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America's Air-Sea Battle Concept: An Attempt to Weaken China's A2/AD Strategy¹

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Significance:

Over the last several years, American military planners have begun the complex task of reorienting U.S. military capabilities towards presumed challenges of the future. While such planning may be slowed thanks to U.S. and allied operations against the “Islamic State”, strategists from both political parties recognize long-term trends in military technology along with the diffusion of advanced, precision strike weapons guarantee that fundamental changes in U.S. military planning, procurement, and overall grand strategy are needed to preserve existing military dominance.

What We Need To Know:

Beginning in roughly 2007 under the George W. Bush administration with a new U.S. Navy maritime strategy, a shift away from counterinsurgency operations began.² Indeed, U.S. defensive planners since the early 2000's have become increasingly concerned over the emergence of what China calls “counter-intervention operations” or what many in the West refer to as Anti-Access-Area Denial (A2/AD) military challenges. Such a strategy, broadly stated, attempts to slow, limit, deny or deter a superior technologically advanced foe from conducting threatening military operations. Using a combination of various military platforms such as ultra-quiet diesel submarines, over 80,000 sea mines, various types of cyber warfare, anti-satellite weapons and swarm attacks by ballistic and cruise missiles Chinese military planners are constructing what various scholars have referred to as an “assassin's mace” of A2/AD capabilities.³ Chinese strategists in most scenarios assume United States military forces and their allies would be the intended target in scenarios ranging from military action over the

East and South China Seas, operations concerning Taiwan, and increasingly over any and all areas in and around the first island chain.

Just as past experiences—events like the 1995-1996 Taiwan Crisis and the 2001 Hainan Island Crisis—have pushed China towards an A2/AD-based strategy, America's own history will guide its response to future challenges with A2/AD being a major part of Washington's post "war on terror" strategic outlook. American military planners have long considered A2/AD challenges an area of priority stretching back at least as far as 1992, when the first reference of the term "anti-access" was used in a largely forgotten RAND study.⁴ Since then, specifically since 2007 onward, U.S. strategic thinkers have considered a number of options that could negate the impact of A2/AD tactics and weapons platforms, with heavy focus squarely aimed at specific Chinese A2/AD military capabilities.

Analysis:

American planners have looked for ways to ensure three core concepts stretching out into the coming decades: (1) retaining unmatched conventional military superiority across all domains of warfare (land, sea, air, space, and cyber), (2) preserve the ability to mass forces and enter a combat zone decisively while (3) ensuring the global commons remains an unchallenged part of the international system for generations to come. To ensure these three goals are met and despite carefully worded statements designed not single out any specific country, America is clearly trying to negate China's A2/AD strategy which clearly puts these three in jeopardy. The most widely discussed idea when it comes to defeating A2/AD strategies is the highly controversial operational concept known as Air-Sea Battle (ASB). Usually mislabeled as a war-fighting plan used to conduct punishing kinetic strikes against the Chinese homeland, in its simplest form, ASB is an effort by various military branches to ensure access to the global commons from any adversary across any and all domains.⁵

Since its creation four years ago, ASB has evolved substantively. Such an evolution has largely been ignored. This is mostly due to the highly complex nature of the operational concept but also thanks to various, highly speculative and “hyped” media reports. The first detailed analysis of ASB and what it could offer U.S. war planners is a widely cited 2010 report from the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) entitled: *AirSea Battle – A Point of Departure Operational Concept*. Even today, the report is one of the most authoritative documents concerning ASB— and is still considered controversial—even though the concept has evolved dramatically past what should be considered this foundational version of ASB.

