

2013

## An Unpersuasive Argument for Overcoming China's A2AD Capability: A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia

Marshall Hoyler

Aaron L. Friedberg

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Hoyler, Marshall and Friedberg, Aaron L. (2013) "An Unpersuasive Argument for Overcoming China's A2AD Capability: A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 66 : No. 4 , Article 9.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol66/iss4/9>

This Additional Writing is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

## REVIEW ESSAY

---

### AN UNPERSUASIVE ARGUMENT FOR OVERCOMING CHINA'S A2AD CAPABILITY

*Marshall Hoyler*

Friedberg, Aaron L. *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2012. 360pp. \$59.95

Princeton professor Aaron Friedberg has made a valuable contribution to the debate on how the United States should respond to a rising China. He argues that the United States should build military forces capable of overcoming China's emerging antiaccess/area-denial (A2AD) capability in the western Pacific. Failure to do so, he says, may lead to Chinese control of East Asia's resources, which in turn will enable China to "project power into other regions, much as the United States was able to do from the Western Hemisphere throughout much of the twentieth century."

Before coming to his conclusions and recommendations, Friedberg provides an informative survey of several relevant subjects. First, he places China's rise in historical context and shows how and why the wealth and power concentrated in the West for the past two hundred years are increasingly shifting to Asia. Next, he provides a useful overview of U.S. relations with China. From 1950 through 1969, U.S. policy sought to isolate and contain China. For the next twenty years, China and the United States developed a much more open relationship and became aligned to offset the power of the Soviet Union. From 1989 until today, U.S. policy toward China has necessarily had elements of both containment and

*Marshall Hoyler, now retired, taught at the Naval War College from 2001 through 2008.*

© 2013 by Marshall Hoyler  
*Naval War College Review, Autumn 2013, Vol. 66, No. 4*

engagement—"conengagement."

Friedberg next turns to an analysis of Chinese thinking. He explains why it is hard to discern China's strategy—available information comprises

“a confusing blend of cacophony and silence.” In addition, Chinese leaders themselves probably do not know how their strategy will unfold. Given these caveats, Friedberg outlines an assessment of China’s strategic position that, on the basis of open sources, appears to be shared by most Chinese analysts and decision makers. He says three ideas appear to govern China’s approach: avoid confrontation, build comprehensive national power, and advance incrementally.

Friedberg believes that the U.S. military edge over China has eroded dramatically in the past twenty years. China is close to having a secure nuclear second-strike capability, which heightens the importance of the conventional balance. That balance has shifted, and China has increased its capacity to find and attack U.S. Navy units, as well as U.S. and allied bases near its borders. America is still ahead militarily, but China is closing the gap. Finally, Friedberg notes several reasons why, over the next few decades, the United States may not spend enough to balance China.

Friedberg’s most valuable contribution is that he explicitly states why he thinks a conventional military buildup serves a vital U.S. interest. Without it, he says, China will have a powerful A2AD capability, threatening the United States and allied bases in the western Pacific and making U.S. surface naval operations within the “second island chain” prohibitively risky. In such circumstances, he says, America’s allies and friends may well decide to pursue an accommodation with China. Most seriously, “unchecked Chinese domination over East Asia could give it preferred access to, if not full command over, the region’s vast industrial, financial, natural, and technological resources.” According to Friedberg, “the same kinds of geopolitical considerations that caused American strategists to conclude in the early twentieth century that they had a vital interest in preventing the domination of Eurasia by potentially hostile powers are still applicable today.”

China apart, Japan controls most of East Asia’s “vast resources.” Therefore, Friedberg needs to show how a fully developed A2AD capability would permit China to cow Japan into giving “preferred access to, if not full command over,” those resources. Such an explanation would have to show how China could credibly threaten Japan with unacceptable consequences if it failed to do so. In other words, Friedberg needs to show how China could credibly threaten Japan with invasion, blockade, or bombardment, or some combination of all three.

A Chinese invasion of Japan is utterly beyond China’s current military capabilities. (According to a RAND study Friedberg cites, China’s amphibious lift is barely adequate to enable an invasion of Taiwan, only one hundred miles away.) In principle, China could try to build the forces needed to make an invasion feasible. Were it to do so, however, Japan could create “porcupine defenses” to defeat any invasion force at a fraction of that force’s cost to China, and it could do so even if the U.S. surface fleet could not operate within the second island chain.

Similarly, Friedberg does not explicitly discuss the prospect of a Chinese attempt to blockade Japan. That is an important omission. Japan has good reason to believe that it could ride out any Chinese attempt at blockade by implementing a range of defensive measures. For example, it could reroute merchant shipping to sea-lanes far distant from Chinese bases and support U.S. submarines in sinking any blockading Chinese ships. Even if China were to make great strides at increasing its capacity for blockade, what is there to prevent Japan from making offsetting moves? And why need the United States necessarily overcome China's A2AD systems to defeat a blockade when its submarines can operate with impunity despite those systems?

Friedberg indirectly refers to bombardment, the only other way China might threaten Japan militarily. He provides a Department of Defense (DoD) figure showing that much of Japan is within range of the CSS-5 medium-range ballistic missile. However, China only has seventy-five to a hundred such missiles and builds them at a rate of nine to fifteen per year. It needs many for the antiship ballistic missile force often seen as the heart of its A2AD capability, and could spare few for striking Japan. DoD's figure also shows that much of Japan lies within range of the DH-10 land-attack cruise missile, but Japan's existing force of F-15J fighters and airborne warning and control platforms could defeat sizable numbers of incoming cruise missiles while operating from bases hardened to survive missile attack. Were Japan to perceive a plausible threat from Chinese missiles, it could readily invest further in active and passive defenses that could "deter by denial" such attacks.

If the United States should appear "irresolute, incompetent, unwilling, or simply unable to fulfill its security commitments," Friedberg says, threatened states "would probably try to build up their own defenses." If so, he needs to show why a Japanese buildup would fall short. After all, if Japan can defend itself successfully with help only from U.S. Navy submarines, why should a U.S. choice not to counter China's A2AD buildup lead Japan to see America as "unwilling, or . . . unable," as Friedberg fears?

Friedberg also mentions threatened states "perhaps acquiring nuclear weapons in hopes of deterring aggression and preserving a measure of independence" if they perceive the United States as "unwilling, or . . . unable" to stand by its allies. China has had nuclear weapons since 1964, and Japan has decided to rely on the U.S. nuclear umbrella for all that time. Again, if Japan and the United States can defeat Chinese attempts at invasion, blockade, and bombardment, even in a world where everyone believes Chinese A2AD systems will work, why should Japan go nuclear?

Some U.S. Navy and Air Force communities want to persuade Congress to cut ground force budgets and to buy costly next-generation weapons by arguing that

the United States has a vital interest in overcoming Chinese A2AD systems. They may cite Professor Friedberg in making their case. If they cannot make a more persuasive argument than his, they ought not to receive such funding.