

Arsenals and Anarchy

Defense Modernization, Unstable Multipolarity, and the Risk of U.S.-China War



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Abstract

The U.S.-China rivalry is held in place by four bars, not three. John Mearsheimer's (2026) "Iron Cage of International Anarchy" identifies anarchy, latent power, and the regional distribution of military power as the structure that makes great power competition relentless and East Asia unusually war prone. An additional bar, the efficiency with which each state converts wealth into usable military power, now matters more for the next two decades than the slow drift of wealth and population.

This paper builds a Defense Modernization Index (DMI), applies it to the United States and China from 1991 to 2026, and projects four scenarios to 2076 with a model of the regional balance. China closed the modernization-quality gap from roughly one-third of the U.S. level to near parity. The two powers are hollow in different places: Washington in its industrial base, Beijing in its high command.



In every scenario the regional balance favors China into the late 2030s, and the sharpest danger window opens not when Chinese power peaks, but when it begins to decline. The main recommendation is to manage transitions, not levels: build deterrence by denial without an arms race, offer conditional assurance, bind crisis channels, and settle disputes without new faits accomplis, all before the danger window opens.

Keywords: defense modernization; conversion; unstable multipolarity; danger window; U.S.-China rivalry

Introduction

Mearsheimer's fiftieth-anniversary essay offers the most complete structural account of why the new multipolarity is dangerous. China is a potential regional hegemon in an East Asia he characterizes as unbalanced multipolarity, and four features of the region make a crisis likely: China lacks the war trauma that restrained the Soviet Union, it has few allies to distract it, its territorial claims are bound up with nationalism, and a maritime theater makes limited war thinkable (Mearsheimer 2026, 76–78).

Yet Mearsheimer's essay forecasts the future balance through latent power alone, on the assumption that "states routinely translate latent power into military power at roughly similar rates" (Mearsheimer 2026, 72). The past decade contradicts that assumption. China built the world's largest navy on a budget that has grown about 7 percent a year since 2023 (O'Rourke 2025; Arthur 2026; Janes 2026). The United States, with a 2027 budget request of \$1.5 trillion, including \$350 billion sought through reconciliation (OMB 2026, 1), needs three to five years to replace the interceptors and cruise missiles it fired in a thirty-eight-day campaign against Iran (Cancian and Park 2026; Warner 2026).

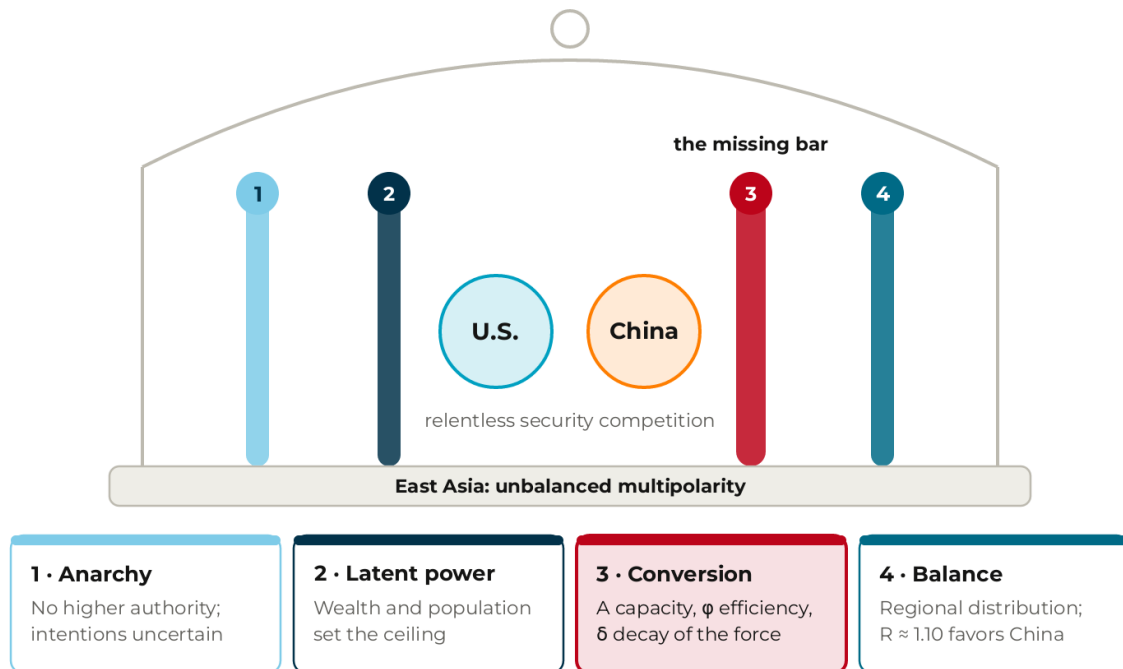
This paper asks how differences in conversion shape the trajectory and danger of the rivalry inside Mearsheimer's cage (Figure 1). It advances a working hypothesis:

Working hypothesis. Within the constraints of anarchy, the U.S.-China regional balance over 2026–2076 will be determined more by relative conversion efficiency (absorptive capacity, production capacity, and command cohesion) than by relative latent power; and the risk of great power war will peak when one side's regional advantage crests and begins to decline, or when the other attempts to reverse an established imbalance.

The paper proceeds in eight sections. It first reviews fifty years of defense modernization research and places eleven theories on one causal chain, which exposes conversion as the missing link. It then tests Mearsheimer's own projections to show why conversion matters and introduces the Defense Modernization Index to measure it. The index is applied to the two "hollow giants," and the accumulation model then generates four scenarios to 2076. The paper next draws

out the consequences of unstable multipolarity and closes with implications and recommendations.

Figure 1. The Iron Cage as four structural layers.



Source: author's illustration, after Mearsheimer (2026). Note: Bars 1, 2, and 4 follow Mearsheimer; this paper adds the conversion layer.

