

# CHALLENGES FACING DOD IN STRATEGIC COMPETITION WITH CHINA

FEBRUARY 2022



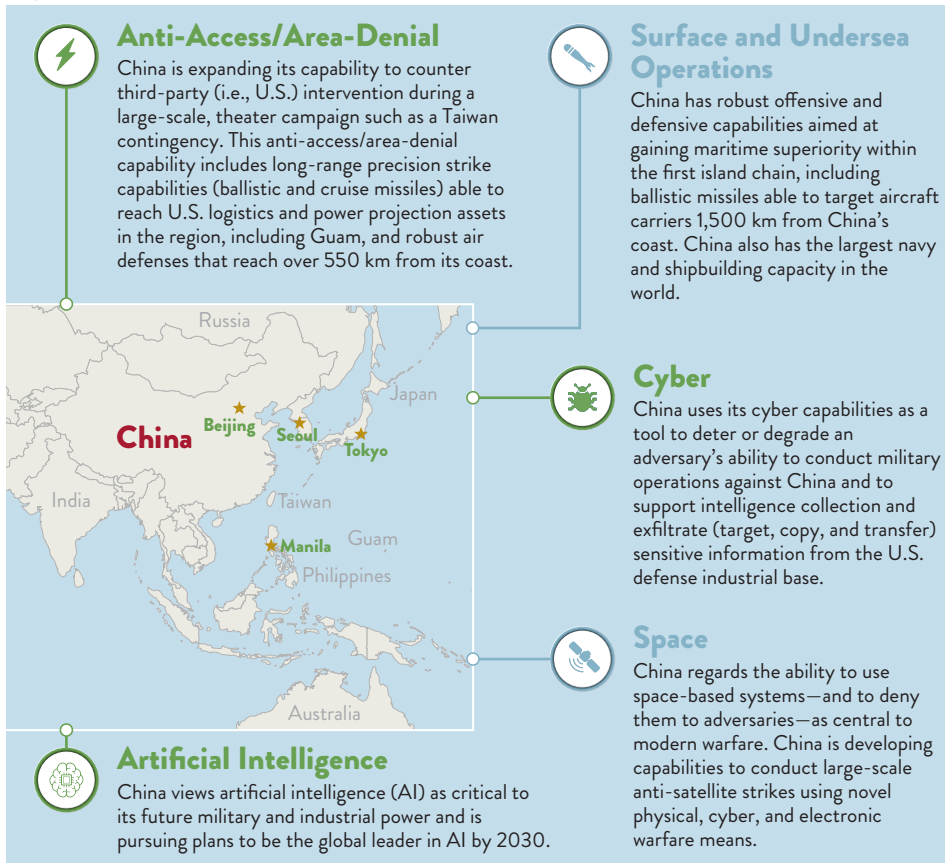
According to the 2021 *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, China is increasingly assertive and the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system.

From a defense perspective, China is a significant and long-term security threat and the pacing threat in most areas, according to the Secretary of Defense. However, the Department of Defense (DOD) has also highlighted weaknesses and challenges facing China. For example, the Defense Intelligence Agency reported that China, as a large developing country, still faces multiple complex security challenges including several regional territorial disputes.

## CHALLENGES TO U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY

China has greatly strengthened its military capabilities over the last 20 years and its stated goal is to have a “world-class” military by the end of 2049, according to DOD. Today, China has transformed what was an obsolete military into one that can challenge the U.S. military across the spectrum of conventional and unconventional capabilities. Below are examples of concerns highlighted by DOD and GAO.

**Figure 1: Selected Chinese Military Capabilities**



## GAO REVIEW OF KEY DOD ACTIONS

GAO has a large body of work that documents the steps DOD has taken as it refocuses on strategic competition and recommends ways the department can bolster national security. GAO has long reported on [China’s military modernization](#) to assist the Congress in decisions it faces regarding China. GAO has more recently reported that [China may challenge](#) U.S. access to air, space, cyberspace, and maritime domains.

