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SLOAN ON GEOPOLITICS, GEOGRAPHY AND STRATEGIC HISTORY IN GEOPOLITICS

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ABSTRACT. Geopolitical literature is experiencing a renaissance and scholars representing classical and critical perspectives in this field bring multifaceted assessments to historical and current international political and security issues. Sloan’s *Geopolitics, Geography and Strategic History*, which is part of Routledge’s Geopolitical Theory Series, examines connections between geography, strategy, and history and is the subject of this review and analysis. Three thesis questions examined by the author include why the geographical scope of political objectives and following strategies of nation states change, how do these changes occur, and over what time period do these changes occur. Sloan examines why the geopolitical theories of Halford Mackinder and Nicholas Spykman remain relevant today by aspiring to produce an enhanced understanding of the relationships between geography, history, and strategy, British foreign policy and the Heartland, the role of these concepts involving Britain and the Battle of the Atlantic, the emergence of geopolitics in the U.S. during World War II, geopolitical analysis of Cold War containment, and emerging geopolitical aspects involving China and the U.S.’ Pacific Pivot. This assessment examines whether Sloan has succeeded in his objectives.

Keywords: geopolitics; geography; strategic history; geopolitical theories;
Halford Mackinder; Nicholas Spykman

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Introduction

Geography remains a critical factor in analyzing the historical and contemporary policies and strategies of nation states. A foreword by Colin Gray cogently notes that much Western scholarship has neglected geography in analyses of international affairs which has resulted in deleterious scholarly consequences including geo-

graphical illiteracy and the inability to handle geographic data.¹ University of Reading Politics and International Relations Professor Geoff Sloan believes there is a critically important and symbiotic relationship between geography, strategy, and history in geopolitics and that policymakers and scholars must understand a dynamic security environment focusing on “changes in transport and weapons technology, new locations of natural resources, and the emergence of new centers of economic power” with geopolitics synthesizing these divergent elements and providing coherence to their strategic implications.²

Sloan’s treatise goes on to examine two British, two American, and one Chinese case study of the relationships between geography, strategy, and history while concluding with the assertion that classical geopolitics is highly relevant to examining and interpreting contemporary international political, economic, and security developments. Points stressed in Chapter 1 include examining the relationship between geopolitics, geography, and strategic history emphasizing geopolitics while stressing that securing political superiority involves more than having power from available natural resources, acquiring wealth, or power projection capability but also includes exercising power. This exercise of power can involve expanding or contracting due to evolving alliances, emerging new enemies, and shifts due to technological advances, incorrect policy decisions, and other salient factors. Sloan goes on to argue that foreign policy formulation must remain geographically dependent and cites construction of the Panama Canal as a pertinent example since this structure facilitated development of the U.S. having a two-ocean navy.³

Chapter 2 stresses classical geopolitical theories presented by Halford Mackinder (1861–1947) and Nicholas Spykman (1893–1943). Sloan maintains that a key tenet of Mackinder’s geopolitical thought is that geography and history are interrelated with historians using geography to facilitate historical interpretation and geographers using history to facilitate current interpretation. Mackinder maintained that future British policymakers must possess the following attributes to effectively manage British national interests: “They must have a global outlook...they must also have a trained power of judging values and be capable of long views in the framing policies for the future; and they will...still need an understanding of the momentum which both Man and his environment come up to the present from the past.”⁴

One scholarly analyst of Spykman’s work asserts he made extensive and deep use of material geographic realities in this theorizing while allowing for significant human discretion for good and bad and that Spykman consistently and explicitly opposed deterministic misuse of physical geographical detail in argumentation.⁵ Sloan demonstrates how Spykman challenged a foundational U.S. assessment that its geographic distance could protect its national security from a continental alliance of Eurasian powers. Spykman asserted that a new geopolitical reality was emerging and that American national interests now transcended the Western Hemisphere and that it was possible for the U.S. to influence European and Asian politics and that the “old world” can influence the “new world.” Spykman’s rimland theory stressed this arguing: “Between the center of the Eurasian land mass and the circumferential

maritime route lies a great concentric buffer zone. It includes western and Central Europe; the plateau countries of the Near East, Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan, Tibet, China and Eastern Siberia, and the three peninsulas of Arabia, India and Burma-Siam.”⁶

