

If A2/AD Will Blot Out the Sun ... Then We Will Fight in the Shade

300 Spartans and Information Warfare in the Twenty-first Century

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In 2019, the *National Interest* ran an article with the headline “A2/AD: The Phrase That Terrifies the U.S. Military (And China and Russia Love It)” —but rather than champion the term as helpful to the Department of Defense’s operational lexicon, the author contends that the antiaccess/area denial (A2/AD) problem set can in fact be overcome through well-integrated countermeasures.¹ Receiving far less attention, however, is the information warfare implications of A2/AD discussions in a great-power competition environment, which is somewhat ironic considering the title’s language regarding fear and love directly testifying to the power of ideas when they are incepted into the minds of an adversary. Thus, this article seeks not to confirm or deny the conclusions reached in the *National Interest* but rather to transcend its tactical and operational levels of analysis and address the strategic.

While the verb *incepted* is a deliberate nod to the 2010 Christopher Nolan film *Inception*, it is not a tongue-and-cheek pop culture reference but instead a mechanism to frame critical thought and introspection—after all, to borrow a line from the film, “if you’re going to perform inception, you need imagination. . . . You need the simplest version of the idea in order for it to grow naturally in your subject’s mind.” What must first be realized is that A2/AD “is a Western [term] and its approximation in the Chinese strategic concept is China’s active strategic counterattacks on exterior lines.”² Second, not only is it a Western term but it is also a generally unproductive term, because it essentially applies to every modern country with an integrated air defense system just on varying degrees of maturation and sophistication (i.e., “states with the ability to use a combination of sensors and long-range missiles to prevent adversaries from operating in an exclusion zone, or ‘bubble,’ adjacent to their territory are said to possess anti-access/area denial capabilities”³).

So, what does this mean? It means that the defense enterprise’s imagination has taken an ancient, yet simple, idea (i.e., combined arms defense of the homeland) and allowed it to grow unchecked into the notion that A2/AD is a revolutionary new concept and anyone who employs it possesses an impenetrable fortress: “A2/AD is an overhyped buzzword leveraged to create an excessive sense of

vulnerability—intimidating potential adversaries before the match even begins.”⁴
Which then begs the question: What do we do about it?



(Kentucky Historical Society image)

Figure 1. King Leonidas at Thermopylae. The Battle of Thermopylae was fought between an alliance of Greek city-states, led by King Leonidas of Sparta, and the Persian Achaemenid Empire over the course of three days, during the second Persian invasion of Greece. Leonidas was a master of what we now recognize as information warfare.

The answer is simple—follow the archetype example of Spartan King Leonidas and engage directly through full-spectrum information warfare! Sparta’s actions leading up to and during the Battle of Thermopylae can be analyzed through three distinct, but interconnected, efforts: generating insights, competing below the threshold of armed conflict, and preparing for escalation.

- **Generating Insights.** Xerxes of Persia wielded an army so massive that the ancient historian Herodotus asserted “whole rivers ran dry” when it stopped for water.⁵ Xerxes was also a self-absorbed megalomaniac, believing himself to be a god with a divine right to crush anyone standing in the way of his authoritarian expansionism. This equipped the Persian Empire with a

coercively compelling strategic narrative that it was in everyone's best interest to surrender rather than fight. Leonidas, however, was informationally resilient—succumbing not to the Persian narrative of invincibility but rather studying his opponent's cult of personality; his adversary's strength, tactics, and mobilization methods; and the topography of the battlespace. In short, Leonidas generated insights that served as the foundation for calculated and informed decision making.

- **Competing Below the Threshold of Armed Conflict.** The Spartan nation did not wait for war to breakout to engage the Persians but instead continually competed and seized the initiative where able. When the Persian emissary came demanding “earth and water” as a sign of surrender; Sparta threw him down a well. When the Persian army amassed its troops, the Spartans were found unafraid and could be seen exercising and tending to their hair. And when the Persians implied that their onslaught of arrows would “blot out the sun,” the Spartan response identified the pragmatic benefit by countering with “then we will fight in the shade!” The Spartan resolve and honor were so regionally renown that when Persian intelligence sources indicated there would be resistance to his army, Xerxes exclaimed, “How is it possible that a thousand, or ten thousand, or fifty thousand, should stand up to an army as big as mine, especially if they were not under a single master, but all perfectly free to do as they pleased?”⁶
- **Preparing for Escalation.** King Leonidas recognized that war with the Persians was inevitable, thus he aligned his forces in a multi-domain environment—realizing the naval forces sent by other Grecian city-states required supplementation from a land force to secure their borders against the Persian invasion.⁷ Moreover, Leonidas prepared his nation for battle while respecting the rule of law at home and abroad. Two key reasons for the size of the Greek fighting force was a Spartan religious festival that legally prevented all soldiers other than the 300 royal bodyguards from travelling⁸ and the ongoing Olympic Games, a customarily peaceful time.⁹ Nevertheless, Leonidas mobilized what he could, brokered a coalition of partner states, and led them to a strategically superior battleground that would serve as a force multiplier and cause Xerxes, while watching the battle, to thrice leap “from the throne on which he sat, in terror for his army.”¹⁰

Information's power is timeless—as seen in the aforementioned case study from antiquity and the Department of Defense's recent designation of “Information” as the seventh Joint Function. The Air Force is actively moving out on operationalizing information warfare by establishing 16th Air Force—a component

numbered air force (NAF) dedicated entirely to information warfare and its core tenants of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); cyber operations (CO); electromagnetic warfare (EW); information operations (IO); and weather (Wx). As Lt Gen Timothy Haugh, commander of 16th Air Force, stated, “We will expose [adversary] actions that undermine international norms and take the conflict in the information environment back to them.”¹¹

Chinese (and other) A2/AD initiatives are a prime example of a problem set already being cracked by the new NAF—and it is being tackled via Lt Gen Haugh’s three lines of effort: Generate Insights, Compete Now, and Prepare for Escalation.