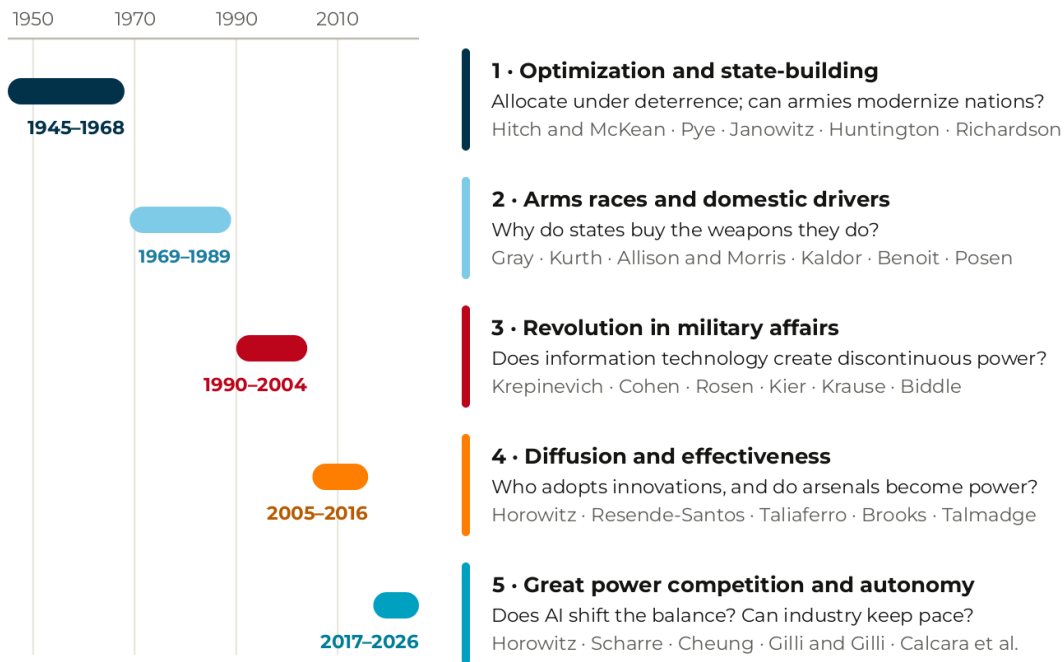
The findings matter for policymakers because budgets and latent power are poor guides to risk if conversion drives the balance. The hardest implication falls on Washington: its preferred future, Scenario B, requires the most careful diplomacy. For Beijing, purges that weaken the conversion of platforms into usable power may tempt a regime to compensate with escalation in a crisis. Middle powers face the narrowest margin. Beijing's push for a Sino-centric Asia is already eroding Southeast Asia's hedging strategies, and for nonaligned states the danger windows arrive between 2036 and the late 2040s. A hedging posture not institutionalized before 2035 is unlikely to survive, so middle powers must act before the windows open.

Fifty Years of Modernization Research

The study of defense modernization has shifted its unit of analysis three times: from arms, to organizations, to systems of adoption. Its dependent variable moved with it, from acquisition, to innovation, to battlefield effectiveness (Figure 2).

The first generation, from 1945 to 1968, treated modernization as optimization in the West and as state-building in new nations. Systems analysts such as Charles Hitch and Roland McKean (1960) framed force planning as allocation under budget constraints, while Lucian Pye (1962), Morris Janowitz (1964), and Samuel Huntington (1968) debated whether armies could modernize societies. Lewis Richardson's (1960) equations and Huntington's (1958) essay on arms races laid the formal foundations of a second tradition.

Figure 2. Five periods of defense modernization research, 1945–2026.



Source: author's synthesis; works cited in the text.

The second period, from 1969 to 1989, asked why states buy the weapons they do. Colin Gray (1971) attacked mechanical action-reaction models; James Kurth (1973), Graham Allison and Frederic Morris (1975), Mary Kaldor (1981), and Matthew Evangelista (1988) located the drivers in bureaucratic and industrial momentum; Emile Benoit (1973) opened the guns-versus-butter debate; and Barry Posen (1984) showed that balance-of-power pressure outperforms organizational theory in explaining doctrinal innovation under threat.

The third period, from 1990 to 2004, was dominated by the revolution in military affairs. Andrew Krepinevich (1994) and Eliot Cohen (1996) gave the idea its canonical form, and innovation studies divided into intraservice, civil-military, and cultural schools. Keith Krause (1992) theorized the hierarchy of arms producers. Stephen Biddle's (2004) *Military Power* delivered the decisive correction: the "modern system" of force employment, not technology, explains battlefield outcomes.

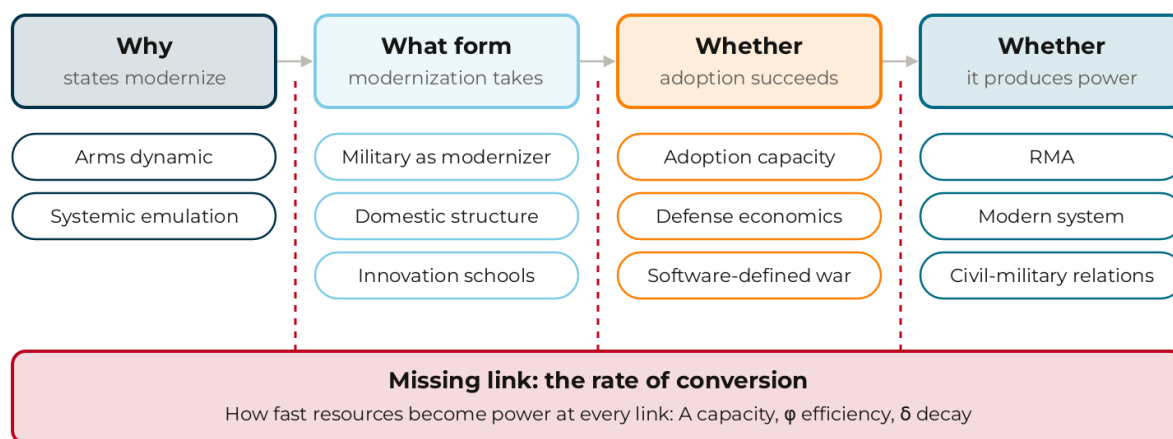
The fourth period, from 2005 to 2016, turned to diffusion and effectiveness. Michael Horowitz's (2010) adoption-capacity theory explained the spread of innovations by their financial and organizational demands; João Resende-Santos (2007) and Jeffrey Taliaferro (2006) restored Waltzian emulation; and Risa Brooks (2008), Caitlin Talmadge (2015), and Jonathan Caverley (2014) showed how regime type and coup-proofing govern whether arsenals become combat power.

The fifth period, since 2017, coincides with the new multipolarity. Scholars debate whether artificial intelligence and autonomy transform the balance, while skeptics such as Andrea and Mauro Gilli (2018) and Antonio Calcara and colleagues (2022) show that imitation is getting harder and that drones have not escaped the hider-finder competition. The war in Ukraine and the Iran campaign have returned the industrial base, magazine depth and production rates, to the center of the field.

