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Assuring Access in Key Strategic Regions

Toward a Long-Term Strategy

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Summary

Since the end of the Cold War, agreement within the defense community that the United States must be able to project power abroad quickly and effectively has been increasing. From the 1990 Base Force's emphasis on forward presence and crisis response to the 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review's strategic tenets of "shape and respond," U.S. defense planning has envisioned the reinforcement of in-theater forces.[1] The most recent (September 2001) Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) gave increased emphasis to deployability, operations in anti-access environments, and protecting bases of operation at home and abroad.[2]

Even as the Army transforms its forces to be more deployable, however, U.S. adversaries continue to develop asymmetric strategies and means, among which we would include efforts to complicate U.S. access to a theater of operation—adversary anti-access strategies. Adversary anti-access strategies can be defined in a very broad way; in our conception, these are strategies

[1] Following publication of the 1997 QDR, the December 1997 report of the National Defense Panel identified access issues as an area of key concern. See National Defense Panel, *Transforming Defense: National Security in the 21st Century*, Washington, D.C., December 1997.

[2] The 2001 QDR states that "projecting and sustaining U.S. forces in distant anti-access or area-denial environments and defeating anti-access and area-denial threats" is one of the Department of Defense's (DoD's) six operational goals driving transformation of the force.

- "whose aim is to deter, prevent, degrade, disrupt, delay, or otherwise complicate the mobilization, deployment, entry, and buildup of U.S. forces for military operations in a theater;
- "that can be executed during peacetime, in crisis, and in conflict and that can involve strategic, operational, and/or tactical methods (strategic methods can include military, diplomatic, political, economic, psychological, and other measures whose effects transform the nature of the conflict; operational methods can include actions that force the United States to operate from a greater than preferred range; and tactical methods can include conventional and unconventional capabilities that can hinder deployment and onward movement);
- "that may involve actions against continental U.S. (CONUS), en-route, or in-theater targets;
- "that may be integrated with broader national strategies to include actions that are executed during peacetime, crisis, and conflict; and
- "that may involve actions taken either by an adversary or by its proxies.

In the context of the Army's ongoing transformation efforts, it is difficult in the abstract to determine the level of threat posed by the growing repertoire of anti-access tools that potential adversaries may have available in the near- and longer-term future. This report aims to make the anti-access threat more tangible by assessing the efficacy of anti-access strategies—and U.S. and coalition counters—in a small but diverse set of conflict scenarios.

Defining the Access Game

In exploring these scenarios, the study team made efforts to examine how the character of the competition between the United States and a potential adversary might evolve in peacetime, crisis, and war and what this might imply for U.S. strategy and force development. This work gave rise to a construct we called "the access game," in which

the United States and a potential regional adversary would, through trial and error, seek to shape the future access outlook for the United States.

The access game envisions that during peacetime the adversary will seek to deter both U.S. involvement in the region and regional cooperation with the United States. It also foresees adversary efforts to shape the U.S. access environment by coercing U.S. regional partners and allies to withhold access. As the situation moves from peacetime to crisis and war, the adversary may use a variety of political, economic, and military means to, first, prevent the United States from gaining access and, failing that, to delay or degrade the buildup and onward movement of U.S. forces.

Meanwhile, in peacetime, the United States will seek to assure partners and allies in handling internal and external threats to their security while deterring the adversary, and preempting and countering its peacetime maneuvering to restrict or otherwise shape the U.S. access outlook. As the situation moves to crisis and war, the U.S. aim will shift to mitigating or overcoming adversary actions to prevent, delay, or degrade the buildup of U.S. forces. For each of the scenarios the study team examined in seminar gaming, we considered the nature of the peacetime, crisis, and wartime actions that might be taken by the United States and its putative adversary and what key challenges and opportunities might present themselves.

Findings

Findings from Scenario Gaming

Our consideration of the access game in the context of the scenarios led us to conclude that, while adversary anti-access strategies are not the only strategies available and others, such as strategies of annihilation and attrition, also need to be considered, we believe that the anti-access threat is a serious and growing one. To reduce U.S. vulnerability to adversary anti-access strategies, the Army and DoD should pursue a range of options that would improve the access-enhancing characteristics of U.S. forces. These options include

- further diversifying the U.S. portfolio of prospective bases and mobility capabilities while reducing their requirements for mature infrastructure;
- improving the self-deployability of some forces to underwrite new deployment concepts and warfighting concepts; and
- ensuring capabilities for rapidly assaulting, seizing, and improving bases to make them suitable for the conduct of operations.

