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The Relevance of History to Current Military Challenges: Anti-Access Warfare: Countering A2/AD Strategies

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Longtime and well-known analyst of maritime affairs Dr. Sam Tangredi, a retired U.S. Navy captain, has written a timely, informative, and useful book. First, he provides historical context to contemporary antiaccess/area-denial (A2/AD) strategies. By reinterpreting well-known historical episodes (the efforts of Greek city-states to resist Persia in the fifth century BC) from an antiaccess perspective, he confirms once again what historians and strategists have long known—the relevance of history to current military challenges.

Second, Tangredi details the recent history of thinking about antiaccess strategies and ways to defeat them. He cleverly describes a narrative in which the wars with Iraq, technological developments dating to the 1970s, and strategic thinking inside the U.S. Navy and Air Force, the Pentagon’s Office of Net Assessment, and private think tanks like the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments all combined to shape the approaches of the United States (such as Air-Sea Battle) to a host of challenges to American power-projection capabilities.

Tangredi also explores the complexity of the interaction of antiaccess strategies with counter-antiaccess strategies, in six case studies. Three represent successful instances of a weaker defending force denying access to a larger force, and three examples are given where entrance into a critical region was achieved. To add even further depth to his analysis, Tangredi examines contemporary or potential future scenarios in which the United States, with or without allied support, might be denied access in East Asia, South Asia, Northeast Asia, and Central Asia. While insiders and experts might quibble with the details of Tangredi’s specific judgments, all will find insights into the general problem of countering antiaccess strategies and the specific challenges posed by known foes and geographical conditions.

If I had to take issue with this book, it would be to ask for even more, especially at the level of strategy or, perhaps better, grand strategy. Tangredi presumes, like many naval officers, scholars, and analysts contributing to current debates...
over sea power, that access and its handmaiden forward presence are the essentials of American defense strategy. The logic underlying this assumption is seductive in its simplicity: the United States needs access to allow it to use force at times and places of its choosing in the service of its national interests. Yet rarely does Tangredi ask whether the assumed national interests are worth the enormous financial, technological (in terms of opportunities forgone), and even human cost of countering A2/AD strategies, given the challenges of geography, the growing capabilities of potential adversaries, and the evolving nature of modern warfare.

After all, what specific national objectives are at stake in, for example, the Taiwan Strait scenario that could not be achieved by other means? Moreover, the author gives insufficient attention to the downside of forward presence and, especially, to the potential negative consequences of executing counter-A2/AD strategies. Some downsides can, of course, be intuited from the historical case studies included in chapters 3 and 4. However, to stress this weakness, serious as it is for the state of maritime and naval strategy in general, would be unfair to Sam Tangredi, because it would ask him to write a book that he chose not to write. He chose to explain and analyze antiaccess warfare in both contemporary and historical contexts, and he has done an excellent job of it.

I highly recommend that the readers of this journal find room for Anti-Access Warfare on their bookshelves.

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Small Navies is a selection of essays presented at the Small Navies Conference held in October 2012 at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, cosponsored by the Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy Studies, King’s College London, and the Centre for Applied Research in Security Innovation, Liverpool Hope University. The first three essays examine existing classifications of what constitutes a small navy. Chapters 4 and 5 reflect on the conditions that inspire innovation within small navies. The remaining eight essays analyze the small navies of several states and discuss their characteristics and employment, the relationships between strategy and naval force structure, and the particular challenges they face.

The first theme in the collection is the question of what constitutes a small navy. Several definitions are proposed; the traditional quantitative methods of comparing and measuring navies are discussed, as well as movements beyond such historical measurements of naval power as tonnage, hulls, and capital ships.

Eric Grove, Geoffrey Till, and Basil Germond review navy hierarchical classification criteria proposed by analysts during the past three decades. They consider naval warfare principles and common naval functions and missions. Till’s essay evaluates the differences and similarities between large and small navies, arguing that “small navies are simply big navies in miniature.” He considers