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Entering the Dragon's Lair

Chinese Antiaccess Strategies and Their Implications
for the United States

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Summary

Since the end of the Cold War, U.S. strategists have become increasingly concerned with the possibility that, in the event of a conflict with the United States, an adversary might adopt and attempt to execute an “antiaccess” strategy intended to interfere with the U.S. military’s ability to deploy to or operate within overseas theaters of operation. This concern stems from two features of the post–Cold War world. First is that, with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, no country fields military forces comparable in both quantity and quality to those of the United States, and thus there is little likelihood that the U.S. military will be defeated in a conventional force-on-force engagement on the battlefield. The principal threat to defeat U.S. military forces, therefore, is through the use of an asymmetric approach, such as an antiaccess strategy.

The chances of success of an antiaccess strategy are increased by the second feature of the post–Cold War world: The absence of a single dominant adversary makes it impossible to predict where U.S. military forces will next be needed and, thus, makes it likely that the United States will have relatively few forward-deployed forces in the vicinity of a conflict about to erupt.

For potential opponents of the United States, the motives for adopting an antiaccess strategy are compelling. These countries must plan to face an adversary that enjoys tremendous military and technological superiority, and they undoubtedly recognize that, as long as the U.S. military can arrive in force and on time, it will almost certainly prevail. Thus, they may seek to impede the deployment of U.S. forces

and restrict or disrupt the U.S. military's ability to operate within a theater far from U.S. territory. They may also calculate that, by mounting a credible threat to do so, they will be able to deter the United States from intervening in the first place, or at least limit the scale and scope of that intervention.

This monograph describes the types of antiaccess measures one particular country—China—might employ in a future conflict with the United States, how these measures might affect U.S. military operations in the event of a conflict between the United States and China, and possible ways the United States can reduce the effects of these measures. For purposes of this discussion, an *antiaccess* measure is considered to be any action by an opponent that has the effect of slowing the deployment of friendly forces into a theater, preventing them from operating from certain locations within that theater, or causing them to operate from distances farther from the locus of conflict than they would normally prefer. Potential Chinese actions that could affect U.S. access to areas around China were identified through the analysis of Chinese military doctrinal writings. These included books on military doctrine, articles from Chinese military journals, reports from Chinese military newspapers, and recent Western studies of Chinese strategic thinking. The potential effects of Chinese antiaccess measures were assessed by examining the capability of the Chinese military to actually implement these measures and by analyzing how such implementation would affect U.S. military operations. Possible U.S. measures to reduce the effects of these measures were identified by consulting with RAND Corporation and external experts on the associated areas of military operations.

The possibility that the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) might employ antiaccess measures in a conflict with the United States is the product of the PLA's view of the nature of modern war, its awareness of China's military weaknesses, and its recognition of U.S. military superiority. Because of the rise of important political and economic centers in China's coastal regions, China's military strategy has shifted from defending the continent to defending areas on China's periphery and maritime force projection. Instead of fighting a "People's War" involving human-wave attacks, the PLA is now preparing to fight

a “local war under high-technology conditions.” PLA strategists expect such conflicts to be characterized by limited political objectives and the use of information technology and by being highly mobile, lethal, and resource intensive. (See pp. 18–23.)

Chinese writers are keenly aware that the PLA, despite the considerable progress it has made in recent years, still lags behind the U.S. military in terms of technology, doctrine, training, and experience and that any conflict against the U.S. military will pose extreme challenges. To defeat a technologically superior enemy, such as the United States, the PLA has focused on devising strategies that maximize China’s relative strengths and that create opportunities to exploit adversary weaknesses. Consequently, the PLA would not seek to confront the U.S. military in a force-on-force battle but instead would seek to strike decisively at U.S. vulnerabilities. In addition, the PLA views seizing the initiative at the outset of a conflict as imperative to defeating a technologically superior opponent. As a result, Chinese writings emphasize “gaining mastery by striking first,” possibly through surprise attack or preemption. This suggests that Chinese leaders might consider preemptively attacking U.S. forces as they are deploying to a region in what U.S. policymakers intend as an action to *deter* a conflict. (See pp. 23–44.)

PLA writings have identified several perceived strategic U.S. vulnerabilities. First is the possibility that U.S. forces could be involved in two major contingency operations simultaneously. PLA writers have observed that even a relatively limited engagement, like the 1999 conflict with Serbia over Kosovo, requires significant U.S. forces and that timing a military operation for when the United States was already engaged could mean that the United States would not have enough forces available to respond to China’s actions. In addition, some Chinese strategists calculate that the perceived U.S. aversion to casualties might be exploited by delivering a sudden blow aimed at causing a large number of U.S. military casualties, sowing doubt and discontent among the U.S. population, and potentially forcing the withdrawal of U.S. forces. Most significantly for this study, some Chinese analysts have suggested that the dependence of the United States on potentially unreliable friends and allies for access to forward bases and support

presents opportunities for China to pressure these countries to limit or deny the United States use of these facilities. (See pp. 44–50.)

