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As War with China Looms, It Is Time to Restart Large-Scale Military Exercises

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

How will new battlefield technologies affect a future war? The only way to gauge the situation is through large-scale military exercises.

Given the very real prospect of war with China, the Department of War should begin exercises similar to the Louisiana Maneuvers of 1941.

The Secretary of War should order the Navy to take on a large-scale, fleet-on-fleet exercise across the Pacific.

The United States faces the potential prospect of war with a great power in the coming years, with the most likely prospect being the People's Republic of China. China is increasingly confident in its own military capabilities, regularly harassing its neighbors and engaging in massive, joint military operations in and around Taiwanese waters and airspace that look for all the world like a full-scale dress rehearsal for invasion.[1] Indeed, former Indo–Pacific Commander Admiral Phil Davidson said that he believes the Chinese military has decided it must be ready for an invasion of Taiwan by 2027, even if opposed by a U.S.-led coalition.[2]

At the same time, the world is witnessing the emergence of new military technologies, and old technologies applied in innovative fashion. In Ukraine, small, tactical drones (different from the large Predator

and Reaper family of drones employed by the United States in the War on Terror) have become ubiquitous on the battlefield.[3] As a consequence, drones have provided both sides with massive amounts of near-real-time tactical surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities unseen before in warfare.

In addition, Ukraine and the conflicts in the Middle East have seen missile campaigns on an unprecedented scale against military targets and government facilities, as well as civilian population centers.[4] Meanwhile, actors in East Asia, such as North Korea and, most worryingly, China, are closely watching such developments and have fielded the largest missile arsenals in the world.[5]

Finally, the rise of cyber operations and the rise of space as a warfighting domain is now a distinct concern, particularly if a conflict between two spacefaring nations—such as China and the United States—should break out.[6]

All of this correctly raises a number of key questions: How will these new technologies affect a future war? Will these new technologies replace existing platforms or will they be additive?

These questions have yet to be answered because the world has yet to see modern, high-end militaries engage in high-intensity conflict with one another. This is a good thing—and the goal is to ensure that conditions do not arise where the United States and China engage in a high-intensity conflict with one another. But should such a conflict erupt, how the above questions are answered will in many ways dictate the outcome. In some ways, the current security environment is akin to the interwar period between the end of World War I and the beginning of World War II. The United States military—along with the other militaries of the world—evolved from reliance on horse-drawn vehicles to combustion engine vehicles.[7] Armored maneuver warfare replaced the horse with the tank.[8] Aviation moved away from flimsy, wood and cloth–based airplanes to aluminum-powered turboprops. Aircraft carriers entered the service.[9] And the world's democracies increasingly faced authoritarians in Asia and Europe determined to overthrow the status quo. How then did militaries "test-drive" new concepts, new platforms, new technologies, and new doctrines—particularly if they believed that war is imminent?

They exercised.

During the interwar period between the first and second world wars, the United States military wargamed, exercised, and experimented at an extraordinary scale.

Not only did the U.S. Navy begin building aircraft carriers during this period, but the military writ large brought aviation of all kinds into its own.

In 1921, U.S. Army officer Billy Mitchell engaged in a series of experiments with the U.S. Navy where he demonstrated the utility of aircraft in destroying—using live ammunition—captured imperial German warships operating off the coast of Virginia, thereby demonstrating the role that modern aircraft could play in naval operations.[10] These exercises played out in real time 21 years later at the battle of Midway, when American naval aviation decimated the Japanese navy and allowed the United States to roll back and eventually defeat the Japanese empire.[11]

Most famously, the U.S. Army conducted the Louisiana Maneuvers from August to September 1941 on the eve of America's entry into World War II, in which 400,000 men arranged in two opposing armies operating across thousands of square miles in Louisiana fought with everything except live ammunition.[12] The Louisiana Maneuvers was a real-world exercise, with winners and losers, commanded by ambitious commanders who were not rehearsing doctrine or plans, but coming up with concepts and ideas to defeat the opposing army.[13] These maneuvers directly tested not only America's generals and provided test beds for new, innovative technologies—but it also identified—with great accuracy, in some cases—how future combat operations would play out in the real world. These maneuvers gave rise to some of America's most outstanding generals, such as Eisenhower, Patton, Bradley, and just as important, the dismissal or retirement of interwar general officers who were deemed unfit to command in the coming war.[14]

The military does some exercises today—but they are just that—exercises. The National Training Center at Fort Irwin has units commanded by officers trying to defeat their opponent—but these exercises are rarely conducted at large scale.[15] At most, a single brigade commanded by a colonel will engage an "enemy" brigade. The Air Force's Red Flag and Navy's Top Gun schools teach tactics—and rarely get involved in testing new doctrine or capabilities in large operations against thinking opponents. Large-scale U.S. exercises, such as U.S. Indo–Pacific Command's Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC), Talisman Sabre (with Australia), Ulchi Freedom Guardian (with South Korea), or U.S. Strategic Command's Global Thunder, generally exercise procedures or operations during a scripted conflict or humanitarian or disaster relief operations.[16] Actual employment of new capabilities against thinking adversaries who are trying to defeat their opponent is by and large not done.

Given the rise of drones, large-scale missile salvos, missile defenses, and the increasing likelihood that the space and cyber domains will be contested in future high-intensity conflicts, coupled with the very real prospect that the United States could be in a large-scale war with China, the Department of War should undertake something similar to the Louisiana Maneuvers

today. Indeed, the Secretary of War should order the Navy to take on a large-scale, fleet-on-fleet exercise across the Pacific.

Such an exercise would unfold over thousands of square miles of open ocean and be comprised of two "enemy" fleets, commanded by vice admirals. This exercise would incorporate multiple carrier strike groups and submarine squadrons and test the role of drones, cyber operations, fires, long-range strikes, missile defenses, and naval tactics—all to experiment in an environment that simulates a possible conflict with China. The fleets could be supported by shore-based elements. Each fleet commander should be ambitious and out to win the exercise.

Fundamentally, such a 21st-century maritime version of the Louisiana Maneuvers would examine whether an aircraft carrier is, in fact, obsolete, or whether drones should be additive to, as opposed to a replacement for, the carrier. It should explore various first mover advantages in space and cyberspace and reward officers who achieve mission objectives and demonstrate initiative.

War with China is a real possibility. The United States must recognize that the prospect of a high-intensity, great power war is just as possible today as it was in 1937 or 1938. The U.S. military must take the steps necessary to prepare for such a war now. The military must understand how unmanned systems, cyber systems, traditional carrier operations, shore-based aircraft, and both legacy and new capabilities can work together to achieve success—or America will likely fail in a future war, whether with China or another great power.

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Endnotes

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