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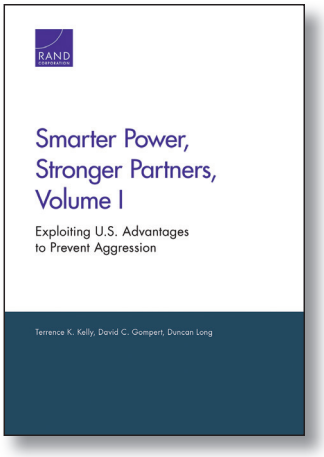

Smarter Power, Stronger Partners, Volume I

Exploiting U.S. Advantages to Prevent Aggression

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The proliferation of anti-access and area denial capabilities threatens to undermine the viability of offensive force projection. Thus, certainty that the United States could decisively defeat any state in all circumstances could be eroding. This research examined trends in military capabilities among potential U.S. adversaries and proposes an alternative way for the United States and its allies to secure their interests.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Are the trends that seem to favor A2AD over force projection likely to persist? If so, why?
- How does A2AD "compete" with force projection operationally, geographically, economically, and technologically?
- Are there alternative strategies that would help the United States defend its interests at less cost and risk? If so, what?
- How should one characterize the threat of international aggression under the protection of A2AD, and what capabilities do U.S. and allied forces need to counter this sort of aggression?

KEY FINDINGS

The United States Will Face Heightened Costs and Risks in Using Offensive Military Force in Critical and Contested Regions by 2025

- This effect is most pronounced in the case of China and the western Pacific. Russia will also enhance its A2AD capabilities to check the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's response. Iran is and will remain a distant third in the ability to oppose projected forces, but its ability to strike soft but important targets in and around the Persian Gulf in reaction to U.S. threats will improve.

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If These Trends Continue, There Is a Growing Danger That Adversaries Will Use A2AD as a Shield Behind Which They Can Commit Aggression

- In the China and Russia cases especially, A2AD capabilities could delay and degrade intervening U.S. ground, naval, and air forces.
- The United States' declining ability to bring forces to bear in these regions and against these countries could have deleterious geostrategic consequences.

As Important as the Ability to Bring Force to Bear Against Aggressors Is the Type of Force the United States Chooses and Prepares

- Current U.S. options to maintain the ability to conduct offensive military operations in these regions are risky, and the trends are not promising.

The Decline of the United States' Ability to Project Offensive Force Warrants Reconsideration of Why and How the United States Uses Its Sustainable Advantages to Support Its Interests, Responsibilities, and Values

- The United States could embrace a broader concept of power projection while working with allies to develop allied A2AD to prevent aggression, concentrating militarily on preventing enemies from projecting power under the shield of their A2AD.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The United States should embrace a multipronged strategy to exploit U.S. advantages to prevent aggression: (1) As the central pillar of the strategy, use Blue A2AD to significantly increase the costs and risks for would-be regional aggressors; (2) do so in cooperation with willing partners, some of which will need assistance to develop capabilities; and (3) use the power to coerce to deter regional intimidation and low-grade aggression by imposing costs on those that threaten U.S. and allied interests.
- To facilitate a transition to the proposed integrated strategy focused on preventing aggression and based on enduring U.S. advantages, the United States should make the following changes to American strategic thinking: (1) Acknowledge that deep trends beyond U.S. control favor A2AD over force projection, especially vis-à-vis China; (2) anticipate risks to U.S. interests in east Asia, eastern Europe, and the Middle East; (3) admit that these trends and risks imply reduced utility of offensive force projection; (4) reassess sources and forms of U.S. power and how they can be used; (5) regard the prevention of international aggression as the principal reason to use force, and recognize that meeting these challenges requires asking and answering questions that differ in important ways from those of the past 25 years; (6) count more on partners, and help develop their capabilities where needed; and (7) enhance and use strategically nonmilitary powers of coercion.

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