



## **The US “Asia Pivot” and “Air-Sea Battle” Concept: Toward Conflict with China?**

Carl Conetta

Project on Defense Alternatives

March 2014

[ This article originally appeared in the 03 March 2014 issue of *Reset Defense Bulletin* as “Will the QDR Pivot for Air-Sea Battle with China.” ]

Will China come to pose a peer military threat to the United States? The Obama administration’s 2012 Strategic Defense Review and the forthcoming Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) turn on this eventuality.<sup>[1]</sup> Both the so-called “Asia pivot” and the evolving Air-Sea Battle (ASB) operational concept are meant to preclude it.<sup>[2]</sup> But they may serve to precipitate it, instead.

The Pentagon’s tilt toward Asia finds strong support in the US Navy, while Air-Sea Battle enthralls the Navy and Air Force alike. ASB, and its link to US-China contention, provides a bulwark against defense budget retrenchment as well as a rallying cry for a defense industry that fears a return of Pentagon modernization spending to pre-Iraq War levels.

Whether or not China develops into a peer military rival, it does pose a critical challenge to America’s defense strategy. Especially since publication of the first QDR in 1997, US strategy has premised itself on global military primacy.<sup>[3]</sup> All of the QDR’s to date have taken primacy to be the cornerstone of American security and, thus, a vital security interest in itself. But the usefulness of this formulation has depended on the unipolar nature of global relations since the collapse of the Soviet Union. That condition is now coming decisively to an end – largely due to the rise of China and other big, rapidly developing nations. Both the Asia pivot and the ASB concept represent efforts to manage this emergent reality and forestall the end of the American Century.

Also central to the “QDR consensus” is the notion that the United States should work to prevent the rise of unfriendly regional superpowers or, failing that, join with allies to balance against them. China has been the focus of such efforts in Asia. Its potential for becoming a regional hegemon is readily apparent. Today, China accounts for two-thirds of the total

population and 55 percent of the economic strength of the 10 nations that border the Yellow, East, and South China Seas.

Successive US administrations have hoped that a combination of close-in military presence, engagement, and activism might shape China's evolution in favorable ways. At the same time, talk of a China as an emergent military threat or likely competitor has been ubiquitous in America's security policy debate (and in QDR's after 2000).[4] There is no evidence, however, that the net effect of US military "shaping" efforts on the Chinese have been positive. Contrary to Washington's hopes, there has been unparalleled growth in Chinese defense spending and modernization efforts since 2001.[5] Indeed, US-China military tensions may be contributing to rather than dissuading China's strong and growing interest in exerting more control over its maritime perimeter (through which its vital trade passes).[6]

Many analysts see America's "Asia pivot," announced in 2011, as largely a change in military priorities – although some question the substance of this military shift. (The Air-Sea Battle concept is subject to similar doubts.) [7]

It's true that the pivot involves little increase in America's military presence in Asia.[8] But this is occurring in the context of a longer-term reduction in America's military presence abroad and a rollback in the overall size of US armed forces to levels current in the late 1990s. Relatively speaking, Asia is being privileged.

