SYM-AM-26-087

Excerpt from the Proceedings
of the
Twenty-Third Annual Acquisition Research Symposium and Innovation Summit

Wednesday, May 6, 2026 Sessions
Volume I
"Accelerating Warfighting Capabilities"

Going on the Offensive:
Acquisition for Competing with China

Published: April 30, 2026

Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.

Prepared for the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA 93943.

The research presented in this report was supported by the Acquisition Research Program, Graduate School of Defense Management at the Naval Postgraduate School.

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Going on the Offensive: Acquisition for Competing with China

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Abstract

This paper argues that the great power competition with China should drive defense acquisition processes, and that those processes should be used proactively to compete with Beijing, not simply as reactive levers. This applies to the directions in which the United States invests: The United States should prioritize capabilities not only that defend against PRC capabilities but also that have the potential to generate desired effects on China. This proactive logic also applies to the way in which the United States times and signals its resource allocations. The US defense acquisition system should invest and message in a way that accounts for and targets the PRC's system – to ensure that US defense acquisition processes not only support American positioning and perceptions of it, but also appropriately shape the adversary. Across the board, an adversary-informed, proactive acquisition system should begin from an understanding of China's central planning system, and use that system both to identify PRC priorities, capabilities, and investments early and to time US responses to maximize strategic effect.

Introduction

China poses a near-peer – and, increasingly, peer – threat to the United States, across economic, science and technology, and military vectors. This makes China the pacing threat for the United States; the dominant force driving adversary-informed US positioning. The challenge posed by the People's Republic of China (PRC) shapes US concerns about and investments in everything from supply chain security to scientific and technological innovation. In particular, China's challenge shapes the US defense apparatus, including capability development, capability demonstration, and the defense acquisition system more broadly.

But thus far, US efforts to counter China's threat – militarily, socially, economically, and industrially – have tended to be defensive and reactive. The US has sought to develop alternative sources of supply where China controls value chains, rather than to cultivate positions of leverage vis-à-vis Beijing. In the defense sector, the US has focused defensively on bolstering capabilities threatened by China and reactively on keeping pace with Chinese investments. The reaction to Chinese restrictions on critical minerals, like gallium and germanium, and the subsequent rush to secure rare earth element and REE permanent magnet supply lines proves the point acutely and recently.

This paper argues that the long-term, peacetime competition with China should drive defense acquisition processes. Moreover, those processes should be used proactively to take the offensive, and to compete with Beijing, not simply as reactive levers. This applies to the directions in which the United States invests: The United States should prioritize capabilities not only that defend against PRC capabilities but also that have the potential to generate desired effects on China. This proactive logic also applies to the way in which the United States times and signals its resource allocations. The US defense acquisition system should invest and message in a way that accounts for and targets the PRC's system – to ensure that US defense acquisition processes not only support American positioning and perceptions of it, but also appropriately shape the adversary.

To do this – to adopt a proactive, adversary-informed defense acquisition process – requires understanding and monitoring China's present capabilities and how it intends for those to evolve, where it is investing, what its priorities in those fields are, and how they are paying off. The United States must also understand and monitor the underlying PRC systems: the systems according to which China's priorities are formed, investments are determined, and capabilities are evaluated – and also and especially how those systems respond to external stimuli (e.g., the US acquisition processes). Then, the United States can direct its acquisition process accordingly; the United States can incorporate threat intelligence further to the left in the acquisition process and on a recurring basis across research and development (R&D), procurement, and operations and maintenance investments.

An enhanced understanding of Chinese systems can begin with the country's high-level planning apparatus: the marquee National Five-Year Plans for Economic and Social Development (hereafter National Five-Year Plans), the subordinate plans that they inform, and the resources that those in turn drive; the cycles according to which this process operates; and the degrees to and ways in which all respond to external stimuli. China's Party and state leaders oversee a "unified planning system" (Dong, 2025). That system starts, at the highest level, with a national architecture that develops National Five-Year Plans. Those National Five-Year Plans in turn inform an ecosystem of subordinate plans, including National-Level Special Plans; industry-, provincial-, and locality-specific plans; and project- and task-specific implementation guides.

