

Big-War Thinking in a Small-War Era

The Rise of the AirSea Battle Concept

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Amidst “rising” China’s increasingly frequent displays of militaristic bravado in East Asia, America has upped the ante with the introduction a new war doctrine aimed at the Pacific. The AirSea Battle Concept (ASBC), in its basic form, is a call for cooperation between the Air Force and Navy to overcome anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) capabilities of potential enemies. At first glance, that seems like an innocuous and even practical idea. When implemented, however, the ASBC will be a jab at China’s most sensitive pressure points. Given China’s rising encirclement paranoia—most recently fueled by US arms sales to Taiwan, intrusion into the Spratly Islands dispute and naval exercises with the South Koreans in the Yellow Sea—Beijing will likely not take news of this development well. As a long-term strategy, the upshot may be an escalation of hostilities that will lock the United States into an unwarranted Cold War-style arms competition.

Why pick this fight—or more prosaically this arms race—with one’s “banker”? The Pentagon has its reasons, with some actually tied to strategic logic, along with the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act and the usual budgetary instincts for service survival. Behind the scenes, an inside-the-Beltway think tank leads the sales job—as

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was the case was with the recent rise of counterinsurgency (COIN). Their rationale? A back-to-the-pre-nuclear-future mindset that only a true Mahanian could love: we will bomb and blockade China for months on end, while neither side reaches for the nuclear button!

So what are we to make of this big-war strategizing in an era of small wars? Is this America seeking strategic balance or simply a make-work doctrine for a navy and air force largely left out of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq?

Why the Pentagon Must Threaten Direct War with China

Given the high costs surrounding US military interventions in both Iraq and Afghanistan, there naturally arises a “never again” mindset regarding regime-toppling exercises. As the Obama administration seeks to sequentially unwind both situations, most experts predict that America will limit itself, across what remains of the “long war” with violent Islamic extremists, to the more “symmetrized” combination of special operations forces and drones currently on display in northwest Pakistan.

Still, as globalization continues to remap much of the developing world by encouraging secessionist movements (hint: it’s always the most ambitious provinces that want out), the demand for great-power nation-building services is likely to remain strong. And to the extent that America eschews such responsibilities, other rising powers seeking to protect their expanding network of economic interests will inevitably step into that void—albeit with less militarized delivery systems. China may do so, but, as is now becoming apparent, it prefers *stategraft* to nation-building, paying upfront from its sizeable cash coffers.

As for the profound evolution of US ground forces in response to operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, that big-war-to-small-wars shift is highly unlikely to reverse itself anytime soon, if for no other reason than the continuing implausibility of direct, large-scale land wars with any of the rising great powers. The rise of proxy conflicts in developing regions would likewise have no impact on this transformation, because a small-wars mindset would also serve us well there. Where core US interests are not involved, Washington would welcome a growing willingness of these new powers to alleviate its policing burden in bad neighborhoods.

But with this strategic reorientation, two challenges emerge. First, how does America maintain a high barrier-to-entry in the “market” of great-power war—essentially the hedging question vis-à-vis China. Second, under increasingly tight budgets (triggered by the long war’s high costs), what ordering principle should be applied to the Air Force and Navy, the two forces that have been left behind? Viewed in this light, the appearance of a unifying battle concept for our air and sea forces was preordained. Whether or not history will judge the ASBC as a make-work project for the two services is irrelevant. For, indeed, such judgment would represent a significant strategic success—on par with Ronald Reagan’s “Star Wars” gambit with the Soviets.

Thus it was no surprise to see Secretary of Defense Robert Gates instruct the Air Force and Navy to seek new operational synergies. As he consistently moves the rest of the force down the small-wars path, he needs to demonstrate his office's recognition of the strategic risk involved—namely, that China might use this historical moment to disconnect an otherwhere preoccupied America from its long-standing Leviathan role in East Asia. In short, Gates and company surely understand that China is unlikely to follow America's lead in pursuing long and costly wars, even to ensure the security of its expanding resource dependency on unstable regions, whether in radical Islamic territories or weak states. While they doubt the possibility of war with China, they have to hedge their bets.

