Scholars have long noted the higher likelihood of war that seems to accompany the rise and decline of great powers. Harvard professor Graham Allison most recently argued that war with China in the coming decades is “more likely than not,” if China and the United States do not go through the “tremendous effort” of avoiding it.\(^1\) Conflict could break out due to deliberate action or miscalculation in the South China Sea or the East China Sea, on the Korean Peninsula, or across the Taiwan Strait. A recent RAND report also notes that “despite cautious and pragmatic Chinese policies, the risk of conflict with the United States … will grow in consequence, and perhaps in probability, as China’s strength and assertiveness increases in the Western Pacific.”\(^2\)

But how would the People’s Republic of China (PRC) end wars? The real possibility of a conflict involving China justifies an examination of Chinese strategic thinking beyond deterrence, crisis behavior and conflict initiation to include how Beijing thinks about conflict termination. In particular, how has China historically approached diplomacy, mediation and escalation in conflict? To what degree are these historical patterns of behavior likely to manifest themselves in future conflicts, especially given all the changes to China’s internal and external environment since China’s last war in 1979? And how might the U.S. role in the region, and shifting power balances more generally, affect China’s decisions about war termination in future conflicts?
The answers to these questions have significant practical implications. First, this article enhances the understanding of Chinese strategic thinking by evaluating how the characteristics of China’s rise may affect how it attempts to bring any contemporary war to a close. Second, by recognizing some of China’s preferred strategies when it hopes to bring a conflict to a close, U.S. strategists can amend their own approach to counter aspects of Chinese wartime strategy that escalate and prolong conflicts to improve the chances of a short, limited war that ends on terms favorable to Washington.

This article proceeds as follows. First, I summarize from previous research how China approaches three critical factors that shape war termination: wartime diplomacy, escalation and third-party mediation. I then evaluate how China’s increased power, nationalism and participation in international institutions may affect each of these tendencies, respectively. I argue that China is more likely than ever to talk only to weaker opponents, to rely on escalation to bring about peace, and to leverage third parties, including international institutions, to pressure its adversaries to capitulate. I conclude with actionable recommendations, given these findings, for adjusting U.S. peacetime policy, posture and plans to better protect its interests.

**How China Ends Wars: A Summary of Critical Factors**

Generally, war termination is more likely under three conditions: when states are open to talks, favor de-escalation to bring their enemy to the negotiating table, and are open to third-party mediation. In contrast, the likelihood of ending a war decreases when a belligerent chooses not to engage in diplomacy, relies on heavy escalation to bring the war to an end, or is reluctant to accede to third-party mediation. When a state approaches war-fighting in this fashion, it erects additional barriers to conflict resolution that make conflicts longer and bloodier than they would otherwise be.

In the three major wars China has fought since 1949—the Korean War, the Sino-Indian War and the Sino-Vietnamese War—Beijing exhibited three problematic tendencies that hindered timely war resolution. First, China was willing to open communication channels in the initial stages of conflict only with weaker parties. Otherwise, China cut off communications and delayed talking until it had demonstrated sufficient toughness through fighting.

Second, its leaders demonstrated confidence that they could escalate to rapidly impose peace against both stronger and weaker opponents. This tendency created a sense of urgency that hindered sound decision making on all sides.

Lastly, with respect to mediation, China did approach third parties, which theoretically could have been beneficial. However, because China specifically
involved them to pressure the adversary on China’s behalf, and not to act as
genuine mediators, empirically Chinese internationalization of disputes did not
lead to swift resolution.

In short, China’s approach to diplomacy, escalation and mediation has created obstacles to conflict resolution. But these are not long-forgotten historical behaviors—in fact, they remain a central part of current Chinese doctrine. Through successive editions of The Science of Strategy (战略学), considered to be the most authoritative work on Chinese strategic thinking, these behaviors continue to be prescribed in the present day. They are therefore likely to continue in future conflicts. This is likely the result of China’s official position that its war termination strategy has been relatively successful in achieving its objectives historically, and therefore it should be maintained. After all, during the Korean War China was able to beat back U.S.-led UN forces and preserve North Korean sovereignty, even though its forces had less advanced equipment and weapons. In 1962, Chinese forces routed Indian forces in a matter of days, and brought the conflict to a swift end while still occupying some territorial gains. In all three wars China’s fought since 1949, China believed it demonstrated its resolve to fight over critical territorial and national security issues. Chinese military scholars also point out that heavy escalation in the early stages of conflict strengthened China’s strategic deterrent, preventing the outbreak of total war.