Eleven Theories, One Causal Chain

The literature's apparent rivalries are largely an artifact. Read in sequence, its eleven frameworks explain different links of a single causal chain rather than competing answers to the same question (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Eleven frameworks placed on the four links of one causal chain.



Source: author's synthesis.

Systemic theories, action-reaction and emulation, explain *why* states modernize. Military-as-modernizer, domestic-structure, and innovation theories explain *what form* modernization takes. Adoption-capacity, defense-economics, and software-defined-warfare theories explain *whether* adoption succeeds. RMA, modern-system, and civil-military theories explain *whether* the result produces power on the battlefield. The genuine disputes are narrower: emulation against culture on whether states converge, the revolution in military affairs against the modern system on how much technology matters, and arms racing against modernization in reading middle-power acquisitions.

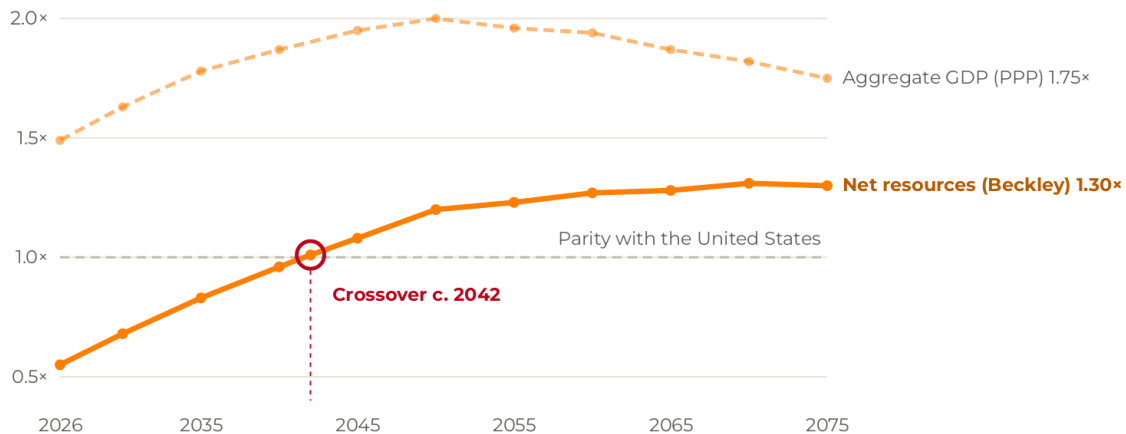
The chain exposes seven gaps. The field conflates acquisition, capability, and effectiveness and has no standard index separating them. It under-theorizes middle powers, for whom supplier choice is an alignment signal. It rarely integrates supply-side hierarchy and chokepoints with national decisions. It treats fiscal constraints and cost escalation as background. It does not model the path dependence of legacy fleets. It explains wartime effectiveness better than peacetime modernization in authoritarian and hybrid regimes. And it assumes platform generations of twenty to thirty years when software iterates in months.

These gaps share a root. Structural realism specifies the pressure to modernize, and the modernization literature specifies the obstacles. No framework specifies the *rate* at which a state converts resources into power under pressure. That rate is the missing link in the chain, and the variable this paper makes explicit.

The Conversion Problem

Mearsheimer's own projections do not support his conclusion that China will not overtake the United States. His figure 5 projects GDP per capita and population for both states to 2075. Multiplying the two, as read from the chart, yields aggregate latent power; weighting by income, following Michael Beckley's (2018) net-resources measure, discounts China's large and poorer population (Mearsheimer 2026, 73).

Figure 4. China/U.S. latent power ratio, 2026–2075.



Source: computed from Mearsheimer (2026, 73, fig. 5); values read approximately from the chart. Note: Values above 1 mean China's latent power exceeds that of the United States.

On aggregate GDP, China's latent power exceeds that of the United States throughout the period, peaking at about twice the U.S. level around 2050 (Figure 4). Even on Beckley's measure, designed to penalize exactly the kind of population China has, China crosses over around 2042. Mearsheimer's judgment therefore rests on arguments outside the projection: China's aging, the productivity penalty of older societies, and America's capacity to expand immigration. Those are arguments about converting population into wealth. They strengthen the case for treating conversion as a variable.

The paper therefore adds a layer to Mearsheimer's model. Anarchy compels competition; latent power sets the ceiling; conversion determines how much of that ceiling becomes force; and the regional distribution of that force determines whether multipolarity is balanced or unbalanced. Conversion enters a simple accumulation model:

$$K(i, t+1) = (1 - \delta(i, t)) \cdot K(i, t) + A(i, t) \cdot \varphi(i, t) \cdot b(i, t) \cdot Y(i, t)$$

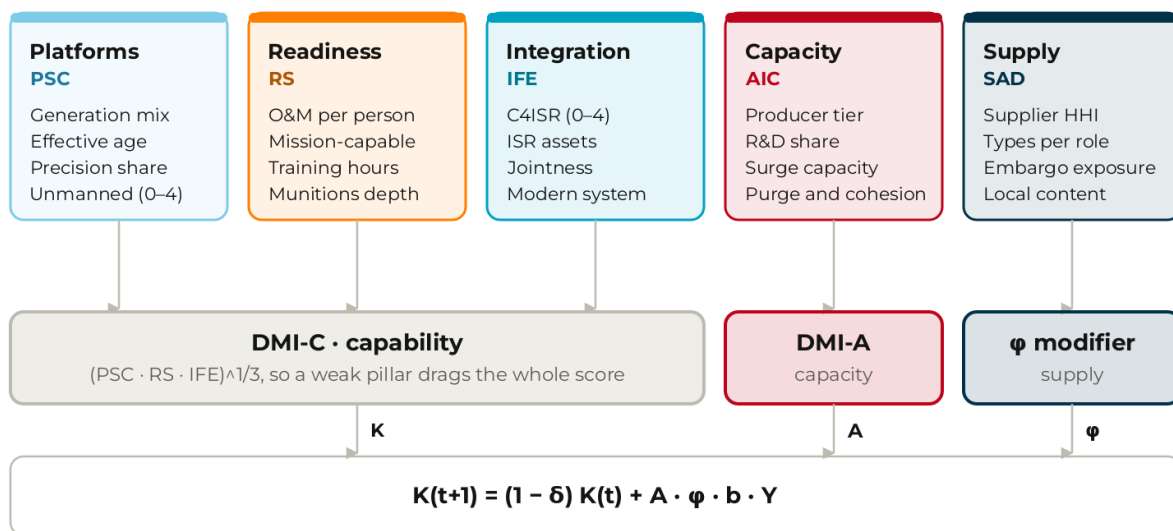
K is quality-weighted capability, δ its depreciation through aging, obsolescence, and combat consumption, A absorptive capacity, φ procurement efficiency, b the defense share of output, and Y output. Mearsheimer's assumption sets $A \cdot \varphi$ equal across great powers. The modernization literature explains why it is not: adoption capacity varies A, cost escalation and producer hierarchy vary φ , and coup-proofing can sever capability from effectiveness altogether. A late developer

