



The New Thirty Years War (2018-2049)

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Executive Summary

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Analysis

The People's Republic of China is now actively preparing for a possible war with the US in the foreseeable future. While the Forbidden City concluded already in the second half of September that such a clash was all but inevitable - it was in late October that the PLA was ordered by President Xi Jinping in person to begin such preparations for war. In action and word, the PRC has started making concrete preparations for a major war against a US-led coalition on all neighboring seas and along all borders except with Russia and Mongolia.

Significantly, the Forbidden City considers the current crisis the beginning of a new Thirty Years War (2018-2049) aimed to guarantee the ascent of China as a global Hegemon despite desperate efforts by the US-led West to prevent this. This Thirty Years War is deemed by Xi Jinping's Beijing to be imperative for the successful last sprint that will guarantee the successful completion of China's Hundred Years Marathon. Little wonder that senior officials in Beijing now warn that the PRC will not hesitate to use force to defeat and reverse any attempt at containing the historic ascent of China to becoming the global Hegemon comes 2049.

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The profound change in Beijing's perception of the national security posture was already apparent in the Vostok-2018 military exercise in eastern Siberia on 11-15 September 2018. Although the PLA's Regiment-level combat force that participated in the exercise was about 1% of the Russian forces involved - the Chinese forces were fully integrated into the Russian forces for the final decisive ground-air assault on the invading forces in the exercise. Most significant, however, is the war-scenario simulated in Vostok-2018. A "major power" with a huge navy and sophisticated powerful armed forces invaded a neighboring country. Soon, the war spread first toward, and then across, the Russian-Chinese border. Consequently, Russian and Chinese forces launched a major holding operation in order to stop and defeat the offensive. Then, they went on the counter-offensive to banish the invader from the neighboring country. Meanwhile, the navies and air forces of both China and Russia pushed back the powerful navy and reestablished the regional A2/AD bubble.

On 27-28 September, Xi Jinping conducted an inspection tour of the PLA's Northern Theater Command in Shenyang Province. He visited the Command's main force grouping - the 79th Group Army - that will be the first to intervene in a future war on the Korean Peninsula. He visited the Group Army's key units and observed drills of ground and air forces. Xi Jinping paid special attention to the up-grading and up-dating of the Group Army's weapon systems in view of the sophistication of their prospective enemy - the US.

Xi Jinping then met with the commander of the 79th Group Army, Major General Xu Qiling, and key senior officers at the Group Army's headquarters in Liaoyang, Liaoning, to discuss in secret the current and future challenges. He emphasized the imperative for enhanced readiness for war. Xi Jinping instructed the senior officers to "strengthen the military training and war preparedness of the Group Army and improve its capability to win wars." He explained that it is important to strengthen the military "in the new era and military strategy for new conditions." Xi Jinping instructed that "The Group Army should integrate itself into the joint operation system of the PLA, carry out the requirements for transformation of the army and accelerate the building of new combat forces, to further liberate and develop its combat capability." He concluded by urging the PLA commanders to be "daring to battle and being sure to win."

On 25 October, Xi Jinping made a similar inspection tour of the Southern Theater Command, Guangdong Province, that is responsible for operations in the South China Sea and against Taiwan. Xi Jinping first visited a forward command post and was briefed about "the joint-operation commanding system for theater



commands.” From the post, he had a video-conversation with unit commanders on the South China Sea islands and key coastal outposts. He was briefed about the ongoing operations and force-building under their command. Xi Jinping instructed them “to accelerate the build-up and advanced training” of their respective units in order “to enhance the military’s ability to win modern wars.”

Xi Jinping then had a closed meeting with the Southern Theater commander Vice-Admiral Yuan Yubai, the first naval officer to command a PLA Theater, and key senior officers at the Theater headquarters. He noted that the Southern Theater Command has been bearing a “heavy military responsibility” in recent years. Hence, he - Xi Jinping - was visiting in order “to assess the situation [the Theater] is facing and boost its capabilities so it can handle any emergency. ... It is necessary to strengthen the mission ... and concentrate on preparations for fighting a war,” he said. “We need to take all complex situations into consideration and make emergency plans accordingly. We have to step up combat readiness exercises, joint exercises and confrontational exercises to enhance servicemen’s capabilities and preparation for war.” Xi Jinping instructed that the theater commands “accelerate capacity-building for commanding and improve their commanding and operation systems to ensure smooth and efficient command.” [alternate translation of the key sentence: Xi Jinping underlined “the importance of preparing for war and combat, while taking consideration of various complex situations, improving response plans and focusing on real-combat training.”]