What Might Be Different Today

Doctrine aside, China is not the same country it was when it fought its previous wars. The Chinese military is significantly more capable with respect to other regional actors, which could plausibly affect its diplomatic posture. Meanwhile, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has less control over domestic public opinion of potential conflicts than before because of greater openness in society and, more recently, greater access to information through the internet. Public opinion in China, therefore, could now plausibly affect the CCP’s willingness to escalate conflicts. And while China was isolated during its previous wars, it is now more economically and politically integrated into the international system, which could affect its approach to third-party involvement. A closer look at these changes, however, reveals that they are likely to magnify rather than dampen China’s historical war termination tendencies.
Wartime Diplomacy under a Stronger China

China has historically been reluctant to engage in talks with an opponent after conflict breaks out if that country is stronger militarily. China offered direct talks early on in a conflict only when it believed itself to hold a significant military advantage over the adversary, as it did in the case of the Sino-Indian War and Sino-Vietnamese War. In Korea, Mao refused to talk for eight months as China fought the United States. Even after Mao accepted that the war would end by negotiated settlement, he refused to offer talks for fear of looking weak and turned instead to the Soviet Union to make the peace talk proposal that would allow for the emergence of negotiations in July 1951.6

This reluctance stems from the general tendency of states to fear that demonstrating a willingness to talk will signal weakness and encourage their enemy to intensify, escalate or persist in the fighting.7 If perceptions of the balance of power determine whether Beijing offers talks, what does this mean for contemporary flashpoints? China is currently more powerful than ever before relative to many regional actors with which it has territorial disputes, such as the Philippines, Vietnam and Taiwan. If anything, Beijing probably overestimates this power asymmetry because of its economic influence and lack of any real test of its military since 1979.8

Given these power disparities, Beijing is likely to offer direct talks with most East Asian countries in the early stages of bilateral armed conflicts, with the possible exception of Japan. However, I make this argument with a few caveats. First, while Chinese willingness to talk may be good for crisis management, such channels may be offered only to enhance the effectiveness of Chinese coercive threats. For example, China wanted to talk to India after the first wave of the 1962 attack to coerce India into signing a binding agreement about the demarcation of the border. The second caveat involves the degree of the power imbalance—if China is so much more powerful than its opponent that it can achieve its goals directly, it may forgo talks altogether and strive to forcibly attain its objectives. While this did not come into play in past wars, it increasingly becomes a possibility in current times as China’s military modernizes, and those of Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Philippines, for example, remain qualitatively and quantitatively inferior. In this scenario, China would no longer use a limited war strategy of coercion, and shift instead to a strategy of direct control. If indicators arise in Chinese military writings that suggest that Chinese leaders believe the power imbalance is
sufficient for forcible achievement, then deterrence by denial, not deterrence by punishment, would be the best strategic response for China’s potential adversaries.

