

The Third Offset in East Asia and its Challenges

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Abstract: Comprehensive military strategy often charts the course for establishing a state's grand strategy. In the case of great power politics, such reasoning is deemed essential if such states wish to preserve their position among other great powers in world politics. The development of military strategy is governed by the politics, economy, institutions, threat perception, and technological capabilities of a state. After the Second World War, technological capabilities gained prominence in comparison to other elements of military strategy. The advancement of technology, both domestically and abroad, played a crucial role in shaping the evolution of military strategy during the Cold War era in the US. These transformations in strategy were characterised as "offsets", reflecting a dynamic interplay between technological innovation and military strategy. The two prior offsets in US military strategy were enacted during periods in which Washington perceived a relative increase in Soviet power, particularly in the European theatre of operations. Technology was deemed the primary means by which the US could counteract this power imbalance. These shifts in military strategy were thus necessary adaptations to maintain a strategic advantage over the adversary. The recent conceptualization of a third offset strategy reflects the continued development of these ideas within the American military establishment. In the following analysis, we will examine the various aspects of the third offset strategy and the potential challenges the strategy may face in East Asia.

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**Introduction:
A retrospective on Two Previous Offsets
in US Military Strategy**

During the Cold War, the United States formulated two strategic concepts, intending to adjust its military strategy and armed forces in response to the increasing capabilities of the Soviet army. The shifts in US military strategy were primarily concentrated in the European theatre of operations, encompassing diverse elements of offensive and defensive aspects of military doctrine. The overarching objective of these changes was to “offset” the mounting Soviet military capabilities and enable the US armed forces to better prepare for a possible conflict.

The first offset started to take shape during the Korean War, when the American administration recognised the need to rely more heavily on nuclear technology in order to contain Soviet expansion, given the impracticality of amassing conventional troops throughout Eurasia. The Korean War also offered a limited-scale illustration of the potential nature of a conventional conflict with the Soviets. Furthermore, the prospect of matching the Soviet forces in a conventional ground conflict in Europe appeared unrealistic for the US armed forces of that era. The Kremlin, possessing the capability to assemble a larger fighting force, could have swiftly overwhelmed the Western allies before Washington could react and establish a fortified line of defence. Moreover, the Western countries were not keen on the idea of building a large-scale army that would take away manpower from the industry and potentially overburden the state economy with more military expenses (Bitzinger 1989, 4-5). As John Foster Dull put it bluntly, “If economic stability goes down the drain, everything goes down the drain” (Gaddis 2005, 132).

The initial offset strategy revolved around countering the conventional Soviet threat with nuclear weapons. In other words, the Eisenhower administration pursued an asymmetric strategy that involved employing nuclear strikes against a potential adversary. This approach was deemed economically beneficial and provided Washington with a technological advantage over its rivals. During the 1950s, the US was capable of producing more nuclear warheads than the Soviet Union while also having long-range bombers such as the B-47 Stratojet and B-52 Stratofortress, as well as military

infrastructure that enabled the US Air Force to reach Soviet territory (Grier 2016, 58).

The first offset was, to a greater extent, propagated by Eisenhower's "New Look" policy (Wolk 2003). In brief, the policy can be described as a top-down endeavour by the military and political leadership to implement changes in the armed forces that would enhance operational efficiency without increasing military expenditure. The development of new weaponry, such as the hydrogen bomb, alongside the formidable capabilities of the US Air Force made nuclear weapons an appealing instrument that could possibly fulfil the objectives of the "New Look" policy (Condray 1998, 33-55).