A distinct, enduring, and structured feature of Chinese governance, this system has been executed since the country's founding – and is increasingly institutionalized. The development of the central Five-Year Plan follows a prescribed sequence of steps, is undertaken by a prescribed cast of stakeholders, and generates a prescribed set of outputs. That central Five-Year Plan in turn catalyzes development of a prescribed system of subordinate plans (e.g., National-Level Special Plans) and determines set categories of resource allocations. This makes the planning process both a ready analytical target for monitoring the PRC and a ready context for efforts to compete with China.

The PRC's hypersonic program offers an example both of the role of the planning system in shaping PRC capability development and the analytical utility of tracking that system. The 2006 11th National Five-Year Plan established – and subordinate plans elaborated on and operationalized – a set of "Major Science and Technology Projects," slated to last through 2020. One of those focused on hypersonic capabilities (Guancha, 2022). The project supported development of, among other things, China's DF-ZF hypersonic glide missile and Dongfeng-17 medium-range ballistic missile. The PRC first tested the DF-ZF in 2014 and the Dongfeng-17 in 2017 (Science and Technology Daily, 2018).

Those tests, and the continued capability development and demonstration that have followed, appear to have taken the United States by surprise. As the Financial Times reported of a 2021 PRC hypersonic test, "China tested a nuclear-capable hypersonic missile in August, showing a capability that caught U.S. intelligence by surprise" (Reuters, 2023). And in 2022, speaking about the Dongfeng-17, Dr. Mark Lewis, executive director of the National Defense Industrial Association's Emerging Technologies Institute, and former director of defense research and engineering for modernization at the Pentagon, stated that, "the investments that we've seen the Chinese make in hypersonics are frankly startling" (Harper, 2022). Moreover, taken by surprise, the United States has responded defensively and reactively to the PRC's hypersonics program, focusing on mirroring and defending against Chinese capabilities.

But close monitoring of the PRC's planning apparatus could have provided early indications of the PRC's ambitions, corresponding investments, and operationalizing entities. In addition, China's planning apparatus responds to external stimuli: The United States could proactively leverage the US defense acquisition process to shape PRC ambitions, investments, and systems – rather than being shaped by the PRC – if better able to incorporate sensing of Chinese priorities and capability developments in the earliest stages of US acquisition processes.

This paper begins with a survey of the PRC's high-level planning system. The next section uses the 2006 to 2020 National Science and Technology Major Projects to detail ways in which the Chinese planning system shapes resource allocations and responds to external stimuli. The third section details the insight into PRC priorities, capabilities, and entities that can be gleaned from understanding and monitoring the planning system. And the fourth section discusses ways in which the United States might leverage understanding of the Chinese governance system to develop not only an adversary-informed but a proactive, adversary-informed defense acquisition process, able to shape the PRC in a period of long-term, peacetime competition.

Understanding the Planning System: The Five-Year Plan Cycle

China's Five-Year Plans constitute the most important blueprints for the country's strategic objectives. These plans detail national priorities and goals and outline measures through which to pursue them. Five-Year Plans exist at the strategic level. They establish roadmaps for the PRC over a relatively long time period. They do not detail specific policies or funding streams.

The strategic blueprints outlined in Five-Year Plans are translated into more concrete lines of effort – as well as allocations of responsibility and resources – through a system of subordinate plans. These include National-Level Special Plans, of which there are dozens per Five-Year Plan cycle, as well as regional and institutional Five-Year Plans. National-Level Special Plans are particularly important within this ecosystem of subordinate plans. They operationalize the major initiatives detailed in National Five-Year Plans, including by detailing their more specific goals, requirements, and indicators; assigning them to bureaucratic stakeholders for oversight; and, therefore, connecting them to resourcing (Yao, 2012).

All of these plans are developed through a regimented, multi-step process. The process for formulating the PRC's high-level, central Five-Year Plan begins halfway through the previous Five-Year Plan period. During the third year of that period, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) organizes a mid-term evaluation of it. The evaluation generates a report that is approved by the State Council and submitted to the National People's Congress. The evaluation also informs research for the next Five-Year Plan. That research takes the form of reports, commissioned by the NDRC. In the third step of the planning process, drafting, the NDRC distills the results of the research phase into a draft plan, completed by the end of the fourth year of the previous Five-Year Plan period (China Daily, 2025).

The Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) revises the NDRC's draft in the final year of the previous Five-Year Plan – with participation from representatives from the National People's Congress, Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, State Council, and local governments and in consultation with external stakeholders. The Central Committee's suggestions are then passed, after which point the NDRC reconciles them with its framework for the new Five-Year Plan, and then solicits opinions from government and non-government entities. Around the start of the first quarter of the new Five-Year Plan period, the draft plan is approved and released.

Subordinate plans are developed according to similar, if less laborious, processes. For example, PRC sources summarize the steps for formulating National-Level Special Plans as "1. democratic participation, 2. planning coordination, 3. expert consultation, 4. approval and publication, and 5. evaluation and revision" (Yang, 2011). Generally, the sequence is initiated with a proposal for the plan submitted to the State Council's Central Committee. The State Council then deliberates over submitted proposals, after which point Planning Coordination Groups are created for approved plans. The groups begin by developing a work plan and methodology, before soliciting opinions, conducting research, and drafting a plan. Next, they revise and improve the initial draft with input from relevant State Council Departments and prominent external entities (e.g., universities). After a revised draft is socialized through "public consultation," final revisions are made and the plan is reviewed at an executive meeting of the State Council (Yang, 2011).

Understanding the Planning System: The National Science and Technology Major Projects

The PRC's 11th Five-Year Plan system established 16 National Science and Technology Major Projects (国家科技重大专项) in 2006, slating those to last through 2020. These projects offer an example both of the role of the planning system in shaping PRC capability development, including military capability, and the analytical utility of tracking that system. The PRC published the 11th National Five-Year Plan in 2006, outlining the country's strategic direction for the 2006 to 2010 period. That plan announced that China would "launch a number of Major Science and Technology Projects."

The 11th Five-Year Plan provided little additional detail. But the responsive, Medium- and Long-term Development Plan for Science and Technology Development (国家中长期科学和技术发展规划纲要) (2006-2020) (MLDP) did. The MLDP, a National-Level Special Plan, constituted a 15-year, strategic roadmap for China's scientific and technological ambitions, programs, and priorities. And the policy documented elaborated on the Major Projects at which the National Five-Year Plan had hinted, explaining that these would be national research, development, and industrialization initiatives. "Starting from pressing real-world needs, focusing on breakthroughs in major key and common technologies," the projects would "achieve leapfrog development and fill gaps." The MLDP stated that there would be 16 Major Projects. It listed 13, ranging from "Ultra-Large-Scale Integrated Circuit Manufacturing Technology and Complete Processes" to "High-Resolution Earth Observation Systems." The remaining three were classified and remained undisclosed in PRC formal media, policies and plans, and resourcing disclosures.

After and in response to the MLDP's publication, subsequent layers of the PRC planning apparatus continued to operationalize and provide detail on the Major Projects. The MLDP described the ambitions guiding the establishment of the Major Projects. But it did not elaborate on any of them beyond their high-level names. Nor did it indicate related tasks, designate lead units, or identify performance metrics. Those details were addressed in another, paired National-Level Special Plan, the 11th Five-Year Plan for Science and Technology Development ("十一五"科学技术发展规划) – as well as in the more detailed planning and bureaucratic work that flowed from it.

Where the MLDP introduced the Major Projects, the 11th Five-Year Plan for Science and Technology Development initiated their implementation. Published in August 2006, this plan identified, as its first "key task," "implementation" of the MLDP under the strategic framework of the 11th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development. Accordingly, the 11th Five-Year

Plan for Science and Technology Development detailed both the “development strategy” behind the Major Projects and, for the 13 disclosed ones, goals for the 2006 to 2010 period (i.e., their objectives for the first Five-Year Plan cycle of their period of performance). The plan also clarified that the National Science and Technology Education Leading Group was the authority charged with “implementation leadership” for the Major Projects.

Bureaucratically, the National Science and Technology Education Leading Group was positioned in the General Office of the State Council.[1] It members included the Director of the National Development and Reform Commission, the Minister of Education, the Minister of Science and Technology, the Minister of Industry and Information Technology, the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Agriculture, the President of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the President of the Chinese Academy of Engineering, the Deputy Secretary-General of the State Council, the Director of the National Natural Science Foundation of China, and the Executive Vice President of the China Association for Science and Technology (State Council, 2008).

