Countering Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD)

Just as China, Russia, and, to a lesser extent, Iran and other regional powers, have been developing an operational concept to deny access to their territory and nearby areas to the United States, so have the U.S. military and defense planning community been devoting considerable resources to countering so-called anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategies and capabilities for the past two decades. A2/AD emphasizes the coordinated use of long-range precision strike capabilities in conjunction with advanced Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities to strike U.S. or other power projection assets at sea, in the air, in space, in cyberspace, and on land. This integrated system of capabilities is designed to either destroy enemy power projection forces out right or prevent their ability to enter into or affect a particular geographic space. Because China has devoted such considerable resources to developing A2/AD capabilities, the ability of the U.S. military to operate in East Asia in the event of war with China has become severely compromised.

The U.S. military has considered a number of options for defeating an enemy with robust A2/AD capabilities. Some of the proposed operational concepts include: directly attacking and/or degrading enemy A2/AD capabilities; creating a counter A2/AD zone or bubble in which friendly forces could continue to operate with virtual impunity; and conducting a distant blockade.

One of the most robust operational concepts for directly engaging and destroying enemy A2/AD capabilities was the AirSea Battle concept developed by the U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force.¹ This concept called for destroying the various missile platforms, surface ships, submarines, and aircraft focused on access denial, along with a synchronized effort to disable and degrade enemy C4ISR capabilities that make these long-range precision strike systems effective over-the-horizon and at long ranges. Because this concept would take a considerable amount of time, especially against a near peer competitor like China, it places a premium on platform survivability and the other defensive capabilities necessary to continue to operate in East Asia prior to the complete destruction of Chinese A2/AD abilities. While the destruction of enemy A2/AD capabilities is most desirable, this operational concept is the most ambitious of those currently under consideration, and requires long-range conventional precision strike capabilities, stealthy air platforms, and the like capable of penetrating China’s robust integrated air defense system. Even locating some of the missile platforms on land or at sea would pose considerable challenges, as many of these launchers are mobile, heavily defended, or concealed by significant denial and deception efforts. Difficulties would be compounded by Chinese counterspace assets, which would be sure to degrade U.S. space-based C4ISR capabilities.

Creating a counter A2/AD zone likewise poses similar challenges but has the advantage of not having to significantly degrade or destroy Chinese A2/AD abilities before the bulk of U.S. forces could begin to operate in East Asia. This operational concept would create a similar, if smaller, maritime denial zone off the coast of China, for example. Proponents of such a concept emphasize that an important component of an American A2/AD campaign in East Asia would target Chinese-flagged commercial shipping as well as military vessels, in an effort to pressure the Chinese economy. While U.S. air assets and submarines certainly possess the ability to sink Chinese ships virtually at will, especially given the relatively weak Chinese anti-submarine warfare capabilities, I am skeptical that the Chinese would not simply re-flag their ships as neutral shipping and carry on; to attack these ships would run the risk of creating international incident. The United States could, however, create a kind of no man’s zone in which no commercial shipping could enter without risking being sunk (Lloyd’s and other insurance carriers would naturally decline to cover cargo ships in the area and that should help eliminate the presence of innocent shipping). That would surely harm the Chinese economy to a great degree, though of course war with China would have equally serious effects on the U.S. economy, placing a premium on a quick resolution.

The third operational concept would involve essentially ignoring the creation of the Chinese A2/AD zone and would create a distant blockade of the Chinese coast in an effort to shut down seaborne trade. American forces could undoubtedly interdict seaborne traffic at the Lombok, Sunda, and Malacca straits, which should remain well outside the Chinese A2/AD zone for the foreseeable future. A distant blockade of this nature might eventually ratchet up sufficient pressure on the Chinese economy to convince the Chinese leadership to change course, though it would also cede the initiative to China and allow it to act with virtual impunity for some time; for example, adopting this strategy could provide China with the flexibility, time, and space to invade Taiwan or undertake similar operations. While this mostly passive operational concept is the most feasible in that it requires no new capabilities and assumes the least amount of risk for U.S. forces, it also does the least amount to address Chinese ability to exert pressure on its neighbors inside its A2/AD zone.

None of these operational concepts are without their flaws or challenges. Currently, the U.S. military continues to seek new ways to defeat robust A2/AD networks like China’s, but doing so in a quick and effective manner that limits U.S. casualties remains a significant challenge.

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