The logic behind the new policy, which was also reflected in the first offset, is that reliance on mechanised and manoeuvre warfare would be substituted with nuclear weapons. In essence, the strategy could be characterised as "massive retaliation". The Eisenhower administration intended to leverage its technological and nuclear superiority to compensate for the shortage of troops and tanks in the event of a conflict with the Soviets. The administration believed that an overpowering nuclear strike would be enough to compel and deter a larger conventional adversary from initiating hostilities (Jackson 2014). Leveraging advanced technological capabilities, particularly in air power, the US armed forces acquired the ability to execute a decapitating first strike that would put the adversary's forces out of action, thereby eliminating the possibility of a second strike or prolonged warfare. These strategic concepts exerted a profound influence on political leadership and how resources were subsequently moved. Nuclear material production witnessed a sharp upsurge, while the Air Force emerged as the principal instrument for securing the success of the new strategic concept. In essence, the first offset embodies Eisenhower's vision of achieving strong first-strike capabilities through the deployment of nuclear weapons, including both strategic and tactical weapons, while simultaneously establishing robust defensive capabilities, such as early warning systems, to mitigate the threat of an adversary's nuclear strike (Rosenberg 1983, 29-33).

One of the chief issues encountered with the first offset was the Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal, which underwent modernization and gained increasing capabilities over time. This development compelled US policymakers to recognise that a nuclear strike might precipitate a retaliatory

decision by the adversary, which could escalate into a full-fledged nuclear confrontation between the two superpowers. As the “nuclear gap” between the Soviets and the US began to narrow, it became apparent that nuclear coercion was viable only as long as the US retained nuclear supremacy. However, such an approach was also dangerous since maintaining nuclear primacy required attacking those nations that aspired to achieve nuclear parity with the US. This perspective entailed heightened risks in foreign policy that could spiral out of control and potentially produce an undesired nuclear exchange between powers. Moreover, employing the threat of nuclear annihilation for any reason other than in cases of existential danger was simply implausible (Jackson 2014).

President John F. Kennedy regarded Eisenhower’s “New Look” strategy as rigid and hazardous for both American and European interests. To this end, Kennedy’s administration introduced a new strategy known as “Flexible Response”, which offered greater flexibility in responding to potential communist aggression by providing a range of options beyond a massive nuclear retaliation. While this strategy was apparently geared towards promoting peace, it ultimately paved the way for US military involvement in Vietnam (Gentile 2021, 11).

During the 1960s, the prospect of employing nuclear weapons against a rival power became progressively more complicated. The Cuban Missile Crisis, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and ultimately the period of Detente restrained political aspirations related to the preventive or active use of atomic bombs. Additionally, Soviet technological advancements enabled them to keep up with the Allies’ capabilities, both in terms of nuclear arms production and delivery systems, including Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) (Wohlstetter 1974; Marshall 1972, 40-41). Such political and technological circumstances gave impetus to the development of conventional armaments and the ideas that later embodied the concept of the second offset in US military strategy.

The Yom Kippur War, similarly to the Korean War, served as an example of what a conventional war would have looked like between the superpowers, albeit on a smaller scale. The speed and lethality of this war offered the US military a valuable lesson in modern warfare. Organisational agility appeared crucial, as the large amount of resources was only useful if they were readily available for combat. Richard Lock-Pullan points out that

the October war underscored the importance of precision and swiftness, necessitating a focus on technological proficiency since the battlefield became increasingly swift and deadly (Pullan 2003, 489-499). In addition to technological aspects, the combat and organisational capabilities of soldiers constitute crucial factors that influence the ultimate outcome of a modern war. According to the Pentagon's analysis of the October War, the Israeli Defence Forces were able to overcome numerical disadvantages on the battlefield through effective planning and good combat skills exhibited by their soldiers. The report further underscored that NATO troops would likely encounter comparable challenges when confronting the Warsaw Pact forces in the European theatre (Transue 1974, 27-28).

Although the ideas behind the second offset were relatively new, the problems that the US armed forces were facing were the same. Specifically, the threat of a substantial Soviet incursion into Western Europe, wherein the US would be unable to deploy sufficient military assets to match the Communist bloc on a one-to-one basis, loomed large. Therefore, the new vision of the US armed forces emphasised not only the incorporation of state-of-the-art technologies but also the implementation of enhanced, rigorous training regimes aimed at improving any battlefield deficiencies (Pullan 2003, 500). The need to enhance the military's capabilities was further underscored by significant changes made to the recruitment system in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, which drastically reduced the pool of available manpower that was once at the army's disposal.

