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US AirSea Battle: Countering China's anti-access Strategies

By Sam Bateman

Synopsis

The US is developing the AirSea Battle concept in response to what it sees as China's anti-access strategies. But there are risks for the region if the two sides misunderstand each other's intentions.

Commentary

THE UNITED STATES and China should reassure each other about their current military intentions. They are appearing increasingly hawkish to each other. Misunderstandings are possible and both sides could explain their plans and intentions more.

China's growing military capabilities have led to deep concern in the US. The "anti-access" nature of some of these capabilities could complicate American operations in East Asia in the event, for example, of conflict over Taiwan or on the Korean Peninsula. In response, the Pentagon is promoting new aggressive concepts to counter anti-access capabilities. Recent top level talks in Washington between China and US included Chinese military officers for the first time. Their presence may have helped provide greater understanding of each side's military intentions.

China's Anti-Access Capabilities

China is acquiring a range of powerful new military capabilities, particularly stealth fighters, new submarines and anti-shipping ballistic missile systems that could potentially defeat a US aircraft carrier battle group. While Beijing claims that these capabilities are for self defence, Washington sees them as potentially capable of denying US access to the East Asian region.

The US may be less concerned about China commissioning an aircraft carrier, which of itself, would be no match for an American carrier. China's submarines, land-based strike aircraft and missiles are a much greater worry. Unfortunately China's 2010 Defence White paper failed to mention, let alone explain, these new capabilities. Instead the White Paper stressed the soft power contribution of Chinese military expansion and the potential contribution to global security.

The AirSea Battle

The AirSea Battle concept is the most prominent response by the US to meet the perceived anti-access threat from China. This received its first public airing in the 2010 US Quadrennial Defence Review (QDR), which announced that the "Air Force and Navy together are developing a new joint air-sea battle concept for defeating

adversaries across the range of military operations, including adversaries equipped with sophisticated anti-access and area denial capabilities”.

The QDR went on to say: “The concept will address how air and naval forces will integrate capabilities across all operational domains — air, sea, land, space, and cyberspace — to counter growing challenges to US freedom of action.” China was not named as one of the adversaries in the context of the AirSea Battle, but US officials are unconvincing in their statements on the concept when they suggest it is not aimed at China.

The Chinese certainly see the concept as aimed against them, and Chinese commentators have responded accordingly. However, this reaction may be reading too much into the concept. China should understand the importance of declaratory military strategies and defence concepts in a democracy, particularly in the US with its huge scrutiny of defence spending through congressional hearings and public commentary. Unfortunately it is the case that the “China threat” has become popular both with US commentators and the American public.

Public promotion of a military concept such as the AirSea Battle is as much about the domestic audience as it is about the international one. The domestic audience comprises the public who need to understand what the military is about; the politicians who are going to approve the defence budget; and last but not least, the militaries themselves who need such a concept on which to base their training and tactics.

Abroad the audience comprises friends and allies who may be reassured of the US commitment, as well as the potential adversaries who need to get the message about the seriousness of the US defence posture. With the Pentagon facing major budget cuts, the main audience for the AirSea Battle may well be the domestic one.

A Cold War Legacy?

The Air Sea Battle has elements of successful US strategies during the latter stages of the Cold War that contributed to the demise of the Soviet Union. These included the LandSea Battle concept for the defence of Western Europe and the US Navy’s Maritime Strategy, which included aggressive forward deployments to confine the Soviet Navy to its home waters in the event of war between the superpowers. These strategies helped convince the Soviet Union that a war against the West could not be won. The AirSea Battle is unlikely to have a similar effect on China.

A vexed issue now is whether strategies, such as the Air Sea Battle, are appropriate in current strategic circumstances. If they are, they need to be explained better. There is no Cold War between China and the US. They are not yet strategic competitors in the same way as the Soviet Union and the US were. The bottom line is that both Beijing and Washington should avoid strategies that invite a “tit for tat” response from the other side. Increased dialogue between American and Chinese military officials would help avoid that outcome.

Outlook

The possibility of increasing competition and even conflict between China and the US is the most worrying scenario in the Asia-Pacific. Events over the past year with Beijing’s response to US naval exercises in the Yellow Sea and differences of view between Beijing and Washington over the South China Sea have confirmed the possibility of increasing competition.

Southeast Asian nations are particularly concerned over the potential for US-China tensions to spill over into their region. Both China and the US have military strategies that appear unreasonably aggressive to the other side although this may not in fact be the case. Talk between military officials under the umbrella of high level talks, such as the recent ones in Washington help provide greater understanding of each other’s intentions.

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