That evening, a similar hardening of position was made by Defense Minister Wei Feng in Beijing. He delivered a keynote speech at the opening session of the semi-annual Xiangshan Forum in Beijing. The overall theme of the conference is “win-win cooperation” with “a more open and friendly China.”

In the first part of the speech, Wei Feng merely repeated all the usual propaganda themes about a peace-loving China devoid of global aspirations. He assured that the Chinese military “will never become a threat to other countries.” Even as China is rising to become the world’s leading economic powerhouse - China will not exploit this to coerce other countries. “Regardless of our level of development, we will not seek [military] hegemony, we will not engage in any military expansion or arms race,” Wei Feng stressed.

Wei Feng then changed his tone drastically when focusing on the security situation in the south - both Taiwan and the South China Sea. He articulated an assertive and uncompromising Chinese policy in terms stronger than before. “The Taiwan issue is related to China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and touches upon China’s core interests,” he said. “On this issue, it is extremely dangerous to repeatedly challenge China’s bottom line. If someone tries to separate out Taiwan, China’s military will take the necessary actions at any cost.” Wei Feng had a similarly clear message regarding the South China Sea. “The islands in the South China Sea have long been China’s territory. They’re the legacy of our ancestors and we can’t afford to lose a single inch of them,” he stated. “The South China Sea situation is stabilizing, which proves that all countries can take care of their own affairs. China opposes countries that come to the South China Sea from outside of the region in the name of freedom of navigation to show force and provoke, which leads to rising tensions,” Wei Feng explained.

By then, the new hardline strategy for confronting the US Navy was already being implemented in the South China Sea. Chinese senior officials explained that the aggressive response by the PLA’s Navy to the FONOP patrol by the US Navy close to Gaven and Johnson Reefs back on 30 September was an early manifestation of Beijing’s new assertive policy. At the time, the Chinese destroyer Luyang cut in front of the USS Decatur. For a short while, according to the US Navy, the Luyang “approached within 45 yards of Decatur’s bow” in what the US Navy considers an “unsafe and unprofessional manner.” Beijing was extremely annoyed by this specific



FONOP because it took place a day before the PRC's National Day. The PLAN destroyer "conducted an identification and warning process to drive the USS Decatur away," explained Wu Qian, spokesperson of the Ministry of National Defense. "The Chinese Armed Forces will continue to take all necessary steps to protect the country's sovereignty and security."

The Chinese professional elites rallied behind Beijing's world view. "The US provocation came first and then China took defensive action," Professor Su Hao of the China Foreign Affairs University in Beijing rationalized for the *South China Morning Post*. "The US warship would not have left the area if the Chinese ship had not sailed near it." Yet, Chinese experts fear uncontrolled and uncontrollable escalation driven by the bitterness of the escalating trade war. In a *Global Times* article, Li Kaisheng of the Institute of International Relations, the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, articulated Beijing's apprehension. "As the China-US trade conflict is likely to escalate into a comprehensive strategic confrontation, the South China Sea has become a card in Washington's hand again. This sums up the reason behind the encounter of Chinese and American military ships in the South China Sea. ... Howsoever severe the trade confrontation is, it is not a military conflict. But the South China Sea concerns sovereignty and military issues which are highly sensitive and may even trigger armed conflicts. If the China-US confrontation is exaggerated unlimitedly, it would only lead to more similar encounters of warships and both sides will fall into the Thucydides trap."

