

**AirSea Battle: An Exchange** by Eric Sayers and Gaoyue Fan  
*Two Pacific Forum resident fellows discuss the AirSea Battle doctrine. Eric Sayers [ericsayers@gmail.com], a 2010-2011 Resident SPF Fellow, offers a US perspective, while Gaoyue Fan [moonfan0815@sina.com], a senior colonel in the People's Liberation Army and 2011 Resident WSD-Handa Fellow, offers a Chinese perspective. The views expressed here are solely those of the authors.*

### **Eric Sayers**

In the late 1970s advances in Soviet military capabilities prompted US war planners to develop a joint warfighting doctrine known as AirLand Battle that aimed to sustain a credible military balance in Europe. This doctrine focused on developing capabilities and maximizing the joint effectiveness of the two services to deter Soviet aggression and prevent coercion against Western European states.

In a similar fashion, the 2010 QDR directed the Air Force and Navy to develop a joint AirSea Battle (ASB) doctrine to accomplish two goals: to further develop joint operations and eliminate duplications in resources and equipment and to stop a growing tilt in the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific. Economic liberalization has made China the world's second-largest economy. Since the late 1990s, this has funded annual double-digit increases in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) defense budget. While Chinese diplomats insist that their nation's rise will be peaceful, the capabilities Beijing is investing in suggest a concerted effort to be able to deny US forces freedom of action in the region. It is, of course, perfectly natural for a rising power like China to acquire capabilities commensurate with its strength. However, many states question Chinese assertions that it will only act defensively when it develops offensive strike-platforms such as precision-guided land-attack and anti-ship ballistic and cruise missiles, kinetic and non-kinetic anti-satellite weapons, and cyber- and electromagnetic-warfare capabilities.

The strike battle network the PLA is building appears designed to create a regional "contested zone" that can challenge the US ability to operate from regional bases, in the commons of space, air, sea and the electromagnetic spectrum, and along traditional logistical routes. Absent a change in US behavior, this buildup will upset the military balance and give Beijing the means to deter the entry of US forces into the region, allow coercion of neighboring states, or, should conflict ensue, inflict rapid, substantial losses on US forces, presenting Washington with a *fait accompli*.

While some in Beijing have raised concerns about the ASB doctrine, they don't appear cognizant of the fact that this development has occurred at least partially in *response* to the emergence of competitor states "equipped with sophisticated anti-access and area denial capabilities," as the 2010 QDR states. If the US is so concerned about Beijing's military

modernization that it is willing to develop a new joint doctrine, to what degree is Beijing prepared to help reassure Washington of its intentions in the future?

### **Senior Colonel Gaoyue Fan**

If AirSea Battle is analogous to AirLand Battle, then the US military has made a wrong decision at a wrong time and a wrong place. AirLand Battle was developed when the US and its allies were seriously threatened by superior Warsaw Pact forces and the European Plain was a fortified battlefield. In contrast, ASB is being developed at a time when US is the sole superpower with the world's strongest military and is not realistically threatened by any nation or groups and the Asia-Pacific region is a relatively stable area.

In such an international security environment, AirSea Battle indicates significant changes: the change of adversary from international terrorists to the PLA (clearly stated in the CSBA report); the change of battlefield from the Middle East and Central Asia to the western Pacific Ocean; the change of operational objectives from destroying international terrorist networks to defeating the PLA; and the change from capabilities-based military construction to threat-based military construction. Such changes will exert great influence upon militaries throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

First, the US military would change its priorities in military procurement and preparations for future operations. Second, the militaries of US allies such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand would follow the US lead and shift their priorities. Third, the PLA and other militaries would react to what is happening in the US and its allies. These interactions will give rise to a heated arms race.

China cannot but ask why, when Asia-Pacific countries are moving to enhance security cooperation to promote peace and stability, does the US military try to disrupt stability by developing an ASB concept? Why is the US military eager to make a partner (the PLA) into an adversary while it is still deeply involved in Iraq and Afghanistan?

If AirSea Battle aims to stop a growing tilt in the balance of power, it means that the US intends to obtain even greater advantages over regional militaries. The US already enjoys the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific; the US has the strongest military and has no counterpart in the world.

PLA capabilities have increased rapidly since the mid-1990s, but that process has been driven by Taiwan's drive for independence. Moreover, those capabilities still lag far behind those of the US military in terms of equipment, organization, doctrine, training, and information. It will take at least 20 years for the PLA to achieve what the US military has now.

If AirSea Battle is a response to increasingly sophisticated PLA anti-access and area-denial capabilities, such capabilities

are only a response to the US pledge to help defend Taiwan. Taiwan is part of China and the US follows the one-China policy. If Taiwan declares independence, the mainland will resort to force to stop it. To prevent US interference in China's internal affairs, the PLA has to develop anti-access and area-denial capabilities. If the US had not promised to help defend Taiwan, the PLA would not develop such capabilities.