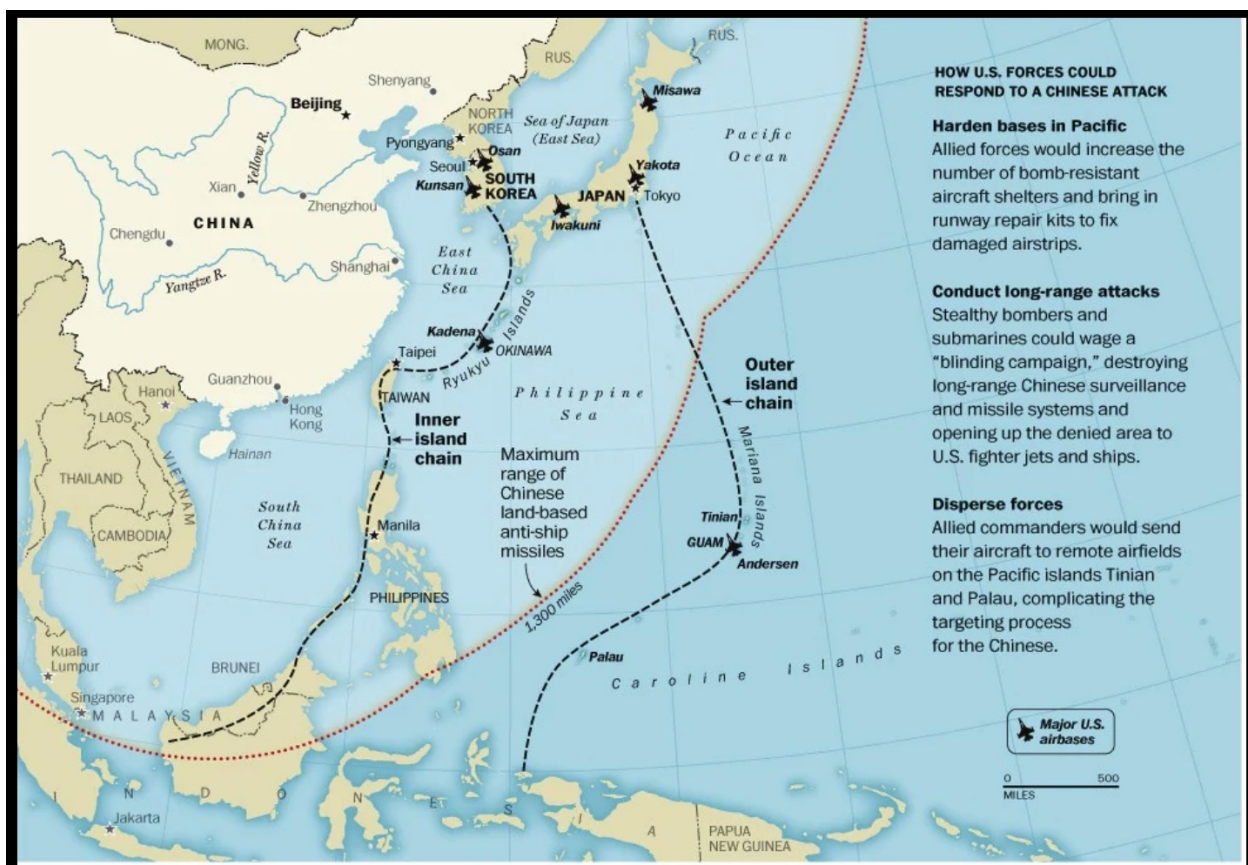
The pivot is also continuing a trend toward a more flexible and distributed presence abroad, but with greater emphasis on the South China sea and Indian Ocean. And it is giving greater emphasis to alliances and cooperation with nations along China's trade routes south of the Tropic of Cancer. If America's Asian interests previously centered on Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, they today more evenly mirror the contours of China.

In sum, the pivot is optimizing America's military posture for Asia and for US-China competition, but doing so within the context of mild reductions in US military spending and force size. Also key to this optimization is the ASB concept.

Like the pivot itself, ASB has a long pedigree.[9] It draws on Cold War concepts of deep attack – especially Air-Land Battle – and reflects more recent interest in net centric warfare and precision attack.[10] ASB responds specifically to the prospect of US adversaries developing capacities to effectively contest or deny US forces safe entry to areas of conflict.[11] Relevant capabilities include anti-ship cruise and theater ballistic missiles, weapons of mass destruction, quiet attack submarines and small fast-attack ships, precision munitions and smart mines, long-

range drones and stealthy combat aircraft, and systems for space, cyber, and electronic attack. Networked with these would be relatively sophisticated command, control, surveillance, reconnaissance, and target acquisition systems.

