



# Stretching and Exploiting Thresholds for High-Order War

## How Russia, China, and Iran Are Eroding American Influence Using Time-Tested Measures Short of War

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Since 9/11, Russia, China, and Iran have successfully exploited or stretched U.S. thresholds for high-order war in order to further their strategic ends and, in the process, undermine U.S. interests. Each of these countries has made expert use of some combination of measures short of war to enact its strategies. This report describes those measures and how these nation-states use them and explains why U.S. notions of thresholds might be outdated.



### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How have Russia, China, and Iran used measures short of war to exploit and stretch U.S. strategic thresholds for high-order conventional or nuclear conflict in eastern Europe, east Asia, and the Middle East?
- Does the United States apply the most effective theories and practices to defend against strategic threshold stretching and exploitation by competing nation-states?



### KEY FINDINGS

U.S. Interests Are Being Undermined by the Use of Timeless Measures Short of War

- Russia, China, and Iran have taken advantage of U.S. strategic vulnerabilities, misapplied theories, and misperceptions to increase their regional influence, often at the expense of U.S. strategic interests.
- Each of these three prospective competitors has expertly used the timeless application of measures short of war—including economic leverage, covert action, and limited military incursions—to achieve their strategic ends.
- Nothing can be done to eliminate the threat that measures short of war pose.
- Instead, addressing their use requires development and maintenance of an effective U.S. grand strategy that seamlessly incorporates measures short of war into a long-term, globally integrated plan.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

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- If the United States is to preclude further erosion of its global influence by nation-state competitors, it will have to address the problems of threshold exploitation and stretching. Policymakers and the military services should consider ways to better identify, forestall, and counteract the use of measures short of war against U.S. and allied interests.
- It must recognize that neither linear threshold paradigms nor revolutionary terms can fully explain such events as Russia's involvement in Crimea or Iran's relationship with Iraq.