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No. 159/2012 dated 23 August 2012

AirSea Battle: Old Wine in New Bottles?

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Synopsis

The U.S. military's "AirSea Battle" is short on specifics, but appears to draw much from earlier concepts of the "revolution in military affairs." This begs the question whether ASB is simply a ploy to repackage the RMA as a "new" warfighting concept.

Commentary

The U.S. military, which has never been at a loss for buzzwords to describe its warfighting strategies or operational objectives, has come up with a new nomenclature, AirSea Battle (ASB). It is a supposedly novel approach to warfare intended to counter 21st century threat, particularly from emerging nation-state competitors such as China and Iran.

During the 1990s, the prevailing concept inside the Pentagon was the "revolution in military affairs" (RMA). In the 2000s, this mutated into "network-centric warfare" and "force transformation." Today, while the perils may be "new," the tools to fight this battle are anything but AirSea Battle is just the RMA in another guise.

ASB and Anti-Access/Area Denial

Central to the ASB concept is overcoming the "anti-access/area denial challenge." According to the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Affairs (CSBA), "anti-access (A2) strategies aim to prevent U.S. forces from operating from fixed land bases in a theater of operations," while "area-denial (AD) operations aim to prevent the freedom of action of maritime forces operating in the theater." CSBA defines the A2/AD threat as strikes by ballistic and cruise missiles (both land-attack and antiship), artillery and rocket barrages, submarine operations, and long-range air strikes. Cyber-attacks, anti-satellite warfare, and even coastal mines are also usually characteristic of A2/AD.

If the A2/AD threat seems overly broad, AirSea Battle is equally ambitious. While ASB is short on specifics, it is based on the idea of carrying out massive counterstrikes against an enemy's home territory. Cruise missiles, launched from submarines or ships, along with smart bombs dropped from stealth aircraft, would blind and incapacitate the adversary by taking out its military surveillance and communications systems. Other attacks would target the enemy's missile bases, airfields, and naval facilities.

ASB = RMA?

Leaving aside this scary scenario of escalating clashes and counterattacks (how, for instance, might China, or a nuclear-armed Iran, react to an attack on its national territory?), however, AirSea Battle, as a warfighting concept, is depressingly familiar, and instantly recognizable, to anyone who has studied the RMA.

While details are sketchy, ASB seems to revolve around two major ideas: jointness and networking. In January 2012, the U.S. Department of Defence (DoD) released its vision for a “Joint Operational Access Concept” (JOAC). According to the DoD, JOAC is explicitly intended to deal with “opposed operational access in an advanced anti-access/area-denial environment.”

Central to JOAC, according to this document, is a “future joint forces [that] will leverage cross-domain synergy [i.e., air, sea, land, and cyberspace] to establish superiority in some combinations of domains that will provide the freedom of action required by the mission.” JOAC “envision[s] a seamless application of combat power between the domains, with greater integration at dramatically lower echelons than joint forces currently achieve.”

And how do we achieve JOAC? By networking. According to a recent article in *The American Interest* by two U.S. flag officers, ASB would use “networked, integrated attack-in-depth” in order to “disrupt, destroy, and defeat” enemy forces. U.S. Representative J. Randy Forbes, in a March 2012 article in the online magazine, *The Diplomat*, also emphasized networking in ASB: “More specifically, the joint force (integrated air, ground, and naval forces) armed with resilient communications (networked) aims to strike at multiple nodes of an enemy’s system (attack-in-depth) along three lines of effort.”

If all this sounds familiar it’s because the RMA of the 1990s and 2000s was all about networking, jointness, precision-strike, and the like. “Integrated joint operations” was a watchword of network-centric warfare (NCW) and force transformation. In defining NCW the now-defunct U.S. DoD Office of Force Transformation argued nearly a decade ago that it generated “increased combat power by networking sensors, decision makers, and shooters to achieve shared awareness, increased speed of command, high tempo of operations, greater lethality, increased survivability, and a degree of self-synchronization.”

Above all, the RMA entailed the “linking of people, platforms, weapons, sensors, and decision aids into a single network,” resulting in “networked forces that operate with increased speed and synchronization and are capable of achieving massed effects.”

Everything Old is New Again

AirSea Battle, therefore, is basically the RMA rebranded. This begs the question: Is it a sincere effort by the U.S. military to apply lessons learned about the RMA and force transformation to a new global threat environment? Or is it a cynical attempt to save expensive new weapons programs, preserve existing force structures, and prop up military expenditures by magnifying threats and by promoting ambitious warfighting concepts? Either way, the DoD needs to do a much better job of explaining ASB’s purpose and function than trotting out the same old clichés of the RMA.

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