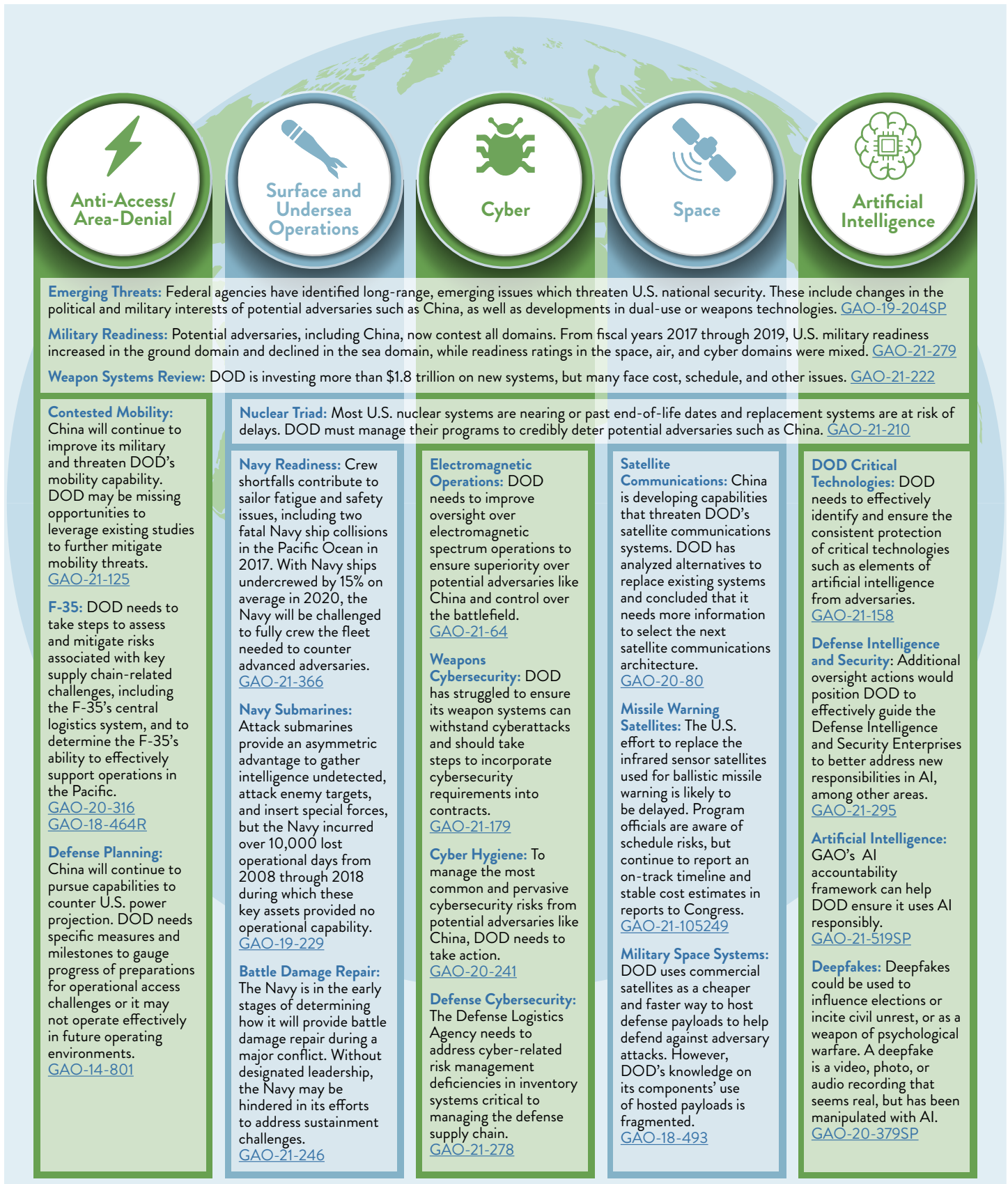
GAO has reviewed various DOD approaches and capabilities for countering these challenges. For example, the Navy is in the early stages of determining how it will provide [battle damage repair](#) during a great power conflict. Additionally, DOD has developed lists of [cyber techniques](#) that adversaries use most frequently and pose significant risk to the department, and identified practices to protect DOD networks and systems against these techniques. GAO has also reviewed DOD efforts to [reform its acquisitions](#) to develop and field new capabilities more quickly and DOD-sponsored studies on [contested mobility](#)—the ability to transport equipment and personnel in a contested operational environment. GAO has also reported on DOD’s efforts to develop advanced weapons systems such as [hypersonics](#).