Sloan proceeds to scrutinize British foreign policy and Mackinder’s Heartland theory whose contention was that Germany and Russia were attaining greater power due to weaknesses in the emerging post-World War I strategic order. He also maintained that newly created countries including Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland would be vulnerable to German and Russian aggression and subversion and that Berlin and Moscow would battle for control of the Eastern European heartland asserting that:

1. Who Rules East Europe Commands the Heartland.
2. Who Rules the Heartland Commands the World Island.
3. Who Rules the World Island Commands the World.⁷

Mackinder maintained there was a subtle relationship between geography and human agency in policy decisions believing that while geographic environment did not define policymakers’ choices that it conditioned them. Sloan also notes that Mackinder stressed that following World War I that contemporary armies possessed railroads, cars, and airplanes making it possible for militaries to take easy possession of land masses and strategic waterways such as the Suez Canal. He also notes Mackinder’s 1943 conclusion that a victorious Soviet Union would become the world’s strongest land power and be in the strategically strongest defense position due to its possession of the heartland.⁸

Chapter 3 sees Sloan analyze Mackinder’s role as British High Commissioner during a November 1919–January 1920 mission to the Soviet Union. Following his return, Mackinder issued a report on January 21, 1920 stressing the Communist regime’s danger to British interests and European democracies while also criticizing Prime Minister David Lloyd George for making speeches tending to undermine British strategic objectives and providing propaganda opportunities for Lenin’s Government and contributing to that regime’s triumph.⁹

Chapter 4 sees geopolitical assessment of Britain, Ireland, and the Battle of Atlantic. Sloan covers the evolution of Anglo-Irish relations from the 1916 Irish rebellion to Ireland’s independence in 1922 and events leading up to the outbreak of World War II. A key geostrategic factor in this bilateral relationship was the presence of British defense installations in Ireland in locales as varied as Bantry Bay, Cork, and Donegal for use in case of potential future military operations against powers as varied as France and the U.S. which was ended by a April 25, 1938 Anglo-Irish agreement turning these ports over to Ireland despite Winston Churchill’s opposition warning that turning these ports over to Ireland would strengthen enemies with submarine fleets and make it harder to defend coastal British naval facilities.¹⁰

This agreement, as Sloan demonstrates, saw Britain go to war in September 1939 without having naval bases on Ireland’s south coast for the first time since

between 1689 and 1697. This agreement and the obstinacy of Irish Prime Minister Eamon De Valera's Government caused the British Government to not take the previously reserved ports between October 1939 and spring 1940. Between July and October 1940, 282 ships were sunk by the Germans off Ireland's northwestern approaches which included 1,489,795 tons of merchant shipping with Ireland's neutrality playing a big factor in exacerbating allied difficulties during the Atlantic campaign in World War II's early years. The British and allies eventually made heavy use of Northern Ireland's naval facilities for the remainder of the war.¹¹

Chapter 5 covers the emergence of U.S. geopolitical thought during World War II. Sloan covers the traditional role played by isolationism in U.S. foreign policy prior to Washington's entrance into this conflict, how U.S. political and security objectives expanded after European hostilities began and Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, and emphasizes the roles of Mackinder and Spykman in shaping U.S. geopolitical thought. Priority is placed on how the German School of Geopolitics was introduced to the U.S., that geopolitical analysis was used in a matter explaining the emergence and evolution of battles far from the U.S., and that geopolitics was developed and used by civilian and military institutions.

