

# ISAS Insights

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## Power-Play of Peers in the Pacific: A ‘Chimerican’ Chess Game?

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### Abstract

*Of late there has been much talk of a new AirSea Battle Concept (ASBC), a synergising calibration of the two services enhancing punch and effectiveness on the part of the United States (US), to strategically engage adversaries in conflict situations. There was mention of this by the US Secretary of Defense at the recent Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. Though direct reference to China was eschewed, there was no doubt as to whom it was directed towards. The Chinese response for now was in words, but this article argues that it will come in kind, over time. The result could be a power-play in the naval arena of the Pacific between the two peers, the US and China, that could have the effect of destabilising a delicate equilibrium. In order for that not to happen, all actors involved would need to be circumspect and take special care. The room for unintended consequences will be large. Signals given and received, and perceptions in this connection, will be key in shaping behaviour.*

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## **Introduction**

In a not too distant a future the Pacific Ocean, it is apprehended, may be less calm than is implied by its name. Large swathes of it, in mostly what is known as the West Pacific, could become host to nations competing in the naval sphere, engaged with one another in something like a chess game, moving figures, or rather battle-assets, across the watery board in accordance with perceived self interests. Two powers, who now strategically view each other as peers, are likely to take a lead in this phenomenon – China and the US. To describe their symbiotic relationship, the neologism ‘Chimerica’ was coined by the historian Niall Ferguson and the economist Moritz Schularick in late 2006, referring both to the potential cooperation and the possible confrontation between the two countries.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the expression is also connected to a monstrous, fire-breathing creature in Greek mythology, composed of many different animals in one body, called ‘chimera’, which has come to mean a ‘foolish fantasy’. It is now becoming increasingly unclear as to which of the two, cooperation or confrontation, more aptly describes Sino-American relations, and whether there is an element of a ‘foolish fantasy’ involved. The global audience is constantly receiving mixed signals.

## **The AirSea Battle Concept**

At the recent Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, the US Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, made no bones about how the US means to keep its own powder dry. At the first plenary session, while also speaking on how Sino-American relations were progressing on a ‘positive’ note, later down the line he said, ‘The US Navy and Air Force have been concerned about anti-access and area-denial scenarios for some time. These two military services are working together to develop a new concept of operations – called “AirSea Battle” – to ensure that the military will continue to be able to deploy, move, and strike over great distances in defense of our allies and vital interests.’<sup>3</sup>

Gates eschewed mentioning China on this occasion, but it was crystal clear he was not referring to Brunei, and in any case US analysts had already cited China earlier in discussions on the

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<sup>2</sup> Niall Ferguson, ‘The Trillion Dollar Question: China or America?’, *Telegraph* (1 June 2009), [www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/5424112/The-trillion-dollar-question-China-or-America.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/5424112/The-trillion-dollar-question-China-or-America.html). Accessed on 9 June 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Robert M. Gates, ‘International Institute for Security Studies (Shangri-La Dialogue)’, *US Department of Defense* (4 June 2011), [www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1578](http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1578). Accessed on 5 June 2011.

ASBC. While ASBC had been debated upon and written on before, this was the first time there was mention of it at ministerial level to a ministerial audience with a Chinese ministerial presence. The Chinese Minister, General Liang Guanglie, immediately rejected hints of criticism of his country's 'peaceful rise'. He said, 'You say our actions do not match our words ... I strongly disagree.'<sup>4</sup> One must wait and see how they respond in kind, even if the response takes awhile, for time is not necessarily of the essence in China. One may only guess what it can be.

One educated guess is that China will take note of this concept in formulating its own strategy. But first, what 'anti-access and area-denial', or A2/AD as it is known now in strategic shorthand, was Gates talking about? This is the belief among certain US policymakers that China's military modernisation aims at denying the US air and maritime freedom of manoeuvrability, both in terms of access and area, in the Western Pacific, by targeting bases and ships with precision-guided missiles, a development designed to render the current 'American way of war' prohibitively costly.<sup>5</sup> The result was the ASBC, whose purpose is to defeat 'adversaries across the range of military operations, including adversaries equipped with sophisticated anti-access and area denial capabilities. The concept [addresses] how air and naval forces will integrate capabilities across all operational domains, air, sea, land, space, and cyberspace – to counter growing challenges to US freedom of action'.<sup>6</sup> The ASBC assumes, that failing deterrence, a conflict with China will be protracted, in which case the Navy and Air Force's assets would be required to provide mutual support in a modern equivalent of some of the innovative strategies and tactics employed by the US during World War II, or more recently, in a AirLand forces combination, against the Soviet Union in Europe during the Cold War.<sup>7</sup>

