Journal of Strategic Studies
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fjss20

Reconsidering a Naval Blockade of China: A Response to Mirski

Evan Braden Montgomery [a]
[a] Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, Washington, DC, USA
Published online: 31 May 2013.

To cite this article: Evan Braden Montgomery (2013) Reconsidering a Naval Blockade of China: A Response to Mirski, Journal of Strategic Studies, 36:4, 615-623, DOI: 10.1080/01402390.2013.790811

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2013.790811

The Journal of Strategic Studies, 2013
Vol. 36, No. 4, 615–623, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2013.790811

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Reconsidering a Naval Blockade of China: A Response to Mirski

EVAN BRADEN MONTGOMERY

Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, Washington DC, USA

ABSTRACT Sean Mirski's assessment of a naval blockade is an important contribution to the debate over how the United States should respond to China's growing military power. Nevertheless, it has three limitations. First, although distant and close-in blockades could be employed in tandem, analyzing them separately helps to explain when they might be used and how they could influence escalation. Second, while conventional countervalue and counterforce options could also be employed together, this would depend on the degree to which they overlapped and the order in which they were implemented. Third, a blockade could lead to unanticipated prewar, intra-war, and postwar challenges.

KEY WORDS: China, Blockade, Strategy, Coercion, Escalation

There is little doubt that China's military modernization efforts are shifting the conventional military balance in East Asia. Fueled by double-digit annual growth rates in defense spending, Beijing is acquiring a variety of precision-guided land-attack, sea-denial, counter-air, and counter-information, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. Collectively, these systems could be used to protect China's maritime periphery, project force against its neighbors, and prevent outside intervention in a crisis or conflict. As a result, the United States may eventually find that its current military strategy of deterrence by denial is increasingly difficult to sustain, while its longstanding objectives such as defending regional allies and preserving freedom of the commons are increasingly difficult to achieve.

How should Washington respond to these developments? On the one hand, it could adapt its existing military strategy, capabilities, and posture to better meet emerging threats. Doing so, however, may require new operational concepts for air and maritime power-projection, as well as significant investments to harden forward bases, increase

the resilience of critical information systems, and field 'access insensitive' platforms that are not excessively vulnerable to opposing forces. On the other hand, it could fundamentally alter its military strategy. For example, a debate is now taking place over the relative merits of conventional countervalue and counterforce approaches to deterrence and warfighting. Specifically, proponents of the former argue that the United States should emphasize measures that would target China's economy rather than (or in addition to) its military if a conflict occurred, in particular by blockading its seaborne commerce.[1]

This debate is hardly surprising. The emerging strategic competition between the United States and China is fundamentally a competition between a maritime power and a continental power, and the former have often resorted to economic coercion against the latter. Moreover, with an export-led model of economic growth, an increasing dependence on imported raw materials and energy resources, and a limited ability to monitor or protect the sea lines of communication that connect it to the global economy, Beijing is already apprehensive that an opponent might disrupt its overseas trade during a future conflict.[2] There are, therefore, compelling reasons for the United States to explore this option, particularly given the operational military challenges it faces in East Asia. Toward this end, Sean Mirski's article is a valuable contribution to this emerging debate.[3] Nevertheless, there are several areas where his analysis should be amended, qualified, or extended: the conditions under which the United States might employ a blockade as well as the type of blockade it might implement; the relationship between counterforce and countervalue military strategies; and the broader strategic risks of economic coercion.

Economic Coercion and Escalation Dynamics

When would the United States actually implement a blockade and what might it look like? According to Mirski, because Washington would be

[1]See, for example, T.X. Hammes, 'Offshore Control: A Proposed Strategy for an Unlikely Conflict', *Strategic Forum* No. 278 (June 2012); Jeffrey E. Kline and Wayne P. Hughes, Jr, 'Between Peace and the Air-Sea Battle: A War at Sea Strategy', *Naval War College Review* 65/5 (Autumn 2012), 35–41; and Aaron L. Friedberg, 'Bucking Beijing: An Alternative US China Policy', *Foreign Affairs* 91/5 (Sept./Oct. 2012). For a skeptical view, see Gabriel B. Collins and William S. Murray, 'No Oil for the Lamps of China', *Naval War College Review* 61/2 (Spring 2008).

[2]US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2012 Report to Congress* (Nov. 2012), 330–3.