Although the Chinese military doctrinal writings we examined for this study do not explicitly discuss antiaccess as a separate and distinct strategy, they do suggest that Chinese doctrine for defeating a militarily superior adversary, such as the United States, includes a number of tactics that are clearly antiaccess in intention or effect. The PLA has identified the U.S. military's reliance on information systems as a significant vulnerability that, if successfully exploited, could paralyze or degrade U.S. forces to such an extent that victory could be achieved. In particular, PLA analysts believe that attacks against information systems can delay the deployment of U.S. military forces by disrupting communications or denying the U.S. military access to information on enemy whereabouts. PLA analysts note that information warfare can employ either "soft-kill" and "hard-kill" methods. Soft-kill methods include computer network attacks and electronic jamming, while possible hard-kill methods include directed energy weapons, explosives, and kinetic energy attacks. Targets could include computer systems based in the United States or abroad, command and control nodes, and space-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and communications assets. (See pp. 51–60.)

Noting the great distances that U.S. forces would need to travel in a conflict with China, attacks against logistic systems are also discussed. The goals of these attacks would be to delay the deployment of additional U.S. forces to the region and to render existing forces in the region less effective or more vulnerable by preventing timely supplies of the materiel needed for warfighting. Attacks against logistic systems described in PLA writings include blockades, attacking supply depots, and striking at air or sea supply missions. (See pp. 60–62.)

PLA writings also discuss attacks against air bases and ports. Such attacks would prevent or disrupt the inflow of personnel and supplies, as well as the basing of air and naval assets. PLA analysts state that attacking these targets is the most efficient way to gain air or sea superiority, although the difficulty of achieving success is not understated. While no source specifically indicated which U.S. bases might be attacked, the importance that bases in the western Pacific would

have for U.S. military operations in a conflict with China suggests that they may be key targets for PLA planners. (See pp. 62–71.)

Similarly, the importance of naval aviation to U.S. operations is of great concern to the PLA. Chinese sources describe the disproportionate role aircraft carriers sometimes play in conflict but also make clear their belief that aircraft carriers can be defeated. Massed attacks using air- and sea-launched cruise missiles can be used to overwhelm an aircraft carrier's defenses, and submarine-launched torpedoes can be used in ambush. Ballistic missiles are also discussed as possible anticarrier weapons. (See pp. 71–76.)

In addition to military strategies, China might also use diplomatic and political strategies to deny or limit the use of forward bases, most notably in Japan. While Chinese writings are not explicit in discussing strategies to limit or deny support to the United States, interviews with Chinese military officers suggest that deterrence and coercion, including threats of force, could be used against Japan. (See pp. 77–79.)

If China were to employ them as described above in a conflict with the United States, such measures could significantly disrupt U.S. military operations as a whole and specifically slow the deployment of U.S. forces to the theater of operations, prevent them from operating from certain locations within the theater of operations, and/or cause them to operate from distances greater than the U.S. military would otherwise prefer. In particular, Chinese antiaccess measures could severely degrade the ability of U.S. forces to operate from airfields near China; impede the deployment of forces to forward operating locations; degrade command and control, early warning, or supply capabilities for forward-deployed forces to the point that the theater commander would choose to withdraw them to more distant locations; and prevent naval surface assets from operating in waters near China. (See pp. 81–93.)

The net result of these effects could be that the United States would actually be defeated in a conflict with China—not in the sense that the U.S. military would be destroyed but in the sense that China would accomplish its military and political objectives while preventing the United States from accomplishing some or all of its political and military objectives. Moreover, even if Chinese antiaccess measures did

not result in the outright defeat of the United States, they would likely make it significantly more costly for the United States to operate in the region, and these costs could even rise to the point at which the United States was unwilling to pay them. Finally, even if Chinese antiaccess strategies did not result in the United States being unwilling or unable to defeat China, Chinese decisionmakers might convince themselves that they *would* cause the United States to be unwilling or unable to intervene successfully. If the decisionmakers then chose to take actions that would cause China to come into conflict with the United States, the result would be a costly and bloody war that would not otherwise have occurred. (See pp. 111–114.)

The United States can, however, take a number of actions to counter Chinese antiaccess threats, including the following:

- strengthening passive defenses at air bases
- deploying air and missile defense systems near critical facilities
- diversifying basing options for aircraft
- strengthening defenses against attacks by covert operatives (PLA special operations forces or covert agents under the control of China's nonmilitary intelligence services)
- reducing the vulnerability of naval forces to attack while in port
- reducing the vulnerability of command, control, communications, computer, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems
- taking steps both to deter and to mitigate the potential effects of high-altitude nuclear detonations
- bolstering allied capabilities. (See pp. 95–103.)

Moreover, given the concern that Chinese decisionmakers could convince themselves that antiaccess tactics might cause the United States to be unwilling or unable to intervene successfully in a conflict, these actions should be openly publicized to reduce the likelihood that China might embark on actions that would result in a confrontation with the United States.

A number of new or improved capabilities would further enhance U.S. ability to counter Chinese antiaccess strategies, including the following:

- improved ballistic missile defenses
- a capability to detect, identify, and attack mobile, time-sensitive targets
- improved land-based and advanced shipborne cruise missile defenses
- improved antisubmarine warfare capabilities
- improved minesweeping capabilities
- an antisatellite capability, as well as counters to antisatellite attack
- an extended-range air defense capability
- counters to long-range surface-to-air and air-to-air missiles
- early strategic and tactical warning capabilities. (See pp. 103–109.)

The potential Chinese antiaccess threat is significant, but there is much the United States can do to mitigate the threat. Some of these measures are relatively low cost, but others will require additional capabilities, and still others may require a fundamental reassessment of operational doctrine and plans.