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A Step Too Far: Why CPGS Is The Wrong Answer to China's Anti-Access Challenge

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In March 1996, the waters of the Taiwan Strait were roiled by Chinese live missile firings and massive military exercises. Washington answered Beijing's blunt demonstration of coercive military diplomacy by promptly dispatching two aircraft carriers to the scene.

This event, which, amongst others, compelled the Chinese leadership to back down in the face of a looming war, will be remembered as a turning point for two reasons, both intimately linked. Firstly, the intense feelings of helplessness and frustration it engendered amongst the Chinese military elite led fresh impetus to its attempts to offset US naval dominance in the WPTO or "Western Pacific Theater of Operations." This was to be accomplished largely through a revamped *Assassin's Mace* strategy, couched in Maoist language of "active defense," drawing on high-end asymmetric warfare and on the use of highly potent anti-access weapon systems. Secondly, and as a direct consequence, the Taiwan missile crisis can be viewed as the swan song of America's full-spectrum military dominance in the post-Cold War era.

Fifteen years later, the region's tactical environment could hardly be more different. While the US Navy, with its 11 nuclear-propelled carrier groups, still far outstrips any of its rivals in terms of sheer power projection, its current stagnation is a cause for concern. Indeed, the US combat fleet today numbers about 280 ships, in comparison to the peak of 597 reached during the Reagan era. The US submarine fleet has been particularly affected, dwindling from 102 boats in 1991 to merely 53 today. Meanwhile, the Chinese Navy is engaged in a process of unremitting expansion. Already comprised of at least 260 ships, it includes more than 75 principal combatants and 60 submarines. Its submarine flotilla is projected to grow to at least 70 in the next decade. Beijing has combined these vigorous naval efforts with an aggressively missile-centric strategy, which revolves around state-of-the-art supersonic cruise missiles, as well as a rapidly growing stock of conventional ballistic missiles that includes the recently inducted and potentially game-changing anti-ship variant of the DF-21. Indeed, as of now it is highly uncertain whether the US fleet's latest class of Aegis-equipped destroyers would be capable of fending off or neutralizing an advanced ASCM strike, let alone the DF-21C.

These developments have led to much anxiety at the Pentagon. The sudden annihilation of US forward bases in Okinawa and Guam under a missile barrage is a major concern, as is the prospect of US Carrier Groups becoming operationally irrelevant due to their growing vulnerability. This would gravely unsettle the entire regional balance, as the US finds itself gradually locked out of the Asia-Pacific.

Iskander Rehman, Research Fellow at the Transatlantic Academy of the German Marshall Fund, argues that the United States' radical reconsideration of its doctrine and force posture in the Western Pacific, in response to the region's changing tactical environment, may result in greater tactical advantage but also in deteriorating strategic stability.



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Responding to this changing environment, the United States is radically rethinking its doctrine and force posture in the WPTO. The result is a strategy entitled “AirSea Battle: A Point of Departure Operational Concept,” first released by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments in May 2010. The concept, which is currently being red-teamed and integrated by the US Navy and Air Force, is an attempt to reconcile two hard truths: the relative stagnation of the US naval force level in Asia, along with the great strides China has made in the field of anti-access and area denial. Using the LandAir Battle Concept implemented by the US military in the early 1980s as a template, the AirSea Battle Concept calls for a seamless cooperation between the US Navy and Air Force in order to offset China’s prowess in anti-access capabilities. Its successful implementation also hinges upon the revival and prioritization of American long-range weapon programs, such as the plan to acquire a fleet of new-generation stealth strategic bombers, or to develop a long-range carrier-borne attack drone.

The emphasis on long-range strike has led to a heated debate within the Pentagon over whether AirSea Battle should come to encompass Conventional Prompt Global Strike (CPGS). The latter is a new class of weapons, currently under development, that would be capable of reaching any corner of the earth in under an hour with overwhelming accuracy and force. On a tactical level, CPGS offers the tantalizing possibility to strike at hardened targets deep in the heart of China without putting costly assets in harm’s way. More generally, the weapon system has also been touted as a means of responding instantly to major threats without having to cross the nuclear threshold. The Obama Administration is particularly wedded to the system, viewing it as a structural component of its nuclear disarmament agenda.

Unfortunately, the path to hell is often paved with good intentions. For while the AirSea Battle Concept provides a thoughtful and pragmatic framework for preserving crisis stability in Asia, its fusion with CPGS would serve the opposite purpose. Indeed, while Chinese writings on asymmetric war are extensive, China’s conceptualization of escalation management is alarmingly opaque. Moreover, despite Beijing’s strict “no first use” policy, there is much discussion in China over whether early warnings of an apparent nuclear attack on its nuclear assets would justify an immediate nuclear retaliation. The induction of CPGS in the Western Pacific would dangerously blur boundaries in a region where competing forces already abide by doctrines centered on preemptive blinding campaigns, and currently share no institutionalized ground-level military communication mechanisms similar in scope to the Cold-War era. Defenders of the project point to the fact that its distinct trajectory—via a hypersonic glider—and specific storage facilities would help distinguish it to the panicked Chinese observer. The timeframe of less than an hour before impact, however, is not favorable to sober assessments of flight paths. Furthermore, the missile is atmospheric, rather than extra-atmospheric, and its US controller can change its trajectory at the last minute if need be. This complicates even further any real-time assurances to Beijing that the missile is targeted at conventional, rather than at nuclear, assets.

The debate over CPGS is a textbook example of how the lure of tactical advantage can erode grander objectives of strategic stability. While the incorporation of such a capability into the Pentagon’s new force posture would offer major advantages on the battlefield, these same benefits would drag in their wake the grim existential threat of misinterpretation and nuclear war. And that risk is something that, regardless of present anxieties and uncertainties, should be left to the past.