The fundamental premise of the second offset strategy, akin to its predecessor, entailed a strategic approach that leveraged technological advancements as a means of achieving a force multiplier effect. This strategy was pursued by five successive American administrations during the 1970s and 1980s (Tomes 2014). As Defence Secretary Harold Brown explained in his annual report to Congress, "*Technology can be a force multiplier, a resource that can be used to help offset the numerical advantages of an adversary. Superior technology is one very effective way to balance military capabilities other than by matching an adversary tank-for-tank or soldier-for-soldier*" (Brown 1981). This idea was in stark contrast with the American concept of war two decades earlier. Whereas the Allies had triumphed over the Axis powers in the Second World War through sheer industrial capacity, the revised strategy vis-à-vis the Soviets prioritised quality over quantity. The integration of

cutting-edge technologies on the battlefield was intended to grant a qualitative edge to the US military and offset the Soviet forces' quantitative advantages (Perry 2003, 3).

In addition to technological advancements, the armed forces acknowledged the need to institute novel doctrinal and organisational measures. This entailed the optimisation of organisational structures with respect to doctrine, planning, and bureaucratic configuration in order to harness the full extent of their capabilities (Jensen 2018, 309). One such development was the "Air Land Battle" doctrine. To a greater extent, the doctrine was intended for the European theatre of operations, with the aim of enabling the military to match the power of Soviet forces. Furthermore, the doctrine sought to leverage the latest technological innovations and emphasise agility, initiative, depth, and synchronisation. In essence, the doctrine stipulated that enemy forces should be attacked in depth with fire and manoeuvre while synchronising other operational aspects on the battlefield, as well as having the ability to swiftly shift operational focus to exploit the enemy's vulnerabilities. As some analysts have noted, the "Air Land Battle" doctrine was suitable for the existing force structure while also having the capacity to accommodate future evolutions (Gessert 1984, 54).

Some of the technological advancements of the second offset constituted significant investments that remain in active use by the US armed forces, as well as other militaries worldwide, to this day. The second offset strategy fostered the development of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms, precision-guided munitions, and stealth technology for aircraft. Examples of systems that resulted from the second offset include AWACS, ATACMS, precision-guided munitions (PGMs), and various stealth technologies implemented on contemporary fighter jets. The impact some of these weapons had on the conduct of battlefield operations and how they were conceptualised was profound. Marshall Ogarkov, head of the Soviet General Staff during the 1980s, declared that PGMs correctly implemented on the battlefield could achieve effects roughly equal to those of tactical nuclear weapons (Manea 2018). In addition to technological advancements, the second offset also prompted organisational improvements and transformed the approach to battle planning and execution. Enhanced communication technologies facilitated more efficient

planning and enabled “real-time warfare”, a capability that was soon demonstrated during the Gulf War (Martinage 2014, 14-16).

In contrast to the first offset, the US managed to field-test the second one, albeit not against the intended adversary. William J. Perry, a former Secretary of Defence, defines the Gulf War as a decisive victory that was made possible by superior military technology as well as better training and organisation of coalition forces. Perry argues that the coalition forces’ use of advanced military equipment, such as communication, command and control systems, defence suppression, and precision guidance, enabled them to engage in combat with minimal losses. Moreover, this equipment provided coalition forces with precise information and situational awareness on the battlefield, allowing them to eliminate adversarial troops with remarkable efficacy (Perry 1991, 66-82). Other authors, such as Thomas G. Mahnken and Barry D. Watts, also confirm the technological superiority of the coalition forces, especially emphasising air power and its effect on the battlefield (Mahnken and Watts 1997, 159). The success of the second offset demonstrated during Operation Desert Storm was soon depicted as a Revolution in Military Affairs. Moreover, these ideas and the impact of technology on warfare were deep enough to prompt other military programmes in the late nineties and early 2000s, such as the F-22 and F-35 combat aircraft, as well as concepts such as information dominance and network-centric warfare (Gentile 2021, 18).