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense information; Map Resources (map). | GAO-22-105448

## RELEVANT GAO WORK

GAO has published numerous unclassified and classified reports that can help inform decision makers in Congress and DOD as they weigh options for how to best respond to the national security challenges posed by China. Figure 2 identifies a number of these unclassified reports and how they relate to five specific challenge areas DOD faces.






**Figure 2: Related Unclassified GAO Work**



## GAO RECOMMENDATIONS

Congress and DOD face many choices as they determine the strategic focus of long-term competition with China, and DOD has implemented many of GAO's recommendations that could help the department better prepare. However, as of February 2022, GAO has identified additional actions that may better position DOD to address the challenges with China that DOD has not yet implemented, including recommendations shown in figure 3.

**Figure 3: Select Recommendations Identified in GAO Work as of February 2022**

 <b>Anti-Access/ Area-Denial</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Develop a process for measuring how issues with the F-35's central logistics systems affect its mission capable rates. <a href="#">GAO-20-316</a></li><li>▶ Develop and implement a strategy for the re-design of the F-35's central logistics system. <a href="#">GAO-20-316</a></li><li>▶ Evaluate the results of contested mobility studies and track the implementation of recommendations. <a href="#">GAO-21-125</a></li></ul>
 <b>Surface and Undersea Operations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Periodically assess and update ship vulnerability models to inform battle damage repair planning efforts. <a href="#">GAO-21-246</a></li><li>▶ Use collected data on sailor fatigue to identify, monitor, and evaluate factors that contribute to fatigue. <a href="#">GAO-21-366</a></li><li>▶ Address the main factors contributing to maintenance delays and improve the timely completion of ship maintenance. <a href="#">GAO-20-588</a></li></ul>
 <b>Cyber</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Develop plans that comprehensively assess and identify specific Cyber Mission Force training requirements. <a href="#">GAO-19-362</a></li><li>▶ Ensure that cyber hygiene initiatives are fully implemented and that completion of relevant tasks is monitored to protect the DOD network from key cyberattack techniques. <a href="#">GAO-20-241</a></li><li>▶ Update Defense Logistics Agency standard operating procedures to require program offices to develop a system-specific monitoring strategy consistent with DOD's risk management framework. <a href="#">GAO-21-278</a></li></ul>
 <b>Space</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Update DOD's dated narrowband satellite communication requirements to ensure warfighters have needed communications tools in the future. <a href="#">GAO-21-105283</a></li><li>▶ Develop a plan to guide implementation of DOD's recommendations for future wideband satellite systems. <a href="#">GAO-20-80</a></li><li>▶ Finalize a comprehensive acquisitions strategy for space command and control systems. <a href="#">GAO-20-146</a></li></ul>
 <b>Artificial Intelligence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Identify, develop, and review metrics to assess the implementation and sufficiency of protection measures for critical technologies, including AI. <a href="#">GAO-21-158</a></li><li>▶ Develop tools to enhance accountability for intelligence and security mission areas and use these tools to conduct oversight. <a href="#">GAO-21-295</a></li></ul>

Source: GAO. | GAO-22-105448

## CONCLUSIONS

China's growing economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power—and a willingness to exercise it—pose a significant long-term challenge to the United States.

Amidst this backdrop, successful preparation for strategic competition with China will depend on continuing efforts to increase U.S. combat credibility and enhance conventional deterrence that can help prevent conflict, protect U.S. interests, and assure allies. Going forward, key policy considerations include ensuring that DOD is prepared to maintain supply chains, gather intelligence, and responsibly leverage emerging space, cyber, and AI technologies in response to potential threats.

DOD has begun to identify new ways to deploy its existing capabilities and identify new ones, and China is facing its own major challenges. The Defense Intelligence Agency reported that China is vulnerable to international and regional turmoil, terrorism, piracy, serious natural disasters, and epidemics. In addition, DOD has reported that China's military continues to have major gaps and shortcomings and has not fought a war with its current suite of capabilities. For the U.S. to be poised for success in facing threats from China, DOD will need to take timely actions and congressional oversight will be important as these efforts proceed.

## ABOUT GAO

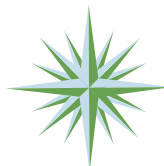
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This document is based on unclassified GAO audit products and may be updated as appropriate. GAO has also produced sensitive and classified products related to these topics.

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