China’s position relative to Japan, in a potential clash in the East China Sea, is less clear. Chinese leaders currently perceive the balance of power to be shifting in China’s favor.\footnote{Japan objectively retains an edge for now, but significant changes in its defense posture are also underway that could affect future Chinese perceptions. On August 22, 2017, the Japanese Ministry of Defense requested a record budget of 5.2 trillion yen ($48.1 billion) for fiscal year 2018.\footnote{A spokesperson for China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed “concern” over the defense spending request, stating that Japan was exaggerating the “China threat” in an attempt to increase its military spending.} Furthermore, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has accelerated efforts to reform the Japanese constitution, which has not been revised since going into effect in 1947.\footnote{The most controversial proposed change concerns Article 9, wherein Abe wants to add provisions clarifying the legal status of the Self-Defense Forces.} \footnote{In any future conflict, China’s assessment of the balance of power, and therefore its position on wartime talks, will depend greatly on its expectations about U.S. intervention. Beijing would likely threaten escalatory measures to compel regional players to negotiate early, while simultaneously presenting itself as reasonable enough to talk, all before the United States could get involved. If the United States does get involved, China’s perceptions of the balance of power would shift, most likely causing Beijing to refuse to talk—or, at least, to set onerous preconditions to talks—which would exacerbate the difficulty of managing escalation and resolving any situation in a timely manner.} In any future conflict, China’s assessment of the balance of power, and therefore its position on wartime talks, will depend greatly on its expectations about U.S. intervention. Beijing would likely threaten escalatory measures to compel regional players to negotiate early, while simultaneously presenting itself as reasonable enough to talk, all before the United States could get involved. If the United States does get involved, China’s perceptions of the balance of power would shift, most likely causing Beijing to refuse to talk—or, at least, to set onerous preconditions to talks—which would exacerbate the difficulty of managing escalation and resolving any situation in a timely manner.

\textbf{Peace through Escalation by a More Nationalist China}

Beijing’s second, and related, historical tendency is to rely on disproportionate, rapid escalation to convince the enemy to capitulate and bring the war to an end. There are two main reasons to believe this tendency will persist in future conflicts. First, China may escalate rapidly in order to swiftly conclude a conflict so as to limit the window for possible intervention by a strong power, i.e., the United States.\footnote{Disproportionate escalation has also been posited as a means to avoid U.S. intervention because it would clearly demonstrate to the United States, which Chinese strategic thinkers believe lacks resolve, the high costs of intervention.} Chinese writers comment that especially since the end of the Cold War, U.S. strategy is shaped by casualty aversion and lacks resolve.
has been shaped by casualty aversion, especially when U.S. interests in a conflict are seen as marginal. Some Chinese thinkers believe that Taiwan, the East China Sea and the South China Sea territorial issues are not vital to U.S. national security, and so it is possible that Washington would be less likely to intervene in a conflict if it believes the costs of doing so would be prohibitively high.\(^\text{17}\)

This belief of weak U.S. resolve has been reinforced in recent years, as Washington has made clear its preference to end costly wars in Iraq as well as Afghanistan, and avoid further military entanglements in Syria.\(^\text{18}\) Moreover, while President Trump has signaled unpredictability in the use of force, his comments about reducing U.S. alliance commitments and presence in Asia hint at a higher threshold for U.S. intervention.\(^\text{19}\) In sum, the Chinese hope to attack hard and escalate to a quick peace before the United States can intervene, but also not to attack so hard as to incite Washington.\(^\text{20}\) American crisis management experts are concerned that the Chinese leadership is insufficiently sensitive to contradictions and dilemmas in any plan to escalate to peace that would also prioritize minimizing the likelihood and scope of U.S. intervention.

The rise of Chinese nationalism provides a second reason to believe China’s tendency to disproportionately escalate early on in a conflict will continue. The Chinese public is increasingly demanding firm responses to perceived slights, international criticism, and perceived attempts to undermine Chinese territorial integrity and sovereignty. While there is genuine populist nationalism, the Party contributes to the dynamic through media manipulation and patriotic education to manage social dynamics, secure Party control, and shift the public’s focus away from domestic issues or problems within the CCP.\(^\text{21}\) One example of this effort is the “three confidences”—the calls for the Chinese people to be confident in China’s chosen path, China’s political system, and China’s guiding theories, to which Xi Jinping has added a fourth: confidence in China’s culture.\(^\text{22}\) These confidences were originally a way to address the so-called “three crises of confidence” in socialism, Marxism, and the Party.\(^\text{23}\) The CCP may even encourage nationalist protest to signal its resolve on an issue, though the driving factors behind such protests can be genuine and difficult to control.\(^\text{24}\)

Once China escalates, nationalist support for such actions—whether it be organic or stirred up by the government—may then make it difficult for the CCP to de-escalate or compromise for the sake of conflict resolution. This is because protecting the Chinese “core interests” of national sovereignty and territorial integrity is a critical component of the Party’s strategy to legitimize its rule. Xi Jinping declared in his first foreign policy speech as leader of both the ruling CCP and the armed forces that China will “never give up” its core territorial and security interests.\(^\text{25}\) Chinese official media often covers statements made to this effect in specific maritime disputes with Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines.\(^\text{26}\) While the Party may condone or even encourage nationalism to signal resolve to
its opponents, once unleashed, it could be hard to control. If the CCP looks like it is backing down, it could risk sharp criticism, expressions of discontent and even widespread protests that could threaten stability and CCP rule. This may especially be the case in an emotionally charged conflict with Japan or over Taiwan.