Against this, ASB would orchestrate US forces to blind and disrupt enemy networks, destroy or disable enemy launchers, and shield US assets from enemy aircraft, missile, submarine, cyber, and space attack. Central to the concept is early (if not pre-emptive) deep attacks on an enemy's homeland. Success in breaking an enemy's "kill chain" would presumably allow the main body of US forces to control and safely operate from areas closer to the enemy homeland, with potentially devastating effect.



Source: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment

The ASB initiative seeks to preserve the type of advantage the United States enjoyed in its two wars with Iraq, which depended on having or establishing secure operating bases nearby. Given significant investment, that goal might be within reach for fighting a nation like Iran. China, by contrast, poses a considerably greater challenge that is further complicated by Chinese nuclear capabilities.

ASB critics have pointed out that the effort so far seems more rhetorical than material. And, indeed, the ASB office is a small one with few modernization programs to call its own.[12] But this misses its chief purpose, which is to *promote a unifying vision that shapes, coordinates, and channels already existing service efforts*. Today, the ASB concept serves as a rationale for Air Force and Navy modernization programs valued by one study at \$525 billion over ten years.[13] These programs include many space, cyber, and missile defense efforts as well as long-range strike and reconnaissance platforms and munitions of many types.

A more prescient critique sees the ASB concept as incompatible with any coherent strategy – essentially, an unusable tool – because it depends on early, large-scale attack on the strategic assets of a nuclear armed nation.[14] Under what conditions would a president walk down this path? As Thomas P.M. Barnett puts it: “You don't conduct widespread bombing campaigns against the homelands of nuclear powers!”[15] Advocates respond that ASB is not specifically about China. And it is certainly true that the concept has application on smaller scales. Still, the influence that the idea is exerting on Pentagon planning and resource allocation only makes sense with a peer contender in mind.

ASB's emphasis on early, deep attack with the goal of rendering an adversary vulnerable to the full brunt of American power will likely put a use-it-or-lose-it hair-trigger on US-China military confrontations, should they occur.[16] It will certainly accelerate the current US-China and East Asia arms race spiral. However, as one top Navy official points out, "Air-Sea Battle is all about convincing the Chinese that we will win this competition." [17] Achieving a degree of arms race dominance that can actually convince others to quit the race has been a strategic conceit of the QDR consensus since 1997. It apparently doesn't work.

This also seems out of touch with economic trends and with the fact that China presently devotes much less GDP to defense than does the United States. It has lots of room to grow. Moreover, China's interest in its maritime perimeter will almost certainly grow to surpass America's interest in patrolling seas so far distant from its homeland.

There are more practicable alternatives to ASB that emphasize blockading Chinese maritime trade at some distance from the mainland.[18] Some see using America's own anti-access and area-denial capabilities to impede any Chinese aggression.[19] Both avoid the costs and provocations of deep attack and big battles near the Chinese shore. And both would allow for more graduated responses. Some alternatives suggest stationing more of America's assets “over the horizon,” where they would be safer from Chinese preemption while retaining the capacity to rapidly surge forward.[20] Critics say these alternatives might weaken the credibility of America's military commitments in Asia. Moreover, one purpose of credibly

threatening to disable China's maritime defense and control capabilities is to gain more leverage over China generally, not simply in military confrontation.

It may be that the most realistic and sustainable alternative would be to exit the QDR consensus altogether and adopt a more broadly cooperative approach to integrating China and reducing regional tensions.<sup>[21]</sup> This would imply de-emphasizing new military initiatives while ramping up inclusive diplomatic ones. Success would hinge on the possibility that China's recent regional assertiveness has more to do with US-China military contention than with intractable regional differences. America's Asian military posture should reflect the fact that no one wins from conflict in this region. Minimally, this means adopting a posture with less escalation potential than Air-Sea Battle.

## Footnotes

[1.](#) US Department of Defense, *2014 Quadrennial Defense Review 2014* (Washington DC: Mar 2014); and, US Department of Defense, *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, (Washington DC, Jan 2012).