Sloan notes that the U.S. was a de facto international empire in 1914 with possessions in Hawaii, Midway, Wake Island, Guam, Samoa, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands while possessing the world's third ranked Navy. Yet the aftermath of World War I, saw the reemergence of isolationism characterized by the utopian Kellogg-Briand Pact which delusionally sought to outlaw war "as an instrument of international policy." U.S. foreign policy during the Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover Administrations sought to emphasize economic growth and preeminence through raising tariffs, insisting on allied war debt payments, demanding openness for U.S. trade and investment, expanding interest in Middle East oil, and assertively promoting U.S. business interests globally.¹²

The prewar period saw the emergence of geopolitical thinkers such as Isaiah Bowman (1878–1950) who argued that Hitler's claims of limited territorial objectives were deceitful and an increasing consensus among U.S. strategic policymakers that an emerging responsibility of U.S. naval forces in the Atlantic would be protecting sea communications with the United Kingdom and allied shipping against German threats. This emerging and expanding global maritime security responsibilities facing the U.S. were reflected in a 1942 speech by Roosevelt noting: "There are four main lines of communication that are now being traveled by our ships: the North Atlantic, the South Atlantic, the Indian Ocean, and the South Pacific. These routes are not one way streets, for ships that carry our troops and munitions out-bound bring back essential raw materials that we need for our own use."¹³

Looking ahead to a potentially emerging postwar international geopolitical order, Bowman warned that the Balkan states were incapable of withstanding Russian subversion without U.S. military support and political leadership and that it may become necessary for the U.S. to stand against Russia. Mackinder also asserted that if the Soviet Union emerged victorious over Germany it would become the world's

greatest landpower and possess the strongest defensive military position. Spykman stressed that the U.S. was a maritime power and that any existential threat to it came from a concentric buffer zone and circumferential maritime routes.¹⁴

Additional emerging geopolitical thinkers profiled by Sloan in this chapter include Robert Strausz-Hupe (1903–2002) who stressed the influence of German geopolitical figures such as Karl Haushofer (1869–1946) in driving German foreign policy, Andreas Dorpalen (1911–1982) a biographer of Haushofer, Derwent Whittlesley (1890–1956) whose 1942 work *The German Strategy of World Conquest* was funded by the Carnegie Corporation and included contributions from military agencies and the State and Justice Department while featuring maps and other visual aids. This influence of geopolitics was also reflected in American popular culture from the role played by Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* film series made between 1942 and 1945 and the magazine *Reader's Digest*.¹⁵

World War II saw a seismic update in emphasis on geography and geopolitics in U.S. academic, governmental, and military institutions. 1942 saw 1,500 courses on geopolitics taught in U.S. universities, maps produced by government agencies as varied as the Departments of Agriculture and Commerce, the Census Bureau, U.S. Geological Survey, the Map Division of the Office of Strategic Services, and geographers were actively involved in the War Department, Foreign Economic Administration, the Board on Geographic Names, and State Department.¹⁶

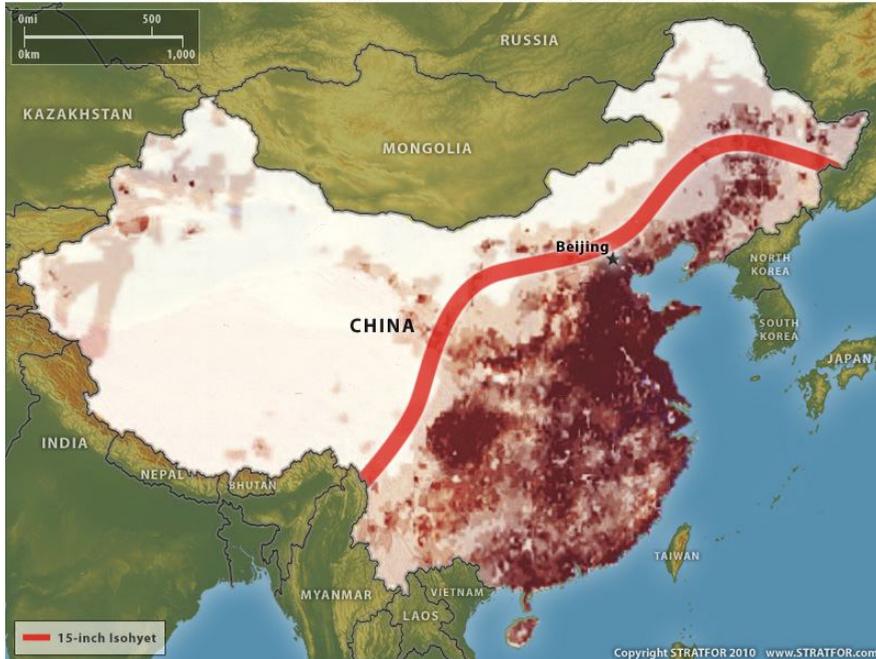
Chapter 6 focuses on the convergence of geopolitics, geography, and strategic history accelerated during the post war period as the U.S. and its allies sought to contain the Soviet Union and China. This period resulted in the emergence of critical documents such as NSC 68 which sought to contain the Soviet Union and the emergence of shooting wars in Korea and Vietnam which demonstrated the limits of military force and public willingness to support military operations to defend U.S. security interests. The roles played by individuals as varied as George Kennan (1904–2005) and Henry Kissinger in U.S. strategic planning are chronicled and analyzed as are concepts such as the Domino Theory. Coverage of U.S. Cold War Soviet containment ends in 1973 and does not include events such as détente, the initial end of the Cold War resulting in the Soviet Union's collapse between 1989–1991, and the reemergence of the Cold War contentiousness between the Russian Federation and the U.S. and its allies during Vladimir Putin's presidency in the 21st century.¹⁷