The two Chinese 'modernising' weapon systems that are most worrisome to the US are the J 20 stealth fighter and the *DongFeng* 21 D anti-ship carrier killing missiles. The J 20 has been called 'the game changer' by the Washington think tank Jamestown Foundation. This, equivalent of the American F-22 A Raptors, as well as the F-35 Joint Strike Fighters, is seen as rendering all air defence systems in the region obsolete. No radar arrays are capable of picking up this stealth aircraft, and therefore it can remain undetected throughout its flight (up to Guam without

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<sup>4</sup> *Financial Times* (6 June 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Greg Grant, 'CSBA AirSea Battle Concept; More Stealth, Long Range Strike to Counter Chinese Battle Networks', *DefenseTech* (18 May 2010), <http://defensetech.org/2010/05/18/csba-releases-its-airsea-battle-co>. Accessed on 9 June 2011.

<sup>6</sup> *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington DC: US Department of Defense, 2010), p.7.

<sup>7</sup> Jose Carreno, Thomas Culora, Captain George Galdorisi, US Navy(Retd.), and Thomas Hone, 'What's New About the AirSea Battle Concept?', *US Naval Institute Proceedings Magazine* Vol. 136/8/1290 (August 2010), <http://www.usni.org/print/6245>. Accessed on 4 June 2011.

refuelling).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, according to a renowned defence expert, Bill Sweetman, the editor of 'Aviation Week', its larger structure than originally assumed, points to a heavy weapon load.<sup>9</sup> The *DongFeng* (East Wind) 21 D is a precious killer-missile that supposedly can destroy a US Super-Carrier in one strike. It is said to employ a complex guidance system, a low radar signature, and a manoeuvrability that renders its flight path unpredictable. It has the capacity to evade tracking system, with the possibility of travelling at a speed of mach-10, reaching its maximum range of 2,000 km in 12 minutes.<sup>10</sup>

The ASBC envisions a two-stage campaign. First, the attempt would be to 'blind' the Chinese reconnaissance strike complex and then deny them accurate targeting capabilities through cyber attacks, electronic warfare aircraft and other means. The idea is to render the Chinese missile magazines useless by degrading the capacity to guide. The second stage would involve targeting Chinese assets in the mainland and seas, and establishing a blockade of the Chinese sea lines for communications. In all this the US Navy and the Air Force would closely calibrate their actions. Also, relevant procurements and weapon productions would be undertaken.<sup>11</sup> The problem with this would be two-fold, it is possible that the Chinese would retaliate with a nuclear-strike at the first stage of the combat, thus, altering the nature of the conflict early [just as any aggressive move into Europe by the conventionally superior Warsaw Pact during the Cold War would have had the 'trip-wire' effect of unleashing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) nuclear retaliation]. Secondly, new procurements would cost more funds, over and above the fiscal year (FY) 2011 budget of US\$668.6 billion, already straining US resources, and the US Congress currently is not in a generous mood.

## **Chinese Battle Concept**

What is the Chinese naval doctrine? Initially, it was no more than the defence of the coast lines. Over time, around the mid-1980s, they evolved an 'off-shore' defence concept that had a three-fold mission; first, to keep the enemy within limits and resist invasion from the sea, second, to

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<sup>8</sup> For details of its capabilities see, Robert Johnson, 'China Claims Air Superiority with Its New J-20 Stealth Fighter', *Business Insider* (10 May 2011).

<sup>9</sup> *Aviation Week* (3 January 2011).

<sup>10</sup> 'Report: China Develops Special 'Kill Weapons' to Destroy US Aircraft Carrier', *US Naval Institute* (31 March 2009), <http://www.usni.org/news-and-features/chinese-kill-weapon>. Accessed on 5 June 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Greg Grant, 'CSBA AirSea Battle Concept; More Stealth, Long Range Strike to Counter Chinese Battle Networks', *DefenseTech* (18 May 2010), <http://defensetech.org/2010/05/18/csba-releases-its-airsea-battle-co>. Accessed on 9 June 2011.

protect national sovereign territory, and third, to safeguard national unity and maritime rights. At the outset the interests to be protected were within the so-called 'first island chain' stretching from the Kuriles, Japan, the Ryukyus and Taiwan to the Philippines and Borneo, though later the goal seems to have extended to the 'second island chain', running from the Kuriles and Japan to the Bonins, Marianas, Carolines, and the Indonesian archipelago.<sup>12</sup>

