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Toward a New Offset Strategy: Exploiting U.S. Long-Term Advantages to Restore U.S. Global Power Projection Capability

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As a matter of urgency, the U.S. military needs to “offset” the investments that adversaries are making in anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities—particularly their expanding missile inventories—by leveraging U.S. advantages in unmanned systems and automation, extended-range and low-observable air operations, undersea warfare, and complex system engineering and integration. Doing so would allow the United States to maintain its ability to project power, albeit in novel forms, despite the possession of A2/AD capabilities by hostile forces. This is the central argument of a new CSBA report by Senior Fellow Robert Martinage, *Toward a Third Offset Strategy—Exploiting U.S. Long-Term Advantages to Restore U.S. Global Power Projection Capability*.

On September 3, 2014, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel delivered an important speech on innovation. While this speech did not attract extensive media coverage, it kicked off what could be a major course change for the Department of Defense (DoD) with strategic ramifications. Secretary Hagel cautioned that “disruptive technologies and destructive weapons once solely possessed by only advanced nations” are proliferating widely, including to unsophisticated militaries and terrorist groups. Meanwhile, China and Russia are “pursuing and funding long-term, comprehensive military modernization programs,” to include fielding an array of capabilities “designed to counter traditional U.S. military advantages—in particular, our ability to project power to any region across the globe by surging aircraft, ships, troops, and supplies.”

To cope with this daunting challenge, Secretary Hagel called on the Pentagon to develop a new “game-changing offset strategy” akin to Secretary of Defense Harold Brown’s “Offset Strategy” in the 1970s. Although the 1970s Offset Strategy occurred during a period of reduced defense spending – as is the case today – it was the Soviet Union’s achievement of strategic nuclear parity coupled with the numerical superiority of Warsaw Pact conventional forces that really drove it. A new Offset Strategy must take account of America’s fiscal circumstances but, at its core, it must address the most pressing military challenge that we face: maintaining our ability to project power globally to deter potential adversaries and reassure allies and friends despite the emergence of A2/AD threats.

This report provides a preliminary outline for an offset strategy that exploits and builds upon existing enduring U.S. capability advantages to restore and maintain U.S. global power projection capability. This effort is essential in order to improve crisis stability, bolster allied confidence in U.S. security commitments, strengthen conventional deterrence, reduce operational risk in the event of war, and compete more efficiently over the long run.