The conflict scenarios used in the study were designed with the aim of illuminating anti-access strategies and threats in peacetime, crisis, and war in four geographic areas of responsibility—European, Pacific, Central, and Southern Command. The scenarios featured adversaries at the high end of the capability scale in each region—i.e., those who would be expected to have recourse to the most potent and diverse portfolio of anti-access strategies and capabilities. Occasionally, the scenarios sacrificed detail in areas that seemed less relevant to access issues to better illuminate the character of potential access challenges.

We explored anti-access in a Southwest Asia scenario in which Iraq was assumed to be months away from acquiring a nuclear weapon. We also examined an East Asia scenario in which the People's Republic of China sought to resolve the issue of Taiwan's status through military means. We also analyzed a European scenario in which Russia undertook an attack on the Baltic states under the guise of protecting Russian minorities. Finally, we considered in somewhat less detail a range of less-than-war operations in Central and South America.

While our assessments of these scenarios led to a reasonably sanguine view of U.S. ability to prevail in each, a number of threats were cause for concern. These will be discussed next.

Adversary Actions Taken for Strategic Political or Psychological Impact Are Likely to Prove Most Successful. Our principal findings from the scenario analyses were as follows:

- Because their weapon systems are likely to lack range, accuracy, and payload during the 2003–2012 period we examined, adversaries are likely to have more incentives to use anti-access military capabilities against regional leadership, population, and high-profile soft military targets rather than attempting to destroy a whole set of bases or other anti-access targets. Moreover, nonmilitary means (cooptation, coercion, subversion, information operations, and psychological operations) may in fact prove to be more effective than military means in achieving anti-access objectives.
- For the same reason, attacks on bases and other infrastructure are more likely to prove successful for their psychological value—raising the costs of a military action in the hope of getting policymakers to reconsider—than the military significance of what they can reliably destroy.
- Control of chokepoints, while likely to be short-lived, can have important operational impacts on the role of land forces and on campaign outcomes and measures of effectiveness.
- Most adversaries presently lack strategic reach except through special operations forces or terrorist proxies and therefore appear to have limited opportunities to conduct anti-access attacks outside of their immediate theater of operation. Nevertheless, important "wild cards" exist, such as longer-range ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads, that should not be entirely ruled out.
- Technological trends are such that anti-access capabilities could substantially improve beyond the 2012 horizon we examined. The United States needs to anticipate these trends and begin to take measures now that would prevent potential adversaries from achieving any new, decisive anti-access capabilities. The proliferation of nuclear weapons, highly accurate ballistic and cruise missiles, or advanced SAMs would be particularly worrisome.

Our analysis of these scenarios suggested that greater concern is warranted for actions that might be taken for strategic political or

psychological impact than for those that are strictly military in nature. In particular, adversaries seemed to have a wide variety of nonmilitary carrots and sticks that they might employ to complicate or restrict the U.S. access outlook in a region, and in many ways these were more worrisome than the military methods. In several of the scenarios, the study team saw great potential for psychological operations and propaganda as a tool for imposing costs on regional partners and allies for their cooperation with the United States. This was especially acute in the Southwest Asia scenario, where Iraq cynically sought to link its own situation to the Palestinian issue in the minds of regional Arab and Muslim populations and to erode support for the United States by highlighting its continued support for Israel. It also played in the Baltics scenario, where Russia's claims that it was acting defensively against an expanding NATO found fertile soil among German Greens and peace groups.

The Threats Likely to Be Faced by U.S. Land Forces Through 2012 Should Be Relatively Manageable, but Could Cause Delays. Numerous instances occurred in which adversaries' military anti-access capabilities had the operational consequence of forcing the United States to operate, at least initially, from greater distance. However, in none of these games could adversaries actually deny the United States access, or sufficiently delay or degrade access to prevent U.S. forces from successfully accomplishing their missions. Thus, the scenario gaming generally seemed to suggest that nonnuclear military anti-access threats should be pretty manageable out to 2012, even as the study team broadly recognized that these threats could become far more potent after 2012. Nuclear threats remained an important wild card in our scenario gaming in the sense that we believed that in most cases use of nuclear weapons would be deterred, but actual use could either destroy needed bases or potentially deter policymakers from continuing with a military operation.

As just described, the scenario gaming had suggested a reasonably sanguine view of the anti-access problem. Accordingly, the study team analyzed another case in which most would expect, a priori, that anti-access strategies should have some sort of impact on campaign

outcomes—Iranian closure of the Strait of Hormuz, the anti-access threat par excellence.