**Mediation by a More Internationally Integrated China**

Lastly, China may be open to third-party mediation in a conflict. In its previous wars, involving third parties was a critical aspect of Beijing’s war termination strategy. Specifically, Beijing proactively reached out to garner support for its position in a given war and encouraged these countries to get involved to pressure its adversary. For example, China could leverage the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to create pressure against U.S. intervention in a South China Sea dispute, or even reach out to U.S. allies in Europe and ask them to speak out against escalating violence or use of force on the part of Washington. The central role of third parties in Chinese military strategy may have been a consequence of the Cold War, when Chinese leaders felt they had natural allies in other socialist or developing countries against imperialist and hegemonic forces.

One main reason China is likely to continue to bring in third-party actors to support its position is that its power and influence in bilateral relationships have increased exponentially since the Cold War. As of September 2015, China held seventy strategic partnerships with countries across Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa and Asia. Since then, China has deepened its cooperation with Brazil, Egypt, India, Pakistan and Tajikistan through strategic partnerships. China has also increased its private sector strategic partnerships with foreign companies, largely for projects that fall under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative. In addition to strategic partnerships, China has solidified its global economic position through bilateral trade. In 2016, China had 212 trade partners and was the largest trading partner for Iran, Russia, the United States, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, North Korea, India, Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam.

While China’s strong economic clout suggests that third parties are likely to be a key part of its wartime strategy, Beijing’s deep involvement in international institutions could change the role of third parties in Chinese military strategy. China is no longer a weak country that needs the support of others to protect its national interests. As China continued to grow economically and politically throughout the reform and opening period and into the 1990s, China sought greater influence in the international community. By 2000, it had joined over 50 international governmental organizations and 1,275 international non-governmental institutions. Now, China participates in 74 different international organizations and “across the board, China has become more effective in utilizing international organizations to advance national interests and to extract what it needs from these institutions.”
China’s attitude toward international institutions has grown from blatant opposition to active participation and leadership; many Chinese nationals have taken up leadership roles in prominent institutions such as Justin Yifu Lin (Chief Economist and Senior Vice President of the World Bank, 2008-2012) and Sha Zukang (head of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2007-2012). In addition to its involvement in these preexisting international institutions, China is beginning to create new multilateral institutions of its own. China is taking a leadership role in international development through its Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), a regional investment bank free from what China sees as the misaligned aims of other international financial institutions.

During its first year of operation in 2016, the AIIB lent $1.7 billion and AIIB officials foresee its lending program growing to $1.5-$2.5 billion in 2017 and $2.5-$3.5 billion in 2018. While small compared to the World Bank Group, which gave out $59 billion in loans, grants, equity investments, and guarantees to partner countries and private businesses in 2017, or even the IMF, which made $8 billion in new commitments of nonconcessional lending and $1.2 billion new commitments of concessional lending in FY2016, it signals China’s willingness to participate in international development. The New Development Bank (NDB, formerly BRICS Development Bank), headquartered in Shanghai, is another example of a new institution in which China is taking a leading role. Founded jointly by Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa and with an initial authorized capital of $100 billion, this bank largely funds ongoing projects in the energy and infrastructure sectors in China or India.

China has also taken a leadership role in global security issues through multilateral security agreements such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which recently expanded to include India and Pakistan. President Xi has indicated that the SCO enables its members, who are mostly Central Asian states, to “take it as our own responsibility to safeguard regional security and stability,” rather than relying on outside powers such as the United States. Despite comparisons to NATO, China has emphasized that the SCO has “created a new model of international relations – partnership instead of alliance.” China has also increased its influence through founding the China-Africa Cooperation Forum and the China-Arab Cooperation Forum in 2000 and 2004, respectively, in which China can set the agenda on economic and political issues.