The Idea of the Third Offset

Over the past two decades, the modernization of the Chinese armed forces has been impressive, to say the least. The development of the Chinese armed forces was evident across the spectrum, in terms of acquiring new high-tech weaponry and military equipment as well as implementing new doctrines and military strategies. While the full extent of the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) modernization cannot be comprehensively addressed in this article, certain significant changes are noteworthy. Notably, since the conclusion of the Cold War, the Chinese military budget has expanded exponentially, growing from 11 billion dollars in 1989 to approximately 223 billion dollars in 2023 (CSIS 2015). The modernization of the People’s Liberation Army Air Force has been a significant undertaking,

with notable changes in the numbers and generations of combat aircraft. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the majority of the Chinese combat aircraft fleet was comprised of second-generation models. However, in the last decade, a significant shift has occurred, with fourth- and fifth-generation aircraft constituting the majority of the Chinese Air Force (Shlapak 2012, 192). Additionally, there has been a visible increase in strategic bombers and large aircraft, enabling improved strategic airlift and power projection capabilities. The ground forces of the PLA have also undergone modernization efforts, with a focus on force structure, training, and troop deployment.

The modernization efforts of the Chinese armed forces have been a cause for concern in terms of the regional balance of power and the United States' position in East and Southeast Asia. Of particular note has been the rapid development of Chinese strategic and naval forces. The Chinese "Second Artillery" has been able to produce a range of short, medium, and long-range ballistic missiles, allowing Beijing better control over a significant portion of the littoral space in the East and South China Seas. The development of anti-ship ballistic missiles, popularly known as carrier killers, is considered a "disruptive revolutionary innovation" that could significantly impact the American conception of power projection in the region (Erickson 2013, 17; Mahnken 2011, 301). These modernization efforts are viewed as a potential threat to the US presence and strategic interests in East Asia.

The Chinese naval forces have also undergone significant modernization with the acquisition of a large number of new warships. The modernised Chinese navy is now equipped with state-of-the-art cruisers, frigates, and destroyers and has the added capability of three aircraft carriers, including a domestically produced carrier, which is a testament to the progress of the Chinese military industry (Stojanović and Šaranović 2021). The modernization of the Chinese navy has also emphasised improving amphibious operations and joint operation capabilities as well as overall organisational capabilities (Cole 2010, 146). These modernization efforts complement Chinese military deployments on islands and reefs in the South China Sea, which have significantly enhanced China's ability to control the maritime domain in this region. The military infrastructure built by China on these islands has the potential to mitigate many of China's deficiencies in terms of naval deployment and area control (CSIS). The United States' naval

dominance in the region depends not only on its naval capabilities but also on its control of the main “access points” to the area inside the first island chain. By stationing troops and military equipment on these islands, China can alleviate some of the issues and potentially deny access to hostile actors in the region, thus improving control over the South and East China Seas.

The rapid and extensive modernization of the Chinese armed forces has prompted a reassessment of the United States military strategy in the Asia-Pacific region. This development, while just one facet of the People’s Liberation Army’s modernization efforts, highlights the growing concern among US officials regarding China’s expanding military capabilities. In response to this perceived threat, the third offset strategy was formulated to leverage technological advancements as a means to maintain American military superiority. Specifically, the use of unmanned aerial and naval systems, AI, computer-assisted human operation systems, and AI-enabled battle networks were identified as key components of this new strategy. It is important to note that this shift in strategy and focus on technology is in part a response to the US military’s recent experiences in the Middle East, where it was primarily engaged in counter-insurgency operations. The third offset, besides technological aspects, has highlighted the need for changes in doctrine and organisation to better address more conventional threats.

The third offset strategy is largely attributed to the ideas put forth by Robert O. Work, a former US Deputy Secretary of Defence during both the Obama and Trump administrations. In his book “*20YY: Preparing for War in the Robotic Age*”, Work argues that the United States’ ability to project power and dominate force-on-force encounters has declined due to the mastery of high-tech military capabilities by rival powers. These adversaries employ various instruments and weapons that enable them to operate across different domains of war. In order to overcome these challenges and maintain technological superiority, the US armed forces must explore new avenues for modernization. According to Work, the key to unlocking a new military-technological revolution lies in collaboration with the civilian sector, which leads to the production of modern high-tech machinery (Work and Brimley 2014, 36).

