



**RSIS Policy Brief**  
**The AirSea Battle Debate and  
the Future of Conflict in East Asia**

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# The AirSea Battle Debate and the Future of Conflict in East Asia

The U.S. military has never been at a loss for catchphrases to describe its warfighting strategies or operational objectives. In the 1980s, there was “AirLand Battle,” which gave way in the 1990s to “full-spectrum” and “network-centric warfare.” The nomenclature currently in vogue within the Department of Defense is “AirSea Battle” (ASB). Of ASB, it has been said that “no new operational concept has been touted as more important, or more hotly debated.”<sup>1</sup> In addition, given Washington’s renewed emphasis on the Asia Pacific as a security sphere, as evidenced by its recent “pivot” (or “rebalancing”) back to Asia, how ASB plays out as a U.S. warfighting concept will have important repercussions for the region.

ASB is being presented as a novel approach to warfare intended to counter 21<sup>st</sup> century threats. And yet, given that some have made ASB such an essential cause in the future of U.S. warfighting, and considering the high underlying stakes that it supposedly deals with, it is mystifying that so few particulars been made public as to what ASB really



Photo Credit: US Navy



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entails. ASB is often advanced as an *essential* military approach when it comes to dealing with modern threats posed by countries such as Iran, North Korea, and China. And yet so little is known, beyond some banalities about how ASB would work in a real-world situation and, more importantly, *why* it is necessary. One journal has termed ASB as simply “a help desk for 21<sup>st</sup> century warfare” – an *ad hoc*, catchall device intended to “fix the problem in front of you with the tools you have on hand.”<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, Pentagon staffers deny this, but the lack of substance or detail surrounding ASB has permitted wide-ranging speculation as to what it really is. In particular, in light of such ambiguity, ASB is being 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.<sup>3</sup> These perceptions, even if exaggerated, raise concerns that AirSea Battle could exacerbate security and stability in the Asia Pacific.

<sup>1</sup> “100 Most Influential People in US Defense,” *Defense News*, December 16, 2012 (<http://special.defensenews.com/people/profile.php?pn=68>).

<sup>2</sup> Sam Lagrone, “Pentagon’s ‘Air-Sea Battle’ Explained. Finally.” *Wired*, August 6, 2012 (<http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2012/08/air-sea-battle-2>).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Jan Van Tol, et al., *AirSea Battle* (powerpoint briefing), (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, May 18, 2010); Andrew F. Krepinevich, *Why AirSea Battle?* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010); Greg Jaffe, “US model for future war fans tensions with China and inside Pentagon,” *Washington Post*, August 2, 2012 ([http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-model-for-a-future-war-fans-tensions-with-china-and-inside-pentagon/2012/08/01/gJQAC6F8PX\\_print.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-model-for-a-future-war-fans-tensions-with-china-and-inside-pentagon/2012/08/01/gJQAC6F8PX_print.html)).

# What is AirSea Battle?

In September 2009, the U.S. Navy and Air Force signed a classified memo to initiate an inter-service effort to develop a new joint operational concept, dubbed AirSea Battle. Emulating intellectual transitions in military doctrine along the lines of the AirLand Battle (ALB) warfighting concept developed in the early 1980s to counter advances in Soviet operational art, ASB has been designed, at the strategic level, to preserve stability and to sustain U.S. power projection and freedom of action, and, at the operational level, to offset current and anticipated asymmetric threats through a novel integration of U.S. Air Force and Navy's concepts, assets, and capabilities.

Central to the ASB concept is overcoming the purportedly emerging "anti-access/area denial challenge" that challenges the operational freedom of U.S. military forces. Advocates of ASB frequently emphasise the growing abilities of potential adversaries (China, Iran, North Korea, etc.) to deny U.S. 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 – for example, efforts on the part of the U.S. military to come to the aid of Taiwan in the case of a cross-Strait crisis, or Saudi Arabia and neighboring states in the case of attacks on shipping in the Persian Gulf.<sup>4</sup> 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."<sup>5</sup> 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.