Given these changes, contemporary China has unprecedented carrots and sticks at its disposal to convince third parties, either bilaterally or through international institutions, to adopt policies that benefit China’s war efforts. Significant wartime diplomatic initiatives may focus on mitigating the reputational repercussions of its use of force and dissuading countries from involving themselves in counterproductive ways. For example, China is likely to appeal to all its Asian neighbors to stay out of any conflict, including by refusing to provide the
United States with any support for potential operations. Whether the crisis occurs over Taiwan or maritime disputes, China could even turn to the Europeans or the broader international community to pressure the United States to stay out or back down. China’s treatment of third parties as extensions of its pressure and coercion, and not as impartial mediators, will hinder international efforts in conflict management, unless a coalition is sufficiently strong and willing to attempt to impose mediation on China. But China is the number one trading partner of most major regional powers and has relied on economic carrots and sticks in the past to persuade others to support its goals, so the effective intervention of outside parties is unlikely. It is also possible that China will enact its strategies through multilateral organizations in a contemporary armed conflict, especially if its leaders believe that institutional pressure will restrain the U.S. response. However, at its current levels of political and institutional power, China is likely to prioritize preventing the multilateralization of its territorial disputes, especially given its fear of horizontal escalation.

**Implications and Recommendations for U.S. Policy and Planning**

The United States and its partners and allies should take these patterns into account in their defense planning. While preventing a regional conflagration from occurring in the first place through crisis management should be scholars’ and policymakers’ top concern, understanding how to ensure that any conflict that does happen is short and limited is equally important for all affected countries. The findings of this article provide some insight into how this might be achieved. To ensure that any conflicts in which the United States is engaged are as short as possible, especially given the instability in East Asia, I suggest three ways the United States and its strategic community can better manage future Asian conflicts.

**Change U.S. Approach to Wartime Diplomacy**

Currently the United States does not have an official policy on the conditions under which it is willing to talk to its opponents during war. The United States should consider declaring in peacetime a new policy that it would be open to wartime talks from day one of any conflict it is participating in. This would undermine the connection between a willingness to talk and weakness that emerges when one moves toward diplomacy under military pressure. Luckily, states can manipulate signals, as they depend on agreement on the meaning of particular
behaviors—as international relations expert Robert Jervis explains, “there is nothing in most situations to compel the adoption of particular pairings of signals and meanings.” If it is a U.S. policy to always talk, then adversaries can no longer infer any information from this openness during a conflict. If the United States does not publicly announce a new policy to offer talks from the first day of any conflict, then the move to talks during a war runs the risk of conveying weak resolve or capabilities to the enemy—that is, it may signal that the United States is eager to stop fighting.

Additionally, the United States should work to make talking to its enemies more natural and desirable. If the United States treats talking as a reward and pairs it with a coercive strategy, a willingness to talk becomes a concession to the other side, making talks less likely. The goal is to inspire direct communication between the United States and China, which supports crisis management, reduces the likelihood of escalation due to calculation, and facilitates conflict resolution.

Relatively, as a mediator, the United States should consider a policy of consistently proposing talks between China and its adversaries from the first day of a conflict. Third-party attempts, while not always successful, did not exacerbate obstacles to talks in any of China’s three previous wars, so there is little downside to trying. Therefore, because working as a mediator is unlikely to exacerbate tensions and could provide a much-needed channel if both sides are ready to talk but want to avoid the image of weakness, this should become a primary component of U.S. foreign policy.

Some may oppose such a strategy, believing that threats would be more effective than reassurance. The United States has historically relied primarily on coercion, whether through the use of force, threats or sanctions, to get an adversary to the negotiating table. Except for extreme cases in which the use of force has completely destroyed a country’s ability to pursue its desired policies, however, coercion has rarely worked since WWII in getting an adversary to the negotiating table. In short, the U.S. belief that military pressure pushes adversaries to the table—currently manifested in U.S. strategy toward North Korea, for example—is flawed; this strategy is bound to fail, given the weaker countries’ perceptions of the prohibitively high costs associated with acquiescing under pressure and their uncertainty about the benefits.