The mentioned technological and organisational changes should not be perceived as separate developments but rather as complementary, where technology can augment human deficiencies and make more powerful battle

networks. Robert Work states five elements of technology that are seen as crucial aspects of this strategic endeavour. First, machine-learning algorithms can supplement and improve data processing from various sensors, providing better information for logistics and maintenance. Second, certain decision-making authorities can be automated and delegated to machines, such as in cyber defence, electronic warfare, and missile defence. Third, integrating all levels of military deployment into a unified information grid will allow better organisation down to the squad level of command. Fourth, further implementation of various unmanned systems can improve the success of military operations. Fifth, the new generation of weapons that will be used should interact with the overall information network (Manea 2018).

Work also mentions two new concepts, such as Raid Breaker and the Multi-Domain Battle concept, which should further propagate the overall high-tech ideas of the third offset. The Raid Breaker system is envisioned as a method that can counter the seeming parity of PGM among adversaries. The idea behind the system is to develop high-end sensors and follow-up equipment that can intercept hostile precision projectiles, forcing the enemy to fire increasingly dense and expensive salvos of guided munitions. In other words, the Raid Breaker system should provide a way to win the guided munitions salvo competition at a reasonable price. The Multi-Domain Battle concept strives to secure cross-domain supremacy. In other words, if the US armed forces are contested in one domain, novel technologies should allow them to achieve an advantage by employing forces from other domains, including air, sea, and ground (Manea 2018).

Though the third offset strategy is focused on delivering new technological solutions, it also builds on some previous ones. We should keep in mind that the offset strategy is designed to make the most cost-effective solution; therefore, we can see conversions of some older technologies for modern battlefields. For example, the well-known guided artillery shell “Excalibur”, used by the army since 2007, is getting a naval variant. The naval variant should be very similar to its ground predecessor but epic in terms of guidance-system electronics, which will provide the navy with a “precision guided missile” at a discount. Though artillery shells cannot substitute for missiles entirely, primarily in terms of effective range, they can help out the navy by providing support for the ground troops ashore as well as destroying fast attack craft that are usually armed with anti-ship weapons (Freedberg 2016). The proposed

modernization of the B-52 strategic bomber is poised to enable it to undertake contemporary missions with modern weaponry. In particular, the concept of the “arsenal plane” envisions a large aerial platform that can carry an array of missiles designed to engage multiple hostile targets. Former airmen argue that the B-52 is a highly capable aircraft that can handle heavy payloads, making it suitable for the deployment of hypersonic missiles that are set to play a critical role in the development of future strategic weapons (May and Pietrucha 2016). The announcement of the B-21 *Raider* also suggests that the US armed forces are preparing to tackle challenges that are in line with the idea of great power rivalry. The plane closely resembles the B-2 *Spirit* and should be able to accomplish the same tasks with greater efficiency (Lopez 2022).

In addition to technological advancements, countering the rise of rival powers also involves doctrinal changes and shifts in military posture. The Air-Sea Battle doctrine, although predating the third offset strategy, serves as a complementary initiative at the operational level. Furthermore, the authors note that the Air-Sea Battle doctrine should be viewed as a model of the Air-Land Battle doctrine, which was developed during the second offset strategy to deter Soviet expansion in Europe. Like its Cold War predecessor, the Air-Sea Battle concept is primarily intended to address the evolving military balance between the United States and its rivals, an ongoing process in the Western Pacific (Tol 2010, 6-8).

