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## **OUTSIDE-IN: DEFEATING IRAN'S ANTI-ACCESS AND AREA-DENIAL THREAT**

By Mark Gunzinger

The Obama administration has released new strategic guidance for the Department of Defense (DoD) that announces its intent to “rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region” and maintain the capability to “project power despite anti-access and area-denial challenges.”<sup>1</sup> As the U.S. military assesses planning and resource initiatives required to support these objectives, it should not forget the need to address Iran’s emerging anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategy and the threat that it represents to the peace and stability of the Persian Gulf.

In the wake of the U.S. military’s withdrawal from Iraq, the so-called Arab Spring, and Iran’s increasingly transparent efforts to develop nuclear weapons, DoD has an opportunity to re-think its future plans and force posture for the Persian Gulf. The last such sweeping review occurred when the threat of Soviet aggression drove the Defense Department’s planning and resource priorities. Many of the assumptions stemming from this review, such as the belief that the United States would enjoy nearly unfettered access to close-in bases and few challenges to its air and sea supremacy in the Persian Gulf, may now be obsolete. Over time, these assumptions have underpinned defense budget decisions that have favored short-range aircraft, non-stealthy systems, and other capabilities that are best suited for operating in permissive environments.

Based on an assessment of how the Persian Gulf security environment may continue to evolve over the next twenty years, CSBA’s latest report, *Outside-In: Operating from Range to Defeat Iran’s Anti-Access and Area-Denial Threats*, proposes a new set of assumptions, a candidate operational concept, and a supporting force posture to maintain a stable military balance in a region of critical interest to United States, its allies, and its partners. Specifically, *Outside-In* addresses an emerging Iranian A2/AD strategy that is designed to control the Strait of Hormuz and prevent the U.S. military from conducting timely power-projection operations in the Persian Gulf.

Previous CSBA assessments have described China’s development of A2/AD weapons that are intended to constrain the U.S. military’s freedom of action in the Western

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, January 2012), pp. 1, 4.

Pacific.<sup>2</sup> Iran is also pursuing capabilities that would allow it to deter, delay, or prevent timely U.S. operations in the Persian Gulf, giving Iran the breathing room it would need to commit acts of aggression or coercion in the region. Of course, Iran lacks the resources to develop an A2/AD weapons complex on the same scale and level of sophistication as China. Instead, Iran appears to be pursuing an asymmetric or “hybrid” A2/AD strategy designed to take advantage of the unique geographic attributes of the Persian Gulf. Rather than confront U.S. forces directly, Iran could attempt to use ballistic missiles and terrorist proxies (possibly armed with advanced tactical weaponry) to coerce Gulf states to deny U.S. forces permission to operate from their sovereign territory. Should this indirect approach fail, Iran could target U.S. forward bases and deployed forces directly. These strikes could complement a maritime exclusion campaign that uses sea mines, anti-ship cruise missiles, and swarms of fast attack craft in an effort to control the Strait of Hormuz. Should Iran choose to escalate a confrontation with the United States, it could use its ballistic missiles and armed proxy groups to attack across the Middle East, or even threaten to use weapons of mass destruction.

While it is important to note that Iran at present lacks the military capability to execute such a strategy effectively, their efforts strongly suggest their objective is to acquire such capabilities as quickly as possible. Rather than finding itself in the position of reacting to events, the U.S. military would be far better served by anticipating them and developing a strategy to dissuade Iran from fielding A2/AD capabilities, deter their use if fielded and, if necessary, conduct military operations to secure U.S. and regional partner interests in the event deterrence fails.

Toward that end, *Outside-In* proposes three lines of operation to counter Iran’s A2/AD strategy:

1. Setting conditions to deter or defeat Iranian coercion and aggression, while deploying U.S. forces to support initial operations against Iran from outside the reach of its anti-access threats;
2. Operating from range to reduce the effectiveness of Iran’s A2/AD complex by degrading and decreasing the density of its offensive and defensive systems, including ballistic missiles, maritime exclusion capabilities, and air defense network; and
3. Establishing localized air and maritime superiority when and where needed, including sea control through the Strait of Hormuz, to support follow-on force deployments and theater campaign operations.