that recapitalizes in one generation also enjoys a young fleet and low δ for two decades, then faces simultaneous obsolescence, a military version of Alexander Gerschenkron's (1962) advantages of backwardness.

Measuring Modernization: The Defense Modernization Index

Testing the hypothesis requires a measure that separates capability from the capacity to build it. The Defense Modernization Index follows three rules. It measures quality per unit, not size, leaving mass to measures such as the Composite Index of National Capability. It excludes inputs such as budgets, which are explanatory variables in the model. And it reports three components that map directly onto the model's parameters (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Architecture of the Defense Modernization Index: five pillars, three outputs, three model parameters.



Source: author's DMI codebook.

Aggregation is deliberately non-compensatory. Indicators are averaged within each pillar, and the three capability pillars are combined geometrically:

$$\text{DMI-C} = (PSC \cdot RS \cdot IFE)^{1/3}$$

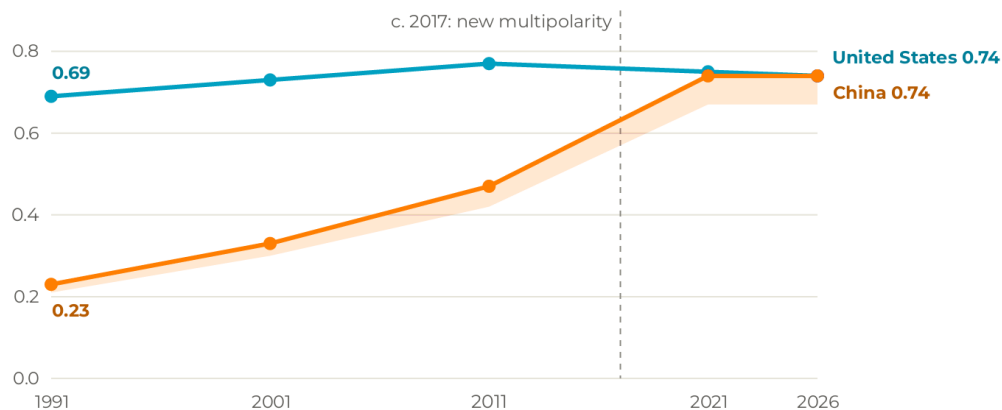
The geometric mean penalizes imbalance. A force with new platforms but poor readiness or integration scores low, which captures “hollow modernization” directly. Each cell carries a confidence flag (A for primary sources, B for authoritative secondary sources, C for expert estimates), two coders work independently with Krippendorff's alpha of at least 0.80, and validation tests whether DMI-A predicts the *rate* of change in DMI-C after controlling for budget, which is the direct empirical test of the conversion hypothesis.

Applying the index to the two rivals forced four revisions now built into the

codebook: a surge-production indicator separate from design capability; a distinction between joint institutions that exist and those that function; a purge-intensity indicator, because counterbalancing measures such as Ulrich Pilster and Tobias Böhmelt's (2011) do not capture the decapitation of a high command; and a flag distinguishing combat-tested doctrine from peacetime practice.

Two Hollow Giants

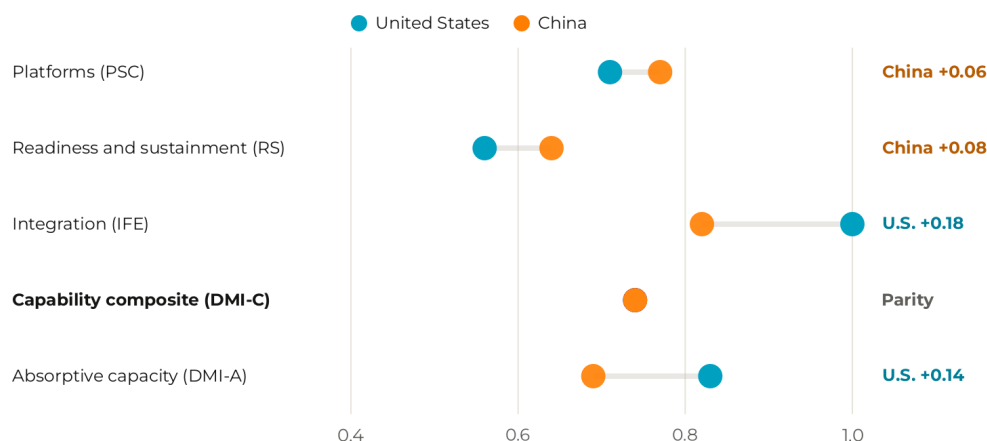
Figure 6. DMI-C, United States and China, 1991–2026.



Source: author's pilot DMI coding; 2026 values from sources: GAO 2026; CRS 2026; Cancian and Park 2026; Warner 2026; Lin et al. 2026; Arthur 2026; Revue Conflits 2025; 1991–2021 expert retro-coded (flag C). Note: Scale 0 to 1. The shaded band shows China's lower-bound coding, and values before 2026 are expert retro-codings (flag C).

China's modernization quality rose from roughly one-third of the U.S. level in 1991 to near parity in 2026, while U.S. quality peaked in 2011 and has drifted down since (Figure 6). Five snapshots were coded for each state; the 2026 values draw on current sources, and earlier years are expert retro-codings flagged C. China's coding carries more C flags throughout, because Beijing publishes neither availability rates nor stockpile data.

Figure 7. DMI components, China versus the United States, 2026.



