

America's 'Great Retreat' is Well Underway

Description

by [Stephen Bryen](#)

via AsiaTimes

Sailors assigned to the amphibious assault ship USS Makin Island clear out of the way of a Marine Corps F-35B Lightning II in preparation for takeoff from the flight deck of the ship. Photo: US Marine Corps / Patrick Crosley

Why would the US Department of Justice drop five cases against Chinese researchers including [Dr Juan Tang](#)

, a cancer researcher who allegedly lied on her visa application after photos of her were found wearing a Chinese military uniform?

Part of the answer is that Tang's case was dropped to facilitate [Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman's high-level visit this week to China](#), where she was treated hostilely by her Chinese hosts.

The five cases are just part of a bigger picture which can best be termed as "The Great Retreat." In many areas, the US is lowering its profile and backing away from its commitments.

For example, the US has [pulled its only aircraft carrier, the USS Ronald Reagan, from the Pacific](#) ostensibly to cover the retreat from Afghanistan. But whether the Ronald Reagan carrier will return to Japan in the future isn't altogether clear.

As the need for an aircraft carrier while the US pulls out of landlocked Afghanistan is questionable, the result is that the US is leaving the Pacific devoid of carrier coverage, which appears to contravene the US policy of protecting its regional allies and partners in the region.

In Guam, the [US has moved its big bombers](#) including the B-1 and B-52 back to the continental United States (CONUS in Penatgonese) and is using the Guam base mostly as a forward depot where it can try and cycle in bombers on an as-needed basis. The real problem: Guam is increasingly threatened by Chinese missiles.



Military vehicles carrying YJ-18 anti-ship and land-attack cruise missiles drive past Tiananmen Square during the military parade to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, in Beijing, China. Photo: AFP via Sputnik / Anna Ratkoglio

Meanwhile, the [B-1 "Bone" strategic bombers](#), which have played an important tactical role in Afghanistan, are now mostly grounded with problems ranging from fuel delivery issues to failing aerostructures. Less than 10 B-1s are currently flyable.

There are only 21 B-2 stealth bombers in the entire US inventory, but most if not all of these would be on standby for a nuclear mission. This leaves the lumbering B-52 as the main US long-range bomber that can be used on conventional missions.

Unfortunately, the B-52 is an easy target and can only operate with standoff weapons, removing its main advantage which is the ability to deliver heavy bomb loads on targets.

The US has also [pulled its air defense systems](#), including the Patriot and THAAD from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates, making clear its displeasure with those countries and underscoring its effort to conciliate Iran.

Of course, the decision to leave Afghanistan was taken without adequate coordination with Afghan authorities. US troops and contractors left [Bagram Air Base](#) in the middle of the night unannounced, and never formally turned the base over to the Afghan army. The base was immediately looted.



A helmet among the destroyed trailer trucks and electronics sold for the price of iron at a bazaar outside Bagram Air Base in a district north of Kabul, Afghanistan, May 19, 2021. Photo: AFP via Anadolu Agency / Haroon Sabawoon

Along with Afghanistan, President Biden is [preparing to take US troops out of Iraq](#). Already the US Embassy in the Green Zone in Baghdad is subject to [regular rocket attacks](#).

The US has the [C-RAM gun system](#) in place, but its effectiveness against rockets is poor. It won't be long before the embassy will be indefensible.

Meanwhile, the US Defense Department has released information about yet [another war game apparently focused on the "battle for Taiwan."](#) But the Pentagon thinks that US forces in support of Taiwan would be "swiftly and thoroughly dominated."

The latest wargame only reaffirms results in earlier wargames run by Rand Corporation, the US Marines and a number of think tanks. But the difference is that now the Pentagon has come to the realization (if it hadn't known before) that its warfighting methods no longer can work in peer-to-peer or peer-to near-peer conflicts.

Making matters worse, US air defense systems remain a shambles and probably are ineffective in any war scenario.

The US relies on three main systems: tactically on [Patriot PAC 3](#), strategically on [AEGIS](#) (at sea and ground-based) and [THAAD](#). The fourth system, the [Ground Based Interceptor](#) (GBI) is at the moment a nearly dead letter, despite huge costs, because it [needs a new interceptor](#) missile.

And [Northcom assesses](#) that North Korea could overwhelm and knock out the GBI as early as 2025, if not sooner, and potentially attack the United States. GBI is based in Greely, Alaska and Vandenberg Air Force Base near Lompoc, California.



