

Non-State Actors and Anti-Access Capabilities: An Emerging Challenge?

Jean-Loup Samaan, Associate professor in strategic studies, UAE National Defense College

Keywords: innovation; military concepts; non-state actors; anti-access, area-denial; Russia; Middle East

Abstract:

This paper proposal looks at the evolving trends in Eastern Europe and the Middle East with regards to non-state actors and their nascent anti-access capabilities. The much-discussed notion of “anti-access and area denial” (A2AD) refers here to the ability of actors to “prevent an opponent from operating military forces near, into, or within a contested region”¹. By nature, A2/AD is a defensive strategy that aims at defending one’s territory and relies on a wide array of weaponry such as precision-guided missiles, anti-ship and anti-air defense systems, and armed drones.

Until today, only States could afford these capabilities, because of their cost and the level of training their use required. This is why scholarship on A2AD strategies has mostly studied States such as Russia, China or Iran². However, our conference paper would demonstrate how the military strategy of some non-state actors in contemporary conflicts like the Lebanese Hezbollah or the Ukrainian Separatists reveals significant similarities with those A2AD postures.

To that aim, the paper will start with the first case, the Lebanese Hezbollah and its main sponsor, the Iranian Islamic Republic. The evolution of Hezbollah’s military strategy evidences clear Iranian influences in the field of A2AD. Rockets and missiles have grown into a major component of Hezbollah’s military posture. The major change at stake here is the way a terrorist organization like Hezbollah now looks at its arsenal, not as mere instruments to destabilize Israel and fuel terror among its population but rather as tools to deny the Israeli Defense Forces the ability to displace the Party of God from its stronghold inside Lebanon. In other words, Hezbollah has been learning from the Iranian A2AD experience and emulating it in the Lebanese context. By extension, such posture has significant implications on how the US and its allies comprehend Hezbollah’s objectives, and consequently how they should design an effective counterterrorism strategy.

After an evaluation of this Iranian-Hezbollah strategy of A2AD, our investigation will broaden its scope by comparing this case with other theatres where arsenals could similarly be used by terrorist or insurgent groups to prevent operations against their area of influence. In the Middle

¹ Sam J. Tangredi, *Anti-Access Warfare. Countering A2/AD Strategies*, Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 2013.

² See among many others, John Gordon IV, John Matsumura, *The Army’s Role in Overcoming Anti-Access and Area Denial Challenges*, Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 2013; Roger Cliff, Mark Burles, Michael Chase, Derek Eaton, Kevin Pollpeter, *Entering the Dragon’s Lair, Chinese Antiaccess Strategies and Their Implications for the United States*, Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 2007; Stephan Frühling Guillaume Lasconjarias, “NATO, A2/AD and the Kaliningrad Challenge”, *Survival*, Vol.58, No.2, April-May 2016, pp.95-116; Mark Gunzinger, “Outside-In: Defeating Iran’s Anti-Access and Area-Denial Threat.” *Backgrounder, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments*, 2012; Shahryar Pasandideh, “Iran Boosts Its A2AD Capabilities”, *The Diplomat*, 23 May 2014.

East, other non-state organizations likely to follow this pattern include groups like the Houthi insurgents in Yemen and Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The paper will also look at Eastern Europe where the Russian strategy may rely on a similar approach. Separatists supported by Moscow in Crimea and the Donbass region have also used rockets to hold the territories they captured. Furthermore, similar tactics were observed back in 2008 in Abkhazia and South Ossetia during and after the Russia-Georgia war.

At the same time, the investigation will carefully emphasize the fact that this non-state A2AD model cannot be easily exported. Only if States such as Iran or Russia decide to spread their military technologies and strategies to regional proxies, could the Hezbollah phenomenon become a conceivable model.

As a result, the paper will discuss the possible evolution in this domain over the course of the coming years. Iran's Revolutionary Guards may be tempted to transfer to their regional proxies not only military technologies, but – maybe more importantly – their ideas and experiences in order to disseminate A2AD bubbles through the Middle East. Likewise, if Russia expands its current regional strategy to the Baltic States – in particular Estonia – NATO could face an A2AD bubble executed by a non-state actor on the territory of one of its members. Terrorist organizations able to acquire an arsenal, to train an artillery unit and build a robust command-and-control infrastructure could consequently use it to deny attacks against their stronghold. For countries engaged in counterterrorism campaigns, this would constrain the use of force, raise the level of potential casualties, and eventually this could constitute a kind of life insurance for those terrorist organizations. Overall, in countries with weak central authorities such as Lebanon, Ukraine, or Yemen, this would make more difficult to dislodge a terrorist group.

Evaluating the emerging A2AD strategies of non-state actors will provide findings with significant implications for scholarship. It will bring new perspectives on two different themes of security studies: first, on the strategies and tactics of non-state armed groups and second, on the evolving use of proxies by regional powers.