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Summative Assessment #3

The United States cannot deter China with driftwood. It must meet force with focus, ambiguity with alignment, and ambition with all four instruments of national power. Because Beijing is playing to win. The People's Republic of China has spent decades refining its economic, military, informational, and diplomatic reach. It now uses these tools to intimidate, divide, and coerce. If the United States wants to stop the slide into conflict and pull Beijing back toward global norms, it must do three things: reinforce deterrence with forward presence and campaigns, reshape economic dependencies, and reclaim credibility through diplomatic leadership.

First, the military instrument must not just deter, it must campaign. This means more than deterrence by punishment. It means presence. It means posture. The 2022 National Defense Strategy emphasizes operating forces and aligning departmental efforts with allies to complicate competitors' military preparations and expose coercive activities (Department of Defense, 2022, p. 2). China builds islands. The U.S. sends a Carrier Strike Group. But that is not enough.

Campaigning means sustained influence below the threshold of war. The Joint Doctrine Note 1-19 emphasizes that campaigning across the competition continuum, particularly below armed conflict, should enable favorable security conditions by integrating diplomatic, informational, military, and economic actions (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2019, p. II-3). Pacific Deterrence Initiative

funding should move beyond ship counts and focus on forward-operating logistics, distributed command-and-control, and multilateral exercises with allies. Strength speaks. Repetition embeds it. Campaigning fosters patterns of allied cooperation that, over time, become instinctive.

Seemingly routine interactions like joint patrols, shared logistics, and synchronized messaging create muscle memory for deterrence. That memory becomes the quiet but essential scaffolding for a web of regional resilience.

Second, the economic instrument cannot stay passive or transactional. China's Belt and Road Initiative is not about ports. It is about leverage. America must respond with credible alternatives, not charity. Drezner (1998) warned that sanctions succeed only when they are tightly targeted and embedded in a broader strategy (p. 74). Sanctioning Chinese firms for intellectual property theft sends a message. But building infrastructure in Southeast Asia does something more: it offers a choice. The NSS (2022) calls for deepening economic engagement with Indo-Pacific partners to offer an alternative to the PRC's coercive practices (p. 12, 24). This is not containment. It is competition with an open hand instead of a closed fist.

Third, diplomacy must lead. Military deterrence and economic incentives are blunt if not framed by credible intent. Former Ambassador John Cloud said diplomacy should be the "first thing we do" (Cloud, 2023). And as Admiral Mullen put it, "we need to worry a lot less about how to communicate our actions and much more about what our actions communicate" (Mullen, 2009, p. 4). Beijing reads signals. Mixed messages create space for miscalculation. Clear diplomatic leadership means showing up, not just speaking up. At the Shangri-La Dialogue or ASEAN summits, the Secretary of State must sit across from allies with shared strategy in hand, not vague affirmations. The Joint Warfighting doctrine reinforces this approach, emphasizing that the

United States can employ joint forces to support diplomatic and economic instruments of national power in shaping adversary behavior (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2023, p. I-4).

Analysts at the Atlantic Council argue that the United States should strengthen coordination with allies on export controls and investment oversight to shape Chinese behavior without triggering escalation (Atlantic Council, 2021). The logic is sound. It favors structure over shock. But it must be matched by resolve. Clarity is not hostility. It is coherence. As the National Security Strategy emphasizes, the U.S. seeks to engage in fair and responsible competition with China while avoiding conflict or a new Cold War (White House, 2022, p. 8). Enticement, then, means offering China a path that appears more profitable than coercion. Climate collaboration, public health cooperation, and scientific exchange may form that path. However, none of this should whitewash repression or condone theft. Transparency builds trust. Silence breeds suspicion.

In short, deterring China and encouraging better behavior requires the U.S. to act like a strategist, and not like a bureaucrat. The most effective deterrent to aggression is forward presence and campaigning. Selective economic engagement takes the power out of coercion. Diplomatic leadership is what holds it all together. The PRC plays the long game. The U.S. cannot respond with short attention spans. This is not a sprint. It is a contest for the future shape of order itself. This contest will not be won by default. It will not be won by slogans, either. Victory demands clarity of purpose, persistence over news cycles, and leadership that aligns words with will. Strategy must translate into action. Rhetoric alone is not a plan.

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