Sloan's final chapter covers the geopolitics of China and the U.S.' Pacific Pivot. He begins this chapter by noting that Chinese elites do not publish an annual grand strategy document outlining their intentions, but that Chinese actions and expanding military capability also illustrate that Beijing is changing geopolitical reality in ways receiving limited recognition in scholarly literature.¹⁸

His analysis proceeds to note how divergent Chinese geographic terrains influence Beijing's geopolitical prerogatives including the Han Heartland and Monsoon Coastal East where the vast majority of Chinese live and includes natural features such as the Pearl, Yangtze, and Yellow Rivers serves as the preponderant location

for China's arable land, and has historically represented a point of security vulnerability as a result of 19th century British interventions, and proximity to international trade routes and potentially hostile military forces.¹⁹

15-INCH ISOHYET AND CHINA POPULATION DENSITY



Source: STRATFOR

This chapter proceeds to stress that understanding contemporary Chinese geopolitics requires focusing on lines of communication, energy supply sources and structures, and how developing economic wealth centers may affect Chinese diplomatic relations. Additional characteristics of this section include stressing how economic growth and change has not reduced the Chinese Communist Party's preeminence, China's increasing demand for raw materials and how this had resulted in the need to gain secure access to these from foreign sources, Beijing's desire to remove potential naval competitors from the South and East China Seas, and how these needs drive China to seek economic and political influence globally in areas as diverse as South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and South America.²⁰

This growing Chinese assertiveness has created concern in the U.S. and its Asia-Pacific allies that the post-World War II Pacific Ocean preeminence is threatened. In 2011, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton proclaimed in *Foreign Policy* that the 21st century would be the Pacific Century and geopolitics future would be decided in Asia. This article stressed that the Asia-Pacific was a key factor driving global politics while failing to define geopolitics, did not mention India, and failed to provide concrete resources or a coherent strategic response to China's increasing assertiveness in this region. This Pacific Pivot also failed to comprehend the security and political implications of the seismic political changes taking place in

Eurasia, failed to evaluate the geographical scope of Chinese foreign policy and its grand strategy since 1978, and did not address the problems of maintaining security in the Pacific due to challenges being presented by China.²¹

Sloan's conclusion reemphasizes a trinitarian connection between geography, strategy, and history which Sloan sees as being foundational to geopolitics. He notes evolving historical geopolitical challenges confronting the west including Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and China and different policies the U.S. and its allies have, are, and may need to engage in to ensure their geopolitical interests are not threatened. He maintains that classical geopolitics provides the flexibility and adaptability to enable policymakers to understand and react to emerging twenty-first century geopolitical realities.