While a detailed analysis of the CSBA report is beyond the scope of this policy paper, how CSBA takes ASB and folds it into a war-fighting strategy against Beijing is important. The report breaks down a presumed ASB campaign against China over a number of stages. The first stage is an initial one, comprised of presumably multiple lines of operation. U.S. forces would first need to endure an initial and likely surprise attack. Such an attack could be quite lethal. Various scholarly sources point to China commencing with a large scale ballistic and cruise missile campaign—the most potent aspect of its A2/AD capabilities—to destroy U.S. and allied airfields, aircraft on the ground, and naval vessels utilizing complicating saturation strikes to limit the capabilities of various missile defense systems.⁶ U.S. and allied forces would then counterattack; a “blinding campaign” would then begin against Chinese battle networks—many of which would be directed against targets on the Chinese homeland to disrupt important A2/AD C2 and C4ISR that would control PLA A2/AD combat capabilities and battle networks—is to this day still highly controversial.⁷ A “suppression campaign” would then unfold, focusing on Chinese long-range ISR and strike systems.⁸ Additional emphasis would also be placed to guarantee “seizing and sustaining the initiative in the air, sea, space and cyber domains.”⁹ During the next stage, emphasis would be placed on “distant blockade operations,” and increased procurement and production of precision guided munitions (PGMs)—among various other goals.¹⁰

After CSBA's rollout of this early version of ASB, the operational concept would by and large find acceptance in the U.S. defense community despite many fearing kinetic strikes on mainland China could elicit a nuclear response. By late fall of 2011, it was announced an Air-Sea Battle office was in the process of being formed to "oversee the integration of air and naval combat capabilities in an age of smaller budgets and leaner forces."¹¹

ASB would continue its evolution and move beyond the scope of the CSBA document. ASB would now become part of the U.S. military's new Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC) in early 2012. Signed by U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey, the goal of the JOAC is to develop how U.S. "joint forces will operate in response to emerging anti-access and area-denial security challenges."¹² The JOAC places into the public sphere the first official U.S. government definition of the ASB:

*The intent of Air-Sea Battle is to improve integration of air, land, naval, space, and cyberspace forces to provide combatant commanders the capabilities needed to deter and, if necessary, defeat an adversary employing sophisticated anti-access/area-denial capabilities. It focuses on ensuring that joint forces will possess the ability to project force as required to preserve and defend U.S. interests well into the future.*¹³

ASB would again be defined and refined as scholars, academics and journalists still cited the now dated CSBA version of ASB—many still referencing and concerned over possible kinetic strikes on the Chinese mainland. On May 12, 2013, the ASB office released an unclassified version of what was at the time was called a "summary" of the ASB concept.¹⁴ The report defines ASB as:

A limited objective concept that describes what is necessary for the joint force to sufficiently shape A2/AD environments to enable concurrent or follow-on power projection operations. The ASB Concept seeks to ensure freedom of action in the global commons and is intended to assure allies and deter potential adversaries. ASB is a supporting concept to the Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC), and provides a

*detailed view of specific technological and operational aspects of the overall A2/AD challenge in the global commons. The Concept is not an operational plan or strategy for a specific region or adversary. Instead, it is an analysis of the threat and a set of classified concepts of operations (CONOPS) describing how to counter and shape A2/AD environments, both symmetrically and asymmetrically, and develop an integrated force with the necessary characteristics and capabilities to succeed in those environments.*¹⁵

Even after the ASB offices authoritative “summary”, various individuals confuse ASB for a war-fighting strategy against China. Many mistakenly continue to this day cite and attack the original—but not U.S. government sponsored—CSBA document. Clearly, many have failed to see ASB as continuing to evolve. ASB now focuses less on specific targets and more on developing capabilities to adapt and fight in A2/AD environments.

In mid to late 2013, various senior members of the U.S. military explained to this author that there was increasing concern within the Pentagon that ASB was still misunderstood possibly leading to a backlash against the still young operational concept. Other options for dealing with China’s A2/AD strategy were slowly gaining momentum such as what is referred to as an “Offshore Control” strategy.¹⁶ Presumably because of such challenges, members of the House Armed Services Committee conducted a special session on October 10, 2013. The goal was to remove any remaining ambiguity on what the concept is and how it would be integrated into present U.S. military planning.¹⁷ Described as “for the first time ever, senior leaders from the Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Army and Joint Staff discussed the Air-Sea Battle Concept in an open hearing.” As U.S. Navy Rear Admiral James Foggo would go on to give much needed detail, he explained in prepared testimony that ASB is:

Designed to assure access to parts of the “global commons” – those areas of the air, sea, cyberspace and space that no one “owns,” but which we all depend on – such as the sea lines of communication. Our adversaries’ anti-access/area denial strategies employ a range of military capabilities that impede the free use of these ungoverned

*spaces. These military capabilities include new generations of cruise, ballistic, air-to-air, and surface-to-air missiles with improved range, accuracy, and lethality are being produced and proliferated. Quiet modern submarines and stealthy fighter aircraft are being procured by many nations, while naval mines are being equipped with mobility, discrimination and autonomy. Both space and cyberspace are becoming increasingly important and contested. Accordingly the Air-Sea Battle Concept is intended to defeat such threats to access, and provide options to national leaders and military commanders, to enable follow-on operations, which could include military activities, as well as humanitarian assistance and disaster response. In short, it is a new approach to warfare.*¹⁸

Chinese A2/AD 2.0 and the Challenge of U.S. Grand Military Strategy in Asia:

Although ASB clearly is focused in dealing with the challenge of Chinese and presumably other nations that our developing A2/AD capabilities, Chinese A2/AD is also evolving to counter the capabilities of ASB in what is quickly becoming a dangerous security dilemma. Beijing is developing a whole host of new A2/AD centric capabilities—what some are calling “A2/AD 2.0”—that hope to preserve present capabilities while transforming the area from its coastline out to the first island chain into a “no-go” zone for U.S. and allied forces.¹⁹ China also presumably seeks to extend its anti-access abilities all the way to the second island chain. With a renewed focus on anti-submarine warfare, a new air-defense identification zone in the East China Sea, possible new weapons purchases such as the S-400 air defense system and SU-35 fighter from Russia as well as possible new developments of longer range cruise and ballistic missiles, Beijing is well poised to challenge American ASB capabilities over the long-term.²⁰

While various A2/AD vs. ASB combat scenarios can paint a decidedly bleak picture for America and its allies in Asia, there are a number of reasons for optimism. For one, the likelihood of a U.S.-China war is small. While trade has not stopped conflicts in the past, with U.S.-China bilateral trade now valued at over \$550 billion and growing, this vital

statistic would likely be an important factor in both sides strategic calculus. However, history has shown time and again the rise of a new great power that could wield hegemonic dominance has sparked a security competition, even war. This is one of the key reasons nations in the Asia-Pacific have looked to Washington to provide a hedge or a “buffer” against a rapidly rising China.

One must also consider the simple fact that there has been many “revolutions” in military affairs going back centuries. While China’s version of A2/AD strategy with weapons that have headline-grabbing names like “carrier-killer” are certainly cause for concern, one must look back to history and how other nations have worked to negate potential changes in how wars are conducted and how new technologies impact modern warfare. For example, Imperial Japan during World War II held a potent submarine based A2/AD capability.²¹ Soviet forces in the Atlantic armed with various anti-ship weapons also were considered extremely potent.²²

In the future, American strategists must now factor in the challenges presented by an increasingly robust Chinese military that holds growing capabilities to effectively deny parts of the Pacific Ocean to U.S. forces. American defense experts are already at work recognizing the challenge and are developing the ASB concept to negate such a scenario. Washington clearly realizes A2/AD weapons and strategies are defusing around the globe—even to non-state actors—putting American and allied forces increasingly in danger unless they continue evolve or adapt.²³

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¹ This policy paper builds on the author's prior works as well as a recent article: Harry J. Kazianis, "The Evolution of Air-Sea Battle," The Center for Maritime Security, February 14, 2014, accessed September 21, 2014, <http://cimsec.org/evolution-airsea-battle/9936>.

² U.S. Navy, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*.

³ Andrew Erickson and David Yang, "Using the Land to Control the Sea? Chinese Analysts Consider the Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile," *Naval War College Review* 62, no. 4 (Autumn, 2009): 61.