To counter a hypothetical crisis scenario or conflict in which an adversary employs an A2/AD strategy, ASB

in turn envisions a pre-emptive, standoff, precision-strike – or "Networked, Integrated Attack-in-Depth" – initiated and carried out by U.S. forces alone, in three distinct phases: (1) by striking the enemy's intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) assets from afar through a "blinding campaign" in order to deny their situational awareness; by reducing the adversary's ability to "see deep", U.S. aircraft carrier groups would thereby gain access to the battlespace; (2) by carrying out a "missile suppression campaign" to disrupt the enemy's air-defence networks, using stealthy long-range platforms, and supported by submarine-launched weapons and sensors; through this destruction or degradation of the enemy's critical air-defence assets and the consequent achievement of air superiority, U.S. forces would be able to attack the adversary's land-based missile launchers, surface-to-surface missiles, and their supporting infrastructure; (3) by conducting diverse follow-on operations, such as "distant blockades," in order to seize the operational initiative and to ensure protracted U.S. freedom of action in the region.

Since its inception, however, ASB has been hindered by strategic ambiguity and uncertain operational consequences. Notwithstanding two semi-official reports published by CSBA and one joint document released in early 2012 (the "Joint Operational Access Concept"), the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) has not articulated in detail the purpose, end or degree to which ASB concept is necessary. Instead, the DoD has attempted to convey a broader strategic rationale behind ASB, particularly in the context of restoring and sustaining a stable military balance in the western Pacific, by strengthening deterrence *vis-à-vis* China, and by providing U.S. allies with security assurances.

While details surrounding ASB are sketchy, this warfighting concept nevertheless appears to revolve around two major ideas: jointness and networking. In January 2012, the DoD released its vision for a "Joint Operational Access Concept" (JOAC). According

<sup>4</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), *2011 Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense, August 2011), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> See Krepinevich, *Why AirSea Battle?* pp. 9-10.

to the DoD, JOAC is explicitly intended to deal with “opposed operational access in an advanced anti-access/area-denial environment.”<sup>6</sup> 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.”<sup>7</sup> JOAC “envisions a seamless application of combat power between the domains, with greater integration at dramatically lower echelons that joint forces currently achieve.”<sup>8</sup>

In turn, the kind of jointness envisioned by the JOAC will be achieved mainly by networking. According to a February 2012 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.<sup>9</sup> As they put it, jointness is seen as:

[E]stablishing resilient communications networks and reinforcing the links between people and organisations, air and naval forces [that] will maintain decision advantage and effective cross-domain operations despite an adversary’s anti-access and area-denial effort. Air and naval forces will [be able to] tightly coordinate their operations across each domain to defeat anti-access and area-denial threats.<sup>10</sup>

Consequently, “Under Air-Sea Battle, we will take ‘jointness’ to a new level.”<sup>11</sup>

In a March 2012 article in the online magazine, *The Diplomat*, U.S. Representative J. Randy Forbes, also emphasised networking with regards to 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.”<sup>12</sup>

To a large extent, ASB is simply a rebranding of the information technologies-driven “Revolution in Military Affairs” (RMA) that was so popular in military circles a decade ago. The IT-RMA of the 1990s and 2000s was all about networking, jointness, precision-strike, and information superiority. “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 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-synchronisation.”<sup>13</sup> Above all, the IT-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 synchronisation and are capable of achieving massed effects.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, “Joint Operational Access Concept,” Version 1.0 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, January 17, 2012), p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Joint Operational Access Concept,” pp. 38-39.

<sup>8</sup> Joint Operational Access Concept,” p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> Gen. Norton A. Schwartz and Adm. Jonathan W. Greenert, “Air-Sea Battle: Promoting Stability in an Era of Uncertainty,” *The American Interest*, February 20, 2012 (<http://www.the-american-interest.com/article.cfm?piece=1212>).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Rep. J. Randy Forbes, “America’s Pacific Air-Sea Battle Vision,” *The Diplomat*, March 12, 2012 (<http://thediplomat.com/2012/03/08/americas-pacific-air-sea-battle-vision/>).