In this regard, the ASBC can be viewed as America's effective "nudge" to the Chinese: signaling the threat of, "Don't make me come over there!" while the US military continues to offer strategic cooperation in other areas, such as sea lane security and antipiracy missions.

Does China's current military build-up warrant such a nudge? With respect to security concerns within the Western Pacific region, absolutely. The PLA is stockpiling weapons and platforms wholly consistent with a big-war mentality. But, is the PLA likewise building an extra-regional power projection capacity consistent with its growing resource dependencies? Certainly nowhere to the same degree or intensity, for port calls—even a "string of pearls" of naval facilities linking China to the Persian Gulf—do not constitute sea control. For now, China gives every indication of free-riding on America's system-policing efforts while seeking a capacity for military intimidation in East Asia. The clearest cause-and-effect proof has been the doubling of arms purchases by China's regional neighbors over the last half-decade.

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Is that an illogical strategy on China's part? Given America's exuberant unilateralism following 9/11, I would have to say no. From China's perspective, it is good to let those crazy Americans tire themselves elsewhere while the PLA builds up its capacity to preclude America's ability to intervene freely in their home waters.

Can we describe China's buildup as "unprovoked"? Put the shoe on the other foot: if China was engaged in two lengthy wars in Central and South America and the United States started building up its naval capacity for defense-in-depth operations throughout the Caribbean, would you consider America's response to be "unprovoked"?

Additionally, as RADM Michael McDevitt (ret.) of the Center for Naval Analyses argued in a recent conference paper submitted to National Defense University, China has naturally gravitated to a more sea-focused security mindset, thanks to the combination of factors. First and foremost is the demise of the fear of invasion from the sea (a historical nightmare that defined the pre-Mao "century of humiliation").

Moreover, China has improved land-border relations with all its neighbors (especially with post-Soviet Russia). Also importantly, the seminal naval “lessons learned” resulting from the Taiwan Straits crises of 1995-96, have been profound (remembering that experience likewise birthed Network-Centric Warfare on our side). Lastly, China’s dependency on seaborne trade and energy is already huge and continues to grow.

Not to put too simple a spin on it, but China’s response to the threat posed by the US military’s Pacific prowess mirrors that of the Soviet Union’s original anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy of the late Cold War. That strategy employed open-ocean surveillance to direct long-range land-based aircraft and submarines armed with cruise missiles that put US carriers at considerable risk as they approached the Soviet mainland. As McDevitt notes, China “has apparently made a series of sensible decisions to adopt an approach that is remarkably similar to what the Soviets did.” “Sensible” here is defined as pursuing an asymmetrical capacity that is far cheaper than creating a 21st-century version of the Imperial Japanese Navy—namely, a heavy reliance on mobile land-based ballistic missiles that soon enough will feature terminal guidance systems capable of “mission-kill” strikes against moving US carriers.

Not to be outdone by this nostalgic turn of events, our Air Force and Navy are essentially updating and “naval-izing” the AirLand Battle Concept pursued back then by our Air Force and Army in the face of superior Soviet firepower massed along Europe’s Cold War divide. The ASBC is hardly a check-mating move, however, and is better characterized as a bare-minimum response designed to keep the board in play. By doing so, the US is signaling to the Chinese the impossibility of a lightning-strike victory. As McDevitt commented in a recent interview, the ASBC “just preserves our ability *not* to be run out of Dodge by China.”

Will the AirSea Battle Concept Work as Strategic Communications?

There is every indication that it will. By enshrining the ASBC in the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review, Secretary Gates has given his imprimatur for the force structure required to implement it, putting them logically on par with those of the now small-wars-focused Army and Marines. Given the clear operational priority of our high-tempo operations in Afghanistan and our legacy presence in Iraq, this move signals America’s long-term commitment to paying the minimum big-war ante required to maintain the strategic balance in Asia.

Despite our strategists’ rather breathless hyping of China’s self-declared capacity for delivering a debilitating pre-emptive strike (the “assassin’s mace” strategy that clearly apes Imperial Japan’s approach to its opening Pearl Harbor strike), the PLA’s Achilles heel is clearly its high-tech reliance on wide-area surveillance. Destroy that, or merely “blind” it, and China’s ability to follow through on its crushing first blow disintegrates. Along these lines, all the US military needs to do is demonstrate just enough implied capacity for offensive cyber/electronic/space operations to make

the PLA doubt in its own ability to deliver a decisive first-round knockout. Again, Reagan's employment of the "Star Wars" challenge is instructive: the Soviets could never discount the possibility that those devious and ingenious Americans might just secretly pull it off.