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Ultimately, the formulation of the increasingly belligerent doctrine is a logical evolution of Beijing's analysis and threat assessment based more on US actions than a reaction to the rhetoric of US leaders. Indeed, in a series of political moves against China starting late September the US effectively escalated the confrontation between Trump's Washington and Xi's Beijing. While the Trump White House considers these unilateral moves integral elements in the wrenching-up of the trade war - the PRC consider them the beginning of a new Thirty Years War (2018-2049) over the ascent of China as a global Hegemon. Since Beijing is not going to either compromise with the US over the key trade and defense issues or slow down the ascent of China as the leading world power - the resulting confrontation with the US will only keep escalating at least until the milestone 2049. The Forbidden City is determined to guarantee the successful completion of China's Hundred Years Marathon irrespective of the cost - including, if unavoidable, a confrontation with the US.

For Beijing, the turning point was on 20 September. The United States imposed sanctions on a series of Russian and Chinese entities on account of the purchase of Russian-made weapon systems and advanced technology by the PLA. Both Beijing and Moscow considered this to be an unprecedented intervention by a third party - ostensibly in the name of commercial interests - in the defense relationship of two sovereign great powers. For its part, Beijing went further and concluded that these sanctions were part of an intentional effort by the US to harm the PRC's long-term military build-up and particularly the acquisition of hi-tech strategic capabilities.

With time, the mere imposition of the sanctions focused the attention of the Kremlin and the Forbidden City on the inevitable aggregate outcome of the concurrent major developments in Northeast Asia starting early September. Beijing relishes the emergence of a new regional order in Northeast Asia based on an irreversible rapprochement between the Koreans in defiance of US objections, the integration of the regional economies (including Japan's) into the Chinese dominated Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through a railway network crossing both Koreas, having Russian-origin pipelined hydro-carbon supplies supplant supplies from US-allies in the Persian Gulf, and having it all happen under a Chinese and Russian regional security umbrella. Both the



Forbidden City and the Kremlin have no doubt that sooner or later the Trump White House will launch a major effort to reverse this dynamic. Thus, each and every event, even if on their own are not sufficient to spark the conflict, reinforces the conclusion that a profound face-off with the US is inevitable. The sanctions thus forced a profound reassessment of the overall dynamics and future prospects for a confrontation with the US.

Meanwhile, on 26 September, President Donald Trump personally escalated the confrontation during his UNGA speech in New York. For him, it is all personal. "Regrettably, we found that China has been attempting to interfere in our upcoming 2018 election coming up in November against my administration," Trump stated. "They do not want me, or us, to win because I am the first president ever to challenge China on trade. And we are winning on trade. We are winning at every level. We don't want them to meddle or interfere in our upcoming election." The new confrontation also expanded to Trump's personal attitude toward President Xi Jinping. "He [Xi Jinping] may not be a friend of mine any more but I think he probably respects me," Trump asserted.

On 4 October, Vice-President Mike Pence delivered a major speech on Sino-US relations that reiterated the new confrontational bellicose policy toward China. Far more important, Pence put Trump's accusations in the context of a coherent analysis of Sino-US relations and the US long-term strategy of "containment". Pence accused Beijing of "malign" efforts to undermine Trump ahead of the mid-term elections. This was the initial phase of a long-term campaign of "covert actors, front groups, and propaganda outlets to shift Americans' perception of Chinese policies" and thus defeat Trump's re-election bid in 2020. "China wants a different American president," Pence stated. He also accused the PRC of efforts to "displace the US in the Indo-Pacific region" that are manifested by confrontational policies in the South China Sea. Pence thus integrated the aftermath of the 30 September confrontation into the US overall doctrine. "Despite such reckless harassment, the United States Navy will continue to fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows and our national interests demand. We will not be intimidated. We will not stand down," Pence declared.

Action followed words. On 22 October, the US withdrew from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty originally signed with the Soviet Union. The treaty bans ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kms. Beijing is very worried about the US walk away from the INF Treaty, and is convinced that this has little or nothing to do with the alleged Russian violations. INF-range missiles are crucial for the US ability to challenge the Chinese formidable A2/AD bubble, as well as the Russian, in the Far East. Presently, the PLA's A2/AD bubble will make it extremely difficult and costly for US forces to strike the Chinese economic bastion along the China Sea coast in case of a Sino-US war, as well as intervene in support of Taiwan. The Sino-Russian A2/AD bubbles, that are coordinated and increasingly integrated, mainly near North Korea, will severely complicate the US ability to strike North Korea under current conditions. As such, the Sino-Russian A2/AD bubbles implement the scenario of Vostok-2018. Hence, senior defense officials and experts in Beijing interpret the US withdrawal from the INF Treaty as a clear manifestation of the growing US bellicosity and active preparations for a future war.