The Air-Sea Battle doctrine is a critical initiative intended to mitigate the dangers posed by anti-access area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities, which have become a crucial aspect of Chinese military strategy in the East and South China Seas. It aims to provide a framework for avoiding large-scale preemptive strikes that could render the air and naval forces of the US incapacitated, along with its auxiliary capabilities such as information and logistical networks. More importantly, the doctrine is designed to address how the US armed forces can overcome these challenges and preserve their freedom of action, particularly in terms of power projection. The US armed forces are likely to encounter a range of issues in the Western Pacific, such as an inability to ensure the secure flow of information, the potential for facing numerous long-range precision missile strikes from China, difficulty initiating timely and cost-effective counter-attacks, an inability to conduct air strikes against critical time-sensitive targets or those located well inland, as well as the likelihood of facing intensive surface and submarine warfare

along with the utilisation of autonomous unmanned vehicles. The Air-Sea Battle doctrine is, therefore, a critical response to these challenges, as it seeks to address the tactical and strategic issues associated with modern naval warfare while enhancing the US military's ability to project its power effectively in contested environments (Tol 2010, 34-47).

The authors have envisioned the Air-Sea Battle concept as a two-stage campaign that includes both traditional approaches to war as well as the implementation of modern, high-tech machinery. While the first stage of the campaign is focused on sustaining the initial strike and achieving initiative across all domains, the second stage is meant to give the US armed forces a better position for prolonged conflict (Tol 2010, 53-77). Various aspects of the third offset that Work had talked about could be integrated at the operational level of the Air-Sea Battle doctrine. For example, classifying and detecting mobile targets in the open sea as well as initiating a strike on them require precise sensors that can provide timely information in a contested space. In such a scenario, electronic and cyber warfare would, to a greater extent, dictate the speed and quality of decision-making, which would also impact the pace of military operations on the battlefield. Having superior information technology that can mitigate some of these threats can have a great impact on both securing one's own informational space as well as disrupting the adversary's. The ideas of AI, machine learning algorithms, and a new generation of PGMs would also improve the overall offensive-defensive balance the doctrine is trying to achieve. Defence against a salvo of modern precision missiles can be supplemented by delegating some of the decision-making authority to the machine, potentially improving the reaction time and precision of the counter-strike. On the other hand, conducting offensive missions, such as striking strategic targets inland, would also require modern platforms that could avoid an adversary's defences and sensors. Although the Air-Sea Battle doctrine predates the third offset, the goals it seeks to achieve are largely aligned with the ideas proposed by Work and his colleagues from the Department of Defence.

The Third Offset and its Challenges

Robert Work's perspective on international relations diverged from that of Obama's first administration, which sought to resolve differences with China and encourage it to become a responsible stakeholder in the

international community (Friedman 2019). The initial strategy did entail cooperation and engagement with China, as some former officials stated. Namely, the US was aware of the new political circumstances in the region and was trying to adapt to them accordingly. Even in the military domain, the US armed forces were trying to improve cooperation with their Chinese counterparts (Pejic 2021, 313-314). However, by the end of Obama's first term, the US had shifted its view of China from a potential partner to a competitor. The strategy of engagement did not yield the desired results, as the rebalance policy towards Asia was viewed as a potential containment strategy by Beijing. On the other hand, some US officials suspected that rapprochement with China was being interpreted as a signal of weakness by the Chinese leadership (Gentile 2021, 24). When President Trump came into office, the idea of great power competition as one of the primary objectives of national security became clear, which was later galvanised by defence secretary Mattis remarks: "*Great power competition – not terrorism – is now the primary focus of U.S. national security*" (Baron 2018).

The seemingly new ideas of great power competition among some members of the US administration are not exactly "novelties" in the American political discourse. The concept of great power competition, specifically the potential for US-China rivalry, has been predicted by scholars and academics for decades. One such individual is Paul Kennedy, who cautioned against the potential impact of a growing China and its potential exertion of power over both regional and global political affairs (Kennedy 1987, 447-458). John Mearsheimer shares a similar vantage point, emphasising that all great powers strive to maximise their power potential in order to feel secure. In such an environment, conflict between the US, as a power that wants to maintain its position in international politics, and China, as a power that strives to expand its sphere of influence, is more likely (Mearsheimer 2001). Graham Allison, building on the ideas set forth by Robert Gilpin, also comes to somewhat similar conclusions. Examining historical circumstances that led to war between Athens and Sparta, that is, between rising and status quo powers, Graham Allison tells us that conflict between the US and China is probable (Allison 2017; Gilpin 1983).