And if that argument doesn't resonate, then simply realize that the PLA spent the last decade watching the world's finest military attempt a shock-and-awe effort against lowly Iraq, only to be trapped into a prolonged unconventional conflict. The US military is battle-hardened in this regard, whereas the PLA is downright virginal by comparison (the PLA's last warfighting experience was just over three decades ago, meaning only a small sliver of senior officers have ever seen combat). The United States likewise has the capacity to swap out its political leadership when wars go badly, while China's single-party dictatorship possesses no such flexibility. Then there's China's single-child family structure: even under the spell of nationalism, how many people would be willing to sacrifice their "little emperors" in combat before social unrest skyrocketed beyond Beijing's control? Nationalism is the promise of political will during wartime—not its guarantor.

By prodding Beijing's insecurities, the ASBC will provide unhealthy encouragement for an arms race.

In this contest of wills, then, America can adopt the strategic posture of the asymmetrical warrior, meaning our signaling need not meet the high standard of a war-winning strategy, but merely that of a war-complicating or -lengthening strategy. Our national security establishment—not to mention our public—has demonstrated an impressive capacity for "sticking to its guns" in protracted and even costly wars, and, contrary to popular opinion, nothing in American history or our current national psyche suggests a diminishment of that capacity. Indeed, for the foreseeable future, one could argue that Americans would have no trouble sustaining a wartime enemy image particularly of the Chinese. America may represent globalization's dark face to many around the planet, but inside the United States that role belongs decidedly to China.

The United States also has at its disposal significant near-term force-structure opportunities for further signaling its strategic resolve. The most salient example: if the US Navy were to move decisively toward fielding unmanned combat air vehicles on its carriers (a good idea for all sorts of reasons), our now vulnerable big decks could—at a moment's notice—mount strike operations at suitably standoff distances to effectively diminish China's first-strike strategy. China's Pearl Harbor-like opening blows will be far less stirring when Doolittle's unmanned "raiders"—with no return address required—strike back at the Chinese mainland almost immediately.

Finally, the PLA and China's senior Communist Party leadership give no serious indication of being anywhere near immune to deterrence on the Taiwan scenario, which lies at the heart of the ASBC's strategic rationale (with Iran a distant second).

Off the record, senior Chinese officials readily indicate a complete understanding of the logic of deterrence with regard to Taiwan. They view the “assassin’s mace” as PLA’s capacity to threaten the US Navy’s capacity to threaten the PLA Navy’s capacity to threaten Taiwan with invasion. The AirSea Battle Concept extends this chain of mutual deterrence one additional link—nothing more. But it will put the ball in China’s court, and, by prodding Beijing’s insecurities, provide unhealthy encouragement for an arms race. Building on China’s 2007 anti-satellite missile test, the next realm for this competition will likely be in space.

The CSBA’s Sales Job: Best Not to Read the Fine Print

The driving intellectual force behind the AirSea Battle Concept’s relatively quick rise to the top is clearly the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. Its best rationales have already been summarized above: this is the bare minimum effort to keep America in the game of maintaining strategic stability across Asia. But when its authors, most notably CSBA president Andrew Krepinevich, offer larger or longer-term strategic arguments, they quickly reveal the usual Pentagon ignorance of how the global economy works.

For example, the CSBA publication entitled, “Why AirSea Battle?” raises the specter of an emboldened Chinese military forcing a “latter-day Chinese Greater Co-Prosperty Sphere of influence” upon the rest of Asia. It’s a concept without credible underpinning logic, given the similar export-driven, manufacturing-intensive and resource-dependent growth profiles of East Asian economies. Indeed, this is the primary problem facing regional economic integration efforts. If China were seriously pursuing such a resource-driven security strategy, it would be building military bases all over Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, South America and Sub-Saharan Africa—where its energy and mineral dependencies are truly ballooning. Instead, it’s that global “policeman” known as the US military that maintains such a world-wide strategic footprint.