[3]Sean Mirski, 'Stranglehold: The Context, Conduct and Consequences of an American Naval Blockade of China', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36/3 (June 2013), 385–421, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2012.743885>.

reluctant to disrupt the global economy and court an international backlash, it would only resort to a blockade during an 'extensive' conflict with China over vital national interests. At the same time, because the United States would have the dual objectives of stemming the flow of trade to and from China while minimizing the risks to neutral shipping, any blockade would be a layered one consisting of an outer cordon (or distant blockade) to screen and potentially seize commercial ships, as well as an inner maritime exclusion zone (or close-in blockade) where commercial ships would be disabled or destroyed.[4] Yet both of these propositions are questionable. Distant and close-in blockades might indeed complement one another at the operational level. Nevertheless, there are strong reasons to believe that they would not be employed together, at least not at the outset of a confrontation, and that a distant blockade is more likely to be employed in a limited conflict than a major war.

One of the potential virtues of a distant blockade is that it could minimize the risks of escalation. By operating beyond the range of China's most threatening military capabilities and seizing rather than sinking commercial ships, this option would avoid large-scale force-on-force engagements and forgo military strikes against targets on or near Chinese territory. A close-in blockade, however, is much more likely to trigger a larger clash. By conducting offensive mining operations against China's ports and sinking vessels near its coast, this approach would almost certainly bring American and Chinese forces into direct contact as Beijing attempted to break the blockade, defend its commercial shipping, and retaliate for the increased damage to its economy. For these reasons, policymakers might implement a distant blockade alone, particularly since they would (ostensibly) retain the option of adopting a close-in blockade later. In fact, because a distant blockade might seem far less escalatory than alternative forms of coercion, it could appear particularly attractive in the context of limited conflicts or crises short of war, when vital interests are not yet at stake and more aggressive measures would be premature.

Disaggregating distant and close-in blockades can also provide additional insights into the escalation dynamics associated with economic coercion – a subject that Mirski's assessment does not address given his assumption that a blockade would only be employed once escalation had already occurred. Importantly, while a distant blockade might seem prima facie appealing as the 'least bad' option in a limited war scenario, there is a danger that it could set in motion a chain of events that results in a wider conflict. If so, then a layered blockade could actually be a *cause* rather than a *consequence* of a major war.

[4]Ibid., 5–7, 12–14.

For example, a distant blockade might not succeed for a variety of reasons, such as stockpiling and rationing on the part of China as well as the transshipment of imports and exports through third parties, all of which could blunt the impact of economic coercion, at least for a time. More generally, because the probability of escalation and the likelihood of success are directly related, a coercive strategy designed to minimize the former can also reduce the latter. That is, low levels of pressure give an opponent little incentive to escalate but also little reason to concede. If a distant blockade did fail, however, then the same rationale that led policymakers to choose this option in the first place – the hope of achieving their objectives while avoiding a major war – could also tempt them to escalate incrementally by implementing a close-in blockade rather than escalate drastically by launching a large-scale counterforce campaign. However, preparations for a close-in blockade would closely resemble preparations for a counterforce campaign, with dangerous consequences.

Whereas a distant blockade could be conducted using military assets that would be highly vulnerable when operating in closer proximity to China, a close-in blockade would require access-insensitive capabilities that could survive within its defensive perimeter. For example, maritime interdiction operations far from China's shores could be executed with platforms that might be held at risk deep inside the first island chain due to their lack of stealth and/or limited organic defenses, such as amphibious assault ships, littoral combat ships, coastal patrol craft, and maritime patrol aircraft. By contrast, interdiction efforts near China's coast would require survivable platforms such as nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) for anti-surface and offensive mining operations, as well as penetrating and standoff long-range strike assets to seed minefields and perhaps conduct maritime strikes against commercial ships or their military escorts.[5] These are, however, the same kinds of forces that would be needed to conduct a counterforce campaign against an adversary equipped with sophisticated anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) systems.[6] Readying for a close-in blockade and a counterforce campaign might therefore yield many of the same indications and warnings, increasing the risk of a preemptive Chinese assault on American forces, bases, and ISR systems. Thus, there is a danger that a strategy of economic coercion could lead to the very type of high-intensity conflict that it was meant to avoid.

[5]Ibid., 14–15, 24–5.