If Beijing needed any confirmation of its reading of the US intentions - they received it on 25 October. Lieutenant General (ret) Ben Hodges, the US Army commander in Europe in 2014-2017, warned a NATO conference in Warsaw of an impending Sino-US war. "I think in 15 years, it's not inevitable, but it is a very strong likelihood that we will be at war with China," he told the conference. There are numerous signs pointing to an "an increasingly tense relationship and increasing competition in all the different domains." Among these are the growing tensions in the South China Sea, Beijing's "constant stealing [of] technology,"



and Beijing's "gaining control of infrastructure abroad" by funding construction projects in Africa and Europe. It is imperative for the NATO allies to internalize this because "The United States does not have the capacity to do everything it has to do in Europe and in the Pacific to deal with the Chinese threat," Hodges explained. Thus, the NATO countries must "permanently assign forces for the eventuality that in 10 or 15 years we're going to be having to fight in the Pacific," Hodges advised. For Beijing, Hodges's opinion reflects Trump's intentions and policies.

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For Xi Jinping's Beijing, the new Thirty Years War is crucial for the successful completion of China's Hundred Years Marathon and the emergence of China as a global Hegemon. Beijing is convinced that Trump's Washington comprehends this, and is adamant on containing and blocking this ascent virtually at all cost. The US words and sanctions confirm that the trade war is but an integral component of a wider and more profound a crusade aimed to contain, suppress and prevent the PRC's rise, as well as contain and suppress the PRC's allies, most notably Russia, and prevent their joint effort at consolidating a new viable Eurasian Sphere, as well as the harvesting of Africa's richness.

However, the US is failing in its efforts to reverse these trends through diplomatic and commercial means even among its closest allies. The ongoing harnessing of both Koreas and Japan into the framework of the expanded Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) - as manifested in the just completed pilgrimage of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to Xi Jinping's Beijing, and the myriad of DPRK-ROK cooperation agreements in multiple spheres - have already created an irreversible dynamic favorable to Beijing's long-term interests. Hence, the real dread in Xi Jinping's Forbidden City is that Trump will attempt a dramatic breakout in a desperate effort to reverse the course of the entire Eurasia - a breakout that will, in turn, escalate to war. Hence, Xi Jinping instructed the PLA to start preparing for a shooting war.

Presently, the words of Trump and Pence only serve to reinforce Beijing's chauvinist-xenophobic attitude toward a hostile US desperate to contain the PRC. Beijing's apprehension is exacerbated by reports from Washington about the forthcoming G20 Summit in Argentina. The White House would like to exclude trade from the agenda of the planned meeting between Presidents Trump and Xi Jinping. Thus, the US will refuse to talk trade "until Beijing shows it is serious about addressing the US's list of negotiating demands" including help on North Korea, relations with Russia, and the posture in the Indo-Pacific and particularly the South China Sea and Taiwan.

According to Chinese senior officials, Beijing has so far declined the US offer for a meeting under these conditions. Indeed, Beijing considers the idea a form of extortion unbecoming normal international relations. "The US side knows China values the importance of summits," explained professor Wang Yong of the School of International Studies at Peking University in Beijing. The Forbidden City determined that "the demands by the Trump administration have exceeded what the Chinese side is able to offer." Under such conditions, confrontation will escalate, and the possibility of localized brinkmanship sparking a war will grow markedly.

On 27 October, Cary Huang of the *South China Morning Post* articulated Beijing's apprehension that a deadlock in the economic conflicts could soon escalate to a military confrontation. "As US-China relations deteriorate rapidly on a number of critical fronts including trade, technology, human rights and geopolitics, a series of events has inflamed military-to-military ties and increased the risk of direct military conflict between the powers." Because of the unstoppable economic, commercial and technological rise of the PRC, "the



increasing rivalry between the world's sole superpower and a superpower-in-waiting" is getting worse than the US-Soviet face-off during the height of the Cold War. The US inability to contain, let alone reverse, the Chinese surge in these spheres compels the US to increasingly rely on the facet where it still remains superior - raw military force. "There will be the protracted risk of military conflict in the future, in the process of the shift in US-China military relations from cooperative conflict avoidance towards adversarial confrontation." The growing US-Sino military brinkmanship is bound to sooner or later deteriorate to an "almost war", just like in the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, or even a full-scale war given the high-stakes for both the US and the PRC. "Growing US presence in [the] South China Sea threatens accident that sparks war," Cary Huang points out.