A similar op-ed argument recently made in the *Wall Street Journal* about China’s military build-up leading to a “Finlandization” of East Asia is equally implausible and unsupported by recent trends.¹ For the more China builds up the PLA, the more its neighbors stock up on Western—and particularly American—military hardware. In this regard, every Chinese effort to bluster and intimidate backfires, driving previously indifferent or reluctant states toward America’s strategic embrace. Pursued long enough in this clumsy manner, China could well find itself having to bomb all of its small neighbors in any big-war scenario to root out America’s many military facilities. The same dynamic is seen throughout the Persian Gulf in response to Iran’s more modest A2/AD strategy. Far from denying the US military access, such attempts tend to increase it.

In general, it is correct to note that, “the US military’s role as the steward of the global commons has enabled the free movement of goods around the world, facilitating both general peace and prosperity.”² But that logic gets bent out of recogniz-

able shape when used to justify a strong response to China's naval build-up. China's growth strategy is highly dependent on attracting foreign capital in the form of direct investment and a trade surplus—a turbo-charged version of Japan's preceding rise. Like Japan, China is becoming highly resource dependent. At this point in history, China—and more specifically the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule—could not be more dependent on the free movement of goods around the world. By extension, the same goes for the PLA, less of a national army than the CCP's bodyguard. It is thus beyond ironic to cite an “open door” strategic logic when it comes to post-Mao China, which, as final assembler of note in Asia's many production chains, constitutes *the* open door linking East Asian and Western Hemisphere economies (resourcing from South America, selling to North America). Are we then to destroy globalization's most dynamic “open door” in order to save it?

Here we begin to map the incomplete logic of the ASBC when arrayed against America's grand strategy of spreading an international liberal trade order—a.k.a., globalization—these past seven decades (i.e., going all the way back to Franklin Roosevelt's Lend-Lease bribing of the British to ultimately end their system of imperial trade preferences). The ASBC makes sense only along the narrow lines of shutting down a remaining Cold War-era trigger for great-power war—namely, Taiwan. Once removed as an instigator, China's fear of attack “from the sea” is far more easily mollified and transmuted into a cooperative relationship with the United States Navy on the subject of securing common sea lines of communication.

The logic of the driving Taiwan scenario in CSBA publications likewise bleeds plausibility on both ends of the warfighting spectrum. Two good examples are Taiwan's successful “invasion” of China's electronics export sector over the last decade, and the recently concluded free trade agreement between island and mainland. Yes, while such deep connectivity hardly precludes all possibility of war-triggering scenarios (most wars occur between neighbors, as does most trade), this unprecedented expansion of economic interdependency in recent years hardly reflects a growing level of political-military tension, despite both US and Chinese militaries clinging ferociously to the historical lessons of the Taiwan Straits crises from a decade-and-a-half ago.

Reading through CSBA's full-up exploration of ASBC, the resulting war between China and the United States strains credulity beyond all reason.³ Three maps in particular depict what are logically lengthy strike campaigns against China's radar/space facilities, ballistic missile facilities and submarine bases. In total, they suggest a China-wide bombing campaign by the United States of such tremendous volume that, as CSBA's authors note, America would be required to dramatically ramp up short-term production of precision-guided munitions. Toward that end, one supposes, America should preemptively terminate all trade with China; trade that would financially underwrite the production lines of such weapon systems—again, to service a theoretical protection of “the free movement of goods around the world.”

Beyond that fantastic scenario extension lies CSBA's plans to basically destroy the entire Chinese air force and submarine fleet, plus institute a "distant blockade" that would see us interdict and search—and here the irony balloons—China's seaborne trade, which ought to be fairly simple since so much of it involves the US economy. And because it's not easy to stop committed large ships (don't tell Somalia's pirates), CSBA broaches the notion of using Air Force bombers to "provide 'on-call' maritime strike." One can only imagine how many thousands of Wal-Mart containers the US military could send to the bottom of the Pacific before the White House would hear some complaints from the US business community. But why let that reality intrude?