[6]Anti-access capabilities are used to prevent or constrain the deployment of opposing forces into a theater of operations, whereas area denial capabilities are used to restrict their freedom of maneuver once in theater.

The Relationship between Countervalue and Counterforce Coercion

The force structure requirements for different types of blockade operations and the potential escalation dynamics associated with economic coercion can also shed light on the relationship between countervalue and counterforce options: Are they complementary or mutually exclusive? Should they be considered in tandem or in sequence? If they are implemented sequentially, does the order in which they are adopted matter? According to Mirski, during a major war a layered blockade would be employed alongside a counterforce campaign because the former alone might not be sufficient to achieve victory.[7] There are, however, reasons to doubt that these two options could be exercised concurrently.

As noted above, although there is relatively little overlap between the forces needed for a distant blockade and those needed for a counterforce campaign, there is considerable overlap between the forces required for a counterforce campaign and those required for a close-in blockade. Simultaneously disrupting China's seaborne commerce with a layered blockade and degrading its A2/AD capabilities would therefore entail using the same set of assets for two distinct military campaigns. This could prove both ineffective (due to the finite number of assets available as well as the limited magazines of these platforms) and unsustainable (due to operational tempo, attrition, and the depletion of precision ordnance inventories). In short, although the United States might be able to implement a distant blockade alongside a counterforce campaign, a layered blockade and a counterforce campaign would be difficult to carry out at the same time.

Table 1. Integrating Economic Coercion and Counterforce Operations

Concurrent Military Options	• Distant blockade and a counterforce campaign	✓ *Capability differentiation*
	• Layered blockade and a counterforce campaign	× *Capability overlap*
Sequential Military Options	• Distant blockade then a counterforce campaign	× *Escalation risks*
	• Layered blockade then a counterforce campaign	× *Capability overlap*
	• Counterforce campaign then a layered blockade	× *Capability overlap*
	• Counterforce campaign then a distant blockade	✓ *Capability differentiation*

[7]Mirski, 'Stranglehold', 7.

Alternatively, these military operations might be implemented sequentially rather than concurrently. In this case, pursuing countervalue options at the start of a conflict could foreclose counterforce options in the later stages of a war, whereas the reverse is not necessarily true. Consider, for example, the lure of gradualism and the risk of incrementalism, which could make a distant blockade an appealing option in a limited conflict as well as a potential catalyst for a wider war. Policymakers who initially adopt a distant blockade might be unwilling to escalate a conflict abruptly by implementing a counterforce campaign if economic coercion fails, while escalating progressively to a close-in blockade could trigger an assault on forward operating bases and forces that degrades American combat power. Even if a close-in blockade were not the catalyst for an attack, it would still rely on a scarce number of high-value assets and consume large numbers of precision guided munitions, undermining the ability of US forces to conduct subsequent operations against China's military forces. By contrast, opting for a counterforce campaign at the outset of a war would not remove the option of subsequently implementing a distant blockade given the very different capabilities required for these operations – although it might preclude the option of a follow-on close-in blockade.[8] Moreover, while there are reasons to question China's vulnerability to a distant blockade at the start of a crisis or conflict, those reasons might not apply in the later stages of a war.

The Strategic Risks of Economic Coercion

Exploring the interaction between countervalue and counterforce options is critical to understanding how they might be employed and whether they would prove effective. Yet embracing the former at the expense of the latter could also have broader strategic ramifications that must be considered. Perhaps most importantly, if Washington did make blockade operations a primary element of its overarching strategy for East Asia, it could face increased alliance management challenges during peacetime, new threats to its allies during wartime, and a particularly fragile postwar status quo.

For example, despite the potential merits of economic coercion, some allies and partners in the region could interpret the adoption of this approach as a sign of weakness and a lack of resolve. Specifically, embracing the blockade option – especially the distant blockade option

[8]On the use of a distant blockade as part of a follow-on campaign to initial counterforce operations, see Jan van Tol *et al.*, *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments 2010), 52–3, 74–8.

– might convey the impression that the United States is unable to defend the territory of its allies or unwilling to directly contest acts of aggression inside of the first island chain. While some frontline nations might respond by 'balancing' against China more vigorously, the large disparity in economic and military power between China and its neighbors suggests that other nations might 'bandwagon' instead. If so, Washington would have to make a concerted effort to preserve the credibility of its security commitments.