Similarly, if the US military develops AirSea Battle to deal with the PLA, the PLA will be forced to develop anti-AirSea Battle doctrine and capabilities. This cycle is not beneficial to China or the US. In fact, the PLA will never target the US military except if it intervenes in a Taiwan conflict or launches a preemptive strike against China.

China's strategy is defensive. However, a defensive strategy doesn't mean that China doesn't need offensive weapons. China faces many challenges and threats, both traditional and nontraditional, as well as separatism, and needs all sorts of instruments to cope with them. Moreover, there is no purely defensive weapon. The nature of an action can only be defined by intention, purpose, and how it is used, it is not intrinsic to the weapon itself. China's development of weapon systems such as an aircraft carrier, J-20, and precision-guided missiles are consistent with its defensive strategy.

China's intention has been reiterated repeatedly. China will never seek hegemony no matter how powerful it becomes. It will never try to be a world leader, and it will try to promote global economic development and prosperity and will contribute to building a harmonious world. Militarily, China adheres to the principles of strategic defense, self-reliance, safeguarding peace, opposing aggression and expansion, and tries to build military power commensurate with its status. It will not challenge the US presence in the Asia-Pacific region. China says what it means and does what it says. If the US were less suspicious and more trusting, it will be more reassured of China's intentions.

### **Sayers Responds**

Sr. Col. Fan argues that all states in the region are moving to enhance cooperation and security, and that the development of an ASB doctrine will undermine this process. This is an optimistic reading of the regional security environment. Despite his insistence that China "will not challenge the US presence in the Asia-Pacific region," the past two years have witnessed repeated, and in many cases provocative, diplomatic and military signaling from Beijing regarding its distaste for the US military presence. Perhaps even more troubling is the reluctance to recognize how China's actions contribute to this trend, making it harder to avoid future misunderstandings.

Moreover, Sr. Col. Fan posits that development of ASB signals Washington's intention to see Beijing as an adversary. But Washington has made every effort to encourage the emergence of a strong Chinese state over the past three decades. Far from acting to contain China's rise, Washington has worked to enable the emergence of a strong Chinese state while encouraging it to become a constructive member of the international order. This is not how adversaries act.

Sr. Col. Fan insists that China's development of A2/AD capabilities are the result of the US commitment to the defense

of Taiwan. Would China cease development of these capabilities if the US were to abandon Taiwan? More importantly, there are second-order effects. China's buildup has prompted Australia and Japan to express diminished confidence in the US military commitment to the region. In the future, Washington will be less confident that it can intervene in support of an ally. Strategists worry that smaller states, including perhaps Singapore or the Philippines, could become "Finlandized," whereby their freedom of action is neutralized by superior Chinese military power.

When I argue that China should help break the downward spiral of distrust that fans the arms race, Sr. Col. Fan counters that the US should be "less suspicious and more trusting": can the US afford to gamble that China won't become more assertive as its power grows? Beijing's inability to answer this question has driven the development of AirSea Battle.

### **Senior Colonel Fan Responds**

That China does not challenge and even welcomes the US presence in the Asia-Pacific, does not mean China will tolerate US behavior detrimental to its national interests. Activities such as EP-3 patrols along Chinese territorial waters to collect electronic signals of PLAN submarines, the *Impeccable* surveillance ship collecting ocean geographic information in the South China Sea and US aircraft carrier exercises close to China's major military bases and important cities, threatened China's national security and caused great anxiety. A "misfired" cruise missile might hit Beijing as "misfired" missiles hit the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade during the Kosovo War. China supports free navigation in international waters and expects a US presence in the region to promote peace and stability, not to increase tension.

Mr. Sayers asks "Would China cease development of these capabilities if the US were to abandon Taiwan?" I believe so. Taiwan is the No. 1 obstacle to the improvement of China-US relations. If the US could abandon Taiwan, we would cease development of A2/AD capabilities, and other difficult issues could be solved. Taiwan is a core interest of China and the A2/AD capabilities have been specifically developed to deal with US interference in a Taiwan conflict.

Mr. Sayers worries that smaller states could become victims of a "Finlandization strategy." This is Cold War thinking. China is not the Soviet Union and there is no state bloc or group that is against US or the West. We need more innovative thinking.

Mr. Sayers suggests that China also bears responsibility for the downward spiral of distrust. Trust should be mutual. China not only has clearly stated its intentions but also has done a lot to prove it is trustworthy. Since China and US both agreed to have cooperative and constructive relations, China has never sold high-tech weapons to a US adversary; the Chinese government has never called the US its greatest threat or potential adversary; the Chinese People's Congress has never required the Ministry of Defense to write an annual report on US military power; the Ministry of Defense has never developed an operational concept specifically targeting the US military; the PLA has never sent a reconnaissance plane or ship to collect military intelligence close to US territory, air, or waters. China expects US to do the same.