

# The Deficiency of Disparity

## The Limits of Systemic Theory and the Need for Strategic Studies in Power Transition Theory

Athahn Steinback and Steven Childs, PhD

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**Abstract:** This article synthesizes power transition theory (PTT) at the grand strategic scale with military studies methods at lower levels of analysis. We analyze the Russo-Japanese War, the recent Afghan War, and the ongoing war in Ukraine as conflicts where political-military specificities enabled outmatched powers to win or force a stalemate. These cases demonstrate the decisive influence of power projection, doctrine, geopolitical constraints, and readiness on conflict outcomes. Finally, the authors operationalize PTT at the grand strategic scale alongside military studies methods at the operational level to propose U.S. responses to Chinese regional revisionism.

**Keywords:** power transition, Russo-Japanese War, Afghanistan War, war in Ukraine, China-Taiwan crisis

### Introduction

Power transition theory (PTT) offers an effective systemic theory to explain competition between states but struggles to predict the outcome of specific conflicts due to reliance on broad metrics of national power. PTT primarily estimates national power by comparing the Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) scores or gross domestic products (GDP) of rival states. By focusing on CINC and GDP, PTT implicitly assumes total economic

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Athahn Steinback is an alumnus of the national security studies and social sciences and globalization graduate programs at California State University, San Bernardino. As a simulation designer, he specializes in modeling combined arms warfare. As an independent researcher, he analyzes factionalism within autocracies. Steven Childs is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science at California State University, San Bernardino, where he teaches in the national security studies graduate program. His research interests include conventional arms proliferation, nuclear deterrence, and the security politics of the Middle East and Asia regions. His scholarship has appeared in *Comparative Strategy*, *Defense & Security Analysis*, and the *Journal of Advanced Military Studies*.

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mobilization while omitting case-specific influences including power projection and readiness. The authors explore the Russo-Japanese War, Afghan War (2001–21), and ongoing war in Ukraine as cases where military studies methods provide more compelling explanations of a conflict's course. The authors then use the potential case of a U.S.-China war over Taiwan to synthesize PTT's grand strategic level with a military studies approach at the operational level to demonstrate how the theory can better guide policy makers. From a policy perspective, PTT can be employed at the grand strategic level to detect emerging challengers and identify which states to mollify or isolate. Meanwhile, military studies approaches should be used in conjunction with PTT at lower levels of analysis to determine how to respond to threats. Strategic considerations such as power projection, readiness, and foreign intervention shape conflict outcomes more decisively than abstract measures of national power as wars are not fought on spreadsheets.

### **Merits and Limits of PTT as a Systemic Theory**

Power Transition Theory serves as a leading theoretical lens for the study of conflict at a systemic level. PTT rests on two pillars. First, it assumes that the distribution of power within the system reflects a hierarchy of states akin to a pyramid with a single state at the top. Second, PTT argues all states in the system are either satisfied or dissatisfied with this dominant power's order. The dominant state constructs an order that reflects its own preferences, and the order persists as long as the majority of power within the international system remains in the hands of the dominant state and its satisfied supporters.<sup>1</sup> The preferences that underlie the dominant state's order are shaped by any number of factors, including history, territory, ideology, religion, culture, and so forth and the dominant state establishes institutions and norms that reflect these preferences.<sup>2</sup> Descending the pyramid from the few great powers at the top to the slightly more numerous middle powers, and then down to the plethora of minor states with little influence, the degree of satisfaction diminishes. Within PTT, the world consists of numerous weaker states dissatisfied with the dominant order and a small number of satisfied states wielding the majority of power perpetuating the dominant order.

Using this pyramid of power and satisfaction as a basis, PTT defines the mechanics of conflict in the international system. PTT predicts power transition conflicts frequently occur when a rising dissatisfied state approaches power parity with a dominant state, leading to either the challenger initiating a power transition conflict, or the declining dominant power striking preemptively to protect its position. Peaceful transitions can occur when a satisfied state supplants the dominant state as the United States did with the UK, but dissatisfied challengers often resort to war to impose their own preferences, as demonstrated by both World Wars.<sup>3</sup> The closer a dissatisfied challenger comes to power parity with the dominant state, the more likely a power transition conflict becomes. Overwhelming power deters challenges, while parity invites them.<sup>4</sup>

While much PTT scholarship largely revolves around global power transition conflicts, the theory applies equally to regional and subregional power structures as well.<sup>5</sup> Within PTT, a dominant regional power can simultaneously be a revisionist state against the current international order. Moreover, a rising global revisionist such as China may attempt a regional transition challenge against the dominant global power before it initiates a bid for global dominance. Despite PTT's limitations, it does reflect the general dynamics of systemic conflict at a highly aggregated level from the late modern period onward.<sup>6</sup>

Power transition theory ably draws on the most cogent elements of its major theoretical rivals to model international politics at a systemic level. From realism, PTT draws the importance of power as a central component of international relations but provides clear conditions under which conflict erupts. PTT's prescription that an imbalance of power deters conflict is more empirically sound than realism's embrace of parity as stabilizing in conflict dynamics.<sup>7</sup> PTT draws on liberalism to explain the persistence of hierarchy and international institutions created by dominant powers.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, PTT's concept that dominant powers typically establish their order in negotiation with satisfied partners, instead of unilaterally imposing them, also draws on liberal concepts of interstate cooperation.<sup>9</sup> PTT's recognition of hierarchy forms a solid basis to understand the persistence of peace between transition conflicts in contrast to realism's unrealistic tenet of perpetual anarchy. Finally, PTT implicitly draws on constructivism in recognizing the influence of identity and ideology in shaping preferences and animating satisfaction.<sup>10</sup> Through preferences and satisfaction, PTT more effectively grasps *why* individual states support the status quo or become revisionist than any exclusive focus on power itself. Collectively, PTT's blend of realist, liberal, and constructivist concepts allow it to robustly explain how power leads to conflict, why hierarchy and peace reign between wars of transition, and why some states resort to violence while others support the status quo.

## Limitations of PTT as a Guide to Policy

While PTT enjoys numerous advantages over its peer systemic theories, it still suffers from inherent limitations that inhibit its ability to inform policy regarding conflict emergence and outcomes. Due to PTT's focus on systemic understanding of total power, the theory overlooks the political-military realities that characterize individual conflicts. For policy makers attempting to operationalize PTT, failure to understand these details may literally mean the difference between victory or defeat in a power transition conflict.

PTT suffers from several key limitations that have already been ably critiqued. Measuring national power by CINC or GDP sometimes creates contradictory predictions of conflict within the theory. CINC scores may suggest a power transition conflict, but GDP indicates the rising power remains outside the 80 percent power threshold necessary to initiate a challenge.<sup>11</sup> Efforts to base the theory's entire operation on readily quantifiable data such as GDP

or CINC have eliminated concepts including national morale and geography present in the theory's original conceptualization.<sup>12</sup> Finally, no consensus exists within PTT regarding *how* to measure a state's satisfaction.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond these critiques, the authors focus on two limitations that most severely inhibit PTT's utility to policy makers. First, sound policy making requires considering case-specific political-military variables absent in PTT's system-level approach. The theory's two levers affecting the likelihood of war, power, and satisfaction are used deterministically when applying theory to policy. According to PTT logic, to avoid war states must either increase their power versus their challengers to prevent a challenge at all or encourage their rising challengers to become satisfied to facilitate a smooth transition.<sup>14</sup> These pathways are not realistic. Total power does not easily lend itself to manipulation by policy levers. GDP growth and key factors within CINC such as total population, urban population, and energy consumption may take decades of bottom-up processes to meaningfully improve. Second, the concept that absent a power advantage, policy makers hoping to avoid war should rely on socializing a rising adversary into adopting the norms of a system alien to its own is excessively optimistic. The prospect of successfully socializing a dissatisfied and rising revisionist power such as China is questionable, and attempting to do so threatens to enhance the revisionist's leverage to subvert the dominant order. Dominant powers must be prepared to fight to retain their position, even if a rising adversary surpasses them in total power. Moreover, proper exploitation of political-military details can enable weaker states to fight and defeat stronger rivals. PTT helps predict when conflicts may arise, but when rivalry erupts into a war of power transition, case-specific political-military realities determine how the war unfolds.

In short, PTT focuses on the wrong levers of national policy to confront (or initiate) a transition challenge by emphasizing material elements absent strategic bearing. By focusing excessively on total measures of national power, PTT struggles to predict conflict outcomes in favor of weaker powers buoyed by strategic advantages not captured in the narrow economic logic of GDP or CINC. This critique applies to all theories that operate at such a generalized level. However, the authors believe PTT possesses great merit as a systemic theory and seek to help the theory understand political-military specificities that shape conflicts once they emerge to make PTT more useful to policy makers. Policy makers must define their interests and devise strategies to safeguard them in the complex international system. Conceptually *how* to harness a state's available power in its many manifestations matters far more than *how much* power a state is thought to have.

## **Deficiencies of Measuring Total National Power**

Measures of total national power based on economic or material measures omits key strategic constraints necessary to understand specific conflict outcomes. GDP- and CINC-based measures of national power can be used at the grand

strategic level to estimate a state's total potential power within the international system, but these metrics should never be treated mechanistically as total power superiority guarantees little. CINC- and GDP-based power models do not consider power projection, implicitly assume total economic mobilization, and struggle to predict the impact of foreign intervention in regional conflicts. Excessive reliance on these metrics harms PTT's ability to help policy makers predict conflict outcomes unless the theory pairs itself with a military studies approach to handle analysis below the grand strategic scope.

Measuring total national power by GDP provides a generalized estimate of a state's power. GDP alone does not ensure that a state invests in its military capabilities. High GDP states can possess dysfunctional militaries insufficient to protect their foreign interests as exemplified by Germany today.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, the implicit technological advantages afforded by a higher GDP do not automatically equate to insurmountable military superiority. No military can equally fill every niche, and competent combatants focus their efforts on procuring technologies that exploit a rivals' weaknesses. For instance, China possesses advanced antishipping missile capabilities that largely nullify America's powerful aircraft carriers within 600 kilometers of China's coastline.<sup>16</sup> Thus, a key American military advantage can be mitigated by an opponent boasting lower GDP. Measuring national power by GDP also neglects the use of intellectual property theft by a lower GDP state to close technological gaps with wealthier rivals. For the purposes of PTT, GDP provides a rough measure of the total *theoretical* power of a state, but it does not capture a state's actual military capabilities.

Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) scores estimate total national power based on early twentieth-century measurements of economic and military might that fail to grasp the complexity of modern warfare or globalized economics. CINC measures each state's military expenditure, military personnel, energy consumption, iron/steel production, urban population, and total population ratios to estimate the state's total share of power in the international system.<sup>17</sup> Military expenditure offers only a surface-level estimate of potential force composition or capabilities. An advanced military can still suffer from poor power projection. Likewise, well-funded militaries, such as those of many Arab states, can still chronically underperform due to ineffective, politicized command structures.<sup>18</sup> Total personnel presents an anachronism because militaries typically become *smaller* as they professionalize and technologically advance. CINC further disregards nuclear weapons, thus conflicting with PTT's concepts that nuclear arms provide leverage, and the threat of mutually assured destruction does not intrinsically deter aggression by nuclear-armed revisionists.<sup>19</sup>

CINC's estimates of economic power through iron/steel production, energy consumption, and urban/total population neglect the complexities of a globalized postindustrial world economy. Iron and steel output do not measure productivity in economies powered by microprocessors and manufactured composites.<sup>20</sup> Second, energy consumption has never been a reliable indica-

tor of productivity, as it conflates inefficiency with output in the case of states such as the USSR that consumed more energy to produce less output.<sup>21</sup> Finally, CINC exaggerates the benefits of large populations by failing to account for the social, economic, and military costs of maintaining them. Middle income states with large populations such as Brazil or Indonesia consume large volumes of economic output supporting their existing population without substantially contributing to economic growth or mustering military might.<sup>22</sup> CINC provides accessible but imperfect insight into total national power; policy makers operationalizing PTT should only use CINC with full awareness of its limitations. Bearing these core limitations of GDP and CINC in mind, deeper challenges of measuring total national power, including power projection, limited warfare, and foreign assistance can be fully explored.

The primacy of power projection cannot be understated in interstate conflict. Power projection represents a state's ability to project military force to achieve political ends beyond its own borders.<sup>23</sup> The degradation of power projection across distance is nonlinear and efforts to use distance and travel time to a prospective warzone as a proxy for power projection fail to capture the complexities of power projection in modern warfare.<sup>24</sup> Assets such as aircraft carriers, aerial tankers, cargo aircraft, and forward bases disproportionately amplify a state's power projection capabilities at distance as demonstrated in both Gulf Wars.<sup>25</sup> However, antiaccess capabilities such as antishipping and antiaircraft missiles employed by a regional adversary can limit the utility of these advantages.<sup>26</sup> For example, even though the United States possesses unmatched *global* power projection, a weaker competitor such as China may still gain a regional power projection advantage through capabilities that deny access to American power projection assets. One such example is the Chinese militarization of artificial islands in the South China Sea to extend forward basing directly into potential combat zones. Moreover, states such as Germany and Japan that appear strong according to GDP and CINC may suffer from abysmal power projection capabilities even in their own home region.<sup>27</sup> Power projection is essential in predicting the possible outcomes of military escalation, but it requires case-specific analysis that PTT omits without the assistance of military studies.

Attempting to measure total national power also implicitly assumes total economic mobilization for a war effort. While PTT theorists correctly observe that economic power has become more fungible into military power over the past century, they underestimate the speed of modern warfare. State combat during the Second Gulf Wars lasted little more than a month. Likewise, the Russo-Georgian War lasted less than two weeks and Russia's forceful occupation of Crimea was complete in slightly more than one month.<sup>28</sup> Modern mechanized warfare moves with such speed that a political or territorial fait accompli is often reached before any meaningful level of economic mobilization can be achieved. While protracted conflicts and extensive economic mobilization still occur as demonstrated by the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, protracted state conflicts are an exception, not the norm. Policy makers would do well to

remember that most wars are limited wars and total economic mobilization should not be automatically assumed.

Competing strategic interests or concerns play an equally decisive role in determining the outcome of individual conflicts. Even in cases of severe total power imbalance, such as the United States versus China in the Korean War, policy makers may deliberately temper escalation due to strategic threats posed by other states. Likewise, all the power in the world counts for little if policy makers in status quo states faced with rising revisionist adversaries decline to act due to domestic political concerns. Alternatively, a rising state such as the United States in the late 1800s may simply decline to initiate a transition challenge and focus on its own internal affairs.<sup>29</sup> National power is a tool directed according to the priorities of policy makers, not the iron laws of theory.

The extent and efficacy of foreign intervention in regional conflicts also eludes prediction within PTT based on GDP or CINC scores. As the United States demonstrated in Afghanistan, even decades of security assistance and billions of dollars in equipment and training does not guarantee a positive military outcome for the recipient state. Conversely, by employing limited military force and highly selective material aid, France was able to play a decisive role in ejecting Libya from Chad during the Toyota War (1987).<sup>30</sup> Likewise, substantial Western equipment, training, and intelligence aid to Ukraine following the February invasion has lent Kyiv key qualitative advantages over Russia.<sup>31</sup> Foreign intervention in regional conflicts ties so closely to case-specific political and military considerations that efforts to predict outcomes of interventions through measures of total national power becomes futile.

Due to the inherent limitations of measuring total national power, PTT struggles to predict the outcome of specific conflicts. PTT serves as a threat radar to detect likely conflicts. Using PTT, policy makers can identify which states are powerful enough to warrant mollification if satisfied or isolation if revisionist. Without accounting for power projection, PTT lacks a method to measure how much of a state's total power can realistically deploy in a specific conflict. By assuming total mobilization, the theory overemphasizes national power available for any conflict short of total war. By omitting competing strategic pressures limiting deployment of state power, PTT overestimates the power of most states in any given conflict. Finally, total measures of power are wholly inappropriate to predict the impact of foreign intervention. Consequently, despite its merits at the systemic level, PTT currently lends little useful guidance to policy makers confronting specific potential conflicts. PTT will be more useful to policy makers if theorists supplement PTT's strategic level of analysis with a military studies approach at the operational level.

## Cases

Each of the following cases highlights modern conflicts where political-military nuances enabled a weaker power to militarily defeat or outlast a stronger opponent contrary to the predictions of PTT. In each of these cases, the defeated



party possessed vastly superior total national power as measured by both CINC and GDP. In the Russo-Japanese War, superior Japanese power projection and qualitative superiority enabled Tokyo to reshape East Asia's regional power hierarchy in its favor. In the Afghan War, the Taliban survived, owing to America's inability to finish them off inside Pakistan due to competing strategic concerns and later returned to overthrow the weak Afghan government. Finally, the 2022 invasion of Ukraine revealed the Russian military's poor readiness, low morale, and obsolete doctrine rendered them vastly inferior to their smaller Ukrainian neighbor and shattered illusions of Russian great-power status. While the details of each case are unique, trends and themes within them such as the primacy of power projection, influence of conflicting strategic goals, and impact of readiness and morale are common to wars across history and at all levels of the international system. By exploring cases wherein political-military specificities shaped the outcome of conflicts contrary to the expectations of PTT, the authors aim to demonstrate the value to policy makers of supplementing PTT's utility at the grand strategic level with military studies approaches at lower levels of analysis. PTT enjoys many merits, but for the purposes of informing policy it needs to be paired with a military studies approach.

While it may be tempting to disregard these conflicts as limited wars and thus of little interest to great-power politics, in PTT regional hierarchies matter because they alter regional power structures within the broader global hierarchy.<sup>32</sup> Japanese victory over Russia transferred regional dominance to Japan, thus enabling its subsequent revisionist actions against the United States and the UK. Russia's invasion of Ukraine explicitly sought to undermine American regional dominance by eliminating what Moscow believed was a vulnerable American partner. Even the U.S. war in Afghanistan, despite not being a traditional power transition conflict, was still relevant to PTT and worthy of study. This is because of its two-decade long opportunity cost it inflicted on American resources and political attention that could have been better spent containing resurgent revisionist Russia or rising China. These limited wars are critical in international relations, and policy makers and PTT theorists alike should not discount their lessons.

### **Case 1: The Russo-Japanese War, 1904–1905**

The 1904–5 Russo-Japanese War exemplifies the supremacy of case-specific strategic considerations such as power projection and doctrine over PTT's adherence to total power in actual warfare. Russia's CINC score of 0.11 was more than double Japan's 0.05 in 1904, and during the conflict Russia's CINC score *grew*, while victorious Japan's score declined.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, Russia enjoyed a 2.5 to 1 GDP advantage over Japan in 1904.<sup>34</sup> According to the logic of calculating national power through CINC and GDP, Russia should have possessed clear superiority, and yet Moscow was soundly defeated. The keys to that defeat rested in Russia's deficient power projection ability in the East Asian theater, adherence to obsolete military doctrine, and abysmal military morale. These



case-specific constraints rendered total Russian power irrelevant and enabled Japan to execute a regional power transition challenge without reaching parity.

## Overview of the Russo-Japanese War

Following the failure of negotiations to demarcate separate Russian and Japanese spheres of influence in Manchuria and Korea in 1903, Tokyo opted to seize its territorial claims by force.<sup>35</sup> The Russo-Japanese war did not result from miscalculation; it was a deliberate gamble by a weaker power to leverage its regional military advantages to force a territorial fait accompli against a stronger adversary. Heading into the war, Tokyo understood that Russia's strategic position was undercut by three factors. First, Russia's overwhelming military might could not be concentrated in theater due to the great distances involved and poor logistical capabilities.<sup>36</sup> Second, Japan enjoyed the benefit of surprise as Russian leadership believed their total power advantages deterred Japanese aggression.<sup>37</sup> Third, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance deterred intervention by third parties.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, Japanese leadership estimated that Russia's regional vulnerability created a window of opportunity to gain a foothold on the continent and assert Japanese great-power status.

Japan initiated hostilities on 8 February 1904, with a surprise attack on the Russian fleet anchored in Port Arthur, followed by a series of unopposed naval landings over the next 10 days. Throughout 1904, Japan enjoyed the freedom to strike when and where it pleased, while Russian commanders possessed limited intelligence regarding Japanese force concentrations or movements, and even less means to inhibit their advance. Russian forces were left immobilized by Japanese naval superiority, isolated by the advancing Japanese army, and crippled by underestimating Japanese capabilities.<sup>39</sup> By May 1904, Japan conquered Korea and much of Russia's ground forces, and all its battleships in theater were trapped in Port Arthur. During the siege of Port Arthur, fighting continued throughout Manchuria, but despite growing Russian force levels, outnumbered Japanese forces consistently repelled Russian counterattacks attempting to relieve Port Arthur. In January 1905, after seven months of grueling siege warfare, and several indecisive naval battles, Russian forces in Port Arthur surrendered and all surviving battleships of the Pacific fleet were scuttled to avoid capture.<sup>40</sup> Although Japan suffered high casualties capturing Port Arthur, seizing the port secured a crucial supply hub for reinforcements and freed Japanese forces to advance farther into Manchuria. Moreover, the loss of Russia's Pacific fleet battleships ended credible Russian naval resistance in theater.

As the war dragged into 1905, Japan reached the limit of its logistical capacity to support a major land war. Japan was running out of ammunition in theater, trained reservists at home, and the Japanese army faced severe difficulties getting supplies forward to combat units.<sup>41</sup> Japanese morale, however remained high, and its soldiers continued to outperform their more numerous Russian adversaries, but Japan now ran a real risk of simply being ground to death in a war of attrition. In February–March 1905, Japan inflicted approx-

imately 89,000 Russian casualties during the Battle of Mukden, but Japanese forces were unable to pursue the retreating Russians and secure a decisive victory.<sup>42</sup> Japan's increasingly fragile logistics simply could not support further exploitation inland. Conversely, Russian forces afflicted by lethargic leadership, poor morale among the rank and file, their own logistical woes, and civil unrest in Russia meant it was unable to regain initiative and drive the Japanese back.<sup>43</sup> Russia's final gambit rested on the prospect that the Russian Baltic Fleet could credibly oppose the Japanese Combined Fleet after trekking halfway around the globe without access to proper port facilities and maintenance en route. Unsurprisingly, the Baltic Fleet was annihilated in detail when intercepted at the Battle of Tsushima Strait in May 1905. With the Russian navy defeated, the mounting costs of the land war, and growing popular unrest, Moscow sued for peace through negotiations.<sup>44</sup> Russia subsequently ceded Korea, Manchuria, and South Sakhalin to Japan. To understand how Japan achieved this seemingly impossible victory, we need to explore the crucial roles of power projection and doctrine in the Russo-Japanese War that made Tokyo's victory possible.