Nuno Monteiro is probably the author who, with greater precision, envisioned the problem between the US and China in terms of the employment of different strategies and what these strategies might invoke.

Monteiro argues that unipolar power is not “hyper-aggressive”, nor does it see an imminent threat in every other potential power. However, unipolar power will react when it senses that other rising powers are developing their own power projection capacities or strategies that can hinder unipolar power’s power projection (Monteiro 2014). In other words, the US will be prone to react to a rising power when the challengers start making gains in these aspects of military power. Although this is an oversimplification of Monteiro’s theory, it does explain why Washington’s politics towards China became more frantic during the last ten years. This type of great power behaviour is not novel and has been consistently observed throughout history. Joseph Parent and Sebastian Rosato, examining the great powers of the 19th and 20th centuries, have made a convincing argument about how balancing works and how great powers perceive power accumulation among their rivals, which supports Monteiro’s theory. Parent and Rosato suggest that while maritime powers may exhibit a relatively slower response to power accumulation, they are quick to identify the threat posed by the development of larger naval fleets by other powers. In these circumstances, maritime powers are likely to adopt balancing strategies aimed at curtailing their rivals’ rising power potential (Parent and Rosato 2015).

It is not hard to conclude that the third offset strategy is primarily targeted at China, which has emerged as a primary contender for the United States’ interests in East Asia. The strategy, much like its predecessors, aims to provide a cost-effective framework to counter China’s growing military power in the region. Additionally, the strategy is envisioned to allow the United States to uphold its key strategic goals in the region, including ensuring political stability, access to regional markets, freedom of navigation, and preventing the emergence of hostile powers. While these objectives can be pursued through peaceful means, great powers are likely to have a contingency plan in place in case diplomatic efforts fail. The third offset, therefore, represents such a plan. However, there are certain challenges that could impede the future development of this strategy.

One of the prominent challenges associated with the implementation of the third offset strategy is the complex economic relationship between the US and China, particularly with regard to technological proliferation. Implementing new hostile policies against China will not be the same as it was during the Cold War against the Soviet Union. The cooperation between

the US and Chinese economies is wide-ranging, and firms from both countries have invested large amounts of capital in each other's markets, seeking more financial gain. The global economy as a whole was also a beneficiary of such industrial cooperation, making products and services more affordable for consumers. Implementing measures or policies that would decouple the US from the Chinese markets will not be an easy task, nor will it be welcomed by other participants in the global market. This is especially evident in the IT sector, where large US corporations have based their production lines in China. Although this was a highly profitable endeavour, it allowed China to develop its own high-tech industry and catch up with the rest much quicker than previously anticipated.

The issue of technological proliferation poses a significant challenge to the implementation of the third offset strategy. Unlike during the Cold War era, when the government had more centralised control over trade and industry, today's high-tech companies have extensive trade and economic relations on the global market. Consequently, controlling the transfer of high-tech products from the US to China has become an arduous task. According to analyses conducted by RAND, Beijing has been able to leverage global trade to reverse engineer and implement US technical solutions in their combat systems, thus enabling them to close the technological gap with the American defence industry at a faster pace (Gentile 2021, 26).

The problem represents a serious issue for Washington, particularly in light of China's burgeoning production of cutting-edge military technologies such as fifth-generation combat aircraft, drones, missiles, and naval systems. The gravity of the situation was underscored by the recent US ban on the export of microchips to China. The Biden administration's imposition of restrictions on microchips and microchip manufacturing equipment represents the latest in a series of measures aimed at curtailing the export of high-tech products to China, a trend that began during the Trump presidency. As noted by some IT analysts, the United States shows no signs of easing its restrictions as technology continues to advance. In essence, Washington seeks to maintain and potentially widen the technological gap with Beijing in the hope of degrading the Chinese high-technology sector (Yoon 2022).

