewed the PLA and its ground, air, and naval components as a Cold War-era mass-conscription force, armed with relic Soviet- and Chinese-produced knockoff equipment, that had no recent operational experience. And, the most recent experience of the PLA was, at best, an inconclusive four-week-long 1979 invasion of Vietnam which ended with China

withdrawing all its units after suffering thousands of casualties at the hands of a force composed mainly of Vietnamese militia. Further, as these skeptics pointed out, Taiwan has an 80-mile wide moat between it and mainland China, and Taiwan fields a small but capable, modern military force equipped by the United States. Russia or violent extremist groups, especially radical Islamists such as al-Qaeda, were certain to be the threats worthy of US military attention for the foreseeable future—or so the predominant thinking went. After all, then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates explicitly stated in 2008 the United States had to focus on winning the ongoing war in Iraq even if it meant diverting resources and energy from preparing for future threats.

These assessments did not take into account (or were even wholly ignorant of) the rapid advance of PLA warfighting capabilities made in the preceding decade-plus since the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis. When our team briefed the new PLA capabilities in reconnaissance, command and control, long-range precision fires, air combat, air defense, anti-surface warfare, and many other areas, we could see some senior leaders were beginning to understand the problem—the PRC was building a suite of advanced combat means that could overwhelm the Taiwan military and prevent the US military from effectively intervening in a conflict near Taiwan. At the same time, the term “anti-access and area-denial” (A2/AD) entered the common professional security parlance.

The US consensus view of the PRC threat relative to others has changed much since 2008. Violent extremism remains a pernicious problem but one that now seems manageable through intelligence, law enforcement, special operations forces, and partner forces. Further, US defeats in Iraq and Afghanistan, while ragged and senseless, have not yet created an existential threat to American security. Russia has demonstrated it is a serious threat to European security (as well as in Syria and elsewhere) but has limited options beyond aggression against its immediate neighbors, especially if NATO chooses to act in a concerted way. Iran and North Korea remain destabilizing threats, particularly with their developing nuclear programs, but their effective reach for now is limited, and the United States has options to check major moves either country might make against others.

Thus, with continued rapid growth in all forms of the PRC’s power, the United States finally recognizes, correctly, the PRC is the single greatest threat to US security. As the current US interim national security strategic guidance states, only the PRC is “capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system.” And it is likely to remain so for many, many years. This is why the same interim guidance centers on the need for the United States to “prevail in strategic competition with China” (Biden, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, 2021, p. 20).

Despite this clarity of guidance and focus on the PRC, there understandably remain those who worry an excessive focus on preparation for conflict with the PRC is dangerously misplaced. Beyond the salient point that this focus might beget the war it seeks to prevent, there is the open question of whether the focus is necessary. It seems apparent the PLA has reached parity with many US combat capabilities and strives to reach parity, and even superiority, in many others. But, if the PRC does not intend to compete directly with the United States, and has no serious designs on displacing US influence globally or even regionally, then the current US preoccupation with the PRC is possibly a serious mistake.

The question of whether China has a grand strategy to replace the United States as the global hegemon is the central question of Rush Doshi's *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*, and the title makes his conclusion clear. Doshi, the founding director of the Brookings China Strategy Initiative and current director for China on the US National Security Council (he completed the book prior to joining the council), makes a compelling argument the PRC has patiently planned for decades to overtake the United States as the world's dominant power. As a China scholar and a proficient Mandarin speaker, Doshi draws heavily from a variety of publically available but hard-to-obtain PRC documents to build a convincing case for the existence of a deliberate PRC grand strategy to counter the United States. He defines a grand strategy as "a state's theory of how it can achieve its strategic objectives that is intentional, coordinated, and implemented across multiple means of statecraft—military, economic, and political" (6).

Doshi charts the evolution of the PRC's grand strategy to displace American order beginning with its emotional roots in China's "Century of Humiliation" but forged critically by a "traumatic trifecta" of major events: the US reaction to the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989, the US Gulf War against Iraq in 1990–91, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (11). He briefly mentions the Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1996 and the errant US strike on the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 (though he says nothing about the EP-3 incident near Hainan Island in 2001) but his main focus is at the grand-strategic level with most discussion centered on political and economic issues. He addresses the military aspects of the PRC's strategy (mostly maritime issues) in two dedicated chapters that take a supporting role to the full body of the narrative.

Doshi frames this strategy as one intended to displace the United States as a regional and global hegemon by first hunting the United States' exercise of control over affairs regionally, then building the PRC's control over others regionally, and finally expanding these two efforts globally. Initially, China followed a "hide and bide" approach to quietly blunt US control so as not to elicit negative reactions or countermeasures from the United States and others. Then, with new direction from then-President Hu Jintao, and with the 2008 global

financial crisis apparently weakening US power, the PRC shifted its approach to “actively accomplishing something” as it began to build its control in the region. Now, Doshi argues, following the election of President Trump in 2016 and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Xi Jinping, the current Chinese president, considers time and momentum on China’s side and has firmly shifted the PRC to expanding its blunting and building efforts globally. Doshi dedicates an entire chapter to examining in impressive detail the political, economic, and military aspects of all three phases.

The book has its limitations though. Doshi does not address PRC espionage or influence operations inside the United States nor does he meaningfully consider options the United States could take to deter China from continuing to pursue its strategy. Nonetheless, he provides the real gem of the book in the final chapter—the strategy the United States should follow to answer the PRC’s challenge. His set of recommendations are thoughtful and compelling and fundamentally recognize the growth of PRC power must be dealt with directly in a concerted, grand strategic way.