## **Twin Failures of Russian Naval Power Projection and Force Posture**

On paper, Russia enjoyed overwhelming naval superiority over Japan, but in practice Japan enjoyed a regional naval advantage. The Russian Pacific Fleet's battleships were based in the easily blockaded Yellow Sea at Port Arthur, while the bulk of the Pacific Fleet's armored cruisers and torpedo boats were based in Vladivostok, separated by the entire Korean Peninsula.<sup>45</sup> Individually, neither of these flotillas possessed the firepower to face the Japanese Combined Fleet; Russia's battleships were ill-suited to combat light torpedo boats, whereas the cruisers lacked the heavy ordnance to duel with Japanese battleships. To achieve parity, Russia's Pacific Fleet needed to sail its squadrons through Japanese-controlled waters and link up, at the risk of their own annihilation in transit. Japan's surprise torpedo boat attack on Port Arthur on the opening day of the war damaged several Russian capital ships, sharply reducing their odds of successfully evading a Japanese blockade to reach Vladivostok.<sup>46</sup> Advancing Japanese ground forces further jeopardized Russia's naval position by threatening to eject them from Port Arthur into the waiting guns of the Japanese fleet or bring them under constant artillery fire from land.<sup>47</sup> From the moment the war started, Japan enjoyed a dominant position on the high seas, despite its numerical disadvantage in total warships.

Throughout 1904 the Russian Pacific Fleet's battleships remained trapped in Port Arthur and incapable of interdicting the flow of Japanese troops and equipment to the continent. In this way, Russia's inability to contest the high seas also contributed to its difficulties on land. By nature of the region's geography and Russia's dispersed force posture, the Russian Pacific Fleet was compelled to face a stronger enemy who had already dealt a surprise blow on unfavorable terms. The Pacific Fleet was ground down through a series of skirmishes during

**Table 1.** Comparative Russian and Japanese fleet strengths in East Asia, February 1904

Russian Pacific Fleet		Japanese Combined Fleet*	
battleships	7	battleships	6
armored cruisers	4	armored cruisers	6
cruisers	7	cruisers	12
destroyers	21	destroyers	22
torpedo boats	22	torpedo boats	28

\*Omits Japanese warships assigned to auxiliary or coastal defense duties and unavailable for offensive combat operations.

Source: Yoji Koda, *"The Russo-Japanese War: Primary Causes of Japanese Success,"* Naval War College Review 58, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 10–44.

**Table 2.** Comparative Russian and Japanese fleet strengths in East Asia, May 1905

Baltic Fleet		Japanese Combined Fleet*	
battleships	8	battleships	4
Coastal Battleships	3	coastal battleships	1
armored cruisers	3	armored cruisers	8
cruisers	6	cruisers	18
destroyers	9	destroyers	21
torpedo/gunboats	0	torpedo/gunboats	34

\*Omits Japanese warships assigned to auxiliary or coastal defense duties and unavailable for offensive combat operations.

Source: Piotr Olender, *Russo-Japanese Naval War 1905, vol. 2 (Sandomierz, Poland: Stratus, 2010).*

summer 1904 and the scarcity of naval repair yards in the Far East prevented Russia from mitigating attrition in theater. When the Pacific Fleet's battleship squadron was finally forced to sea by Japanese artillery in August 1904, the squadron failed to evade the blockade and its vessels were interned in neutral harbors or forced to return to Port Arthur and was subsequently scuttled. Likewise, the Vladivostok cruiser squadron was crippled beyond repair while attempting to slip through Korean waters to rendezvous with the battleships.<sup>48</sup> By the time the Russian Baltic Fleet resupplied in Madagascar in January 1905, the Pacific Fleet was already defeated.<sup>49</sup> In the ensuing four months, it took the Baltic Fleet to reach the combat zone, the Japanese enjoyed ample time to repair damage and replace lost vessels.<sup>50</sup> Conversely, the Russian Baltic Fleet was forced to transit halfway around the world, without access to friendly forward bases or repair facilities, with some vessels that were never designed for high-seas service.<sup>51</sup> The Baltic Fleet's numerical superiority in capital ships was undermined by demoralized and undersupplied crews and the fleet was annihilated by Japan's navy at the May 1905 Battle of Tsushima Strait.

Russia's theoretical naval superiority was meaningless in the actual conduct of the Russo-Japanese War. The separation of its fleets by half a globe diminished Russia's naval might, while the country's poor global power projection capabilities and the vulnerable posture of existing forces in theater further exacerbated this weakness. Russia's lack of overseas repair and refueling assets to support the Baltic Fleet's global transit and the unreadiness of its equipment for long-range redeployment rendered it combat ineffective by the point it arrived in theater. Likewise, the Pacific Fleet's disposition of force at the start of the conflict undermined its ability to counterbalance the Japanese Combined Fleet. Japan never faced the combined might of the Russian navy; instead, it faced two weaker Russian fleets and defeated them separately. Consequently, a strategic situation that appeared to assure Russian victory on the macroscale, in fact, favored Japan.

### **Failure of Russian Land Power Projection and Military Doctrine**

Russia's apparent superiority on land proved equally illusory due to poor power projection, archaic military doctrines, and abysmal morale. Russia's poor infrastructure in the Far East prevented it from projecting overwhelming force against Japan and allowed Japan to fight the Russian army on roughly equal terms. Likewise, obsolete military doctrines combined with the low morale and poor training of the army prevented Moscow from gaining qualitative superiority. Consequently, revisionist Japan gained the upper hand on both land and sea and forcefully reshaped the power dynamics of East Asia. While the particulars of every war vary, Russia's defeat in 1905 serves as a stern warning that total power does not guarantee military victory, even against weaker regional revisionists.

Russia's entire land war effort hinged on the single-track Trans-Siberian Railroad, wholly inadequate for the logistical burden of high-intensity warfare. Transit times across the Trans-Siberian rail line averaged 40–50 days, thus planners in Moscow were compelled to plan resupply and reinforcement far in advance of actual events at the front and errors required months to correct.<sup>52</sup> Weather hazards, incomplete rail sections, and chronic derailments further compounded the Trans-Siberian Railroad's logistical difficulties.<sup>53</sup> Consequently, Russia's land power projection capabilities were undermined throughout the conflict, because it could not move men and material into theater as quickly as the Japanese could by sea. During the conflict, Japanese forces generally remained at full strength as fresh replacements arrived from the home islands, while Russian forces hovered around 70 percent of their paper strength due to shortages of replacements in theater.<sup>54</sup> Despite the numerical supremacy of the Russian army in its entirety, Japan enjoyed a significant regional force advantage at the beginning of hostilities.<sup>55</sup> Due to these logistical constraints, Moscow could not overwhelm the Japanese through sheer force of numbers. Moreover, the threat of invasion by European rivals further reduced Russian power pro-

jection capabilities by tying down Russia's finest troops on its western borders.<sup>56</sup> Logistical deficiencies severely undermined Russian land power projection and strategic uncertainty further exacerbated these problems.

Russia enjoyed key technological advantages on land that promised to offset its logistical failures, but these advantages were undermined by obsolete doctrine and poor morale. When the war began, Russia had already begun issuing machine guns to its combat divisions, while Japan was only just beginning to embrace the new weapon.<sup>57</sup> Likewise, modern Model 1900 field guns made up a full one-third of Russian artillery, in contrast to the archaic Type 31 mountain gun used by Japan.<sup>58</sup> Russia further utilized modern entrenchment techniques, barbed wire, and minefields to funnel Japanese forces into the killing fields of its machine guns. From a purely technical perspective, the Russian military was well-equipped to fortify and defend its far-flung Eastern holdings. However, archaic doctrines and abysmal morale undermined qualitative advantages offered by these technological advances.

Russian infantry doctrine continued to embrace nineteenth-century massed volley fire tactics followed by a bayonet charge.<sup>59</sup> While Russian training emphasized archaic practices of unaimed massed fire, their Japanese adversaries embraced modern concepts of individual marksmanship and initiative.<sup>60</sup> Likewise, Russian doctrine did not foresee the possibility of night combat and infiltration, which the Japanese explicitly trained for and exploited to great effect throughout the conflict.<sup>61</sup> Russia's obsolete practices proved disastrously ineffective on war waged around the clock with battlefields filled with trenches, machine guns, and bolt-action rifles. While Russian forces offered effective resistance when fighting from strong defensive fortifications, their obsolete doctrines diminished their ability to retake lost territory. Before the war had even begun, poorer Japan already fielded a better trained military that embraced new doctrines suited to modern warfare, despite its qualitative inferiority in equipment. Technological advantages alone do not ensure a military is prepared for a modern conflict; sometimes the less affluent combatant more accurately predicts and exploits the conditions of future warfare.

Second, obsolete Russian artillery doctrine allowed Japan's technologically inferior artillery to outperform Russian rivals. Russian field artillery doctrine did not use indirect fire to engage targets beyond line of sight, despite their new field guns possessing that capacity. Russian doctrine further failed to anticipate the dangers of hostile indirect fire and called for artillery to be deployed in concentrated groups on high hilltops, without entrenchment or camouflage. Finally, Russian artillery operated autonomously and chronically failed to coordinate with adjoining infantry to protect valuable artillery assets.<sup>62</sup> The Japanese exploited these doctrinal deficiencies by employing their own artillery pieces in dispersed groups, firing from beyond line of sight, coordinated by field telephone wires and forward observers, to destroy Russian artillery with little fear of reprisal.<sup>63</sup> Throughout the war Japan continued to improve combined arms cooperation by ultimately co-deploying artillery in the trenches with the infan-

try while Russia continued to keep these forces separated.<sup>64</sup> Thus, Russia's technological artillery advantage was nullified by doctrinal incompetence against the innovative thinking of their less advanced rival.

Finally, poor morale and unmotivated soldiers exacerbated Russia's doctrinal deficiencies. Russian field commanders consistently noted "complete apathy, almost an indifference toward the war" among rank-and-file soldiers.<sup>65</sup> Likewise, postwar Russian military reformers identified the lack of national sentiment or investment in the conflict's outcome as a major contributing factor to defeat. Military mutinies and civilian riots in Russia's core territories erupted during the conflict in the east, precipitating its transition to constitutional monarchy after the war.<sup>66</sup> In a society where 70 percent of the army's conscripts were impoverished peasants living under constant repression, the average soldier had little incentive to sacrifice themselves for the czar's interests halfway across the world.<sup>67</sup> Conversely, Japan's better trained soldiers also displayed greater commitment to the conflict. Throughout the war, Japanese units continued to fight without breaking, even as their commanders repeatedly threw them at entrenched fortifications without concern for their survival.<sup>68</sup> Despite suffering significant casualties, Japan reinforced its logistical and doctrinal advantages by maintaining discipline among its rank-and-file soldiers throughout the conflict.