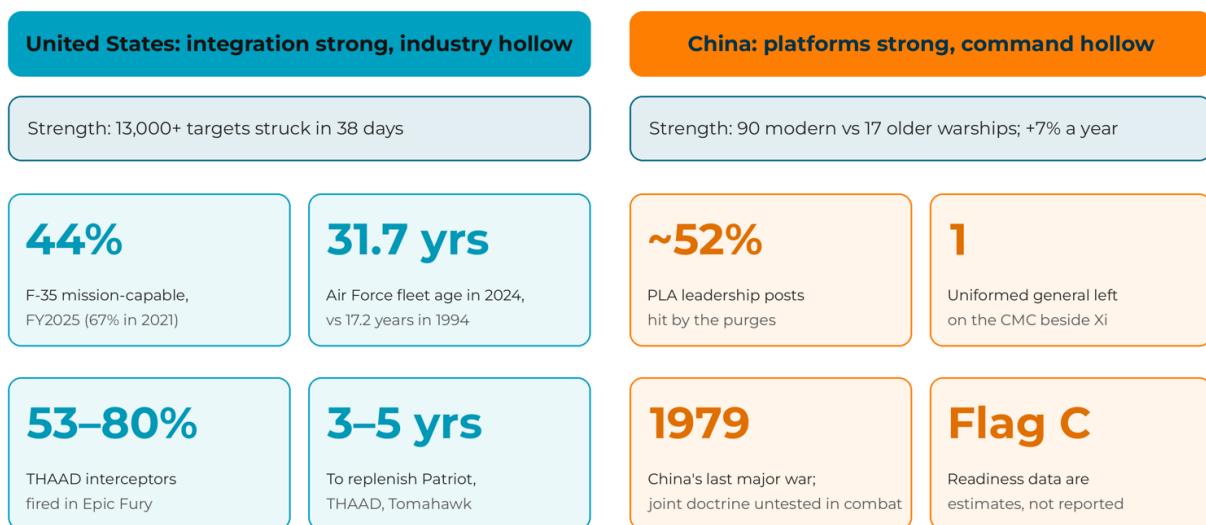
Source: author's pilot DMI coding; sources: GAO 2026; CRS 2026; Cancian and Park 2026; Warner 2026; Lin

et al. 2026; Arthur 2026; Revue Conflits 2025. Note: Scale 0 to 1. China's readiness score is flagged C, and DMI-A includes surge production capacity.

The aggregate hides diverging pillars (Figure 7). The two rivals are not more or less modern on one scale; each is strong where the other is weak.

The United States leads decisively in integration. A campaign that struck more than 13,000 targets in 38 days demonstrated cross-domain kill chains in combat (Warner 2026). But its readiness and sustainment pillar fell from 0.94 in 1991 to 0.56 in 2026. China leads in platforms because it recapitalized in a single generation; its fleet is young and its shipyards vast. Its weakness lies in command: the purge of its high command impairs the joint institutions it built after 2016.

Figure 8. The evidence behind the two hollownesses, 2025–2026.



U.S. hollowness is industrial and repairable with time; China's depends on choices made by a single leader.

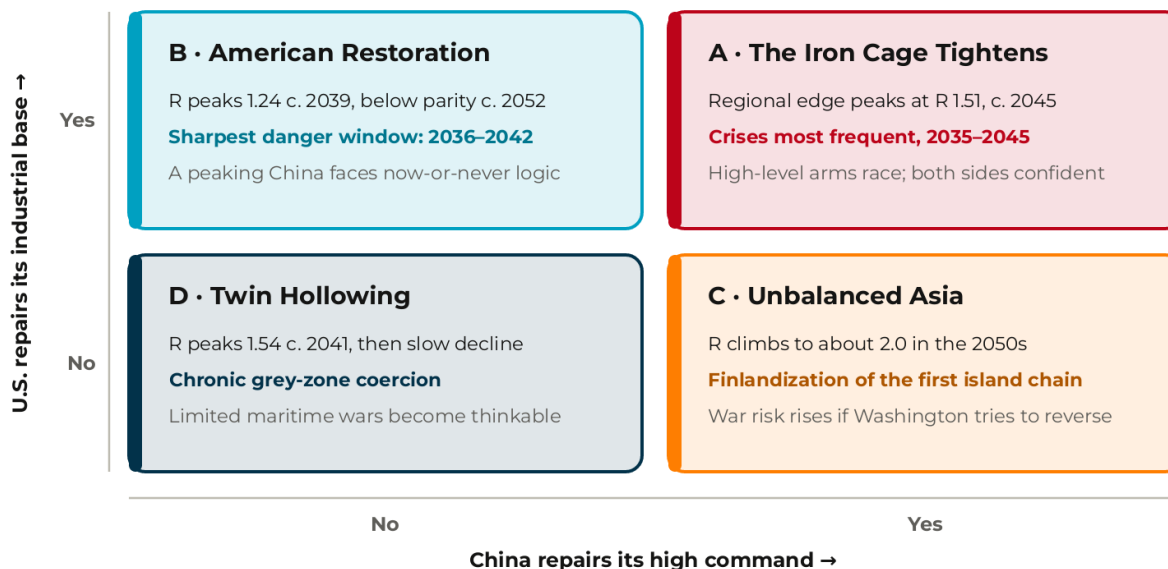
Source: F-35 mission-capable rate, GAO (2026, i, 12); Air Force fleet age, CRS (2026); THAAD use and replenishment time, Cancian and Park (2026); targets struck, Warner (2026); PLA purges, Lin et al. (2026); warship counts, Revue Conflits (2025); defense budget growth, Arthur (2026); 1979 war and joint doctrine, author's synthesis from U.S. Department of War (2025, 14), Cozad et al. (2023), and Zhang (2015). Note: Warship counts are IISS data for 2025, as reported by Revue Conflits (2025). Fleet age is for 2024, with 1994 as the comparison year. Other indicators date from 2025 to 2026.

The numbers behind each hollowness are stark (Figure 8). For Washington, money is not the bottleneck; production capacity is. Officials from the F-35 program office and its engine maker told the Government Accountability Office that even with additional funding, industry might lack the capacity to meet demand for engine parts (GAO 2026, 20). For Beijing, the bottleneck is political. This is Caitlin Talmadge's (2015) mechanism in a new form: political control purchased at the expense of converting capability into effectiveness, rather than at the expense of the platforms themselves. The difference matters for the future. American hollowness is industrial and can be repaired with time and investment; Chinese hollowness depends on choices made by a single leader.

Four Futures Inside the Cage, 2026–2076

The central uncertainty of the rivalry is which hollowness each side repairs first. Crossing the two produces four scenarios (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Scenario matrix, 2026–2076.