In *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*, Elbridge Colby argues a similar premise but arrives at slightly different and more detailed prescriptions. Like Doshi, Colby has deep experience with national strategy formulation as a former deputy assistant secretary of defense for strategy and force development who led the development of the 2018 National Defense Strategy. Where Doshi focuses on grand strategy, Colby centers squarely on defense and military strategy. He unabashedly argues “because force is the foundational form of power and the ultimate arbiter of disputes in the anarchic international arena, the regional balance of power is at its core a question of military power” (17). He further suggests the United States must accept China will not suddenly disappear as a threat and will continue to seek to grow its power. As such, Colby calls for the United States to play a balancing role in the Indo-Pacific and create an “anti-hegemonic coalition” to prevent the PRC from becoming the dominant power in the region. More specifically, the United States should pursue a denial strategy only, not more aggressive strategies to replace the communist party in China or more accommodating strategies that focus on influencing the PRC to act more in line with US interests. Colby describes how this US-led anti-hegemonic coalition should array a geographical defensive perimeter, add certain nation states as members, and potentially consider providing nuclear-strike capabilities to select members.

The aim of this approach would be to deny the PRC its *best* (not most likely or most dangerous) course of action—a limited war to seize control of Taiwan forcibly to remove it from, and break, the coalition. This distinction as the *best* strategy is important since it addresses the view that conflict over

Taiwan is not likely. Colby argues a focus on likely options—such as gray-zone competition with the PRC—risks expending resources on inconsequential matters, and most destructive options—such as nuclear war with the PRC—are highly unlikely and have effective counters in place already. He makes a persuasive case that seizing Taiwan is the best option for the PRC because of the many important benefits it affords them toward gaining regional hegemony. Hence, the United States and the coalition must focus on denying China such a potential large gain in power.

Colby also notes US and coalition preparations for a limited war over Taiwan would certainly build readiness to deal with other contingencies. If his argumentation suffers, it is in his dismissal of the importance of the gray zone as a “euphemism for actions that do not cross the threshold of major significance” (105). This could be true when considering any one or just a small set of actions. But, the PRC seeks to accrete the benefits of many such actions over time for decisive effect while avoiding the risk of war directly with the United States and its allies.

Additionally, Colby forgoes operational assessments of relative military strengths and weaknesses between the PRC, the United States, and others. He outlines a conceptual framework for building a defense strategy that should be resilient beyond any discrete or purely military considerations. Yet, he also aims for the framework to be detailed enough to provide a clear focus for concerted action. He generally succeeds but never convinces readers his strategy is resilient enough to deal with the extreme asymmetries in military capabilities the PRC seeks to build.

Despite their minor shortcomings both books are strong works of strategy. They succeed because they accurately assess the security problem the United States faces, and they offer novel and realistic solutions.

Doshi and Colby are clear-eyed and frank about the potentially severe threat the Communist Party of China-led PRC poses to the US-led liberal order that underpins US security and freedom. The very nature of PRC strategic aims and of its authoritarian political and economic systems are at fundamental odds with that of the United States' own. If the PRC were to realign most of the global order under its standards, there is no doubt the US position in the world would decline and US security would suffer. Also, both books rightly recognize the PRC challenge is likely to intensify as the country's economy continues to grow larger than the economy of the United States, its already much larger population becomes increasingly wealthy, and the Communist Party of China grows increasingly nationalistic and confident. Both authors propose complementary strategies that are excellent for many reasons.

First, Doshi and Colby recognize the United States must achieve focus. It should concentrate on, and orchestrate, a strategy to deal with the central security problem posed by the PRC while managing other security issues that warrant secondary attention. Without a consistent and coordinated long game of its own, centered on a strategy of denial, the United States risks being distracted by the here and now of regional problems at the expense of the global threat.

Second, both authors propose the United States adopt asymmetric strategies that do not seek merely to match Chinese moves but instead endeavors to leverage US advantages. This approach is necessary because, as noted, the PRC enjoys real advantages over the United States which past serious threats such as Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and the Soviet Union never came close to enjoying. And given the trajectories of growth of these advantages, were the United States to try to outspend the PRC on, say, military platforms and technology, it would be making a mistake similar to the one the Soviet Union did during the Cold War. Instead, the authors correctly advise the United States to build upon its current advantages in a robust network of allies and partners to thwart the growth of PRC power. As Doshi frames it, the United States would employ its blunting and building strategy through political, economic, and military means coordinated with allies and partners. For Colby, the anti-hegemonic military coalition is the bulwark. Both approaches are necessary because of the added resources these partners will bring and because regional partners especially are needed to answer the “first-mover advantage” the PRC enjoys with its geographical position and short lines of communication.

Finally, Doshi and Colby propose strategies which advance US thinking about its response to China’s challenge. Both note the current US debate over how to deal with the PRC is mired between the two poles of accommodating or changing—trying to get along with Beijing and generally accepting its growing power, or influencing the Chinese to change their behavior fundamentally to suit US interests. The authors recognize both strategies are dead ends. Instead, they propose strategies that account for PRC power, and reduce it, while rebuilding US power. Thus, Doshi and Colby resolve a false and unproductive dichotomy in US thinking and provide a much-needed evolution in US strategy development.

Properly recognizing and dealing with the potential threat China and the PLA pose is the most pressing security problem the United States faces now and in the near future. Both *The Long Game* and *The Strategy of Denial* are important, if not vital, contributions to the study of this problem and demand the attention of military professionals.

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