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The Challenge of Strategic Ambiguity in Asia

By Richard A. Bitzinger

Synopsis

Both China and the United States share responsibility for failing to be more forthcoming as to their regional strategic and military postures. Such ambiguity is perilous to long-term security in Asia.

Commentary

ONE OF the most dangerous challenges facing the Asia-Pacific is ambiguity – particularly strategic *ambiguity* on the part of the two most important players in Asian security, the United States and China. How these two nations engage with each other is ultimately of paramount importance to regional security.

Therefore it is crucial that they make their intentions crystal clear, not only to each other but to the other nations of the Asia-Pacific as well.

China's Military Opaqueness

China is, of course, still an overwhelmingly opaque system. Despite recent efforts at transparency, it is difficult to fully fathom Chinese strategic intentions. More to the point, its military modernisation efforts of the past decade have been extremely worrisome, mostly because Beijing has done such a poor job justifying its actions to the outside world.

Its defence budget has grown at least five-fold over the past 15 years; it has added numerous types of advanced military equipment – including fighter jets, submarines, surface combatants, and all kinds of missile systems – and it has accelerated its development of a host of new weapons systems, many of them quite unprecedented, such as an anti-ship ballistic missile.

At the same time, it has matched this military buildup with a new assertiveness in pressing its territorial claims in the South and East China seas, and sometimes ratcheted up the rhetoric with little apparent regard for how poorly this goes down in the rest of Asia. Indeed, China's recent behaviour is increasingly perplexing to neighbours.

The US "Return to Asia" and AirSea Battle

For its part, the United States' "return to Asia" has been only fitfully enunciated. Even more disturbing is the whole issue of the US military's so-called AirSea Battle (ASB). The US military has embraced ASB as a novel approach to warfare intended to counter 21st century threats. Yet, given that so many have made AirSea Battle

such an essential element of US warfighting, and considering the high stakes that it supposedly deals with, it is mystifying that so few particulars been made public as to what ASB really entails.

ASB is often advanced as an *essential* military approach when it comes to dealing with modern threats. And yet so little is known, beyond some banalities, about how ASB is supposed to work in a real-world situation and, more importantly, *why* it is necessary. However, the lack of substance or detail surrounding ASB has permitted wide-ranging speculation as to what it really is.

Central to the ASB concept is overcoming the purportedly emerging “anti-access/area denial challenge” (or A2/AD) that challenges the operational freedom of US military forces. Advocates of ASB frequently emphasise the growing abilities of potential adversaries to deny US forces the ability to enter or operate in maritime territories adjacent to these countries. A2/AD is seen as especially crucial in deterring or countering third-party interventions.

ASB and China

In this regard, China, above all other potential adversaries, is seen as the most critical potential employer of an A2/AD strategy, and therefore the main object of an ASB-based response. The People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) strategic priorities have shifted since the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1996 towards adopting a diverse portfolio of A2/AD capabilities for air, sea and land operations designed to deter, delay and prevent external (i.e., US) entry into specific areas deemed vital to China’s “core interests.”

To this end, the PLA has been gradually upgrading its existing weapons systems and platforms, while experimenting with the next generation of design concepts. This can be seen in the comprehensive modernisation of China’s nuclear and conventional ballistic missiles; integrated air-, missile- and early-warning defence systems; electronic and cyber-warfare capabilities; submarines; surface combat vessels and the introduction of the fourth and fifth generations of multi-role combat aircraft.

In the light of this, AirSea Battle is increasingly regarded, first and foremost, as a response to perceived growing Chinese military power in Asia. This discernment of a “counter-China” emphasis has especially been spurred by the many briefings and writings that predominantly identify China as the *raison d’être* behind ASB. These perceptions, even if exaggerated, raise concerns that AirSea Battle could imperil security and stability in the Asia-Pacific.

At this point, AirSea Battle is either too vague to sufficiently discuss as a conceivable warfighting construct, or too apparently focused on being simply a “counter-China” strategy so as to be credible – for instance, would the US *really* initiate deep strikes on Chinese territory, and, if so, under what conditions? How “scalable” is ASB as a response, and how believable might ASB be as a deterrent or response to lesser forms of Chinese aggression – for example, China’s use of limited military actions (gunboat battles, harassing ships) to press its claims in the South China Sea? In all these cases, the answer is either unclear or the inferred conclusion simply too frightening.

Regional implications of Strategic Ambiguity

In the final analysis, ambiguity is a challenge not just for the Sino-American strategic relationship; it affects all of the Asia-Pacific. Many US allies in the region are justifiably wary of AirSea Battle, for instance, to a large part because the US has not clarified the link between ASB and its “rebalancing strategy” in the Asia-Pacific region, nor what particular aspects of ASB will be relevant for future allied interoperability requirements and involvement.

This operational uncertainty in turn translates into broader strategic uncertainty, which could adversely affect future alliance solidarity and effectiveness.

Overall, both countries share responsibility for failing to make more clear their strategic aims and objectives, as well as how their militaries are poised against each other. In such a situation, regional security and stability is ill-served.

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