The doctrinal concept of Air-Sea Battle presents another crucial issue that requires consideration. Engaging in long-term conflicts that necessitate the consumption of significant quantities of high-technology systems is non-sustainable. In contrast to previous eras where great powers could deploy vast amounts of armament during hostilities, potentially overwhelming their adversaries, the feasibility of such tactics with modern weaponry is uncertain (Vracar and Saranovic 2018). The production of modern weapon systems, such as fifth-generation aircraft and precision missiles, involves the utilisation of various resources, a skilled workforce, and specialised industrial capabilities. Furthermore, there is a genuine risk that certain components of weapons and platforms will be manufactured by other countries or even a rival power, adding to the complexity of the production process. In a conventional war, the loss or wastage of modern military hardware increases the likelihood of becoming stuck in a quagmire, as evidenced by the Russian armed forces' failed invasion of Kiev last year. Additionally, without the clear possibility of timely renewal of modern weapons and equipment, the whole operation slows down, thus giving the opponent enough time to recuperate and possibly reorganise for counterattacks. Therefore, gaining and sustaining proper initiative in a modern conflict with the ability to conduct a decapitating strike is a very important aspect that can determine the overall victory.

Finally, the issue of maintaining a leading position in terms of both conceptual military strategy and material-technological capabilities against rivals poses a challenge. With the rapid dissemination of information and ideas between states, the Chinese military frequently updates its strategic guidelines to address potential issues in conducting warfare. Many of these guidelines are aimed at the American armed forces and their position in East Asia, with the intention of effectively subduing them. Some of the ideas proposed in the third offset, such as the importance of AI, have also been recognised as strategic assets by the Chinese leadership (Nelson and Epstein 2022). In addition, the concept of quick and decisive victory, which requires strong initiative during combat operations, is also present in Chinese strategy. The need for decisive strikes on enemy forces is one of the more prominent aspects of the Chinese deterrence strategy, which has been in place for at least two decades. Maintaining a competitive edge against such adversaries will require constant innovation and adaptation, both in terms of technology and strategy (Pejic 2022, 21-22).

In the current international environment, achieving a strategic breakthrough that could catch the enemy off guard is a challenging task. Rather, a more practical approach to strategy would be to pursue a “layered development” of different sectors through better cooperation and integration. Despite the aforementioned challenges, the third offset tries to address these issues by employing new technologies that are not focused on producing greater destruction capacity as much as making weapon systems and military equipment more reliable, precise, and cost-efficient.

Concluding Remarks

During the Cold War, the United States underwent significant changes in its military strategy due to the development of technology. These changes were known as offsets in military strategy, which were implemented when Washington perceived the Soviet Union as a greater military power, especially in the European theatre of operations. Technology was the primary instrument the United States relied on to maintain a competitive advantage over its adversaries. The third offset, conceptualised in the past decade, largely reflects the ideas present among American strategists during the development of the previous two offsets. The latest offset represents a necessary shift in the United States military strategy to maintain a technological, doctrinal, and organisational edge over its rivals.

The offset strategies during the Cold War era represented a significant shift in the United States military strategy, encompassing not only technological advancements but also organisational and doctrinal changes. Political decision-making was primarily influenced by threat perceptions of the adversary’s military might and the consequences of directly engaging with such capabilities. The American military strategy during the Cold War sought to implement cost-effective solutions in order to establish favourable positions for potential conflict with the Soviet Union. Despite these strategies never being enacted against the intended opponent, they did produce modern military capabilities that continue to be employed by the US armed forces to this day.

The genesis of the third offset strategy is somewhat similar to the previous two, and it can be attributed to the changing international landscape and the evolving nature of threats to American national security.

In response, the US government, led by the Pentagon, has recognised the need to shift its strategic focus from unconventional threats to the rise of other rival powers. This shift has required changes in terms of technology, doctrine, organisation, and overall approach to new developments in international politics. While it is difficult to determine whether the third offset is still regarded as the primary strategy for the military establishment, given that the original architects of the concept are no longer in government, the ideas proposed by Robert Work and his colleagues have undoubtedly had a significant impact on how the US perceives other powers in global politics. In essence, the third offset has laid the groundwork for the future modernization of the US armed forces while also placing the political mindset back on the track of great power rivalry.

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