Inadequate power projection precluded Russia from gaining quantitative superiority and forced Moscow to rely on qualitative advantages that it chronically misused. Russia's technological edge in artillery was nullified by deploying these assets in ways that made them easy targets for less advanced Japanese artillery. Likewise, despite acceptable defensive performance, Russian infantry doctrine was poorly suited to retake lost ground. Finally, pervasive poor morale stemming from the tsarist regime's declining legitimacy lent the average Russian soldier little reason to sacrifice themselves to defend far-flung outposts of the empire. Despite impressive power according to the logic of GDP or CINC, Russia could not concentrate its full might in East Asia. Bereft of overwhelming numbers, Moscow badly misused the forces it did possess in theater and received a humiliating defeat at the hands of a regional rival.

## **Underestimating the Weaker Party—Japan Triumphant**

Moscow's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War presents a stark reminder that GDP and CINC reveals little about the likely outcome of a conflict to policy makers. Russia's total power did not prevent weaker Japan from seizing regional dominance due to its superior power projection in theater. Likewise, possessing technological advantages does not guarantee that a military will exploit these advantages in combat. Predicting military outcomes from total power alone courts the same hubris that delivered Russia an ignominious defeat in 1905 and created a new political order in East Asia. American policy makers confronting China today must carefully consider the military aspects of the rivalry to avoid falling victim to a similar gambit.



## Case 2: The U.S. War in Afghanistan, 2001–2021

The recent war in Afghanistan further demonstrates the problems of PTT's GDP/CINC-based predictions of conflict outcomes divorced from strategic and broader geopolitical factors. The Afghan War simultaneously reveals the difficulties PTT faces predicting outcomes in asymmetric warfare, coupled with its omission of competing priorities that impede the use of national power. Compared to the Russo-Japanese case, the conventional power imbalance between the belligerents in Afghanistan was significantly wider. Table 3 notes the CINC scores and gross domestic product measures before the onset of hostilities between the U.S. and Taliban governments up to the most recently available data. The government of Pakistan is further included given the prominent role that elements of its security apparatus played in supporting the Taliban.

At the beginning of the war, in late 2001, the United States maintained a nearly 35 to 1 advantage in power over the Taliban as measured by CINC score. This ratio narrows to a factor of 9 to 1, including the full government of Pakistan on the Taliban's side of the ledger.<sup>69</sup> With GDP alone, the imbalance skyrockets to a factor of more than 1,000 to 1, down to 86 to 1, if including Pakistan. This phase of the conflict fully aligns with PTT's predictions considering the huge power advantage of the United States and its allies over the Taliban. Such calculations also assume that all the energies of the government of Pakistan were devoted to the effort, which is clearly not the case. Consequently, the practical disparities in capability should be even greater than these portrayals.

The fall of Kabul to the Taliban in 2021, however, contradicts the theory's expectations. As a nonstate actor there are no concrete datasets that provide a hard power measure of the Taliban's capabilities; however, comparing the U.S. and Afghan governments' combined scores to that of the government of Pakistan yields preponderance factors of 56 to 1 for GDP and a CINC power imbalance by a factor of 9 to 1. Moreover, the U.S. and Afghan governments operated with the support of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partners in the International Security Assistance Force, further bolstering the power brought to bear against the Taliban insurgency.

Security assistance data demonstrates that the U.S. government provided nearly \$73 billion in military aid to Afghanistan between 2001 and 2020, which was close to 20 times the government of Afghanistan's military expenditures.<sup>70</sup> These monies were directed to paying the salaries of Afghan security personnel and included extensive training and equipping efforts for the Afghan National Police and the Afghan National Army. Despite these significant investments, there was no return in terms of security performance. Former Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker argued that Afghan personnel were "useless as a security force because they are corrupt down to the patrol level."<sup>71</sup> Such was the extent of this corruption that as many as 18 percent of security personnel on record were "ghost" soldiers who existed for the purposes of commanders skimming their paychecks.<sup>72</sup> U.S. forces and logistical support was required to keep Afghan security forces operating. However, the Taliban continued to make gains.

The Afghan government could count on more than 250,000 of its own security personnel, with some scholars estimating that the daily on-call number was 180,000.<sup>73</sup> By comparison, estimates of the Taliban hover around 60,000 full-time fighters.<sup>74</sup> These figures do not include the thousands of Western troops or contractors in theater at any given point during the conflict and the extensive support they brought in terms of artillery and airpower. Notably, during the course of the war most of the Afghan forces operated with qualitatively superior weaponry and in a largely defensive role while Taliban fighters maintained an offensive orientation without access to air support or armored vehicles. Per raw troop count and the disposition of forces the traditional military logic of a 3:1 advantage, albeit at the theater level, was inverted in favor of the defense. Yet, the Afghan National Army decisively lost the war and failed to defend its capital city.

How did such a lopsided case in terms of power distribution yield a decisive victory for the weaker side? The key to U.S./Afghan defeat in 2021 rests in the broader geopolitical situation in South-Central Asia. Despite an overwhelming advantage in on-call firepower in favor of the U.S.-aligned Afghan government, the Taliban benefited from a safe haven and sponsorship by elements within the Pakistani government. The Taliban enjoyed relative freedom to reorganize and recruit inside Pakistan, protected from most elements of U.S. power by Pakistani sovereignty. America's understandable unwillingness to expand the war into the Taliban's safe havens inside Pakistan and risk throwing the entire region into chaos by destabilizing a nuclear-armed power strongly contributed to the Taliban's victory. The Taliban could afford to fight for years, even sustain heavy losses, because losses could be recovered inside Pakistan, aided by direct support from elements of the Pakistani government. Thus, America was never fully able to defeat the Taliban because it never gained full control over the Taliban's bases of operation or neutralized the Pakistani government's role in resupplying the Taliban. Geopolitical realities precluded military victory, and the United States was never capable of fully defeating the Taliban before handing control over to the fatally flawed and doomed to fail Afghan government.

### **The Taliban's Long Road (Back) to Kabul**

Eventual Taliban victory in August 2021 was aided by regional political trends established before the war even began. As part of their efforts to achieve strategic depth against India, Pakistani leadership long sought to establish a friendly regime on their western flank in Afghanistan, while directly supporting Kashmiri militant groups against India.<sup>75</sup> For the former, Pakistan facilitated aid to the Taliban, while in the latter it enlisted the assistance of international jihadists, including Osama bin Laden. Pakistani ties to the Taliban also extended beyond simple matters of state policy as Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) personnel operating in Afghanistan predominantly shared both Pashtun tribal identity and fundamentalist Islamist ideology with the Taliban they assisted.

During the Afghan warlord period in the early- to mid-1990s, Pakistan

**Table 3.** Comparative U.S., Afghan, and Pakistani CINC and GDP (in millions constant 2015 USD) values

	CINC (2000)	CINC (2016)	GDP (2000)	GDP (2020)
United States	0.1426877	0.1330576	\$13,754,300	\$19,247,056
Afghanistan	0.0040984	0.0028154	\$11,900	\$20,621
Pakistan	0.0132468	0.0151497	\$146,487	\$320,098

Sources: CINC data per “National Material Capabilities v6.0 Dataset”; GDP data for Afghanistan in 2000 extrapolated from Maddison project dataset and converted to constant 2015 USD; Jutta Bolt and Jan Luiten van Zanden, “Maddison Style Estimates of the Evolution of the World Economy. A New 2020 Update” (Maddison Project Working Paper WP-15, October 2020); and GDP drawn from World Bank, “GDP (constant 2015 US\$)—United States, Pakistan, Afghanistan,” World Bank Group, accessed 31 October 2022.

extended its influence inside Afghanistan by harnessing cross-border Pashtuns tribal connections. First, Pakistan attempted to bring Afghanistan’s Pashtun population under their influence through pro-Pakistani mujahideen commander Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and then, more successfully, by supporting the Kandahar-based warlords who subsequently formed the Taliban.<sup>76</sup> Extending Pakistani influence, although not control, over the Afghan Taliban proved possible since many Taliban fighters and leaders alike were strongly shaped by and connected to Pakistan. As a prominent expert on the Taliban, Ahmed Rashid observed:

The Taliban were born in Pakistani refugee camps, educated in Pakistani madrassas and learnt their fighting skills from Mujaheddin parties based in Pakistan. Their families carried Pakistani identity cards. The Taliban’s deep connections to Pakistani state institutions, political parties, Islamic groups, the madrasa network, the drugs mafia and business and transport groups came at a time when Pakistan’s power structure was unravelling and fragmented.<sup>77</sup>

ISI support for the Taliban and al-Qaeda persisted following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. After the United States and the Northern Alliance defeated the Taliban at Kabul in November 2001, Taliban and al-Qaeda combatants coalesced in their last major bastion in the northern city of Kunduz. Among them were Pakistani military advisors and intelligence officials embedded with the movement. With Northern Alliance forces closing in and fearing the embarrassment of its agents being captured, Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf orchestrated a quid pro quo with President George W. Bush seeking to evacuate his military advisors in exchange for helping the United States gain access to the region for military operations.<sup>78</sup> The evacuation commenced in a series of secret Pakistani flights dubbed the “Kunduz Airlift.” Whether through

these evacuations or in the successive weeks via the porous border, al-Qaeda's senior leadership also escaped capture. That Osama bin Laden was ultimately found in a compound within a mile of the Pakistan Military Academy suggests some degree of complicity within elements of Pakistan's security services.

Following the success of the Northern Alliance and U.S. forces in deposing the Taliban, the security situation allowed officials to create a constitution and hold elections in 2004. After these milestones, the U.S. government in 2005 elevated Afghanistan to the level of "strategic partner."<sup>79</sup> For Pakistani strategists, the potential rise of a pro-Indian government in Afghanistan backed by the United States directly threatened their aspirations for strategic depth. Reestablishing a pro-Pakistani government inside Afghanistan became a matter of Pakistani national interest, and the pro-Islamabad Pashtun Taliban continued to present ideal proxies for the task.

The security situation in Afghanistan quickly destabilized in subsequent years as Pashtun fighters from Pakistan flowed across the border to support a Taliban insurgency. The central government based in Kabul faced the difficult task of creating a strong centralized government in a society that is ethnically fractured, tribal, and dramatically underdeveloped. Demographically the largest ethnic bloc in the country are Pashtuns (42 percent) who are joined by various other ethnic minorities.<sup>80</sup> Persistent grievances between concentrations of minorities in the north and the majority Pashtun populations in the south and east continued to sow mistrust and conflict. Although the nation's Human Development Index climbed in the years following the Taliban's ouster in 2001, in 2021 Afghanistan still ranked 180th out of 191 countries, even before the government's collapse.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, the country ranked 174th out of 180 countries on Transparency International's Corruption Index in the last year where data was available.<sup>82</sup> The Taliban exploited the national government's rampant corruption and weakness and enjoyed a steady stream of fighters from across the border supported by camps in Pakistan's then Federally Administered Tribal Areas.