Most incredulously, a guiding assumption of the CSBA's war scenario analysis is that, despite the high likelihood that a Sino-US conventional conflict "would devolve into a prolonged war" (presumably with tens of thousands of casualties on China's side at least), mutual nuclear deterrence would be preserved throughout the conflict even as China suffers humiliating defeat across the board. The historical proof offered for this stunning judgment? Neither Nazi Germany nor Saddam Hussein's Iraq used chemical weapons as a last-ditch tool to stave off defeat. And if China took that desperate step? The CSBA then admits that, "the character of the conflict would change so drastically as to render discussion of major conventional warfare irrelevant." As strategic "oops!" disclaimers go, that one has the benefit of understatement.

Of course, CSBA's counter to such criticism is to argue that thinking about—and preparing for—that unthinkable *is what keeps it unthinkable*, much like our successful Cold War-era deterrence of World War III in Europe. Fair enough, but that suggests a multi-pronged political-military approach to reduce the overall likelihood of such catastrophic escalation.

Understanding ASBC within Our Bilateral Relationship with China

Stipulating that the ASBC constitutes a strategic communications strategy not unlike the Reagan administration's employment of Star Wars vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, we must immediately ask why the United States consistently refuses China's offer of a multilateral treaty designed to prevent the weaponization of space. As CSBA frequently notes, the United States is far more dependent on its space infrastructure than fledgling China, so why doesn't Washington lock in this clear advantage while it can?

It is no secret within US national security circles that the primary opponents of such a diplomatic breakthrough are the Air Force and Navy, with the former being the lead advocate of America's eventual weaponization of space. This begs the question of whether or not ASBC serves America's strategic interests or dangerously encourages a strategic/space arms race with China that significantly elevates the possibility of great-power war. Pursued in its separate track, the ASBC is likely to make it far more difficult to build a positive military-to-military relationship with the PLA—or

more specifically the PLA Navy—concerning the overlapping Sino-American security interests outside of East Asia.

Unless you consider the North Korean situation to offer a secondary opportunity for large-scale direct Sino-American conflict—an argument virtually no serious strategist offers anymore—then you're left with the larger strategic trend of America continuing to focus more attention on central/south/southwest Asia (and Africa) relative to an otherwise highly stable East Asia. While the ASBC correctly argues for an even heavier air/sea regional focus from the US military, our strategic goal cannot be to pin down the Chinese military “back home” by creating undue strategic uncertainty there. If we want a positive bilateral relationship to supersede this negative legacy relationship, then we must not only signal our desire to cap any resulting regional arms race, but likewise aggressively seek out Chinese security cooperation elsewhere—if for the only reason that we must end the strategic mismatch between the West's dwindling security resources (and associated political will) and the East's rising worldwide network/resource dependencies.

In sum, ending China's free-riding is arguably more important for long-term system-wide stability than continuing to deter China's military invasion of Taiwan. As globalization's networks continue to expand at a rapid pace, America's ability to play sole Leviathan to the system naturally degrades dramatically. That means, while the likelihood of China's military invasion of Taiwan dissipates with each passing year, the likelihood of America's “imperial exhaustion” most certainly surpasses it in strategic importance *in the near term*.

History will judge US strategists most severely if our choice to maintain “access” to East Asia by triggering a regional arms race *precludes* our ability to draw China into strategic co-management of this era of pervasively extending globalization—without a doubt America's greatest strategic achievement. I cannot fault the AirSea Battle Concept as an operational capability designed to keep us in the East Asian balancing “game.” But my fear is that it will—primarily by default and somewhat by “blue” ambition—serve America badly in a strategic sense, absent a proactive political *and* military engagement effort to balance its negative impact on the most important bilateral relationship of the modern globalization era.

Bluntly put, that means killing the Taiwan scenario immediately, in a Nixonian diplomatic thrust, before ambitious admirals and generals (and think tanks) on both sides lock us into a far worse strategic pathway. ☹️

Notes

¹ Andrew F. Krepinevich, “China's ‘Finlandization’ Strategy in the Pacific,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 11, 2010.

² Andrew F. Krepinevich, “Why AirSea Battle?” Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010, p. 7.

³ Jan Van Tol, Mark Gunzinger, Andrew Krepinevich and Jim Thomas, “AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept,” Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010.