Based on the authority granted it by the PRC planning process, the National Science and Technology Education Leading Group assigned the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) the role of operationalizing the Major Projects.[2] MOST proceeded to formulate management regulations for the initiatives and to assign them to “leading organizations.”

“Leading organizations” refer to the entity or entities responsible for specific organization and implementation of any given Major Project. Most of the 16 MLDP-launched Major Projects were assigned to government departments or ministries (e.g., the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology). But local governments, State-owned enterprises, and academies were also eligible. The leading organizations established management offices to undertake day to day work on their Major Projects; assembled overall expert groups, composed of individual experts, to consult on technical trajectories; and recruited participants, including academic, industry, and government research entities, often working together, to carry out project tasks. The leading organizations also formulated implementation plans for their Major Projects. Projects were formally launched only after their implementation plans were approved by the State Council.

This process can present as self-contained and insulated. But it featured engagement with external stakeholders and responded to external stimulus. On the first front, implementation plans were developed through consultation with researchers, management experts, financial experts, enterprises, and local government stakeholders (Unitalen, 2026). On the second front, some Major Projects were selected in response to external pressures and others were accelerated because of external pressures. One of the MLDP-era Major Projects, for instance, focused on “large aircraft” development; PRC sources attribute that project to Israel’s 2000 decision to terminate cooperation with China on early warning aircraft (Shanghai Commission, 2018). Another Major Project – the Core Electronic Devices, High-End General-Purpose Chips, and Basic Software Products Major Project – sought to localize chips, software, and electronic devices.[3] PRC sources suggest that the Major Project’s 2008 launch was accelerated by that year’s “Microsoft black screen incident,” Microsoft’s forced black screen warnings to users of

[1] This State Council affiliated bureaucratic organ would see multiple evolutions in the time since its founding in 2003: It was reorganized as the National Leading Group for Science and Technology in 2018; in 2023, its primary functions, including “studying and reviewing national science and technology development strategies and plans, major science and technology tasks, and coordinating cross-departmental science and technology matters,” were transferred to the Central Science and Technology Commission.

[2] Or, at least, the civilian Major Projects. The seven military Major Projects appear to have been assigned to the General Armaments Department of the People’s Liberation Army.

[3] The Major Project is often referred to as “Special Project 01,” because it was first on the MLDP’s list of Major Projects.

pirated Windows and Office (Science Times, 2008). The PRC viewed this as an information security threat – and, through the Major Project, prioritized development of an independent Linux operating system and basic office software.

Importantly, the Major Projects – with them the PRC's national planning system as mapped in this example – drove military as well as civilian capability development. One of the three classified Major Projects, for example, focused on hypersonic vehicle technology. The project incubated PRC hypersonic capabilities – including the DF-ZF hypersonic glide missile and Dongfeng-17 medium-range ballistic missile – that, when demonstrated, took the United States by surprise (Science and Technology Daily, 2018).

Finally, while the Major Projects outlined in the MLDP were slated to operate only through 2020, the Major Project program remains active. In 2016, at the start of the 13th Five-Year Plan period, the PRC introduced a new generation of Major Projects, the Innovation 2030 Major Projects. Some of those are obvious successors to the MLDP era set. For instance, where the C919 and Y-20 developed under the Large Aircraft Major Project relied on foreign engines, the Innovation 2030 Major Projects include one dedicated to localizing engine technology, the Aeroengine and Gas Turbine Major Project. Others are new and respond to emergent technological trends. The New Generation Artificial Intelligence Major Project constitutes an obvious example. Many of the Innovation 2030 Major Projects have military relevance. All continue to reflect some of the PRC's highest-level, most capital-intensive research, development, and industrialization efforts.

Monitoring the Planning System to Monitor the PRC

The PRC's planning system is responsible for, at the highest level, defining the country's strategic vision, and, at a more granular level, obligating state funds to pursue that vision. Monitoring the planning system therefore enables monitoring, contextualization, and anticipation of China's strategic priorities, operational activities, and capability development. And doing so is critical for an adversary-informed defense acquisition process.