Source: author's scenario model. Note: R above 1 means the East Asian regional balance favors China.

The scenarios were generated by running the accumulation model annually from 2026 to 2076, with output from Mearsheimer's figure 5. The United States allocates 3.5 percent of output to defense, China 1.4 percent on a purchasing-power basis; China's conversion efficiency starts 30 percent higher and its depreciation rises after 2038 as its single-wave fleet ages. The regional balance R divides China's theater-committed capability (85 percent of its stock) by that of the United States (40 percent, discounted 20 percent for distance and anti-access defenses) plus its allies:

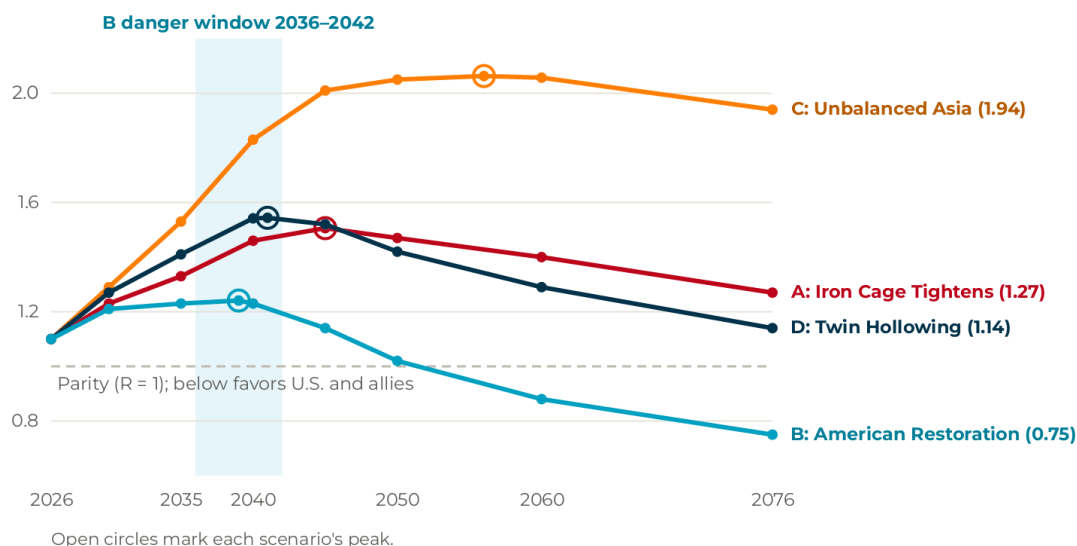
$$R(t) = 0.85 \cdot K(\text{China}, t) \div [0.40 \times 0.8 \cdot K(\text{U.S.}, t) + K(\text{allies}, t)]$$

The model is calibrated to R of about 1.10 in 2026, consistent with Mearsheimer's (2026, 76n93) judgment that the regional balance already favors China (Anderson and Press 2025).

In **Scenario A, the Iron Cage Tightens**, both sides repair their weaknesses and the regional edge stays with China, peaking at 1.51 around 2045 (Figure 10). Crisis frequency is highest here, because both sides have capability and confidence. In **Scenario B, American Restoration**, R peaks at 1.24 around 2039 and falls below parity around 2052. This future looks the most comfortable for Washington, yet it opens the sharpest danger window: a power whose advantage crests and visibly declines faces the “now-or-never” incentive Hal Brands and Michael Beckley (2022) identify in peaking powers. In **Scenario C, Unbalanced Asia**, R rises just above 2.0 by the mid-2050s, the archetype of unbalanced multipolarity; its most plausible outcome is the Finlandization of the first island chain, with the greatest

risk arriving if Washington later tries to reverse the slide. In **Scenario D, Twin Hollowing**, R peaks at 1.54 around 2041, producing chronic grey-zone coercion and the limited maritime wars that Mearsheimer considers thinkable.

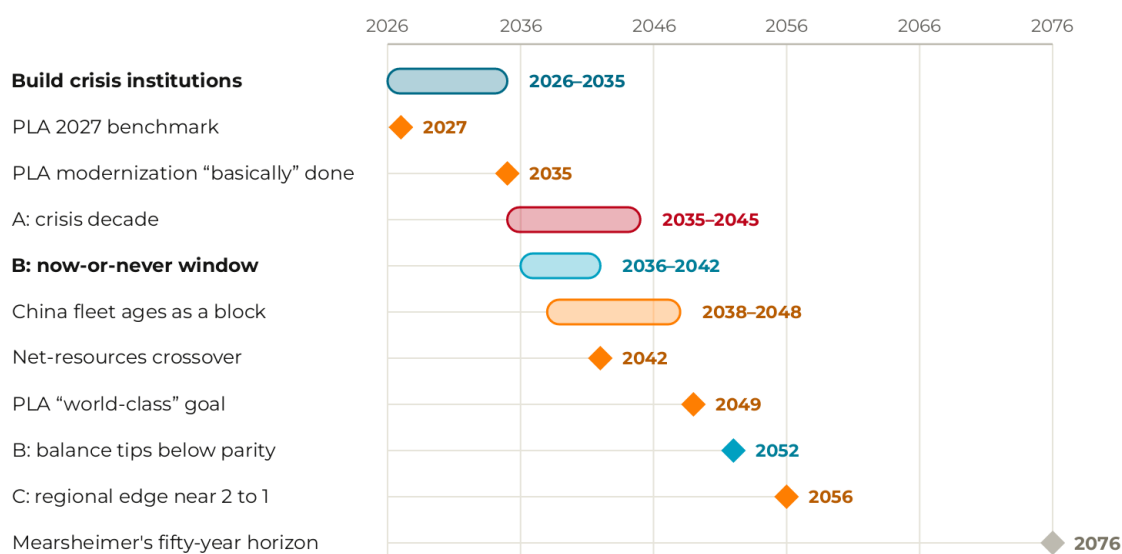
Figure 10. Regional balance R under four scenarios, 2026–2076.



Source: author's simulation of the accumulation model; latent power from Mearsheimer (2026, 73, fig. 5). Note: R is China's theater capability divided by U.S. and allied theater capability, and the values are illustrative model output.

Three wildcards shift every curve. A Russian realignment, under the three conditions Mearsheimer specifies, would force China to hold back forces on its northern border and lower R by about 18 percent. A doubling of Japan's contribution would lower R in Scenario C by 0.3 to 0.4. And the possibility of limited nuclear use at sea is greatest in Scenarios A and B, when the side losing a maritime war retains a large arsenal.