The United States would also have to anticipate and prepare for Chinese responses to a blockade, which might not match existing expectations. Today, the prevailing concern is that Beijing will eventually be able to hold at risk US forward bases, forward-deployed forces, and critical ISR assets. Rather than launching an assault against American military targets, however, it could conduct its own countervalue campaign – driving up the costs of a conflict and compelling local nations to withdraw their support for the United States. Mirski, for example, suggests that China might target commercial ships bound for neutral nations in the region.[9] Over time, however, Beijing could adapt its A2/AD capabilities and implement a form of 'economic warfare with Chinese characteristics'. Specifically, as the range and accuracy of China's missile forces improve, as the size of its missile arsenal grows, and as the sophistication of its cyber warfare capabilities increases, Beijing could conduct standoff strikes against economic targets in nearby nations, including air and sea ports, ground transportation nodes, and communications, manufacturing, and energy infrastructure. If this threat were to materialize, Washington would have to determine how much destruction China could inflict on neighboring economies during a conflict, how much damage those nations would be willing and able to sustain, what steps could be taken to protect and reinforce local allies, and the extent to which these defensive efforts might compromise other military operations.

Finally, a successful blockade against China would have long-term implications for the region that could heighten the prospect of renewed conflict. Specifically, if China succumbed to economic coercion – and especially if a protracted blockade led to inelastic substitution effects – the Chinese economy could suffer a severe and enduring blow. Absent a counterforce campaign, however, its military forces would remain largely intact. If so, then the United States would confront the challenge of reaching a sustainable accord with a defeated, potentially revanchist, and still militarily powerful China.

[9]Mirski, 'Stranglehold', 26.

Conclusion

Due to a variety of factors – including the inherent advantages that a regional power enjoys in a competition with a distant global power, the unfavorable cost-exchange ratios between many of China's offensive capabilities and available countermeasures, and the likelihood that US defense budgets will continue to shrink – there is understandable skepticism that the United States can preserve a stable conventional military balance in East Asia over the long run. In this context, a strategy of economic coercion that plays to American strengths and exploits Chinese weaknesses should certainly receive greater consideration, and may become increasingly relevant if the conventional military balance in the region continues to shift in China's favor. Nevertheless, this approach has a number of risks and limitations that must be explored and taken into account. In the end, a comprehensive strategy for preserving stability in East Asia should attempt to strike a balance between several different elements: adapting American military capabilities and posture to better meet emerging A2/AD challenges; encouraging local allies and partners to field their own A2/AD capabilities; and perhaps holding China's seaborne commerce at risk if deterrence fails and conflict breaks out.[10]

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to Thomas Mahnken, Stacie Pettyjohn, John Stillion, Jim Thomas, and Jan van Tol for comments on an earlier version of this article.

Note on contributor

Evan Braden Montgomery is a Senior Fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA). In addition to authoring a number of CSBA monographs, his work has appeared in *International Security, Security Studies, and Foreign Affairs*.

Bibliography

Collins, Gabriel B. and William S. Murray, 'No Oil for the Lamps of China', *Naval War College Review* 61/2 (Spring 2008).

Friedberg, Aaron L., 'Bucking Beijing: An Alternative US China Policy', *Foreign Affairs* 91/5 (Sept./Oct. 2012).

[10]James P. Thomas and Evan Braden Montgomery, 'Developing a Strategy for a Long-Term Sino-American Competition', in Thomas G. Mahnken (ed.), *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History, and Practice* (Stanford UP 2012).

Hammes, T.X., 'Offshore Control: A Proposed Strategy for an Unlikely Conflict', *Strategic Forum* No. 278 (June 2012).

Kline, Jeffrey E. and Wayne P. Hughes Jr, 'Between Peace and the Air-Sea Battle: A War at Sea Strategy', *Naval War College Review* 65/5 (Autumn 2012), 35–41.

Mirski, Sean, 'Stranglehold: The Context, Conduct and Consequences of an American Naval Blockade of China', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36/3 (June 2013), 385–421, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2012.743885>.

Thomas, James P. and Evan Braden Montgomery, 'Developing a Strategy for a Long-Term Sino-American Competition', in Thomas G. Mahnken (ed.), *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History, and Practice* (Stanford UP 2012).

US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2012 Report to Congress* (November 2012), 330–333.

van Tol, Jan, *et al.*, *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments 2010).