ISI support for the Taliban remained significant despite Pakistan's alleged support for the U.S.-led Global War on Terrorism. ISI support efforts coincided with major Taliban offensives such as in 2006 and the extent of assistance extended beyond sanctuary across the border to include actively providing training and furnishing equipment, fuel, and ammunition.<sup>83</sup> ISI training provided to the Taliban included instruction in creating suicide bombs and improvised explosive devices, both crucial to Taliban combat operations. Some estimates note that as many as 80 percent of Taliban fighters in some sectors were trained in Pakistan.<sup>84</sup> Much of this training and recruitment took place in madrassas in the border region, which are ideologically aligned with the Taliban.

Despite shared interests and ideological similarities, the Taliban were not completely aligned with the Pakistani government. In fall 2007, the Pakistani Taliban launched an offensive against the Pakistani government to seize the city of Swat in 2006. A Pakistani counteroffensive subsequently recaptured the

Swat valley, but soon the Pakistani Taliban returned, forcing the government into a cease-fire in February 2009. By spring 2009 the government launched a renewed offensive to reclaim Swat and pursue the group's leadership specifically. However, the offensive did not seek to assert Pakistani control over the entirety of the border region or seek to undermine the broader Taliban movement. As the Swat valley confrontation indicates, while the ISI consistently aided the Taliban, they never controlled them. The Taliban was simultaneously a partner and challenger to the Pakistani government, a weapon the Pakistani government unleashed against Afghanistan at its own risk, but never a puppet. As part of the equilibrium, Islamabad never attempted to drive the Taliban from Pakistani territory entirely.

Pakistan's role as the Taliban's primary state supporter and as a Taliban base of operations was actively understood by U.S. leadership at the time. The theater of operations was even routinely referenced as AfPak in recognition of Pakistan's persistent role during the conflict, both as a Taliban base of operations and active supporter. The U.S. special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan at the time, Richard Holbrooke, noted the critical role that the territory of Pakistan played when he said that "it is on the eastern side of this ill-defined border that the international terrorist movement is located."<sup>85</sup> U.S. leaders were fully aware of Pakistan's key role in the conflict, but larger concerns precluded serious action against/inside Pakistan. At an operational level, the United States relied on Pakistan as the most direct route of resupply into Afghanistan. Meanwhile, at a strategic level, fear of creating a worse crisis by destabilizing Pakistan loomed large over American decision making.

The border region haven and continued assistance by the ISI worsened the security efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. The year 2010 marked the height of the insurgency, following the announcement of a troop surge in 2009 by incoming President Barack H. Obama. This effort sought to "disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda and its safe havens in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future."<sup>86</sup> The surge in troops was matched by a surge in American foreign aid, which doubled from approximately \$1 billion in 2009 to an average of \$2 billion in 2010 and 2011. After security gains in 2013, the U.S. government officially handed over security to the Afghan government, and in 2014 President Obama announced a schedule of the U.S. withdrawal. However, the Taliban's bases in Pakistan remained active and thus the cornerstone of the entire Afghan insurgency survived the surge. In the successive seven years, the Taliban gradually reasserted control of regional provinces in the south and east, which later became the basis for their campaign of national conquest.

In the final stages of U.S. involvement, in 2017 President Donald J. Trump adopted a policy of expanding military operations and delineating more decision making to military officers in theater. Trump simultaneously directed diplomats to negotiate with the Taliban while remaining security operations confronted growing Islamic State elements in Afghanistan. The following year

Trump restricted aid to Pakistan and announced a renewed offensive against the Taliban. By 2020, U.S. and Taliban representatives signed a peace deal shifting diplomacy to the Taliban and Afghan government and the United States announced a major drawdown to 2,500 personnel remaining in country. In April 2021, incoming President Joseph R. Biden announced a full withdrawal of U.S. forces by 11 September. On 6 August, the Taliban captured their first regional capital at Zaranj, and within a little more than a week the Afghan national government collapsed and the national capital at Kabul fell without significant fighting on 15 August. With the protective shield of U.S. forces removed, even after years of training and material support the Afghan government proved utterly unable to defend itself.

### **Competing Strategic Goals Preclude U.S. Victory**

In the end, the Afghan government proved unable to defend itself, but the foundation of U.S./Afghan defeat stemmed from the failure to neutralize Pakistan's role as a base for and supplier of the Taliban. If the Taliban never enjoyed the luxury of regrouping and recruiting inside the relative safety of Pakistan, the weak Afghan government may have never faced an opponent strong enough to overcome its limited power. Larger geopolitical considerations precluded America from crippling the Taliban insurgency by eliminating its Pakistani bases of operation. On the contrary, the United States provided Pakistan more than \$91 billion in foreign assistance since 2001, even as Pakistan's security services supported the Taliban.<sup>87</sup> Pakistan was simultaneously an American adversary and partner.

U.S. policy makers used foreign assistance to Pakistan at an operational level to maintain a key supply route through Pakistani territory and gain easier access to the eastern portions of the Afghan theater. Intervening inside Pakistan with the level of U.S./allied force would have required control of both sides of the border and necessitated toppling the Islamabad regime and turning the crucial U.S. logistics route through the country into an active insurgency zone. In short, from an operational perspective, intervening inside Pakistan was prohibitively dangerous, even ignoring the more pressing strategic implications of invading a nuclear power. In a strategic sense, propping up the Islamabad regime was preferable to the risk of allowing the regime to fall and risk its nuclear arms falling into the hands of anti-American terror groups. Islamabad's support for the Taliban was dangerous and prevented U.S. victory in the Afghan War, but Pakistani regime survival was still preferable to the hazards posed by its potential collapse. The United States could either win the Afghan War but risk creating a larger regional catastrophe with global ramifications, or it could support the same state that kept the Taliban insurgency alive in the hopes of averting a wider crisis.

Predicting outcomes based on CINC or GDP is futile in conflicts such as the Afghan War, because in the end American defeat stemmed from competing strategic concerns that precluded the military steps necessary to win. The Unit-



ed States could contain the Taliban by beating their advances back annually using the extraordinary military power available to America and its allies, but it could never destroy the Taliban completely. Conversely, the infinitely weaker Taliban merely needed to prevent the Afghan national government from creating a stable civil society, replace its losses behind the shield of Pakistan, and then topple the weak Afghan government as soon as the United States ceased combat operations. The Afghan government's rapid defeat was the epilogue of U.S. strategy at odds with itself, and Washington wasted two decades in a holding pattern until the conflict was abandoned and allowed to run its course. Victory or defeat in Afghanistan had little to do with actual power and everything to do with larger strategic constraints on the use of power.

### **War Cannot Escape Politics—The Taliban Victory**

The United States spent two decades pursuing illusory victory in Afghanistan, while any chance for lasting victory remained firmly out of reach behind Pakistani borders. Total measures of power favored by PTT cannot capture case-specific limitations on the use force wrought by competing strategic or political priorities. Simply because a state can project overwhelming power as the United States did inside Afghanistan matters little if it cannot fully defeat its opponent due to competing political necessities, such as the American unwillingness to expand the war inside Pakistan. Instead, the United States frittered away manpower, resources, and its national image chasing victory that could never come. When Afghanistan finally collapsed in 2021, the shock to American power reverberated around the globe. Revisionist adversaries seized on apparent American weakness to test the edges of what they perceived to be Washington's declining imperium. Just 20 days after Kabul's fall, China dramatically increased the number of incursions into Taiwan's air defense identification zone, and these increased sortie rates expanded dramatically in the subsequent month.<sup>88</sup> A little more than six months after Kabul's fall, Russian president Vladimir Putin launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in direct opposition to the Pax Americana that has dominated European politics since the end of the Cold War. After two decades, thousands killed, and more than \$2 trillion spent during the conflict, the Afghan War clearly demonstrated that no amount of material preponderance can guarantee victory if overarching political conditions prevent operational level military success.<sup>89</sup>

### **Case 3: The War in Ukraine, 2022–2023**

The ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine illustrates the pitfalls of obsolete military doctrine, inadequate modernization, and poor training or morale in the face of a determined combatant strengthened by foreign material aid. GDP and CINC have failed spectacularly to predict the course of the war thus far. Ukraine stands at approximately 20 percent of Russia's CINC score, 7 percent of its GDP, and despite apparently overwhelming odds, continues to push Russia back.<sup>90</sup> According to the logic of measuring power by CINC and GDP

Russian victory *should* have been swift and decisive and yet the war leans in Kyiv's favor as Ukrainian forces have delivered stunning defeats to the Russian military. Understanding the war in Ukraine requires engaging with concepts that cannot be readily captured by sweeping assessments of broad national capabilities. Simply stated, Ukrainian forces outfight their Russian opponents due to deeply engrained Russian doctrinal and procurement deficiencies. For the broader field of PTT, the war in Ukraine proves finite military details matter in predicting conflict outcomes. Even seemingly minute details such as equipment modernization, doctrine, and training can profoundly reshape a conflict in favor of a seemingly hopelessly outmatched state.

### **Opening Moves, 24 February–8 April**

On 24 February 2022, after months of preparation, Russia invaded Ukraine intent on toppling the Ukrainian government. Instead of a swift blitzkrieg, Moscow found itself trapped in a quagmire with its forces overextended and vulnerable. Russian forces initially attempted to drive through Ukrainian positions guided by the dubious assumption that Ukrainians would not resist. Entire Russian units were annihilated with little resistance as they wandered blindly into Ukrainian defenses without support or preparation.<sup>91</sup> Russian units that did fight frequently advanced deep into Ukrainian territory without protecting their flanks, thereby exposing themselves to encirclement and their logistics to ambush.<sup>92</sup> While attempting advances on four primary axes (Kyiv, Sumy/Kharkiv, Donbas, and Kherson), Russia demonstrated an inability to support all four lines of advance effectively.<sup>93</sup> Crucially, most Russian axes of advance lacked follow-on forces needed to secure lines of supply and neutralize defenders bypassed in the initial breakthrough.<sup>94</sup> Deprived of fuel, necessary supplies, or immediate reinforcements, Russian spearhead units lost momentum and operational initiative passed to the defenders in northern Ukraine. Meanwhile, Russia's air forces remained ineffective both due to their frequent absence and failure to secure air supremacy—necessary to prevent movement of Ukrainian forces reacting to Russian breakthroughs. Where Russian forces encountered strong resistance near Kyiv, Kharkiv, Chernihiv, and along the Donbas line of contact, they quickly defaulted to costly direct assaults with little maneuver or finesse in efforts to dislodge the defenders through sheer weight of numbers. While Russian forces made incremental gains in the Donbas and overran Ukrainian territory south of the Dnieper, their main efforts against Kyiv and Kharkiv ended in humiliating defeat that saw Russian forces withdraw from much of northern Ukraine by 8 April.<sup>95</sup> Even Russia's deepest breakthrough into southern Ukraine was soon halted and forced back on the defensive.<sup>96</sup> Despite possessing nearly every material advantage on a spreadsheet, Russia utterly failed to capitalize on those advantages in real combat.