Figure 11. Horizon scan, 2026–2076.



Source: PLA goals from U.S. Department of War (2025); other dates from the author's model. Note: Scenario windows and model milestones are illustrative.

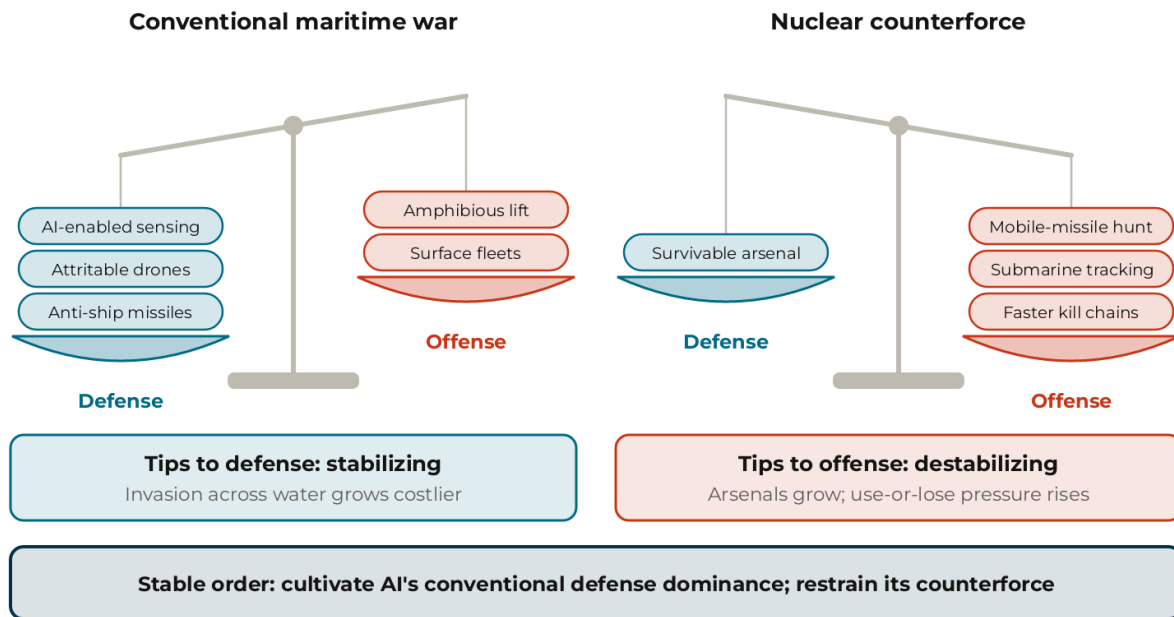
The model is illustrative: its parameters are calibrated assumptions, Mearsheimer's figure 5 is read from a chart, and the DMI remains a pilot. Its value lies in the timing and shape of the curves, not in their point estimates.

The Consequences of Unstable Multipolarity

Unbalanced multipolarity in East Asia, nested inside a three-pole global system, produces six consequences that the scenarios make concrete.

- 1. More dangerous dyads.** The three advantages Mearsheimer attributes to bipolarity (fewer dyads, rarer imbalances, and less miscalculation about resolve and coalitions) all disappear. Russia's alignment alone can move the regional balance by nearly a fifth, so uncertainty about it is itself a source of miscalculation.
- 2. Unstable alliances in both directions.** Thomas Christensen and Jack Snyder (1990) showed that multipolarity produces both chain-ganging and buck-passing. Whether Japan and Australia rearm quickly enough in Scenario C is a buck-passing problem; a reef clash that drags Washington into a war it did not choose in Scenarios A and B is a chain-ganging problem.
- 3. Windows that structural theory cannot see.** Because the rivals are hollow in different places, an industrial revival or a command consolidation could shift R by 0.2 to 0.3 within a decade. Rapid shifts create windows of opportunity and vulnerability, and with them preventive temptations.
- 4. A weaker nuclear firebreak.** The treaty term of New START ended in February 2026, China's arsenal is growing, and a maritime theater makes limited nuclear use against naval forces less unthinkable than it was along the Iron Curtain. Artificial intelligence sharpens this asymmetry. AI-enabled sensing and cheap autonomous systems favor the defender around the first island chain and make amphibious invasion costlier (Calcara et al. 2022). But AI applied to finding mobile missiles and submarines threatens second-strike survivability (Figure 12; Lieber and Press 2017).
- 5. Allied proliferation pressure.** In Scenarios C and D, declining confidence in extended deterrence will raise pressure on Japan and South Korea to consider independent nuclear options, multiplying nuclear dyads and compressing crisis timelines.
- 6. Shrinking room to hedge.** Jessica Liao and Lucas Myers (2025) show how Beijing's push for a Sino-centric Asia is already eroding Southeast Asia's hedging strategies (see also Lind 2024; Walt 2025). For nonaligned states the danger windows arrive between 2036 and the late 2040s, just as hedging comes under maximum pressure. A hedging posture not institutionalized before 2035 is unlikely to survive the decade that follows.

Figure 12. AI and the offense-defense balance in two domains.



Source: author's illustration.

Scenario B shows why danger peaks when an advantage begins to decline rather than when it is greatest. Rationalist theories of war hold that rapid shifts in power create a commitment problem: a rising side cannot credibly promise not to exploit its future strength, so the side facing decline may prefer to fight while it still can (Fearon 1995; Powell 2006). In Scenario B, an American industrial revival turns the regional balance after R peaks at 1.24 around 2039, and R falls below parity around 2052. Beijing would then face the “now-or-never” incentive that Brands and Beckley (2022) identify in powers whose rise has crested. Washington could not credibly promise restraint once its conversion recovers, and Beijing could not count on bargaining from a shrinking position later. The shift is fast because conversion, not latent power, drives it: an industrial revival can move R within a decade, far faster than wealth or population change. The years when R crests and turns, not the years when it is highest, are therefore the most dangerous.

Implications and Recommendations

Conversion matters more than latent power, and danger peaks when an advantage begins to decline, as in Scenario B between roughly 2036 and 2042. Policy should therefore manage transitions, not levels: it should smooth shifts in R before they become windows for war. Four recommendations follow, each timed to take effect before the danger window opens (Figure 11).

