

Obama's Asia Pivot Is Aimed at China

by Carl Osgood

April 24—On Jan. 5, 2012, President Obama formally introduced his new “Strategic Guidance,” more popularly known as the “Asia Pivot.” With this document, which he himself presented in the Pentagon briefing room, Obama sent the message that rather than coming to an end, the perpetual wars of the last ten years are, instead, entering a new phase. The manpower-intensive ground wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are giving way to regime-change campaigns, such as that in Libya in 2011, and to confrontations with China and Russia in the not-too-distant future.

In the 15 months since that announcement, the Defense Department has moved aggressively to implement the shift that Obama outlined, but at the same time, has struggled to convince the world that the Asia Pivot is not about China.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey's visit to China this week, is clearly an effort to move away from confrontation with China. That effort, however, is contradicted by the force deployments that are underway, and the development of the Air-Sea Battle operational concept, as part of the Asia Pivot. Naval and air forces are being deployed ever closer to China, and with an operational concept designed to counter capabilities that China—though not exclusively China—is developing, to defend its sovereignty.

An inherent part of the Pivot is the redeployment of the U.S. military's most advanced capabilities to the Western Pacific. As part of that shift, the U.S. Navy is reposturing its forces so that 60% of its fleet will be stationed in the Pacific by 2020. A large portion of those forces will be forward-based, that is, home-ported in Hawaii, Guam, Japan, and starting this year, in Singapore, where the first of four new Littoral Combat Ships arrived this month.

The Air Force is similarly putting its most advanced combat capabilities in the Pacific. A squadron of F-22 stealth fighters is based in Okinawa, and B-52 and B-2 bombers are stationed on Guam on a rotational basis;

squadrons F-35 Joint Strike Fighters will be stationed in the Pacific, when that aircraft becomes available in a few years. Last December, then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced that a squadron of the Marine Corps version of the F-35 will be based at Iwakuni, Japan, beginning in 2017. The Navy and the Air Force will also have their most advanced intelligence-gathering capabilities in the Western Pacific, including the P-8 maritime patrol aircraft and the Global Hawk surveillance drone.

Obsession with China

The focus on China, and the adoption of an operational concept to militarily oppose it, are both the brainchildren of Andrew Marshall, the 91-year-old head of the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment. Marshall, who has run ONA since 1973, has been building up a network of co-thinkers both inside and outside the Pentagon, including in Washington, D.C. think tanks that have become influential on national security matters inside the Beltway. The lead think tank in Marshall's network is the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA), whose head is retired Army Lt. Col. Andrew Krepinevich.

The CSBA first surfaced the concept of Air-Sea Battle in 2010, in a report authored by Krepinevich himself, then, in a report by retired Navy Capt. Jan Van Tol, who, like Krepinevich, is a veteran of duty in Marshall's office. *Washington Post* military reporter Greg Jaffe reported last August that the CSBA typically collects between \$2.75 million and \$3 million a year in contracts from Marshall's office, about 40% of its annual income, and that Krepinevich collects about \$865,000 a year in salary and benefits.

Marshall has been obsessed with China since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, and has pushed the idea that the U.S. military ought to be prepared for a high-intensity conflict with the People's Republic of China, even though no one can explain how or why such a war might start. In the Summer of 1999, Mar-

FIGURE 1



shall and his office sponsored a study at the Naval War College in Newport, R.I., that postulated a China that would be the focus of future strategic confrontation with the U.S., *whether it was strong or weak*. “A stable and powerful China will be constantly challenging the status quo in East Asia,” the report said. “An unstable and relatively weak China could be dangerous because its leaders might try to bolster their power with foreign military adventurism.”

The Navy’s Pacific Shift

The shift of high-end military forces to the Pacific does indeed begin to look like preparation for a high-intensity war with China. Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Jonathan Greenert explained the Navy’s part of the shift during an April 8 panel at the Navy League’s Sea Air Space 2013 conference, in Maryland April 8-10. Using a slide showing how many of the Navy’s ships are deployed in the various regions of the world, Greenert explained that, currently, there are 52 ships underway in the Pacific, but 42 of them are non-rotational, that is, they’re forward-based in the region—in Hawaii, Guam, and Japan. By 2020, Greenert expects that there will be an average of 60 ships underway, with 50 of them forward-based in the region, to include the four Littoral Combat Ships homeported in Singapore.

The rest of the world will see about 30 ships, on average in the Persian Gulf/Arabian Sea, and 13 in European waters (Figure 1).

But Obama’s strategy isn’t just focused on the Pacific; it still keeps a watch on Southwest Asia, and on what Greenert termed the world’s crossroads, but might better be thought of as choke points: The Navy’s station in Rota, Spain, which, beginning in 2015, will be home to four missile-defense-capable Aegis destroyers, is close to the Strait of Gibraltar; the Sixth Fleet, headquartered in Naples, Italy, combined with the NATO base at Souda Bay, Crete, command the Suez Canal; the Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain is close to the

Strait of Hormuz. The Strait of Malacca is close to Singapore where the four Littoral Combat Ships are going; and the Navy’s base at Guantanamo, Cuba is within striking distance of the Panama Canal.