Conclusion

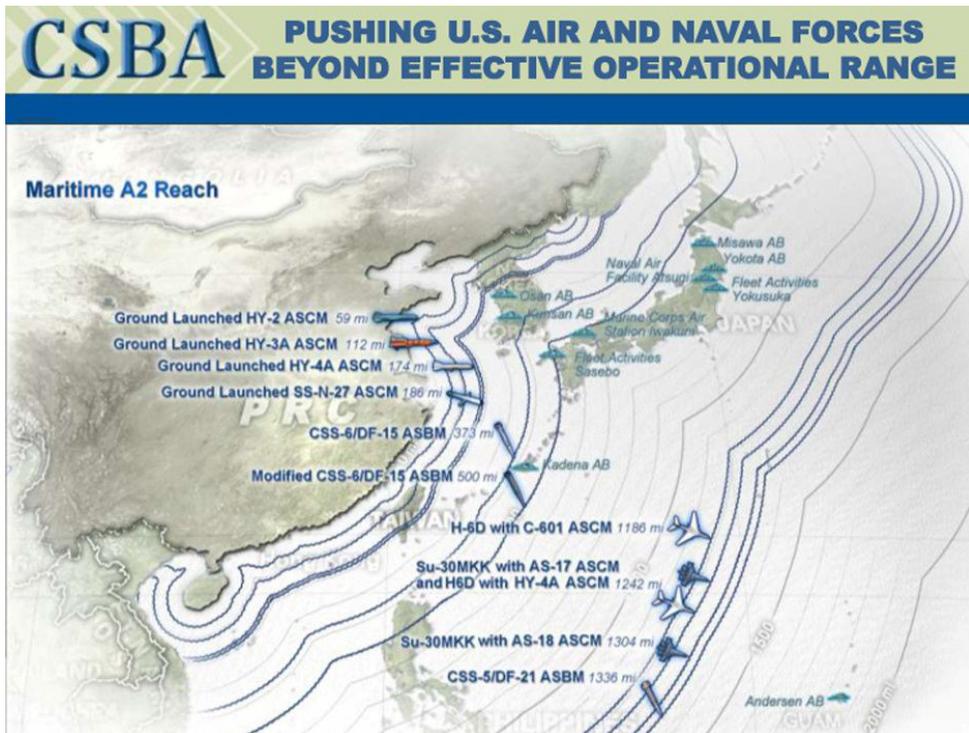
This is an erudite and well-reasoned analysis of historical and contemporary strategic trends and how classical geopolitics should be a key factor in examining the historical, contemporary, and emerging trends affecting emerging international politics and security. Suggestions for improvement include bringing analysis of contemporary geopolitical challenges up to date by discussing the Suwalki Gap between Russia, Poland, and the Baltic republics and how this region could become a fulcrum for conflict between Putin's Russia and NATO countries as Russia may seek to sever the Baltic Republics from the west and forcibly reintegrate them into territory occupied by the former Soviet Union. Suwalki Gap analysis should also be compared and contrasted with how the Fulda Gap was a key fulcrum of historical Cold War geopolitical analysis and policymaking.²²

THE SUWALKI GAP



Source: Stratfor

The concluding chapter on Chinese geopolitics and the Pacific Pivot is partially weakened by not incorporating China's Anti-Access and Aerial Denial (A2AD) policy into its recommendations for how the U.S. and its allies can counter Chinese attempts to maintain dominance of this region by using its conventional, nuclear, and asymmetric forces to keep the U.S. and its allies from being able to conduct military operations in waters, land territory, and airspace, space-based assets, and cyber assets against Chinese attempts to achieve regional hegemony. The logistical and operational complications of effectively responding to Chinese A2AD are daunting and will be a key factor in the effectiveness of U.S. and allied responses to increasing Chinese geopolitical assertiveness.²³



Source: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

The book could also have been enhanced with closer editing in some places. For instance, note 36 on p. 59 in chapter 2 refers to a Colin Gray article on Spykman referring to him as a being a geographer or geopolitician as being anachronistic on p. 5 of the June 2015 edition of *Journal of Strategic Studies*. Instead, the actual reference to Spykman in Gray's article is on p. 877 in this issue of this journal. Another example of a bibliographic reference oversight is found in note 138 on p. 188 referencing an article from the journal *Political Geography* without mentioning that the article was published in 1982.