Analysis of the Iran scenario in fact provided compelling evidence that under some conditions—in this case, where a committed adversary was in the geographically advantageous position of controlling a key chokepoint—anti-access strategies can have substantial impacts. More specifically, this modeling suggested that as the delays in the arrival of land forces increased as a result of closure of the strait, campaign outcomes deteriorated, even to the point where strategically important facilities might be lost. Thus, the campaign modeling provided an existence proof for the proposition that the success of campaigns could, under some limiting conditions, pivot on the question of timely access. The modeling also showed that several weeks with the loss of the strait could mean that U.S. land forces might play only a very limited role in blunting the offensive.

The U.S. Army and the Joint Community Need to Consider a Wider Range of Anti-Access Scenarios. Taken together, the analysis of these conflict scenarios suggested that the anti-access threat is a heterogeneous one that varies by adversary, the adversary's political effectiveness in regional political and security affairs, military capability levels, geography, and a number of other factors. It also suggests that the overall potency of the *military* anti-access threat may hinge on the geographic circumstance of the adversary, especially its proximity to and ability to threaten or control chokepoints, sea lines of communication, and corridors for ingressing aircraft. Absent a favorable combination of such circumstances, the impact of adversaries' anti-access strategies generally would be expected to be relatively modest.

This differentiated view of the anti-access threat suggests to us that the Army and joint community need to consider the anti-access issue in greater detail in the context of a wide range of scenarios. Additional campaign modeling and analysis of the anti-access options available to adversaries are needed, both for the standard planning scenarios used for force planning and for regional commanders' contingency and operational plans. As in so many cases of analysis, the details really do matter.

Toward an Access Strategy

These results, coupled with the earlier efforts on the access game begun in the early phases of the study, suggested a general Army and joint strategy for assuring access, with peacetime, crisis, and wartime elements.

In this strategy, during peacetime, the United States should undertake activities that can reassure partners and allies and deter adversaries. Execution of the theater security cooperation plan and Army international activities (AIA), including exercises, military training, military-to-military contacts, and other activities can further this. So too can the sale of systems that can, as in the case of layered theater air and missile defenses, reduce the threat of coercion in crisis and war or increase the interoperability of U.S. and friendly forces in specific areas that may redound favorably on forced entry and force protection.

But the United States also should develop new options that can expand the portfolio of potential bases and infrastructure that might be used in a military operation. A range of complementary means is available to accomplish this.

First, access options can be improved by increasing the number of possible bases and other infrastructure that might be available. This can be accomplished in part through negotiations aimed at providing access to additional bases or to allow prepositioning. In some cases, partners and allies might build new facilities or improve existing ones, with many possible cost-sharing arrangements and other means of giving incentives for such efforts. Finally, investment in sea-based prepositioning or sea bases might improve the access outlook.

Second, the flexibility of mobility might be improved so that mobility assets simply are capable of operating in less developed environments. To the extent that the mobility force's current reliance on mature infrastructure can be reduced and a "go anywhere" mobility force can be created, the access outlook will greatly improve. For example, a mix of shallow-draft sealift, lighterage, and organic docking capabilities could reduce the reliance of the sealift force on deep-water ports and wide berths. Development of a C-17/C-130 trans-

shipment concept of operations might similarly improve the access outlook.

Third, the deployability of forces might be improved to make them more expeditionary, such that their basing, sustainment, and lift requirements can be reduced. By improving the deployability of air and theater missile defenses, for example, it will be easier to assure partners and allies who are facing ballistic missile threats and to move missile defenses in more quickly. By improving the deployability of long-range fires—and developing concepts of operation for their use as an alternative to ground maneuver forces—land forces might be able to play an earlier and more important role in halting an attacking enemy's advance. The cost-effectiveness of such capabilities would need to be compared with sea-based and aviation alternatives. Finally, improving the self-deployability of some forces, such as attack helicopters, may facilitate both deployment directly into the combat zone and dispersed operations and thereby improve their access-enhancing characteristics.

Fourth, Detection, Warning, and Force Protection Measures at Key Bases Can Be Improved. By improving the ability to detect and warn of conventional and unconventional attacks and improving force protection and other defensive measures, the impacts of many attacks might be mitigated.

In crisis and war, the United States will need to deploy military forces and defend both deploying forces and the infrastructure they need. In many cases, the leadership and populations of the host nations also will need to be defended. In some cases, U.S. forces may need to improve, seize, or build access: *improving* existing inadequate infrastructure, forcibly *seizing* the needed infrastructure, or *building* new infrastructure. Finally, to ensure continued access, U.S. forces will need to protect forces and bases of operation.

Thus, any long-term access strategy for the Army and DoD will involve placing bets across a wide range of activities, while remaining alert to, and adapting to, the unexpected.