A THAAD interceptor is test-launched in Kodiak, Alaska, on July 11, 2017. Photo: Leah Garton / Missile Defense Agency / Handout

In the [latest test of AEGIS](#) against two short/intermediate-range ballistic missile targets, only one of the targets was hit. That test, on July 24, 2021, took place off of Hawaii.

The AEGIS system was installed on the [USS Ralph Johnson](#) (DDG-114) and used the AEGIS interceptor missile, [SM-6 Dual II](#). The ship fired four missiles against two targets and hit only one.

This was an improvement over a previous test [last May](#) where a single target was not intercepted. AEGIS is regarded as perhaps the best US system for short and intermediate-range terminal ballistic missile defense and is the backbone of [Japan's sea-based interceptors](#).

In missile defense, it is generally understood that firing two missiles at a target should yield a 95% probability of a hit. The latest AEGIS test only achieved 50%.

Concern over missile defenses is matched by the increasing vulnerability of US weapons platforms and bases. While the US has bases in Japan including on Okinawa, and further away in South Korea and Guam, all of them would be exposed to massive Chinese missile attacks.

In addition, US aircraft carriers, even if available, will have to locate hundreds, if not thousands, of miles from a war front such as Taiwan, rendering them less than useful for launching and supporting fighter aircraft. Most US carriers [do not support the F-35](#).

The latest wargame also suggests that the US could not maintain networked communications, meaning that they could be disrupted by the enemy.



An F-35B Lightning II set for take off aboard the amphibious assault ship USS Makin Island (LHD 8) in support of Northern Edge 2021. Photo: US Navy / Ethan Jaymes Morrow

A key US wartime advantage is the ability to mass firepower on high-value targets using networked systems to find the target, direct the nearest interceptor to the target, and knock it out. Networked communications is an important US force multiplier and key to US battle dominance.

Not included in the wargame released information is the distinct possibility that the Pentagon does not have high confidence in the usefulness or survivability of the semi-stealthy F-35.

The F-35 is mainly a tactical air superiority platform that carries only a limited number of bombs because it must carry them internally. It has somewhat limited range and it will have to potentially

compete in a conflict scenario with increasingly better Chinese aircraft (Su-35, J-20) equipped with [beyond visual range](#) (BVD) air-to-air missiles and [advanced AESA radars](#).

The Navy's surface ships are primarily useful for anti-air missions and for challenging China's surface ships. There is some progress in anti-ship missiles, especially the [Long Range Anti-Ship Missile](#) (LRASM) which can be used by aircraft including the F-18, B-1B and F-35 and on surface ships.

It has a range of 300 miles and is regarded as stealthy. Unlike the [Russian Tsirkon \(Zircon\) hypersonic missile](#), which flies at 5,000 mph or 8,047 kph and fits in existing ship launch tubes, the LRASM (when it is deployed) is subsonic.

The Russians successfully test-launched a Tsirkon missile from the frigate Admiral Gorshkov on July 19. The Tsirkon has a range of 1,000 kilometers (621 miles) and can't be detected on radar, according to the Russians.

Whether China will acquire the Russian missile or build their own is not known, but the Tsirkon significantly outperforms anything the US now has or will have in the next four or five years.

The Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Barry (DDG 52) transits the East China Sea. Photo: US Navy / Samuel Hardgrove

Meanwhile, the Biden administration's proposed defense budget (roughly \$716 billion) [is 4% less than the 2020 Trump defense budget](#) after galloping inflation is taken into account. The Biden administration

is maintaining the US Navy at [296 ships](#), down from the Trump administration goal of 316 ships by 2026.

The Navy will get only one new Arleigh Burke class guided-missile destroyer at a cost of \$2 billion, not two as the Navy had planned. The proposed defense budget also cuts older US Air Force jets from the inventory, including some of the A-10 fleet (42 to be retired from a fleet of 367), and retiring 47 F-16 C/Ds, 48 F-15 C/Ds, 14 KC-10 and 19 KC-35s.

The US Marines' expeditionary capability is also being terminated, [leaving the Marines as some sort of adjunct](#) to the US Navy. The Army's budget is also being cut back compared to the other services, but yet it [hopes to be able to overmatch potential opponents](#), mainly China, by 2035.

In essence, then, the current US posture is best defined as "The Great Retreat." The US is pulling in its military horns, at least for the time being, leaving partners and allies, especially in the Middle East and East Asia, exposed and uncertain.

Under the circumstances, many current US allies and partners may thus seek accommodation with China or in the Middle East aligned instead with Russia and Iran.