Despite these shortcomings, this is an erudite and magisterial book enriching our understanding of how historical events and emerging geopolitical trends and

developments are enhanced by understanding the close relationship between geopolitics, geography, and strategic history and how the multidisciplinary relevance of these subjects makes classical geopolitics an essential prerequisite for analyzing, interpreting, and understanding international relations and history. Strongly recommended for all interested in these subjects!

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3. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
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6. See Sloan, 43–46; and Nicholas John Spykman, *America’s Strategy in World Politics*, (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1942): 181.
7. See Bert Chapman, *Geopolitics: A Guide to the Issues*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011): 18; and Halford J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, (New York: 1919/1962): 74–77.
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9. “Report by Sir H. Mackinder on the Situation in South Russia,” 656 *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919–1939: First Series Volume III*, (London: HMSO, 1949): 768–787.
10. See Sloan, 93–99; and Great Britain, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons. “Eire: Confirmation of Agreements Bill,” 5 (May 5, 1938): Cols. 1100–1101; <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1938/may/05/eire-confirmation-of-agreements-bill>; Accessed May 10, 2017.
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14. *Ibid.*, 123, 127–128.
15. See *Ibid.*, 125, 129–131, 137, 141–142; and Derwent Whittlesey, *The German Strategy of World Conquest*, (New York and Toronto: Farrar and Rinehart, 1942). Capra’s films can be found on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=frank+capra+why+we+fight; Accessed May 11, 2017.
16. *Ibid.*, 144.
17. *Ibid.*, 152–157.

18. See *Ibid.*, 189; John Lewis Gaddis and Paul Nitze, “NSC 68 and the Soviet Threat Reconsidered,” *International Security*, 4(4)(Spring 1980): 164–176; and John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2011).

19. *Ibid.*, 192–195.

20. *Ibid.*, 197–214.

21. See Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century: The Future of Geopolitics Will Be Decided in Asia, Not in Afghanistan, or Iraq, and the United States Should be Right at the Center of the Action,” *Foreign Policy*, 189 (November 2011): 56–63; and *Ibid.*, 214–216.

22. See Agnia Grigas, “NATO’s Vulnerable Link in Europe: Poland’s Suwalki Gap,” (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, February 9, 2016): 1–2; <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/nato-s-vulnerable-link-in-europe-poland-s-suwalki-gap>; (Accessed May 8, 2017); *Project 1721: U.S. Army War College Assessment on Russian Strategy in Eastern Europe and Recommendations on How to Leverage Landpower to Maintain the Peace*, (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2017): 10, 12, 116, 134; <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=1342>; (Accessed May 11, 2017); William E. Stacy, *U.S. Army Border Operations in Germany, 1945–1983*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center for Military History, 1984); www.history.army.mil/documents/BorderOps/content.htm; (Accessed May 15, 2017); and Paul Davis. *Rethinking Defense Planning*, (New York: Robert W. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, 2007): 5; <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Rethinking-Defense-Planning-Davis/9160fe4635bda5f9ba9bca82add181152f3cc007>; (Accessed May 15, 2017).

23. See Robert C. Owen, *Basing Strategies for Air Refueling Forces in Antiaccess/Area Denial Environments*, (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 2015): <http://purl.fdlp.gov/GPO/gpo76225>; (Accessed May 11, 2017); Bert Chapman, “The East China Sea in DOD China Military Power Reports,” *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, 29(1)(March 2017): 71–93; http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/lib_fsdocs/169/; (Accessed May 11, 2017); and Andrew S. Erickson, Evan Braden Montgomery, Craig Neuman, Stephen Biddle, and Ivan Oelrich, “Correspondence: How Good Are China’s Antiaccess/Area-Denial Capabilities,” *International Security*, 41(4)(Spring 2017): 202–213.