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Commentary ([//www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/](https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/))

If China loses a future war, entropy could be imminent

By: Jan Kallberg ([/author/jan-kallberg](https://www.defensenews.com/author/jan-kallberg/)) 📅 September 17, 2020

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What happens if China engages in a great power conflict and loses? Will the Chinese Communist Party's control (<https://www.defensenews.com/top-100/2020/08/17/chinas-industry-reaps-the-benefits-of-political-connections-international-trade/>) over the society survive a horrifying defeat?

The People's Liberation Army last fought a massive-scale war during the invasion of Vietnam in 1979, which was a failed operation to punish Vietnam for toppling the Khmer Rouge regime of Cambodia. Since 1979, the PLA has been engaged in shelling Vietnam at different occasions and involved in other border skirmishes, but not fought a full-scale war.

In the last decades, China increased its defense spending (<https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2020/05/22/china-announces-1782-billion-military-budget/>) and modernized its military, including advanced air defenses and cruise missiles; fielded advanced military hardware; and built a high sea navy from scratch. But there is significant uncertainty of how the Chinese military will perform.

Modern warfare is integration, joint operations, command, control, intelligence, and the ability to understand and execute the ongoing, all-domain fight. War is a complex machinery with low margins of error and can have devastating outcomes for the ill-prepared. It does not matter if you are against or for the U.S. military operations the last three decades; the fact is that the prolonged conflict and engagement have made the U.S. experienced. The Chinese inexperience, in combination with unrealistic expansionist ambitions (<https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/05/11/chinas-strategic-interest-in-the-arctic-goes-beyond-economics/>), can be the downfall of the regime. Dry swimmers maybe train the basics, but they are never great swimmers.

Although it may look like a creative strategy for China to harvest trade secrets and intellectual property (<https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2020/06/09/is-china-already-inside-americas-hypersonic-industrial-base/>) as well as put developing countries in debt to gain influence, I would question how rational the Chinese apparatus is. The repeated visualization of the Han nationalist cult appears as a strength amid the youth rallying behind President Xi Jinping's regime, but it is also a significant weakness. The weakness is blatantly visible in the Chinese need for surveillance and population control to maintain stability — surveillance and repression that is so encompassing in the daily life of the Chinese population that German DDR security services appear to have been amateurs.



(<https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2020/09/13/chinese-military-calls-us-biggest-threat-to-world-peace/>)

Chinese military calls US biggest threat to world peace (<https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2020/09/13/chinese-military-calls-us-biggest-threat-to-world-peace/>)

China's Defense Ministry on Sunday blasted a critical U.S. report on the country's military ambitions, saying it is the U.S. instead that poses the biggest threat to the international order and world peace.

By: The Associated Press

All chauvinist cults will implode over time because the unrealistic assumptions add up, and so will the sum of all delusional ideological decisions. Winston Churchill knew after Nazi Germany declared war on the United States in December 1941 that the Allies would prevail and win the war. Nazi Germany did not have the gross domestic product or manpower to sustain the war on two fronts, but the Nazis did not care because they were irrational and driven by hateful ideology. Nazi Germany had just months before it invaded the massive Soviet Union to create Lebensraum

(http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/hitler_lebensraum_01.shtml) and feed an urge to reestablish German-Austrian dominance in Eastern Europe. The Nazis unilaterally declared war on the United States. The rationale for the declaration of war was ideology, a worldview that demanded expansion and conflict, even if Germany was strategically inferior and eventually lost the war.

China's belief that it can be a global authoritarian hegemony is likely on the same journey. China is today driven by its flavor or expansionist ideology that seeks conflict without being strategically able. It is worth noting that not a single major country is China's ally.

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The Chinese supremacist propaganda works in peacetime, holding massive rallies and hailing Mao Zedong as a military genius, and some of its people sing, dance and wave red banners, but will that grip remain if the PLA loses? In case of a failed military campaign, is the Chinese population, with the one-child policy, ready for casualties, humiliation and failure? Will the authoritarian grip — with facial recognition, informers, digital surveillance and an army that primarily functions during peacetime as a force for crowd control — survive a crushing defeat?

If the regime loses its grip, the wrath of the masses may be unleashed from decades of repression. A country of the size of China — with a history of cleavages and civil wars, and that has a suppressed, diverse population and socioeconomic disparity — can be catapulted into Balkanization after a defeat. In the past, China has had long periods of internal fragmentation and weak central government.

The United States reacts differently to failure. The United States is as a country far more resilient than we might assume from watching the daily news. If the United States loses a war, the president gets the blame, but there will still be a presidential library in his/her name. There is no revolution.

There is an assumption lingering over today’s public debate that China has a strong hand, advanced artificial intelligence and the latest technology, and that it is an uber-able superpower.

I am not convinced.

During the last decade, the countries in the Indo-Pacific region that seeks to hinder the Chinese expansion of control, influence and dominance have increasingly formed stronger relationships. The strategic scale is in the democratic countries' favor. If China, still driven by ideology, pursues conflict at a large scale, it is likely the end of the communist dictatorship. In my personal view, we should pay more attention to the humanitarian risks, the ripple effects and the dangers of nukes

(<https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2020/09/01/china-planning-to-double-nuclear-arsenal-pentagon-says/>) in a civil war in case the Chinese regime implodes after a failed future war.

Jan Kallberg is a research scientist at the Army Cyber Institute at West Point and an assistant professor at the U.S. Military Academy. The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Army Cyber Institute at West Point, the U.S. Military Academy, the Defense Department or the U.S. government.

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Roger Lenton

Interesting article and many points would make for great debates. However, I do think Mr. Kallberg over states possible divides in Chinese society and culture. For example, he asserts that China has a long history of division and civil war, but that isn't really true, or at least not to the extent that he claims. The U.S. had a civil war less than a hundred years after its founding, France and the U.K. have had several, and the German states fought constantly before unifying. China has had many “break ups”, but the “warring states” period was over 2,000 years ago. Considering the culture is well over 5,000 years old, it would be wrong to paint such a picture of its national bond. That said, many of Kallberg’s points are likely correct given the current level of state control.

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Rick Cavado