### **Donbas Offensive, 18 April–25 June**

After a brief period of reorganization and redeployment, Russia renewed its

offensive, intent on eliminating Ukrainian forces in the Donbas region. Unlike the opening phase, Russia concentrated its forces on a single-front advance, supplemented by small operations elsewhere. While Russia made better use of its substantial artillery advantage during the Donbas phase of the war, it still replicated the same pattern of attempted maneuver, failure, and default to costly frontal assault. Russia launched the Donbas offensive with a classic pincer movement aimed at shattering the defenders' flanks near Iziurm and Popasna to encircle large portions of Ukraine's most experienced combat units near Sievierodonetsk.<sup>97</sup>

Despite some initial success, Russia's pincer lost momentum and degenerated into a series of bloody frontal assaults culminating in the capture of Sievierodonetsk on 25 June.<sup>98</sup> Ukrainian forces evaded encirclement, retreated in good order, and continued to contain the Russian advance. Despite gaining a local territorial victory, Russia failed to either unhinge the Ukrainian defensive line and achieve broad territorial gains or inflict the kind of catastrophic casualties needed to irreparably damage Ukraine's military capabilities. Meanwhile, Ukrainian counterattacks regained ground near Kharkiv and held Russian forces in check along the southern front toward Kherson.<sup>99</sup> The failed Donbas phase of the conflict served as a bloody interlude between the humiliating Russian failures of the initial invasion and Ukraine's counteroffensive.

## **Ukrainian Counteroffensives, 6 September–11 November**

After grinding Russian forces down for six months, Ukraine gained operational initiative and launched a wildly successful counteroffensive in Kharkiv and Luhansk Oblasts starting on 6 September. Within a week, Ukrainian forces liberated the logistical hubs of Iziurm and Kupiansk, severing Russia's railway lifelines into northeastern Ukraine.<sup>100</sup> Likewise, Ukrainian forces regained near complete control of Kharkiv Oblast to the Oskil River and ejected Russian forces across the northern border. Within a month Ukraine conducted a second encirclement of Russian forces near Lyman, pushed into Luhansk Oblast, and threatened to unhinge Russia's northern flank above Sievierodonetsk.<sup>101</sup> As fighting for Lyman subsided, Ukraine launched a second counteroffensive in the south, creating another localized rout, and ultimately culminating in the liberation of Kherson, the only major city captured by Russia, on 11 November. In two months, Ukraine regained more territory than Russia conquered during the entire summer Donbas offensive and dealt deep material and personnel blows to Russian forces in the field. Throughout both counteroffensives, Russian forces continued to fight poorly, rout frequently, and prove unable to wage mobile warfare. Likewise, Russian modernization and equipment readiness continued to backslide as modern combat vehicles were replaced by older models from reserve stocks.<sup>102</sup>

In response to the twin shocks of the Kharkiv and Kherson counteroffensives, Russia declared partial mobilization and began forced conscription across

the country to replace losses. However, little attention was given to training or equipping mobilized forces, and many fresh soldiers were deployed to combat without even receiving basic training.<sup>103</sup> Attacks of recruitment facilities escalated throughout Russia, soon joined by reports of fratricide inside mobilized units, and more than a million Russians fled the country following mobilization.<sup>104</sup> Partial mobilization provided the Kremlin manpower to bolster numbers at the front, but the lack of training provided to mobilized personnel combined increased reliance on obsolete equipment, perpetuating the qualitative decline of Russia's armed forces. The same key issues of modernization, readiness, and morale that facilitated Russia's shocking failures throughout its invasion of Ukraine have intensified. If the war in Ukraine remains a conventional conflict, Russia will fail to achieve its objectives of regime change and Ukraine will continue to liberate lost territory.

### **Inadequate Modernization and Poor Material Readiness**

Although Russia's CINC and GDP overmatch versus Ukraine seems formidable on paper, inadequate modernization of equipment and poor material readiness undermined Russia's military capabilities. Russia continued to modernize its arms since the end of the Cold War, however, production rates fall far short of demand. Analysis of Russian combat losses reveals that many maneuver units operate obsolete equipment.

Of Russia's most modern vehicles and aircraft, only 67 T-90M main battle tanks, 9 BMP-T tank support vehicles, 133 Kamov KA-52 attack helicopters, and 97 Sukhoi SU-35 4.5 generation fighters were in service at the war's onset.<sup>105</sup> Due to years of delays, Russia's next generation of armored fighting vehicles have not entered active service.<sup>106</sup> Whatever value Russia's modern hardware offers is of limited utility in such small numbers. In truth, Russia's land forces have received low priority in modernization budgets since 2020, despite their paramount importance to Moscow's revisionist ambitions. As an example, 26 percent of the 2020 State Armament Program's funding was directed to Russia's vestigial navy, compared to 14 percent for its gargantuan army.<sup>107</sup> New vehicles have been developed primarily for export, with little regard to improving the capabilities of the Russian army itself. Moreover, Russian military industry remained dependent on technology imported from the West to produce its most modern equipment right up to the day of the invasion.<sup>108</sup> Sanctions imposed after the invasion of Ukraine have subsequently impeded production of Russia's newest war machines, forcing the country to adapt to resume production or produce older, less sophisticated weapons instead. The months of production lost have further hindered efforts to replace losses, let alone modernize its forces. Moscow's military-industrial complex is well-suited for internal security and developing new arms exports, but it lacks reserves of modern equipment necessary to wage sustained high-intensity warfare.

Shortages of modern equipment have forced Russia to rely heavily on Soviet-

era arms, but due to a combination of poor maintenance and corruption, actual equipment stocks have fallen far short of on-paper estimates. Many Russian reserve vehicles lack critical equipment, such as engines.<sup>109</sup> In late March, the Russian military remobilized long-term vehicle reserves in Boguchar, near the Ukrainian border, but found 40 percent of equipment stored there was inoperable.<sup>110</sup> Within days after the invasion, antiquated Soviet-era vehicles such as the T-72A (1970), T-72B (1984), and BMP-1P (1979) began to enter combat. Many of these Soviet relics were captured in incredibly poor states of repair, having been visibly neglected for years, further degrading their combat capabilities. More importantly, many of these obsolete vehicles lack crucial add-on explosive reactive armor that they are *supposed* to have, to protect against modern antitank weapons. Moscow's reliance on Soviet-era equipment did not abate as the war dragged on; in June, Russia began deploying 50-year-old T-62s to Ukraine in response to mounting losses among more advanced tanks.<sup>111</sup> With Russia suffering more than 1,600 visually confirmed tank losses alone, Russian forces fall further behind in the modernization of equipment.<sup>112</sup> Russia has failed or is unable to mitigate deficiencies with equipment such as explosive reactive armor.<sup>113</sup> Consequently, Moscow is trapped in a downward spiral of equipment quality due to limited industrial incapacity versus the large volumes of force it must support in combat.

## Failure of VKS

The inability of Russian Aerospace Forces, the *Vozdushno-kosmicheskiye sily* (VKS), to gain air superiority over Ukraine stands as one of the war's colossal failures. The VKS's impotence stems from a combination of material deficiencies and an obsolete air warfare doctrine that views air forces as auxiliary support for ground units. The VKS lacks both an effective doctrine to utilize aircraft on a modern battlefield and the material reserves to wage high-intensity state war.

The core of the VKS's failure in Ukraine stems from a World War II-era doctrine rooted in the idea that air forces should be "flying artillery," intended to support ground forces, instead of a fully developed warfighting tool.<sup>114</sup> This flying artillery doctrine hobbles Russian military operations because it does not envision the use of air forces independent of ground operations or conduct air campaigns. Properly executed air campaigns aim to lock down airspace, decapitate command control, and interdict enemy ground movements.<sup>115</sup> The idea of maintaining air control, relentlessly striking hostile air defense systems, and expending thousands of tons of ordnance to render airfields useless is alien to Russian doctrine. Instead, the VKS focuses on providing flying artillery support to ground forces, spotting for ground-based artillery, and terror bombing against civilian populations.<sup>116</sup> Russia's employment of air power during the war in Ukraine reflects these ideas. The VKS embarked on a few indecisive days of strikes against Ukrainian air defenses and airfields at the start of the invasion before reverting to its traditional role in tactical air support, interspersed with terror bombings using valuable precision-guided munitions.<sup>117</sup> Even more tell-

ing, as Russia commits soldiers and vehicles into Ukraine by the thousands, the VKS typically deploys one to four aircraft per strike package with little coordination between strikes. The VKS appears incapable of coordinating large-scale airstrikes or air operations more sophisticated than localized air support and has never attempted to establish air superiority over any part of Ukraine.<sup>118</sup> Russia has squandered its overwhelming aerial advantage on paper through flawed doctrine exacerbated by material deficiencies.

The VKS suffers from equipment modernization pitfalls detailed earlier, specifically limited availability of its newest aircraft. However, the failure to mass produce modern aircraft *should* have mattered less for the VKS considering Ukraine's reliance on Soviet-era air and antiaircraft systems when the war began.<sup>119</sup> The VKS's most serious material pitfalls flow from insufficient reserves of precision-guided munitions. The VKS rapidly depleted its stockpiles of these munitions against infrastructure and civilian targets in a terror bombing campaign, compatible with Russian doctrine but divorced from military needs on the ground.<sup>120</sup> Doing so forces fighter-bombers to resort to less accurate unguided munitions, delivered at lower altitudes, placing aircraft in additional danger from low-altitude air defense systems.<sup>121</sup> Consequently, Russia's air attacks have become less effective as the war progresses while Ukraine has enhanced its air-defense capabilities with more advanced Western equipment.

Beyond shortages of precision-guided munitions, Russia failed to modernize its drone arsenal to supplement traditional air power. While Ukraine responded to similar difficulties of using traditional air power due to Russian antiaircraft systems through increased reliance on drones, Russian drones have not yet played a significant role in the conflict.<sup>122</sup> Ukraine uses a sizable arsenal of Western drones to strike supply depots, antiaircraft systems, and facilities beyond reach of traditional air power. Conversely, Russian drone development and production was sidelined in favor of more vulnerable attack helicopters.<sup>123</sup> Ukraine has leveraged the advantages of drones to great effect whereas Russia struggles to catch up due to its frail electronics industry and reliance on imported Western components.<sup>124</sup>

After the first days of the war, the VKS failed to suppress or destroy Ukrainian medium- and high-altitude air defenses. This pressured VKS sorties to remain close to the ground where they are vulnerable to low-altitude air defenses. This failure was matched by a parallel failure to eliminate the Ukrainian air force in the opening days of the war. Russia attacked Ukrainian airfields at the beginning of the invasion but overall failed to cripple the Ukrainian air force. Ukrainian aircraft face the same air-defense threats as their Russian adversaries, but the Russians still failed to remove them entirely. Moreover, the Ukrainian air force actively trains its pilots for low-altitude operations, and Russian pilots found themselves forced into a low-altitude battlefield for which they were inadequately trained.<sup>125</sup> The Ukrainian air force remains a threat-in-being, helping deter Russian air strikes against crucial interior lines of communication in western/central Ukraine and providing occasional support to



Ukrainian ground forces. Without air superiority, Russia cannot meaningfully interdict the movement of Ukrainian ground forces from the skies, lending Kyiv freedom to move its forces between hot spots.