In other words, early identification of the priorities established in the planning system provides early warning of the capabilities Beijing is positioned to develop. Monitoring of the process through which those priorities are operationalized fuels contextualized, adversary-informed insight into the PRC's progress in developing those capabilities. And mapping of the entities involved (e.g., assigned to lead specific initiatives) permits targeting of linchpin adversarial actors. Such early warning, adversary-informed insight, and targeting can all support adversary-informed defense acquisition that accounts for PRC goals and trajectories before they are proven – as well as strengths and weaknesses that might not otherwise be known.

Again, the Major Projects offer a prime case. The PRC stated its highest-level, most forward-looking scientific and technological goals in 2006, when it established the 16 National Science and Technology Major Projects. Those projects made clear that the PRC would, between 2006 and 2020, allocate significant government resources toward and likely make significant strides in, among other fields, large aircraft development and hypersonic vehicle technology. Over the fifteen years that followed, the sequential Five-Year Plans for Science and Technology Development provided updates to the PRC's strategic-level goals. More tactically, the leading organizations for the Major Projects reflected the institutional structures of the relevant PRC S&T ecosystems – while implementation plans they published, lines of effort they funded, and success cases they identified illustrated more specific technical objectives, investments, and capabilities. The same remains true for the current generation of Major Projects.

Of course, the PRC does obfuscate some of the relevant information. For example, the hypersonic vehicle technology Major Project was not explicitly discussed in any public-facing PRC government plans. But details about it do exist in the open source. And other, military-relevant elements of the PRC planning system are not obfuscated the same way. By virtue of the PRC's national-level strategy of military-civil fusion, most of the country's scientific, technological, and industrial initiatives, including those that are openly discussed and are not classified, are military-relevant. The Large Aircraft Major Project was responsible for developing the Y-20 transport aircraft. The Core Electronic Devices, High-End General-Purpose Chips, and Basic Software Products Major Project supported the PKS System, a PRC domestic alternative to the "Windows+Intel" system that has been used across the PRC military apparatus (New Times Securities, 2021).

United States understanding and monitoring of the PRC's planning system – and the capability development and investments it drives – should interface directly with the defense acquisition process. For example, early warning of PRC ambitions should be used to shape investments into responsive capabilities. to vet supply chains supporting acquisition priorities for exposure to Chinese dominance and influence upstream; and, to guarantee that requirements definition and analysis-of-alternatives processes receive threat intelligence inputs as they set the direction for major defense acquisition programs. Identification of entities involved in operationalizing China's ambitions should be used to ensure sufficient barriers against PRC bad actors in the acquisition process and, more broadly, across Federal procurement. Nor should this be just a defensive dynamic. Monitoring of PRC capability development should be used to ascertain weaknesses that can be targeted with the defense acquisition process and the integrated priority lists of operational defense acquirers, including the Combatant Commands, should be measured according to such a logic.

Understanding the Planning System to Shape the PRC

Understanding the PRC's planning system offers more than just insight into the adversary's goals, capabilities, and key entities. It also offers insight into the ways in which the PRC responds to external stimuli – including the types and timing of stimuli that generate responses, as well as the nature of those responses. With that insight, the United States has the potential not only to monitor but also, proactively, to shape the PRC system.

For all its institutionalization, the PRC's planning system is not rigid. Rather, it leaves room for flexibility and consistently responds to external stimuli. As already noted, both the slate of 2006 Major Projects and their timing were informed by international developments in the early 2000s that changed Beijing's perception of the geopolitical environment. Foreign countries (e.g., Israel) and companies (e.g., Microsoft) imposed restrictions on access to their technologies that exacerbated the PRC's concerns about international dependence, therefore amplified the country's emphasis on self-reliance, and in turn led it to accelerate its investments to that end.

The Innovation 2030 Major Projects, first established in 2016, saw an even more drastic systemic change, this one driven by external technological trends. The original set of Innovation 2030 Major Projects, listed in the 13th Five-Year Plan for Science and Technology Innovation ("十三五"国家科技创新规划), was composed of 15 publicly disclosed initiatives. But in 2017, the State Council added a sixteenth: the New Generation AI Major Project (aka Artificial Intelligence 2.0 Major Project). This late-addition Major Project appears formally to have been established via the New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan (新一代人工智能发展规划). And that plan constituted a response to emerging PRC diagnoses regarding artificial intelligence as a transformative technology – informed at least in part by Chinese Academy of Engineering research and pressure during the 2015 to 2017 period (China Net, 2017).

