

Rethinking Air/Sea Battle Before It Is Too Late

Written by Dan G. Cox

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DAN G. COX, APR 6 2012

Initially, several of my colleagues and I speculated the Air/Sea Battle concept was simply an avenue for the US Navy and Air Force to gain budgetary primacy in an increasingly tight budgetary environment. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down and as the American economic travails continue, increasing pressure to downsize the US military force mounts.

I am going to simplify the Air/Sea Battle claim for the sake of brevity here but it runs along these lines. China is increasing not only its military capabilities but also its military reach. China has become increasingly belligerent in Asia and outright antagonistic toward US foreign policy goals. For example, China's threatened armed takeover of the Spratley Islands, largely fueled by the speculation of large oil reserves in that area, has provoked condemnation from neighbors with claims to the Island chain (Vietnam and the Philippines in particular). However, no one in the region or in the international community is able to stop China from forcibly seizing this island chain. Further, China consistently stymies US military action through its veto power on the UN Security Council. China has used this veto threat, along with Russia, to prevent any action on the Syrian conflict. These facts coupled with China's development of increasingly dangerous weapons platforms, some aimed directly at US assets, such as the "carrier killer" missile system, has made China, so the proponents of Air/Sea Battle claim, the number one threat to US national security. It just so turns out that the best defense, according to proponents, is an increased Naval and Air presence in the region to deter further Chinese aggression.

Initially, I thought this argument would eventually be debunked as I mused that the China threat was being overblown. In fact, one could argue that China is simply practicing a foreign policy of area denial stemming from multiple years of embarrassment dolled out by the United States in a very dangerous game of chicken that forced China to cool its aggressive rhetoric and military war gaming aimed at Taiwan. This happened several times in the 1980s when the US sent the 7th Fleet into the Taiwan Straits. Perhaps the shame these actions provoked in the Chinese leadership's collective psyche forced China to develop military capabilities, like a "carrier killer," to prevent future embarrassment.

Instead of dying, the Air/Sea Battle concept has done nothing but pick up steam. In fact, the US Army Chief of Staff, General Raymond Odierno, actually ended up recognizing the concept as one that had gained a lot of force in the military community.

One of the complaints about the Air/Sea Battle concept is that it gives short shrift to the Land component of defense and war. The Air Force and Navy are absolutely integral to US joint warfare and this missive is not about disparaging any service. However, having said this, the Air Force and Navy are not designed to seize land and all warfare eventually revolves around seizing and retaining land and effectively affecting the people on that land. This is the human domain of warfare, to bend those people's will, as Carl von Clausewitz said, to your will. Air Bases need land component protection and Sea assets, no matter how technologically advanced, they can only affect the situation on the ground in a limited way. To be fair, the US Air Force and Navy have a valid point when they contend that the Pacific is a theatre that, by geographic necessity, forces these two services to play a larger military role, but sea and air assets still cannot seize and retain land.

Therefore, when I read that Myanmar held fairly democratic elections and invited foreign observers to monitor these

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elections, I was initially surprised. When the government released hundreds of political prisoners, I became even more surprised. This seemed to nest nicely with ASEAN's recent call to end the economic sanctions against the Myanmar regime. If I am correct, the sanctions should end soon and the United States will lead the way in ending these sanctions. Notice too that there is no more overbearing insistence by US governmental officials to refer to Myanmar as Burma.

Why you wonder? Well if you look at the location of Myanmar and especially the location of Myanmar's ports, you will notice that they are strategically important if one is aiming the Pacific theatre forces toward containing an overly aggressive China. In fact, an entire ring of ports from Myanmar to Thailand become strategically and militarily important. But what does such posturing look like to the Chinese military and political leaders? This is a question that I feel has not been adequately addressed and it seems as if no one is discussing the potential second and third order effects of such posturing.

In the end, my biggest problem with Air/Sea Battle is that it forces China to feel like enemy number one. My fear is that China will, in the near future, start acting like enemy number one. Air/Sea Battle may seem like a harmless, theoretical concept and perhaps nothing more than the manifestation of inter-service rivalry in a budget constrained environment to everyone but the Chinese.

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Dan G. Cox is a professor of political science at the US Army School of Advanced Military Studies. He is interested in systems thinking, operational art, strategy, and anticipating the future of conflict. He is currently working on a book anticipating future pandemic shocks and their implications tentatively entitled *Breaking Point*.