1. Washington, Taipei, and U.S. allies should rebuild defensive munitions and interceptors and strengthen deterrence by denial before the danger window opens in the mid-2030s. They should avoid a rapid expansion of long-range offensive strike forces, which would sharpen the very transition they seek to smooth.

2. Washington and Beijing should pair each step in denial with assurances that are conditional, reciprocal, and verifiable: no support for unilateral change to the status quo in exchange for no coercion, and advance notice of large exercises. Both should have a reassurance package ready before China's advantage in R begins to decline.
3. Defense ministries should turn their crisis-communication commitments into binding incident rules that cover coast guards and maritime militias and should not suspend channels as punishment. They should make the AI incident channel operational and commit that AI will not enter nuclear launch authority or target the other side's nuclear command and control. They should complete these rules before the danger window opens, because channels built during a crisis arrive too late.
4. ASEAN and China should conclude a binding South China Sea code that covers coast guards and is anchored in UNCLOS, and Washington and Beijing should refrain from new faits accomplis while the parties negotiate it. All parties should contain these disputes between 2026 and 2035, before shifts in R tempt either side to use force.

For middle powers, the same timeline sets the margin: hedging not institutionalized before 2035 is unlikely to survive, defensive capabilities that raise the cost of coercion without threatening either great power preserve options, and independent public assessments of both rivals would make danger windows visible earlier. The appendix details the mitigation agenda and sequence (Figures A1 and A2).

Acknowledgment of AI Use

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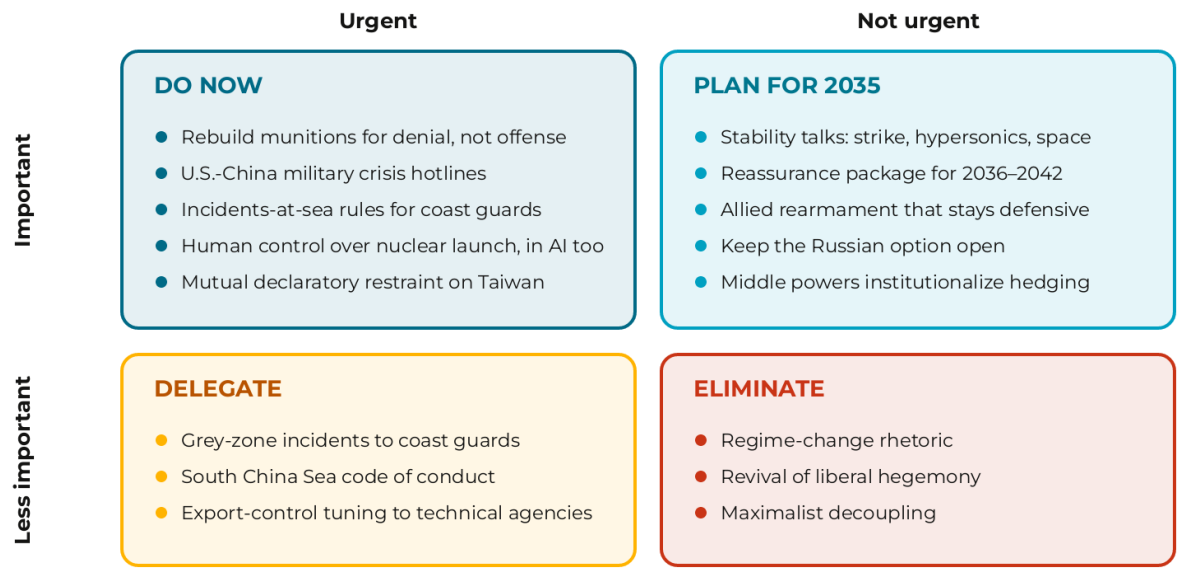
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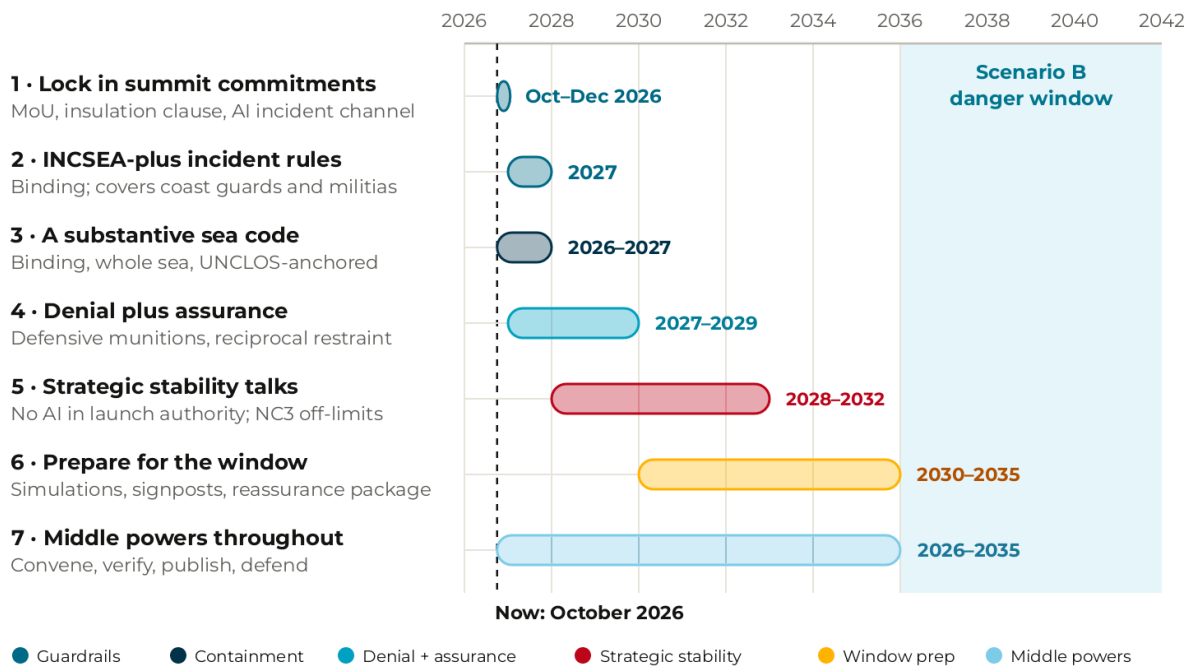
Appendix

Figure A1. Mitigation measures by urgency and importance.



Source: author.

Figure A2. Seven-step war mitigation plan, 2026–2035, set against Scenario B’s danger window.



Source: author.