These cases indicate that the PRC planning system responds to perceived threats (e.g., technology restriction) and opportunities (e.g., emerging technologies with potentially disruptive capabilities). These cases also indicate that the timing of those stimuli may inform the PRC's response. At the most basic level, opportunities or threats identified in planning's research process or before that process begins – like concerns over Israel's provision of aerospace technology – can readily be incorporated into the process's outputs (e.g., converted into Major Projects). Opportunities or threats identified after the planning process ends, like Microsoft's "black screen," may be likely only to generate marginal changes (e.g., speed the implementation of relevant Major Projects). And opportunities or threats identified before plan finalization but after research phases (e.g., the emergence of AI as a disruptive technology) may be able to be integrated into the research pipeline and subsequent resourcing, but with a lag and therefore at greater cost. For example, CAE was able to initiate research on AI's transformative potential before the 13th Five-Year Plan was formalized in 2016. But the results were not incorporated into the Major Project system until after that plan was published.

Understanding these factors – the stimuli that the PRC's planning system responds to, how they interface with different steps of the process, and how their effects might vary at different points in the process – can all support development and deployment of a proactive, adversary informed defense acquisition process. Specific interventions from the United States, and its defense acquisition process, may be particularly efficacious at specific points in the Chinese planning process.

The process of applying this framing to defense acquisition could begin with a rubric that maps defensive and offensive actions onto different points in the Chinese planning system, namely "early," pre-capability points, when the Chinese planning process has formally identified areas in which to invest but has not yet scaled resourcing of them, and "late," post-capability points, when investments have been completed to field a new capability.

Defensive actions early in the PRC planning process, when new Chinese investment areas have been formalized and are being scaled, could focus on updating existing US capabilities proactively to defend against emerging PRC priorities. Doing so would allow the United States to be prepared when the PRC ultimately demonstrates its capabilities, and by extension to be more efficient in its investments and corresponding operational capability development. For example, if Beijing were to launch a program to develop a new anti-ship ballistic missile that would increase the PRC's ability to restrict US maneuver in the western Pacific, the United States might respond by leveraging a mix of procurement and operations and maintenance (O&M) funding and modifying existing programs of record to arm surface vessels with improved camouflage and concealment technology and capabilities.

	Defense	Offense
Early	Use O&M funding to update existing capabilities	Use R&D funding to put new PRC investments on the defensive
Late	Re-assert escalation dominance by substituting operational approaches	Demonstrate disruptive offensive capabilities

Offensive actions early in the PRC planning process could focus on R&D investment that forces the PRC to defend its new investments. For example, were Beijing to launch new programs focused on drone swarms, leading innovation forces within the Department of War, like DARPA and the Defense Innovation Unit, could launch programs to research and develop systems able offensively to target the networking hubs and coordinating mechanism required for those drone swarms. Actions like this – and signals of them – would force the PRC to expend additional resources defending its drone swarms, while also bolstering US prospective responses to them.

Defensive actions late in the PRC planning process, when capabilities have been developed, could orient around re-asserting escalation dominance by changing operational approaches. Take, for instance, PRC investments into controlling supply of a key resource, like rare earth elements. Once that capability is developed, the US might defensively respond by revealing the ability to substitute for that resource (e.g., motors that do not require rare earth permanent magnets). The substitute in its own right would help to protect the United States from the new PRC threat. By demonstrating it late, the United States would have encouraged the PRC to complete its investments in its now-less-threatening capability, and therefore to expend additional resources.

Finally, offensive actions late in the PRC planning process could feature demonstration of disruptive offensive capabilities that invalidate Chinese investments. In the same supply chain case, for example, the United States might unveil an electromagnetic pulse weapon able to target counter-value industrial base capabilities across the Chinese mainland – therefore placing at risk the basic premise, and foundation, of the new PRC capability.

This is a notional and generalized rubric. But, at a minimum, it demonstrates a theoretical model according to which an adversary-informed, proactive defense acquisition system could orient – offensively and defensively – to target the PRC planning system. At the same time, this abstracted rubric also underscores the need to incorporate threat intelligence earlier in, and in a recurring fashion throughout, the US capability development process.

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