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Office of Defense Transformation, *Network-Centric Warfare: Creating a Decisive Warfighting Advantage* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2003), p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Office of Force Transformation (OFT), *Elements of Defense Transformation* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, October 2004), p. 8.



# Why ASB? The China Factor

Whether or not it is a totally new concept or simply a warmed-over IT-RMA, AirSea Battle does have significant repercussions for security in the Asia Pacific, because it is an essential component of Washington's response to the growth of Chinese military power. Together with the "pivot toward Asia," promulgated in early 2012, ASB is part of a decidedly military effort by the U.S. to counterbalance Beijing's growing strength and influence in the region.

China, above all other potential adversaries, is regarded 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 toward adopting a diverse portfolio of A2/AD capabilities for air, sea and land operations designed to deter, delay and prevent external (i.e., U.S.) 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.

Alongside the qualitative shifts in "hardware," the PLA has also been revamping its "software," including its military doctrine, organisational force structure and operational concepts, which are now conceptualised in the context of "Local Wars under Conditions of Informationisation." In particular, China's military doctrine envisions future conflicts as being short in duration, limited to its coastal periphery or "near seas" (the Yellow, East and South China Seas), and involving integrated or joint military operations across the air, sea, land, space and cyberspace domains. The shifting character of the future battlefield in turn alters the PLA's operational requirements and compels the

Chinese military to adopt innovative concepts and capabilities that would constrain the U.S.'s strategic advantage and freedom of action in the region. These include A2/AD-oriented "attack and defence" concepts that aim to offset the military effectiveness of U.S. forward-deployed bases, mobile forces and their supporting infrastructure.

In a range of conventional potential crisis scenarios on the Korean Peninsula, for example, China could take measures to disrupt the build-up of U.S. combat power in terms of size, location and timeframes. Specifically, the PLA could delineate clear air, sea and land buffer zones (conflict limit lines) beyond which U.S.-South Korean forces could not operate. In such a case, the U.S. would need to construct alternative points of entry for its reinforcements, which could effectively delay its initial and follow-on responses. Similarly, in a scenario involving a Chinese attack on Taiwan, the use of antiship cruise and ballistic missiles would impede the use of aircraft carriers around the island. Finally, depending on the modalities of China's A2/AD strategies, the U.S. could potentially have to adjust the scope of its involvement in the region, limiting its operational conduct and freedom of action, particularly with regard to its naval deployments in the South China Sea.

Interestingly, while ASB appears to be inherently designed to limit China's emerging A2/AD systems and capabilities, its proponents go out of their way to deny that ASB does not specifically target China. CSBA, for example, has explicitly stated in a 2010 briefing that "ASB is NOT about war with China or containment of China" but rather "part of a larger 'offsetting strategy' aimed at preserving a stable military balance and maintaining crisis stability in East Asia." Nevertheless, the briefing also describes the PLA's acquisition of A2/AD capabilities as the "most stressful case" for an ASB strategy. It then goes on to describe, in excruciating detail, how ASB would be employed to fight a war against China, including attacks on the Chinese mainland.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Van Tol, *AirSea Battle*, assorted pages.

## The Asian Response to ASB



*Photo Credit: US Navy*

The political and military establishment in the U.S. emphasises the growing importance and complexity of East Asia's security challenges, including the strategic and operational consequences of China's ongoing military modernisation. U.S. allies in East Asia, however, have not fully embraced the ASB concept or the rationale behind it. Indeed, South Korea, Japan, Australia and other U.S. partners in the region have been relatively quiet on the implications of ASB, largely because they do not possess the full extent of the planned operational details, which remain classified. Such hesitance is also attributable to concerns, from the allied perspective, over the extent to which ASB provides strategic reassurance as opposed to representing abandonment by the U.S.. Indeed, the U.S. DoD has not clarified the link between the ASB concept 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. Moreover, at the operational level, U.S. allies question whether implementing ASB would actually mitigate military effectiveness and the defence of proximate U.S. allied bases in the region.