Integrate Diplomats into Military Contingency Planning

In limited conflicts, outcomes depend not only on battlefield results, but also on how each side perceives the other, through political statements and diplomatic
positions. This means that military leaders and diplomats should jointly devise strategies of fighting and talking which take advantage of military victories to the greatest degree possible and reduce the costs of operational setbacks.

A way to bridge this research with practice would be to promote including both diplomatic and military leaders in war games and contingency planning to learn how to best coordinate to affect adversaries’ actions and perceptions of talking while fighting during times of conflict. While military doctrine gives a nod to diplomatic processes, they are generally not translated into contingency plans for conventional operations. In recent years, the U.S. military’s preoccupation with irregular conflict has forced relevant doctrines and training to accommodate diplomacy and other instruments of national power in low-intensity conflict. But this whole-of-government approach is missing from planning high-intensity conventional conflicts, which are still considered to be entirely military affairs.

Facilitating coordination among State Department officials and the Pentagon, even in a war game scenario, would better train them both to manage conflict. This, in turn, would reduce the costs and risks for American military and civilians deployed to conflict areas as well as the duration of wars if they break out. This has become even more relevant with the release of President Trump’s National Defense Strategy, which describes China as a “strategic competitor,” citing Beijing’s drive to achieve “regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States” on the path to “global preeminence in the future.”

Reconsidering Which Countries Can Shape China’s Choices

When China hopes to pressure an adversary, it turns to the countries closest to its opponent, not necessarily the countries with which it has the most in common. In the Korean War (1950-53), China assumed that the United States would eventually cave to pressure not to expand the war from the other UN sending states, and later that it would concede on the prisoner-of-war issue to allow ceasefire talks to come to an end. In the Sino-Indian War (1962), China made appeals to non-aligned and socialist countries to convince India to negotiate. In the Sino-Vietnamese War (1979), Deng Xiaoping tried to reach out to Southeast Asian leaders to solicit strong statements against Vietnam while on tour there in November. Vietnam complained about these efforts to turn countries, especially those in ASEAN, against Hanoi. While this strategy has varied in its effectiveness, it does present an interesting alternative to the U.S. tendency to focus on gaining the support of its own friends and allies, instead of those of any adversary.

In other words, if the United States finds itself directly or indirectly in conflict with China, it should attempt to convince countries close to China—like Pakistan, Russia and Cambodia—to pressure China, in addition to appealing to traditional U.S. partners like Australia, the NATO countries, Japan and South
Korea. This strategy also creates a rationale for revitalizing the UN Secretary General’s role as a mediator—a role codified in the UN Charter.

**Ending China’s Wars**

China’s approach to wartime diplomacy, escalation and mediation all play roles in determining how a hypothetical conflict would unfold in East Asia and what the U.S. role in restoring peace and stability should be. In its three major conflicts since the Cold War began, China has demonstrated a preference only to talk to weaker states, to rapidly escalate any conflict to quickly impose peace, and to use third parties not as genuine mediators but to pressure its adversaries to concede—all of which work against war termination. Since those historical case studies, China has grown even stronger relative to its neighbors, has become more nationalistic, and has become more internationally integrated—all of which may affect, or could affect, any future Chinese war termination strategy.

The United States has a critical opportunity to shape China’s choices toward more openness to diplomacy and mediation and to nudge China away from its reliance on compellence, rather than concessionary actions, to convince an adversary to reach a peace settlement during any potential future conflict. Before any such conflict might occur, the United States can take advantage of this opportunity by taking actions such as publicly declaring U.S. policy to negotiate during a conflict, integrating diplomats into its own military contingency planning, and reconsidering its focus on parties closest to China rather than itself to maximize third-party leverage to terminate conflict. The alternative—to wait until a conflict erupts to make such decisions—risks being perceived by China as a sign of weakness and ultimately being ineffective in U.S., or in shaping China’s, war termination policy.

**Notes**

6. For a summary of findings, see Mastro “The Theory and Practice of War Termination: Assessing Patterns in China’s Historical Behavior.”


42. Mastro, Forthcoming Book.
