



# Operational Unpredictability and Deterrence

## Evaluating Options for Complicating Adversary Decisionmaking

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The 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy instructed the U.S. military to become more operationally unpredictable and suggested that doing so would help the United States deter attacks on U.S. partners. The authors of this report assess whether and how the U.S. military might utilize unpredictability in force employment, posture, and operations to deter adversaries and identify the possible risks of such approaches.



### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What is operational unpredictability?
- How can the United States increase operational unpredictability?
- How might greater U.S. operational unpredictability affect extended deterrence?



### KEY FINDINGS

- Increasing operational unpredictability is possible but likely costly, and may have negative side effects
- Increasing U.S. operational unpredictability is only one of many approaches to enhancing extended deterrence.
  - Limited information on Russian and Chinese intelligence, military planning, and decisionmaking processes makes it difficult to assess the potential effects of U.S. attempts to be operationally unpredictable.
  - The available information suggests that increasing Russian and Chinese perceptions of U.S. operational unpredictability may be possible, but also costly.
  - The most promising way to increase U.S. operational unpredictability is to publicize new U.S. capabilities and demonstrate that they give the United States multiple options for achieving its key objectives.

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- This approach may enhance extended deterrence if each U.S. way of fighting requires different and costly adversary counters.
- This approach may have negative side effects, such as reducing U.S. readiness and increasing China's and Russia's threat perceptions.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

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- Compare the use of operational unpredictability with alternative approaches to deterring U.S. adversaries.
- Develop a clear logic linking activities intended to enhance U.S. operational unpredictability to desired outcomes, and consider potential trade-offs.
- Review existing intelligence and consider increased collection on Russia's and China's intelligence, military planning, and decisionmaking processes.
- Continue initiatives on Army and U.S. Department of Defense flexibility and agility, which may also increase U.S. operational unpredictability.