In this context, U.S. allies in the region question whether and to what extent ASB foresees active allied participation in the envisioned "deep-strike missions" targeting China's surveillance systems and the long-range missiles dispersed across the mainland. This operational uncertainty in turn translates into broader strategic uncertainty, in which future alliance credibility may be compromised. Consequently,

if ASB indeed comes to shape U.S. operational conduct, U.S. allies in the region may feel the need to devise alternative defence strategies, and rethink the pace, direction and character of their military modernisation, including their resource allocation and weapons acquisition priorities.

However, with the prevailing emphasis in the media, think-tanks and ultimately the military services on decoding ASB itself, there has been a lack of awareness of the recent emergence of critical responses to ASB and the evolution of alternative strategies and innovative concepts within the U.S. military. Opponents of ASB point to the high escalatory risks resulting from projected deep-strike operations against China, including the possibility of a nuclear response. Critics also point to the fact that implementing ASB would require substantial investment in the next generation of networked C4ISR systems (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance), submarines, long-range conventional strike systems (including stealth bombers and anti-satellite weapons), strike fighters and innovative unmanned technologies, which even the U.S. defence establishment may not be able to afford, let alone its allies who might have to fight alongside U.S. forces.



*Photo Credit: US Navy*



*Photo Credit: US Navy*



# Conclusions

In its current state, “AirSea Battle” is either too vague to sufficiently discuss as a conceivable warfighting construct, or too focused on being simply a “counter-China” strategy so as to be credible – e.g., would the U.S. *really* initiate deep strikes on Chinese territory, and, if so, under what conditions? How “scalable” is ASB as a response, especially after launching initial attacks on the Chinese mainland? 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 too frightening.

AirSea Battle is so divisive that it is even propelling inter-service debates *within* the U.S. military. Conceptual alternatives to ASB have arisen such as the “mutually denied battlespace strategy” (MDBS), currently debated within the Naval Postgraduate School and the U.S. Naval War College. The MDBS – a type of mutual A2/AD – refrains from initiating ABS’s deep precision-strike campaign against China to gain access to the battlefield. Instead, it reverses the ASB concept by relying on the U.S.’s maritime superiority to threaten to limit the freedom of action of Chinese warships and commercial ships in the contested areas. The U.S. Army, meanwhile, is sceptical about the entire ASB concept, given ASB’s neglect of U.S. expeditionary and ground forces. Instead, the U.S. Army is developing its own “joint concept for entry operations” that envisions amphibious, airborne and air-assault operations to gain and maintain inland access to the adversary’s territory.

Notwithstanding the ongoing inter-service debates within the U.S. military, the ASB concept will be tested and calibrated with changing strategic realities, available defence resources, and the operational experience of U.S. forces. While it is unclear whether or when the concept will be fully implemented amid varying institutional and organisational support, technological and budgetary requirements and operational uncertainties, its adaptation trajectory will have significant policy implications for U.S. friends and allies not only in the Asia Pacific. Indeed,

the emergence of contending operational concepts provides an important background for the projection of potential paths and patterns of future warfare. This is because the ASB debate challenges not only the established interoperability roles and missions of U.S. allies at the operational level, but more importantly, it may also shape the contours of the next RMA, which will drive defence planning, weapons procurement, and operational conduct of other advanced militaries. In this context, the emerging strategic competition in East Asia will inevitably focus U.S. strategy toward the Asia Pacific as a whole, and accelerate the diffusion of military innovation that will provide greater lethality, precision, range, and an overall increase in power-projection capabilities.

Consequently, detecting, predicting, and responding to military innovation or new approaches to combat in different geostrategic settings is vital to ensuring strategic and operational adaptability in advanced military establishments. Comparative perspectives and studies of military innovation trajectories, whether in terms of “hardware” or “software, in different geostrategic settings can help defence policy-makers to detect changes in approaches to combat; and in doing so, prompt a new debate on the validity of their countries’ established strategic paradigms and operational art. The implications of AirSea Battle as an emerging concept are, ultimately, not confined to the U.S. or China alone; indeed, U.S. friends and allies in the Asia Pacific need to explore, benchmark, and debate the applicability and implications of the emerging ASB debate in terms of their own evolving strategic narratives and military innovation paths.



Photo Credit: US Navy

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