Marine Corps Commandant Gen. James Amos, speaking on the panel with Greenert, showed a map of all the places the Marines have operated in the past ten years, which is just about everywhere, except for Russia and China, and perhaps a few other places not clearly visible on the map. Those operations range from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to “building partnership capacity” exercises all around Africa, to disaster response, not only overseas, but even in New York after Hurricane Sandy.

As Greenert’s map (Figure 1) had showed all of the choke points, and the location of Navy bases near them, Amos’s slide showed a belt of crises, extending from North Africa to the East China Sea, but also included a few areas in the Western Hemisphere, to include narco-trafficking. “This is reality,” he said. “These are the types of issues we’ll have to face.” And how to face them? “Forward deployed naval forces are part of the solution,” he said. And, of course, the drawdown in Afghanistan is key. The Marine force there has already dropped from 20,000 troops to 7,000, meaning that there are greater opportunities for Marines to do other

kinds of things, such as sailing around the world with the Navy to drop in at various places, such as Darwin, Australia.

The following day, Rear Adm. Michael Smith, the director of policy and strategy on the Navy staff, emphasized the importance of military-to-military engagement, during a panel discussion on engagement with Asia. “We have to build an enduring military relationship at all levels,” from petty officers to senior ranking officers, Smith said. There are areas of common interest, such as combating piracy (China continues to have a major presence in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden), humanitarian assistance/disaster relief operations, and medical exchanges. Smith said that these, and other areas of common interest, have to be built upon to foster trust, so that the issues between the U.S. and China that cause tensions can be addressed.

In response to a question from panel moderator Patrick Cronin, Smith cited the example of the strategic and economic dialogue between the U.S. and China, led by the Secretaries of State and Treasury, where in-depth discussions on economic and diplomatic issues are taking place, but this depth of engagement doesn’t extend to the military realm. It’s starting, Smith said, “but the issue is to establish an enduring military-to-military relationship.”

Not surprisingly, Air-Sea Battle also came up in this context. A reporter, speaking from the floor, noted that last year, former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. James Cartwright warned that Air-Sea Battle demonizes China, and the reporter interpreted Smith as saying that the military engagement is well behind that of the civilian engagement. Smith replied that the DoD has, in fact, lost the “strategic narrative” on Air-Sea Battle, i.e., misperceptions of what Air-Sea Battle is have become dominant in the public discourse, as opposed to the DoD’s notion of what it is.

“It’s about having the combat power to go wherever we need to go to protect regional security,” Smith said. “It’s about being able to go wherever our national interests are threatened.” He went on to explain that the U.S. has to have assured access and the services have to work together to gain that access, as no service can do it alone. “This is not a strategy against an individual country,” Smith said. “This is not about demonizing China. It’s about building a military to defend our interests.” He added that the services need to do a much better job of articulating what it is that they’re doing.

The Concept of Air-Sea Battle

On the afternoon of the April 8, two officers from the Pentagon’s Air-Sea Battle office, Col. Jordan Thomas, USAF, and Capt. Philip Dupree, USN, made an effort to “articulate” what it is they are doing, in developing and implementing the Air-Sea Battle concept. Thomas insisted that Air-Sea Battle is not only about China. “It’s about the proliferation of anti-access/area denial threats that are out there and our capabilities to overcome them.” Nor is it a battle plan for high-end warfare. “Air-Sea Battle is about 21st-Century warfare—about how we’re going to do things better in the coming environments,” Thomas explained. “What Air-Sea Battle is doing is enabling discussion among the services in order to address anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) environments. That includes discussion, collaboration, and experimentation among the services about the kind of A2/AD threats that are out there. Our focus is long-term force development ... between the services, and we look for that to be the integration of service capabilities.”

As Thomas explained it, what Air-Sea Battle does, is look at the so-called anti-access/area denial measures that a possible enemy has taken, then looks at the command and control (C2) and intelligence and surveillance systems that the enemy uses to target hostile forces. In order to destroy an enemy ship, for example, that target has to be found and fixed; then a weapon, or weapons, has to be targeted on that ship to destroy it. It’s that “chain of effects” that Air-Sea Battle is seeking to attack, first by disrupting it, then by destroying it, to “take out their ability to track or engage,” so that enemy forces can then be defeated. This process is called “attacking in depth.”

Dupree emphasized the institutional commitment within the Pentagon to Air-Sea Battle, going back to a directive in 2010 from then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates to the Secretaries of the Air Force and the Navy. The Secretaries signed on to it, and organized an office to do the work, “giving it governance and the authorities to do something,” Dupree said. “This leads to the behavior change we’re seeking.” That behavior change amounts to closer coordination between the two services (and also the Marines and the Army) in terms of force development, and the ability to “command, control, and communicate our forces and gather intelligence.”