## Deficient Training and Poor Morale

Much like its Russo-Japanese War ancestor, the modern Russian military suffers from inadequate training levels and low readiness rates combined with competing security concerns outside of theater, as well as poor morale. Russian forces are not well trained for combat. Relatively few units are actually available for action in Ukraine, and poor morale saps the capabilities of the units that are deployed.

The Russian military suffers from low training levels. Roughly 30 percent of the Russian military, including its elite paratrooper units, consists of conscripts and even the vaunted Spetsnaz commandos still employ some conscripts.<sup>126</sup> While conscripts *can* fight effectively when properly motivated by crises such as foreign invasion, they present a liability to armies that already suffer from poor morale or lack a professional core to supplement. Many of Russia's personnel are one-year contract soldiers or conscripts.<sup>127</sup> Half of Russia's military personnel are contract soldiers, of which 30 percent are professionals who have completed more than one contract, and the remaining 20 percent are first-year contract soldiers.<sup>128</sup> Consequently, between first-year contracts and conscripts, a staggering 50 percent of the Russian military consisted of soldiers with less than a year of military experience at the beginning of the invasion. Russian forces admit this time frame is insufficient to train soldiers for combat.<sup>129</sup> By contrast, the standard enlistment period for American or British soldiers is eight and four years, respectively. Russian units in the field unsurprisingly display signs of low morale and poor discipline, including looting, atrocities, failure to execute orders, and occasional mutinies. Stopgap measures like mobilization and the indefinite extension of military contracts or forcible remobilization of reservists and conscripts threatens to undermine morale further. As casualties mount, Russia has transferred internal security forces out of Chechnya and garrison units from its foreign military bases in Tajikistan and occupied Georgia to replace losses in Ukraine. Likewise, it levies conscripts from occupied Ukraine itself under the banner of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR/LNR puppet republics), to provide additional cannon fodder. Finally, Moscow extensively utilizes its private military contractors to stiffen the resolve of its proxy forces.<sup>130</sup> As Russia continues to deploy even lower-grade forces, it will further debase the quality of its troops.

While Russia must rely on quantity in the conflict, low readiness rates and competing security concerns undermine its ability to overwhelm Ukraine with sheer volume of force. Before Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine, it was already 150,000 personnel short of its nearly million-person target.<sup>131</sup> Standard prewar practice in the Russian army required brigades to maintain a single battalion battlegroup in a combat-ready status, less than 30 percent of each brigade's total force.<sup>132</sup> The rest of each brigade must be hastily assembled in a crisis

from conscripts and contract soldiers. Hasty mobilization leaves units little time to learn to operate as a coherent unit before entering combat.<sup>133</sup> Practical experience in Ukraine reveals many Russian units routinely fail to coordinate internally, let alone with other units, and fight with little tactical finesse.<sup>134</sup> Russia's need to garrison its extensive borders and requirements of internal security in southern/eastern Russia further diminishes the amount of force it can realistically deploy to Ukraine. Partial, or even general mobilization, will not resolve Russia's manpower deficiencies.

In truth, Russia has little choice but to deploy conscripts, mercenaries, and other expendable cannon fodder en masse. In 2019, the Russian army maintained a mere 4,000–5,000 reservists by Western standards.<sup>135</sup> On paper, it could reactivate the two million former conscript and contract soldiers available in deep reserve to compensate for losses, but remobilizing veterans proves problematic. First, only 10 percent of former soldiers receive any refresher training after completing their initial service. Second, the Russian Ministry of Defence admits that it does not effectively track ex-soldiers, frustrating remobilization efforts.<sup>136</sup> Russia's recent "partial" mobilization amounted to random conscription regardless of prior military experience to provide untrained bodies for the war in Ukraine.<sup>137</sup> In 2021, the Russian Army trialed a new reserve program aimed at creating a three-year contract active reserve, but the effort fell far short of stated goals and did not bolster Russian reserves.<sup>138</sup>

Russia was prepared for defense and deterrence, not initiating the largest war in Europe since 1945.<sup>139</sup> Russia's professional reserve deficiencies were further exacerbated by disproportionately high casualties among elite units during the initial invasion and heavy casualties among the officer corps and long-serving contract soldiers.<sup>140</sup> Russian forces may grow more numerous, but they will not grow more competent as the war progresses. Relying on poorly trained, understaffed, and low morale forces undermines Russian prospects for victory against Ukraine. Even if Russia somehow resolves its modernization deficiencies and the VKS embraces a modern air warfare doctrine, the poor quality of Russian forces will continue to cripple performance.

## **A Hollow Bear—When Power Is an Illusion**

The ongoing course of the Ukrainian war defies the mechanistic logic of PTT, but it is unsurprising when viewed in terms of political-military specificities. Russia enjoys overwhelming material superiority on paper, but its actual power against Ukraine is limited in ways PTT's preferred power metrics of GDP and CINC cannot capture. Inadequate modernization forces Russia to rely on obsolete equipment against an opponent with access to vast quantities of modern Western equipment. Due to material shortages and archaic doctrine, the VKS has proven itself incapable of conducting a sustained air campaign against Ukraine, lending Kyiv freedom to maneuver largely unharmed behind the front lines. Finally, deficient training, readiness, and morale degrades Russian effectiveness in combat, in the face of a determined and skillful opponent. From

the grand-strategic perspective where PTT prospers, these fine military details may seem like minutiae, but they are decisive in actual military campaigns. If policy makers operationalize PTT based solely on the theory's measures of total national power independent of case-specific military considerations, opportunities for victory against revisionist rivals, as in Ukraine against Russia, will be overlooked and lost. Russia's own failure to appreciate the importance of military details has mired it in a war it cannot win, left its reputation as a great power in tatters, and strengthened the U.S.-led dominant order in Europe. Wars are not fought on spreadsheets. Details matter. Moscow failed to see this, and PTT scholarship must avoid the same pitfall as it seeks to guide policy.

## **Operationalizing PTT in Defense of Taiwan**

Power transition theory can aid policy makers by serving as a threat radar at the grand strategic level, while leaving predicting theater strategic and operational outcomes of specific conflicts to more appropriate military studies methods. PTT helps policy makers understand the wider grand strategic stage, while military studies provides essential case-specific understanding of military and political specificities to predict likely conflict outcomes. In light of this concept, the authors will use the case of China's regional power transition challenge against the United States, with Taiwan as its likely first target as an example of how to better operationalize PTT for Western policy makers.

## **Shaping the Conflict through PTT**

Following the logic of PTT, China is a dissatisfied revisionist great power that presently lacks the power or allies to confront the United States on a global scale. Thus, a regional power transition struggle in East Asia initiated by Beijing against the United States presents a more credible threat. Given Taiwan's proximity and its political importance to the Chinese Communist Party, the island republic presents a likely first target for Chinese revisionism. Consequently, this article will apply PTT's methods to determine which states in the region matter at a grand strategic scale. Table 4 displays the rough total power disparity between China and the U.S.-aligned Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) states surrounding China that are the most likely to take direct action against Beijing's revisionist ambitions. When measured by CINC, China reaches 90 percent of the total strength of the QSD states, easily within the 20 percent power parity danger zone advocated by PTT theorists. However, as measured by GDP, China only reaches 54 percent of the strength of the QSD status quo states. While CINC and GDP's propensity for exaggerating national power should be kept in mind, it remains clear that China poses a regional threat to U.S. interests. Beijing outmatches all U.S. partners in the region combined in total power as measured by both CINC and GDP. American involvement is essential to confront China, and with U.S. power included the situation becomes far more favorable.

Through PTT's total measures of national power combined with its con-

**Table 4.** Comparative CINC and GDP values of China and Quadrilateral Security Dialogue states

	CINC (2016)	GDP (2021) millions 2015 USD
United States	0.1330575	\$20,338,578
Japan	0.0329674	\$4,433,848
India	0.0868413	\$2,733,062
Australia	0.0018544	\$1,512,962
People's Republic of China	0.2306177	\$15,801,911

Sources: CINC data per "National Material Capabilities v6.0 Dataset." GDP from "GDP (constant 2015 US\$)—United States, Japan, India, Australia, China," World Bank Group, accessed 29 September 2022.

cept of satisfaction, policy makers can identify which states to integrate further into security arrangements, which to satisfy purely to keep them out of revisionist coalitions, and which to ignore as irrelevant. To confront China, the United States must deepen the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue toward a formal alliance and ensure the continued satisfaction of its members as the basis of regional opposition to Beijing. The QSD already includes both of South and East Asia's leading non-Chinese local powers, India and Japan, as measured by CINC and GDP. Care should be taken to accommodate the satisfaction of these states, particularly rising India, by further investing them in American-led institutions to discourage defection from Washington's coalition. Moreover, steps should be taken to improve the satisfaction of relatively powerful U.S.-aligned or neutral regional states such as South Korea and Indonesia that have shown little interest in directly confronting China.<sup>141</sup> While it may be unrealistic to expect either state to take direct action against Beijing, mollifying them promises to prevent defection of these major regional actors to any Chinese-led revisionist bloc. Beyond the region, the United States should also seek to invest other major strategic partners in opposition to China such as Britain and Germany, which have indicated interest in containing China's rise.<sup>142</sup> Even if little direct military assistance is expected from these states, involving them in opposing China helps invest them in potential economic pressure or embargo schemes necessary in a major war. Thus, America's objective should be to isolate China by keeping powerful regional actors satisfied with the American-led order to either deter China entirely or force it to oppose U.S. regional dominance without major partners.

This application of PTT promises to help policy makers understand regional power dynamics in East Asia, conceptualize what states possess power, and what states are worth going out of America's way to satisfy. These considerations are essential at the grand strategic level because they help inform American diplomacy, but they predict little about the likely course of any conflict. PTT sets the stage for conflict. It does not predict how the actors will perform.

## Understanding the Specifics

China's territorial disputes with its neighbors and efforts to build competing international institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, signal Beijing's dissatisfaction and revisionist ambitions. Taiwan constitutes a logical first target of Beijing's regional power transition challenge, but only military studies can model the specifics of such a conflict. PTT sets the stage for the conflict, now it hands off to military studies to predict the political-military details that threaten to shape a war for Taiwan. The United States and its allies enjoy advantages in Taiwan's highly defensible geography and command of the global commons. Conversely, China possesses advantages in antiaccess/area-denial (A2/AD) weapons and proximity of its industrial heartland to the combat zone. Taiwan may be hopelessly outmatched according to total power calculations of CINC and GDP, but there are compelling arguments that predict a war over the island could go either way.

Taiwan's geography gives the island republic a fighting chance. First and foremost, a direct invasion of Taiwan requires the largest opposed amphibious landing in human history.<sup>143</sup> Amphibious landings are notoriously difficult even for the most experienced militaries, and they require both excellent interservice cooperation and extreme logistical support to execute successfully. Moreover, China's interservice cooperation required to pull off such a complex operation is untested. The People's Republic of China has never staged a sizable opposed amphibious landing and has not fought a major state war since it invaded Vietnam in 1979. Even after clearing the substantial amphibious hurdle at the start of an invasion, most of Taiwan's interior consists of rugged mountains, suburban sprawl, and metropolises, all of which substantially favor the defender. The forested mountains of Taiwan's interior provide innumerable points of concealment for missile systems. Likewise, modern metropolises constitute substantial fortifications in and of themselves, and Taiwan's well-developed metro network promises shelter to move personnel and equipment around combat zones without attracting attention.<sup>144</sup> Even if the Chinese military proves itself highly competent, a direct invasion of Taiwan promises a meat grinder for Chinese forces. To defeat a Chinese invasion, Taiwan does not need to defeat every landing; instead, it needs to inflict sufficient damage on Chinese logistics and amphibious assets to render resupply of invasion forces impossible and eliminate them via attrition. Swift Chinese victory over Taiwan remains unlikely, and short of extraordinary strategic surprise and decapitation, there are few reasons to believe Taiwan will be a cheap acquisition for Beijing. Using the present war in Ukraine as an example, the longer Beijing takes to secure its objectives and the more collateral damage inflicted on the civil population, the greater international support for economic and political consequences for China becomes.

