



Air-Sea Battle and China's Anti-Access and Area Denial Challenge

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Abstract: The challenge presented by China's military modernization has seemingly altered the conventional balance in the Western Pacific, with significant implications for U.S. national security policy, and, thus, deserves the focus of planners and decision-makers.

This article examines the concept of Air-Sea Battle (ASB) as a response to the growing Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) challenge posed by the People's Republic of China (PRC).¹ While U.S. defense officials and experts have been quick to point out that the concept is not directed at any single country, the increasingly formidable capabilities deployed by China present the most appropriate scenario for considering Air-Sea Battle's potential contribution to U.S. national security interests. It may be true that countries such as Iran, North Korea and Syria also present A2/AD threats. However, they are typically "lower-end" in nature and limited in scope and can be addressed by the conventional military superiority of the United States and its regional allies.²

The article proceeds as follows: the first section briefly describes and discusses the nature of the Chinese A2/AD challenge. The illustrative case of a potential conflict over Taiwan's future status underscores what China's military has been able to accomplish and the difficulties confronting U.S. experts in forging an effective response to a crisis or conflict initiated by Beijing. The second section lays out the key components of Air-Sea Battle, based on the recently released declassified version of the concept, as well as other official statements. Using existing

¹ *Air-Sea Battle: Service Collaboration to Address Anti-Access & Area Denial Challenges* (Washington: Air-Sea Battle Office, 2013), Andrew F. Krepinevich, *Why AirSea Battle?* (Washington: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010), Jan Van Tol, Mark Gunziger, Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jim Thomas, *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept* (Washington: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010).

² On the nature of the Iran A2/AD threat, see Krepinevich, *Why AirSea Battle?*, pp. 28-35.

and emerging technologies, including weapons systems but also focusing on cyberspace and information warfare, Pentagon planners seek to create a highly integrated, adaptive, and robust Joint Force approach to the A2/AD threat. Thus, Air-Sea Battle and the overarching Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC) can be expected to shape and inform U.S. defense policy in the areas of planning, research and development, procurement, and future force structures and postures.³ The third section assesses the Air-Sea Battle concept in the larger geopolitical context of a rising China and the relations of the Western Pacific. The critical question that emerges is whether Air-Sea Battle—a warfighting concept—is necessary for deterring China from aggressive behavior, or effectively defending against Chinese offensive operations? The fourth section briefly considers two alternative approaches—distant blockade and enhanced theater deterrence—and programs that could enhance U.S. conventional military capabilities and contribute to a greater Joint and allied capability to deter China and also avoid some of the potential problems that challenge the perceived efficacy of Air-Sea Battle.

China's Anti-Access/Area Denial Capabilities

U.S. security concerns about the People's Republic of China (PRC) are driven primarily by a possible crisis or conflict involving Taiwan. For more than a decade, the development and deployment of robust conventional short-range ballistic missile (SRBM) capabilities have been as a specific focus of China's military modernization efforts. With over 1,000 shorter-range ballistic missiles (CSS-6 and CSS-7) deployed in areas adjacent to Taiwan, these weapons have been viewed as primarily dedicated to the mission of deterring leaders in Taipei from unilaterally altering Taiwan's current status and formally declaring independence or to compelling the leadership in Taipei to reverse such a declaration and return to the status quo ante.⁴ However, as China's missile capabilities have expanded, the nature of the threat to Taiwan has also increased significantly. A coordinated Chinese attack, utilizing its missile forces to degrade Taiwan's air defenses and potentially destroy much of the Republic of China Air Force (ROCAF) on the ground, even units located within hardened, well-defended shelters, would virtually provide the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) with air superiority over the Straits. With its quantitative advantage in fighter and strike aircraft, the PLAAF would be expected to overwhelm any surviving ROCAF units. Such a scenario underscores the crucial role of the United States in a defense of Taiwan in the event of such an attack, but the capacity for the United States to mount an effective response is now also in doubt.⁵ The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has also deployed a formidable array of intermediate-range missiles. The quantities and qualitative improvement of those

³ *Joint Operational Concept (JOAC)*, United States Department of Defense, January 17, 2012.

⁴ David A. Shlapak, David T. Orletsky, and Barry Wilson, *Dire Strait?, Military Aspects of the China-Taiwan Confrontation and Options for U.S. Policy* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2000).

⁵ David A. Shlapak, et al., *A Question of Balance: Political Context and Military Aspects of the China-Taiwan Dispute* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009), pp. 128-29.

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