“Either we have to take greater operational risk as we close our force and/or we’ll have to operate from farther away,” Dupree explained. “If you’re network-



U.S. Navy/Ignacio D. Perez

President Obama's Asia Pivot is deploying U.S. Naval and Air Forces ever closer to China, risking a confrontation, and even general war. Here, Two Super Hornets take part in an air power demonstration over the USS John C. Stennis, somewhere in the Pacific.

integrated and you attack in depth to disrupt, destroy, and defeat the enemy, then you can shape the A2/AD environment to be able to operate with acceptable risk.”

What is the purpose of implementing Air-Sea Battle? “Air-Sea Battle gives us the ways and means for the joint force to overcome the A2/AD environment,” Dupree said. “We’re defining through experimentation and exercises what capabilities and proficiencies are required to overcome the anti-access/area denial environment.” The Air-Sea Battle Office has become a place which collects lessons learned from the exercises and experiments of the services and tracks how closely the services are becoming conceptually aligned.

Official U.S. protests to the contrary notwithstanding, China does, in fact, figure largely in the Air-Sea Battle effort. Dupree, in response to a question from this reporter, explained that China is a country that is advancing its military capabilities, and the Chinese have openly stated that they may choose to have a counter-intervention strategy. If they want to do something in their region, they don’t want outside intervention. They prefer to work on a bilateral basis. “A lot of the capabilities that they’re fielding are indicative of A2/AD,” Dupree said. “China is developing capabilities that do challenge our access, and they are students of the game. They have watched how the U.S. has operated” over the past ten years and are

taking what they’ve learned into account.

The ASBO is not a war-planning cell, however, he said. That function remains with the Joint Staff and with the combatant commands. What the ASBO provides is the conceptual basis for the doctrine that will be employed in the war planning and in actual military operations, whether against China, Iran or some other adversary with similar capabilities. “It’s really not for us a function of who but of what,” Dupree said. “What are the systems, what are the effects chains and how are they assembled and how can we disrupt, destroy, and defeat those chains.”

The Air-Sea Battle Office offered its own clarification to

EIR on April 23. Air-Sea Battle, they explained, is not about any particular region, but is about access to the “global commons,” everywhere. “Plainly described, the Air-Sea Battle concept is a combination of capabilities and ideas that enables a pre-integrated force built on habitual relationships to maintain freedom of access in the global commons in the face of emerging A2/AD threats,” they explained.

“Air-Sea Battle assures an unprecedented level of interoperability among components of U.S. and allied forces in support of regional cooperation everywhere supporting vibrant, sustainable world trade and investment by ensuring freedom of access to the global commons everywhere.” The ASBO also pointed out that they render the term “Air-Sea Battle” in order to distinguish it from the CSBA’s AirSea Battle. “While the hyphenation is seemingly a small, administrative point,” the ASBO’s spokesperson wrote in an email to *EIR*, “AirSea Battle is very different from Air-Sea Battle.”

Air-Sea Battle and Australia

What does this mean for U.S. allies in the Western Pacific and East Asia? That’s precisely the question asked in a new report produced by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, entitled “Planning the unthinkable war: ‘Air-Sea Battle’ and its implications for Aus-

tralia,” which was released on April 15. The author, Benjamin Schreer, takes a middle position between critics of the concept and its proponents. He decides that Air-Sea Battle could “make a contribution to regional stability by promoting deterrence in Sino-U.S. strategic affairs.”


But that possible benefit also comes with a great risk. Schreer notes that Air-Sea Battle is optimized for a high-intensity conflict between the U.S. and China (and is therefore useless in dealing with territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas), and that a central element of the concept is deep attack against Chinese command and control and intelligence and surveillance capabilities used for conventional operations. “But such a ‘blinding campaign’ could increase the risk of a disproportionate Chinese response, including nuclear escalation,” Schreer warns. “Beijing might well perceive such attacks as American attempts to disarm China’s nuclear deterrent and could thus be tempted to nuclear preemption.”

Another question is whether being involved in Air-Sea Battle would be good for Australia. Schreer notes that while current U.S. deployments in Australia, including the detachment of Marines in Darwin, are not

directly tied to Air-Sea Battle, options are under consideration that would allow the U.S. greater force presence in Northern Australia, including with long range bombers which are integral to the Air-Sea Battle concept. Secondly, the Australian Defense Forces could provide niche capabilities, such as air refueling, and other types of support to U.S. forces.

“That said, fully embracing the logic behind Air-Sea Battle or developing specific military capabilities to underpin the concept’s implementation are so far not in Australia’s interests,” Schreer writes. “Openly signing up for the concept would send a strong political message to China that the ADF is now actively planning and equipping for a potential war with the PLA.” Therefore, any actions that Australia would take to participate in Air-Sea Battle would be an unnecessary provocation to Beijing. Australia has already demonstrated its commitment to the ANZUS (Australia-New Zealand-United States) alliance and can make its contributions “independently of any public commitment to a concept that’s still in its early stages and seems designed for a strategic environment in Asia that’s yet to materialize,” Schreer writes.

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