Generate Insights. Responsible for the USAF’s entire ISR portfolio, 16 AF is leveraging all-source intelligence operations to analyze and characterize adversary arsenals to ensure US decision advantage by fostering an informed and informationally resilient air component. Furthermore, the invaluable intelligence collected is used to drive kinetic, nonkinetic, and cyberspace weaponeering strategies to provide commanders options that lead to effective outcomes across the continuum of conflict. And, like Leonidas, the intelligence categorizes and prioritizes key terrain—physical, cognitive, and digital—that will be critical power-projection platforms and force multipliers for Joint and coalition operations.

- **Compete Now.** Instead of fearing the very thought of A2/AD, as described above, the response to Chinese assertions that missiles will blot out the sun along the First Island Chain must be “Then we will fight in the shade!” While the threat should by all means be respected, it is equally necessary that challenge not be attributed a supernatural status that makes people believe it is an impenetrable fortress. 16 AF’s problem-centric, multi-domain operations (e.g. cyberspace operations, sensitive reconnaissance operations, etc.) are actively generating insights regarding Chinese capabilities and Beijing’s global activities (e.g., 5G technology, space, artificial intelligence, etc.) to provide tailored options for Joint Force Commanders to compete now below the threshold of conflict.
- **Prepare for Escalation.** Unlike the situation between the Persians and Greeks, war is not inevitable, and the current tensions are far from a Thucydides Trap. However, 16 AF is preparing for escalation on the basis that information at the speed of relevance is paramount to maintaining stability within the community of nations and unimpeded access to the global commons. Russian-built surface-to-air missile systems (of which China has bought many and reverse engineered many more) have increasingly been involved in identification mishaps, targeting civilian airliners as

seen in Iran and even more recently in Syria—the point of engaging in the information domain is not to drive an arms race but, to the contrary, eliminate plausible deniability for destabilizing actors and encourage responsible statesmanship via accountability. Similar to Leonidas, 16 AF is also tackling problems such as A2/AD through coalition partnerships and the fostering of new multilateral relationships. Finally, as in Sparta, above all, 16 AF is performing the critical information warfare mission with respect and reverence for the rule of law—protecting the civil liberties of Americans in the information and cyberspace domains and counter malign influence against the 2020 elections. That said, with regards to the rule of law, there is one key point of departure from Sparta. As 16 AF prepares for escalation in steady-state operations, it can identify means of engaging the legislative and executive branches at the state and federal levels to identify possible changes to laws that would better enable the defense of the homeland while preserving liberty for all (ex. an Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) that could allow Air National Guardsmen to defend infrastructure across statelines without having to mobilize from a Title 32 to Title 10 status).

Ending this where it began, “A2/AD is an overhyped buzzword leveraged to create an excessive sense of vulnerability—intimidating potential adversaries before the match even begins” . . . in the manner of the timeless writings of Sun Tzu: “To win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.”¹² Fostering an informed and informationally resilient air component will drive agile basing and other US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) initiatives that complicate China’s targeting apparatus and enable the Joint Force and its coalition partners to say: “Then we will fight in the shade!”

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Notes

1. Sebastien Roblin, "A2/AD: The Phrase That Terrifies the U.S. Military (And China and Russia Love It)," *National Interest*, 9 April 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/>.
2. Si-Fu Ou, "China's A2AD and Its Geographic Perspective," *Asia-Pacific Research Forum* 60 (2014): 81–124, <https://www.rchss.sinica.edu.tw/>.
3. Robert Dalsjö, Christofer Berglund, and Michael Jonsson, "Bursting the Bubble? Russian A2/AD in the Baltic Sea Region: Capabilities, Countermeasures, and Implications," FOI-R--4651—SE (Stockholm: FOI Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut, 2019), <https://www.foi.se/>.
4. Roblin, "A2/AD: The Phrase That Terrifies."
5. Will Durant, *The Life of Greece: The Story of Civilization, Part II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1939), 237.
6. Stephen Samson, "GOVT 490—Political Theory" (class notes, Liberty University, Fall 2010), 63, from Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Auhrey de Selincourt, rev. A.R. Burn. (London: Penguin, 1970).
7. A R. Burn, *Persia and the Greeks: The Defence of the West, C. 546–478 B.C.* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1963), 362–63
8. "Battle of Thermopylae," *New World Encyclopedia*, 2 April 2008, <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/>.
9. Durant, *The Life of Greece*, 216. "The laurel wreath was the only prize given at the Olympic games, and yet it was the most eagerly contested distinction in Greece. So important were the games that not even the Persian invasion stopped them; and while a handful of Greeks withstood Xerxes' army at Thermopylae the customary thousands watched Theagenes of Thasos, on the very day of the battle, win the pancratiast's crown. 'Good heavens!' exclaimed a Persian to his general; 'what manner of men are these against whom you have brought us to fight? – men who contend with one another not for money but for honor!'"
10. George Rawlinson, *Herodotus: The Persian Wars* (New York: The Modern Library, 1942), 582.
11. Mark Pomerleau, "What the New 16th Air Force Means for Information Warfare," *C4ISRnet*, 13 October 2019, <https://www.c4isrnet.com/>.
12. Quoted in Mark R. McNeilly, *Sun Tzu and the Art of Modern Warfare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).