⁴ Please see Paul K. Davis, "Jimmie McEver and Barry Wilson, Measuring Interdiction Capabilities in the Presence of Anti-Access Strategies: Exploratory Analysis to Inform Adaptive Strategy for the Persian Gulf," (Washington, DC: Rand Corporation, 1992).

⁵ Sydney D. Freedberg, "DoD Sheds First Clear Light on AirSea Battle," *BreakingDefense*, June 3, 2013, accessed November 24, 2013, <http://breakingdefense.com/2013/06/dod-document-sheds-first-new-light-on-airsea-battle-warfare-unfettered/>; Harry Kazianis, "AirSea Battle for Dummies," RealClear Defense, June 17, 2013, accessed October 14, 2013, http://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2013/06/17/airsea_battle_for_dummies_106656.html.

⁶ Please see, for example, Toshi Yoshihara, "Chinese Views of Sea-Based Ballistic Missile Defense," in Andrew S. Erickson and Lyle J. Goldstein, eds., *Chinese Aerospace Power: Evolving Maritime Roles* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2011) 353.

⁷ Jan Van Tol et al., "AirSea Battle – A Point of Departure Operational Concept," 53.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *Stars and Stripes*, "Military Creates AirSea Battle Office," November 9, 2011, accessed October 14, 2013, <http://www.stripes.com/news/military-creates-air-sea-battle-office-1.160382>.

¹² U.S. Department of Defense, *Joint Operational Access Concept*, Washington, DC, 2013, foreword.

¹³ U.S. Department of Defense, *Joint Operational Access Concept*. 4.

¹⁴ Air-Sea Battle Office, *Service Collaboration to Address Anti Access & Area Denial Challenges*. 4.

¹⁵ Kazianis, "AirSea Battle for Dummies."

¹⁶ Please see T.X. Hammes, "Offshore Control: A Proposed Strategy for an Unlikely Conflict," *Strategic Forum*, June 2012, accessed July 28, 2013, <http://www.ndu.edu/inss/docuploaded/SF%20278%20Hammes.pdf>.

¹⁷ The author was able to attend the hearing in person.

¹⁸ U.S. Navy, "Read Admiral Foggo Discusses Air-Sea Battle Concept," *NavyLive*, October 10, 2013 accessed October 14, 2013 <http://navylive.dodlive.mil/2013/10/10/rear-adm-foggo-discusses-air-sea-battle-concept/>.

¹⁹ Harry J. Kazianis, "Welcome to Chinese A2/AD: Version 2.0," China Policy Institute Blog, February 13, 2014, accessed September 21, 2014, <https://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/chinapolicyinstitute/2014/02/13/welcome-to-chinese-a2ad-version-2-0/>.

²⁰ For a deeper discussion of this please see Harry J. Kazianis, "Air-Sea Battle and ADIZ: A Reaction to a Reaction," *China Brief*, December 5, 2013, accessed September 21, 2014, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=41720&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=25&chash=730e43928bd2bd8cc7a8bf49cc1b5bd6#.VB8zE_IdV-w](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=41720&tx_ttnews[backPid]=25&chash=730e43928bd2bd8cc7a8bf49cc1b5bd6#.VB8zE_IdV-w)

²¹ James Holmes, "Flash Name, Old Idea: Anti-Access Strategy," *The Diplomat*, October 28, 2012, accessed May 10, 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/the-naval-diplomat/2012/10/28/flashy-name-old-idea-anti-access-strategy/>.

²² Michael McDevitt, "The Evolving Maritime Security Environment in East Asia: Implications for the US-Japan Alliance," *CSIS:PACNET* 33 (May 31, 2012): 1.

²³ Yaakkov Katz, "Intel Flaw to Blame in INS Hanit Attack," *The Jerusalem Post*, accessed September 21, 2014, <http://www.jpost.com/Israel/Intel-flaw-to-blame-in-INS-Hanit-attack>.