Chapter Title: Background

Book Title: The Army's Role in Overcoming Anti-Access and Area Denial Challenges
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Background

The U.S. military has become increasingly concerned about the challenges it could face in gaining access to an operational area. Given their global responsibilities, the U.S. armed forces must be prepared to deploy to a wide range of locations that include almost any type of terrain and that span the threat spectrum from very poorly armed opposition to peer-level foes. Research indicates that, in most situations, anti-access challenges require a joint solution, in which the capabilities of the different services can be brought to bear based on the threat and the mission. This study examined the nature of those future challenges and the Army's role as part of a larger joint or combined force.

During the Cold War, much of the U.S. military—particularly the Army and Air Force—could plan on operating in regions where considerable forces were already deployed. For example, in 1988, as the Cold War was about to end, the U.S. Army had 207,000 personnel organized into two corps and the equivalent of five divisions in West Germany. At the same time, the Air Force had over 90,000 personnel and some 600 combat aircraft in Europe.[1] The anti-access challenge in that theater was characterized primarily by the enemy attempting to interfere with the arrival of reinforcements for the considerable forces that were already in the operational area prior to the start of hostilities.

Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. military has become smaller and increasingly based inside the United States.[2] Starting with the 1991 Gulf War, the military has had to project power into regions where there has been little if any precrisis positioning of personnel and equipment. Potential adversaries have noticed this change in operational mode, and some are building capabilities to threaten the arrival and subsequent operations of U.S. forces as they attempt to deploy and initiate operations.

It is appropriate to start with a framework to ensure common understanding of the challenges that the Army, and the U.S. military in general, will likely face. It should be noted that while some of the terms are new, the U.S. military has confronted significant anti-access and area denial challenges in past operations.

Anti-access (A2) challenges prevent or degrade the ability to enter an operational area. These challenges can be geographic, military, or diplomatic.[3] For example, an operational area could be very far inland, a great distance from ports and usable airfields. That would be a geographic challenge. In other cases, diplomatic or political issues can pose an A2 challenge

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[1]   International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 1988–1989*, London, 1988, p. 27.

[2]   Even so, the number of locations to which the U.S. Army has been deployed since that time has been quite extensive.

[3]   U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps, *Gaining and Maintaining Access: An Army–Marine Corps Concept*, version 1.0, March 2012, p. 3.

when one or more nations in a region prohibit or limit the ability of the U.S. military to deploy forces into their sovereign territory or to fly through their airspace.

Area denial (AD) refers to threats to forces within the operational area. As they relate to U.S. ground forces (the Army and Marine Corps), AD threats are characterized by the opponent's ability to obstruct the actions of U.S. forces once they have deployed. Importantly, there are far more potential opponents that could pose significant AD challenges than there are opponents with major A2 capabilities. For example, when U.S. forces deployed to Afghanistan in 2001–2002, there was not a significant military A2 threat, although there were initially diplomatic challenges to overcome with regard to nearby countries, and the geography of the region required a long-distance deployment far from the sea and existing U.S. bases. However, once U.S. forces began operating in Afghanistan, they faced numerous and, at times, severe AD threats, such as the increasingly common use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) that caused casualties and imposed constraints on the mobility of U.S. and coalition forces.

The types of anti-access/area denial (A2AD) threats that the U.S. military could encounter in future operations will vary considerably. At the *low end* of the conflict spectrum, there could be guerrilla-type forces, like the Taliban in Afghanistan, with very limited A2 capabilities and a small number of modern weapons. These forces could still pose a considerable AD challenge due to their ability to operate among the local population and employ irregular tactics to strike U.S. forces at times and places of their choosing.

In the *middle* of the spectrum are so-called "hybrid" opponents, which can employ irregular or guerrilla-type tactics but are reasonably well armed with modern weapons. Hybrid opponents can therefore simultaneously fight in a conventional manner. Examples include the irregular Viet Cong and regular North Vietnamese forces during the Vietnam War and, more recently, the Hezbollah forces that Israel fought in southern Lebanon in 2006.[4]

At the *high end* of the threat spectrum are the armed forces of nation-states that tend to employ conventional tactics and weapons. Even at this end of the spectrum, the level of A2AD capability can vary considerably. As with the hybrid threat, this challenge is not new to the U.S. military. In the case of World War II, Nazi Germany had a potent, long-range A2 capability in its submarine force (the U-boats) that threatened Allied shipping routes that carried troops and supplies across the Atlantic. Similarly, during the Cold War, a major mission of the Soviet Navy's submarines was to prepare to interdict the movement of U.S. reinforcements to Europe.

In many cases, the U.S. military will have to employ a system of joint capabilities to overcome A2AD challenges. This observation is based on both the insights gained in the scenarios that were examined as part of this research and an examination of how operations were actually conducted in the post–World War II era in which a range of air, land, and naval capabilities were required to gain and maintain access. In some situations, U.S. air and naval power will be the primary capabilities required (at least in the initial phases of an operation) to overcome significant A2 threats. In other situations, the role of ground forces will dominate or could come to do so as an operation progresses.

Chapter Two of this report examines the range of A2AD military threats that U.S. forces could confront today or in the foreseeable future, including the relationship of air, land, and naval forces in overcoming those threats. Chapter Three explores a selection of key threat

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[4]   Frank G. Hoffman, "Hybrid Warfare and Challenges," *Joint Force Quarterly*, No. 52, 1st Quarter, 2009.

capabilities in greater detail, with an emphasis on the joint implications of A2 challenges. Chapter Four profiles a joint approach to countering A2AD challenges, focusing specifically on the A2 challenges faced by the Air Force, the Navy, and the Army and options to reduce these threats. Chapter Five offers conclusions and highlights the primary findings presented in the report.