These initial operations are intended to take advantage of the U.S. military’s unsurpassed ability to fight over extended ranges. Accordingly, *Outside-In* calls for establishing a forward posture that would reduce the vulnerability of U.S. forces to Iranian strikes that could occur with little or no warning. From a more resilient basing posture, U.S. long-range air and naval forces could execute missions to reduce the density of Iran’s A2/AD threats and regain the freedom of action necessary for other joint operations. U.S. ground forces, including Army and Marine Corps expeditionary forces, could execute a follow-on theater entry operation to

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<sup>2</sup> See Andrew F. Krepinevich, *Why AirSea Battle?* (Washington, DC: CSBA, 2010); and Jan van Tol with Mark Gunzinger, Andrew Krepinevich and Jim Thomas, *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept* (Washington, DC: CSBA, 2010).

seize littoral areas adjacent to the Strait of Hormuz and help open the way to the flow of coalition forces into the Persian Gulf.

*Outside-In* also recommends the U.S. military be prepared to conduct other lines of operation as part of a comprehensive theater campaign:

- Deterring Iran from employing WMD, including nuclear weapons, and, should deterrence fail, preventing their use and diminishing the impact of a nuclear strike;
- Countering proxy groups equipped with G-RAMM—guided rockets, artillery, mortars and missiles—to include preventing Iran from resupplying terrorist groups (e.g., Hezbollah, the Mahdi Army) located throughout Southwest Asia;
- Imposing costs on Tehran by attacking energy infrastructure and other critical targets required to sustain its war effort; and
- Conducting unconventional warfare operations to help set the conditions for a regime change from within, should it become necessary.

To implement these lines of operation, DoD will need to modify its current program to develop new capabilities and a more resilient forward posture. To this end, *Outside-In* recommends the following initiatives:

**SURVEILLANCE AND STRIKE CAPABILITIES.** DoD should design its new long-range strike family of systems to operate in degraded or denied communications environments, and procure non-kinetic capabilities, including cyber, electronic warfare, and directed energy systems, to disrupt, disable, or destroy A2/AD threats. DoD should also invest in sustaining its undersea strike capacity by adding Virginia Payload Modules to future *Virginia*-class submarines. The Army may wish to increase its investments in short-range land attack capabilities such as the Army Tactical Missile System.

**MARITIME CAPABILITIES.** DoD should field a ship-based, solid-state laser for defending against swarming boats and salvos of anti-ship cruise missiles; equip a new Long-Range Strike Bomber to carry anti-ship missiles and mines; and field a new Amphibious Combat Vehicle and sustain sufficient amphibious lift capacity to support joint theater-entry operations. Additionally, DoD should invest in mine warfare capabilities, to include additional mine countermeasure modules for Littoral Combat Ships and offensive mining systems.

**GUIDED MUNITION DEFENSES.** DoD should develop kinetic, non-kinetic and non-lethal means to reduce the threat posed to deployed U.S. forces by missiles and G-RAMM. Given the high cost of kinetic missile interceptors, DoD may wish to emphasize investments in directed energy defenses that could be developed and fielded over the next decade.

**POSTURE REALIGNMENTS.** DoD should work with its Persian Gulf partners to diversify and selectively harden forward bases to complicate Iran's ballistic missile targeting, while creating an expanded network of distant shared access locations to support initial U.S. power-projection operations from beyond the reach of Iran's anti-access threats.

In summary, new operational concepts such as *Outside-In* and *AirSea Battle* can help provide the connective tissue between DoD's new strategic objectives on the one hand, and resource priorities on the other. Individually, such concepts could identify capability shortfalls and regional posture imbalances. In combination, they might also highlight broader areas where the U.S. military may have excess capabilities. Clearly, funding new initiatives in an era of declining defense budgets will require difficult decisions; the United States cannot meet future challenges that Iran could pose to its vital interests by simply spending more and adding new capabilities and capacity to those already programmed.

Specifically, DoD could help resource these initiatives by reducing heavy ground force structure in the Army and Marine Corps, decreasing planned investments in manned and unmanned aircraft that have short ranges or are non-stealthy, and building partner capacity for counter-terrorism, missile defense and short-range strike missions. Moreover, forces that require very large close-in theater footprints, are only suitable for operations in permissive and semi-permissive areas, or are limited to performing "niche" missions may be candidates for reduced funding, compared to capabilities that are capable of performing a broad range of operations in *all* threat environments.

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