Beyond Taiwan, America and its allies command the global commons through unmatched power projection capacities and possess the capability to blockade China and liquidate its overseas bases. China possesses a relatively

weak nuclear-powered attack submarine fleet, and its surface ships as well as bases abroad are vulnerable to American retaliation in a major escalation.<sup>145</sup> Even if China assembles a formidable navy with potent power-projection capabilities, it does little to help the fact that China is largely surrounded by pro-American states. American allies can and should be provided with anti-shipping capabilities to target any Chinese ships passing through their waters in a conflict. Much like the German High Seas fleet during World War I, all the advanced warships in the world matter little if they cannot safely leave home. Moreover, a general blockade of naval trade to China conducted beyond China's antishipping missile range threatens to impose a heavy economic price on Beijing. China may be able to confront the United States and its allies within East Asia, but its lack of global partners and reach presents a major liability if the West is willing to accept the economic costs of imposing a blockade. America controls the global commons. China does not. If Taiwan can inflict substantial losses on Chinese forces, and if its allies can punish China with severe economic sanctions, then a potential pathway opens to destabilize the Chinese Communist Party and force it to either negotiate or risk collapse.

Conversely, China boasts strong A2/AD capabilities that curtail American power projection in East Asia's littoral waters. Chinese ballistic missiles threaten American access to the region by holding key forward island bases on Okinawa, Guam, and Saipan at risk in the event of a conflict.<sup>146</sup> Likewise, antishipping missiles in continental China project a roughly 600-kilometer area denial radius against American surface naval assets operating in the East and South China seas.<sup>147</sup> Consequently, China threatens simultaneously to impede resupply of Taiwan and sharply degrade American power projection inside the combat zone surrounding the island. In the event of a Chinese invasion or blockade of Taiwan, the United States and its allies will not be able to flood the island with equipment as has been done in Ukraine. Disabling China's antishipping and ballistic missile capabilities requires extensive strikes inside continental China itself. Such strikes remain implausible due to heavy concentrations of Chinese antiaircraft systems and the high mobility of the targeted launcher units.<sup>148</sup> In summary, the United States cannot credibly eliminate China's A2/AD capabilities. It must plan around them in any war over Taiwan. Only a small part of total U.S. power will be available to directly defend Taiwan, and most equipment aid will have to arrive *before* a conflict starts.

Beyond capacity to curtail American power projection, China enjoys its own power projection advantage against Taiwan due to proximity. Whereas American equipment will have to travel to Japan, Australia, or even back to the United States for repair and reinforcement, China can replace losses in theater. Damaged but not destroyed assets will be much easier for China to replace than the United States. China's power projection capabilities fall far short of the United States, but they do not need power projection parity to cross a strait less than 200-kilometers wide. Whereas the United States and its allies must operate aircraft from either vulnerable carriers or forward bases on Okinawa, China



can operate virtually its entire air force in the combat zone from well-defended bases in its own homeland.<sup>149</sup>

Still, China faces key naval and air power projection challenges in any proposed invasion of Taiwan. First, Chinese air forces need to successfully suppress Taiwanese air defense networks and establish air superiority over the island. Taiwan's rugged geography complicates this task, and executing sustained suppression/destruction of enemy air defense operations requires a talented air force coupled with excellent planning. Second, China possesses an overwhelming ground force, but it must transport those forces by air and sea into Taiwan to present a credible threat. China still deploys relatively few amphibious assault ships and will likely rely heavily on civilian vehicle transports to project land forces into Taiwan.<sup>150</sup> If China fails to either control the air or protect its amphibious assets, its invasion risks failure. Consequently, China commands a major regional power projection advantage due to proximity, but it still has to use these capabilities wisely and avoid undermining its whole war effort by wasting them.

### **Synthesizing PTT with Strategic Specificities in Taiwan**

Taken at face value, applying PTT to a Taiwan escalation without an additional military studies perspective suggests overwhelming Chinese victory. However, even a brief overview of the political-military specifics of a potential Taiwan conflict indicates that outcome is far from assured. Both sides enjoy strong advantages and crucial weaknesses. Taiwan's geography and the amphibious nature of any invasion grants substantial advantages to the defender. Moreover, American global power threatens to place China under severe international economic pressure that it is poorly positioned to resist. Conversely, China's A2/AD capabilities negate projection of substantial American military power around Taiwan. China's innate advantages from proximity further strengthen Beijing's hand by shortening its logistical tail and allowing it to operate from the relative safety of its own home territories. War for Taiwan could realistically go either way; in fact, the situation strays dangerously into the territory of parity that PTT argues incentivizes conflict in the first place.

Fortunately, by synthesizing PTT at the grand strategic level with military studies at theater-strategic and operational levels, the steps for U.S. policy makers to defend American dominance in East Asia become clear. At the grand strategic level, China will initiate a regional power transition challenge against the United States as it moves closer to regional power parity. Taiwan represents the logical first target due to its proximity to China, strategic significance inside the first island chain, and political import to the Chinese Communist Party. Thus, we can predict where but not when the first blow of China's power transition challenge will land. To confront this challenge at the grand-strategic level, U.S. policy makers need to:

1. Satisfy and further invest members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue in a security arrangement designed to contain China.

2. Satisfy neutral regional actors to deter defection to a Chinese revisionist bloc. Make China face the U.S. regional order alone.
3. Engage major powers outside the region to build support for severe economic consequences, up to and including blockade, if China strikes Taiwan.

Meanwhile, at the theater level, the United States needs to prepare for the war PTT indicates is coming. This article divides these suggestions into those focused specifically on strengthening Taiwan and those intended to improve American or allied capacities to confront Chinese revisionism across the region.

### **Defending Taiwan**

1. Provide Taiwan with its own antishipping, ballistic missile, and unmanned submersible vehicle capabilities to threaten China's amphibious assets, break blockades, and hold China's airfields and ports at risk.
2. Strengthen Taiwan's air-defense capabilities to prevent total Chinese control of airspace to facilitate at least limited U.S. aerial resupply.
3. Provide Taiwan with large volumes of infantry weapons, ammunition, and communication equipment suited for urban combat. Taiwan will largely have to fight with the tools it starts the war with; Ukrainian-scale resupply is not an option.
4. Sponsor Taiwanese creation and training of a territorial defense force along Ukrainian or Polish lines to maximize deployable Taiwanese force against Chinese invasion.

### **Confronting Chinese Regional Revisionism**

1. Ensure forward deployed U.S. air and logistical assets in Japan are sufficient for high-intensity warfare to create a ready reserve of personnel and equipment already in theater.
2. Support comprehensive modernization and expansion of Japanese air, air defense, and naval forces. Japan must be able to protect its airspace and defeat Chinese intrusions into the East China Sea.
3. Prioritize modernization and production of American submersible combat assets suited to hunt Chinese amphibious landing ships and submarines.
4. Enhance American train and equip cooperation with India to make the Indian military a more substantive threat to tie-down Chinese forces outside of the main East Asian combat zone.

Collectively, these policy recommendations seek to strengthen U.S. dominance in East Asia and isolate China. China will challenge the United States as a dissatisfied revisionist, driven by its opposition to America's rules-based order, and Washington must prepare accordingly for war. The authors base the theater-level recommendations on the concept established throughout this ar-

ticle that the state with weaker total power can defeat a stronger state given the right tools, conditions, and suitably limited war goals. This principle applies equally to the United States and China. Global power dominance of the United States combined with its allies does not assure Chinese defeat in Taiwan, and American policy makers should not become complacent by assuming it will. Likewise, China's overwhelming on-paper overmatch against Taiwan does not guarantee a direct invasion will succeed. The authors have chosen the theater strategic policy recommendations on the basis that Taiwanese victory is possible if it is provided with enough weapons and training to irreparably damage invading Chinese forces. Even short of direct Taiwanese victory, inflicting heavy material losses on Beijing undermines its ability to launch further aggression in East Asia and potentially destabilizes the Communist regime. Beyond Taiwan, this article's recommendations focus on either improving capacity of American regional allies to defeat Chinese aggression or enhancing the ability of American forces to subvert China's A2/AD advantages. China presents a formidable but by no means invincible adversary. China can be defeated, and in the process, both the sovereignty of Taiwan and the persistence of American dominance can be secured. In the case of Taiwan, PTT sets the stage for China's revisionist challenge, but strategic specificities in theater provides insight into the likely character of that conflict once it erupts. Far from encouraging war, promoting a disparity in military capability at the operational level is needed to deter Chinese challenges to the security order in East Asia.

## Conclusion

Power transition theory has great merit as a systemic theory to guide policy at the grand strategic scale, but it must be synthesized with case-specific strategic studies approaches to predict likely outcomes of conflict. By utilizing military studies methods at the theater-strategic and operational levels, the authors do not believe they are reducing the utility of PTT through theoretical bloat. On the contrary, the authors merely identify the limits of PTT's scope and hand off to more appropriate methods at more finite levels of analysis. From a policy perspective, PTT detects threats, while strategic studies provide insight into confronting those threats. Total measures of power alone such as GDP and CINC overestimate deployable national power and neglect the ability of some "weaker" states to punch above their weight or the inability of "stronger" states to invest in military capabilities.

In each of the cases explored in this article, a stronger power failed to defeat an allegedly *much* weaker adversary. In the Russo-Japanese War, Japan leveraged superior regional power projection and qualitative superiority of its forces to overcome its better equipped but poorly supplied, trained, and deployed Russian adversary. In the Afghan War, America's inability to eliminate the Taliban's Pakistani strongholds due to competing strategic concerns ensured the United States could never translate military superiority into lasting victory. Finally, in the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia's poor military readiness, morale, and ob-

solete doctrines rendered their allegedly overwhelming power mute in the face of more skillful and better-equipped Ukrainian defenders.

Bearing these lessons in mind, the authors apply PTT at the grand strategic scale to explain China's rise as a dissatisfied revisionist and synthesize it with case-specific military and political considerations to inform U.S./Taiwanese countermeasures to Chinese revisionism. This same logic can be applied to virtually any looming power transition conflict. To constructively guide policy, PTT must be used appropriately at the grand strategic level and synthesize itself with traditional strategic studies methods to analyze specific conflicts. When properly used, PTT presents a strong theoretical lens to identify conflict across the globe, but it must divorce itself from the misperception that wars are fought on spreadsheets to reach its fullest potential; total power alone guarantees nothing—only how that power is employed matters.

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