The Tyranny of Distance (with Erik Gartzke)

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There is a growing sense that U.S. military effectiveness has been on the wane in recent years. Is this the case? If so, what are the reasons for the decay in American combat performance? We first examine the available systematic evidence for American military decline, showing that the United States has indeed experienced a drop in the quality of outcomes of its military contests. Observers have offered a number of explanations for declining American military success, most predominantly an increase in intrastate conflict after the Second World War. After showing that a decline in performance is observed even after fully excluding intrastate conflict, we propose an alternative explanation: the increasing distance-from-home at which the United States has been fighting. Distance is tyrannical: it saps military strength and increases the cost of contests, even as it reduces U.S. expertise and motivations to prevail. We then show that the distance from home at which the United States fights is the best predictor of the outcome of the conflict. We conclude by noting some avenues for future research and policy implications as the world returns to great power competition.