[2.](#) Air Sea Battle Office, *Air Sea Battle: Service Collaboration to Address Anti-Access & Area Denial Challenges* (Washington DC: DOD, May 2013); and, CDR John Callaway, US Navy, "The Operational Art of Air-Sea Battle," guest publication, Center for International Maritime Security, 18 July 2014.

[3.](#) Carl Conetta, *A Prisoner to Primacy, PDA Briefing Memo #43* (Cambridge MA: Commonwealth Institute, 5 Feb 2008)

[4.](#) Amitai Etzioni, "Who Authorized Preparations for War with China?", *Yale Journal of International Affairs* (12 June 2013).

[5.](#) Meia Nouwens, "China's defence spending: a question of perspective?," *Military Balance Blog*, International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 24 May 2019; and, Center for Strategic and International Studies, "What does China really spend on its military?," *China Power* page, 2018.

[6.](#) Michael D. Swaine and M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Assertive Behavior, Part Two: the Maritime Periphery," *China Leadership Monitor* 35 (2011)

[7.](#) Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy* (11 Oct 2011); Benjamin Friedman, "What Asian Pivot?," *China-US Focus* (13 Nov 2013); and, John Feffer, "Why America's Strategic Rebalance Is Really Just Retreat," *Huffington Post*, 28 Jan 2013.

[8.](#) Mark E. Manyin, et. al., *Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration's 'Rebalancing' Toward Asia* (Wash DC: Congressional Research Service, 28 Mar 2012)

- [9.](#) Commander James Stavridis, *A New Air Sea Battle Concept: Integrated Strike Forces* (Wash DC: US National War College, May 1992). The author of this piece, which was written 18 years before the Air-Sea Battle concept rose to prominence, served during the period of ASB ascendancy as NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe.
- [10.](#) Robert Farley, "AirLand Battle: The Army's Cold War Plan to Crush Russia (That Ended Up Crushing Iraq)," *The National Interest* (Aug 2018); and, John Romjue, *From Active Defense to AirLand Battle* (Fort Eustis, VA: US Army Raining and Doctrine Command, June 1984).
- [11.](#) Jan van Tol, Mark Gunzinger, Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jim Thomas, *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 18 May 2010); and, Andrew F. Krepinevich, *Why AirSea Battle?* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 19 Feb 2010).
- [12.](#) Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., "Glimpse Inside Air-Sea Battle: Nukes, Cyber At Its Heart," *Breaking Defense*, 9 Jul 2013.
- [13.](#) Greg Grant, "CSBA AirSea Battle Concept: More Stealth, Long-Range Strike to Counter Chinese Battle Networks," *Defense Tech* (18 May 2010); and, Zachary Keck, "Air-Sea Battle to Cost \$524.5 Billion Through 2023," *The Diplomat* (24 Dec 2013).
- [14.](#) TX Hammes, "Sorry Air-Sea Battle Is No Strategy," *National Interest* (07 Aug 2013).
- [15.](#) Thomas P.M. Barnett, "Nice critique of the sheer and reckless overkill that is ASBC," *TPM Barnett* blog, 10 Aug 2012; and, Barnett, "The Military-industrial Complex's Self-serving Fantasy" *Time.com*, 8 Aug 2012.
- [16.](#) David C. Gompert and Terrence K. Kelly, "Escalation Cause: How the Pentagon's New Strategy Could Trigger War with China," *Foreign Policy* (02 Aug 2013).
- [17.](#) Greg Jaffe, "US model for a future war fans tensions with China and inside Pentagon," *Washington Post*, 1 Aug 2012.
- [18.](#) Sean Mirski, "How to Win a War with China," *The National Interest* (1 Nov 2013).
- [19.](#) TX Hammes, "Offshore Control: A Proposed Strategy for An Unlikely Conflict," *Strategic Forum* (Jun 2012).
- [20.](#) Robert D. Kaplan, "The Geography of Chinese Power: How Far Can Beijing Reach on Land and at Sea?" *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2010).
- [21.](#) J Stapelton Roy, *Dealing with Rising China*, Policy Brief (Woodrow Wilson Center, Nov 2012).