Meanwhile, Xi Jinping's Beijing is hoping that even as the new Thirty Years War escalates - it will stop short of a military confrontation and actual use of force. Such posture will only expedite the global ascent of China comes 2049. The emerging doctrine is being formulated by Zheng Bijian, the vice-president of the Central Party School who formulated the "peaceful rise" doctrine that has defined the PRC's foreign policy for well over a decade now. Zheng Bijian is convinced that under the conditions of the current Sino-US Crisis, "Beijing can seize an opportunity to lead the next phase of globalization."

On 14 October, Ni Tao reported in the *South China Morning Post*, Zheng Bijian articulated his vision at Fudan University in Shanghai. In the grand scheme of things, "China is resilient enough to withstand a full-blown trade war." This is because the Chinese "market power" is a fifth unique strength of China's, after "considerable productivity, strong national defense, unique cultural power and unparalleled social governance". The BRI provides for a "mega world market" that will enable the Chinese "breaking free from Trump's choke-hold on trade." Taken together, "China's market and transcontinental marketplace" provided by the BRI are "pillars" of the "great strategic opportunity". Zheng Bijian explained that "by placing itself at the center of world affairs and economic globalization while the US is pulling out, China is building its reputation as a champion of free trade in its quest to win over hearts and minds."

Meanwhile, the resilience of the Chinese people will help the PRC withstand the near-term setbacks wrought by the trade war. Therefore, Beijing should tell the Chinese people to "steel yourself for the looming economic hardship, and remember, whoever sticks it out to the end wins." Ultimately, Zheng Bijian emphasized, the PRC's triumph is inevitable as much because of the clairvoyant policies of Xi Jinping as by Trump's self-defeating policies. "Trump's trade bullying, hectoring attitude toward allies and ravings about US pre-eminence will further estrange the US from its friends. He will drive them into the open arms of China, whatever they may make of Beijing's posturing."

Russian experts have a more nuanced vision for the outcome of the new Thirty Years War. The Kremlin concurs that the US sanctions will only serve to improve the defense relations and tighten the alliance between the PRC and the Russian Federation (RF). The current US-Sino crisis is indeed the starting point for a fierce and fateful, if hopefully non-violent, Thirty Years War for the future of the entire Eurasia, and even the world. Like the original Thirty Years War, the current war will end with the emergence of a new world order - a new Peace of Westphalia.

Kremlin experts and senior officials foresee a new international system led by four powers - the US, the PRC, the RF, and Germany. Each of these powers will dominate their respective regions while posturing and building systems of alliances for global power and influence. The Kremlin points out that as stipulated in the Common Eurasian Home doctrine originally introduced by President Vladimir Putin, three of the four leading powers - with the PRC by far the most powerful - will have a vast myriad of largely anti-US common interests,



as well as mutual dependence on the common economy of the Eurasian Sphere. Thus, for the Kremlin experts and senior officials, the world of 2049 will see the ascent of the PRC as the strongest world power, but not necessarily the indisputable global Hegemon anticipated by Xi Jinping's Forbidden City.

Left to be determined is how the US will react to the PRC's ascent - a trend considered inevitable and irreversible by both the Forbidden City and the Kremlin. Beijing is increasingly apprehensive that Trump's Washington will strive to escalate the new Thirty Years War through increasingly reckless brinkmanship. Whether the likely outbreak of war will be accidental or intentional is secondary for Beijing. Hence, in late October, Xi Jinping formally instructed the PLA to start preparing for war. A historically significant threshold was crossed.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

About the Author of this Issue

Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State.

He is the author of eleven books – including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (New York Times No. 1 Bestseller & Washington Post No. 1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (New York Times Bestseller & Foreign Affairs Magazine Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* – and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports.

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