It is also necessary to bear in mind that more than 90 per cent of China's trade by volume is transported by sea, as two-thirds of its oil needs will be met from overseas by 2015.<sup>13</sup> This implies the need to protect the routes. At a seminar in Singapore in 2008, a participant Huang Jin said that the People's Liberation Army Navy is the fastest growing force in the Chinese military.<sup>14</sup> Since 2000, China has procured around 20 major surface vessels as destroyers and frigates, at least 31 new submarines and plans to build six aircraft carriers, commissioning the first by 2015.<sup>15</sup> Obviously, therefore, there are 'blue-water' aspirations. Understandably, for the reasons stated above and also for the fact that China is slated to overtake the US economy soon, indeed by 2020, if one is to believe PricewaterhouseCoopers, an economy of that magnitude would feel the need to protect itself.<sup>16</sup> At present, though, the size of its defence budget is at US\$97.7 billion, only a fraction of that of the US.

### **Some Ramifications for the Region**

At the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, the Chinese Minister did not specifically respond to Gates' reference to the ASBC. The Chinese are not wont to make remarks off the cuff without requisite, and oftentimes thorough, preparations. However, what he did say could have significant relevant ramifications. Insisting that 'quite a big gap' still exists between China and that of more developed nations (implying that there should not be), he observed, 'Our forces are mainly equipped with second generation technology now, but more developed countries (read:

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<sup>12</sup> Milan Vego, 'China's Naval Challenge', *US Naval Institute Proceedings Magazine* (29 March 2011), [www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2011-04/chinas-naval-challengemagazines/proceedings/2011-04/chinas-naval-challenge](http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2011-04/chinas-naval-challengemagazines/proceedings/2011-04/chinas-naval-challenge). Accessed on 9 June 2011.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> 'Between Rising Naval Powers: Implications for Southeast Asia of the Rise of Chinese and Indian Naval Powers', *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies* (18-19 November 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Richard A. Bitzinger 'China's Naval Ambitions: Aircraft Carriers Will Make Waves', *Straits Times* (8 July 2009).

<sup>16</sup> 'China can overtake US economy by 2020, says PricewaterhouseCoopers', *The Economic Times* (21 January 2010), <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/indicators/china-can-overtake-us-economy-by-2020-says-pricewaterhousecoopers/articleshow/5483012.cms>. Accessed on 9 June 2011

‘the US’) are ... already moving into the fourth generation.’ This is a strong argument for a yet greater build-up by the Chinese military, underscoring that currently, in comparison with others, it has been insufficient, and that as China develops it will have the moral right and practical compulsions to further strengthen its defence potentials.

A Chinese analyst, Senior Colonel Fan Gaoyue, commenting directly on the ASBC has said, ‘This cycle is not beneficial to China or the US. In fact the People’s Liberation Army will never target the US military “except” if it intervenes in the Taiwan conflict or launches a pre-emptive strike against China. If AirSea Battle aims to stop a growing tilt in the balance of power, it means that the US intends to obtain greater advantages over regional militaries. The US already enjoys the balance of power in Asia-Pacific. The US has the strongest military and has no counterpart in the world.’ He described the ASBC, if it is modelled on the AirLand Battle model during the Cold War, ‘as the wrong decision [by the US] at a wrong time at a wrong place’, because the Cold War situation no longer existed, and the Asia-Pacific region was a stable one at this time.<sup>17</sup>

It is conceivable, of course, that the ASBC is designed mainly to attract some budgetary attention. For instance, as already stated in this article, there is no existing radar capability to detect a stealth craft such as J 20. The concept would involve such procurements, and, therefore, also the need for appropriate resources for the purpose. Though, the practical effect would be inviting the Chinese to an arms race, if not to make up the gap with the US the possibility of which lies well beyond the rim of the saucer, but at least to keep the gap constant or even to reduce it and most certainly not widen it. There is a differential in the equilibrium that the Chinese would tolerate, but they would perhaps react to anything more. More hazardous, it could lower the nuclear threshold for the protagonist, in this case China, which perceives itself to be conventionally too inferior.

On the other hand, if the idea is to reassure the US allies and partners in the region, this could have the opposite effect of delinking them. This will be particularly true if the Chinese attempt to respond to new US initiatives widens the gulf between them and consequently enhance their vulnerability. They would then be chary of continuing a partnership with a more distant player, should their own insecurity be heightened. If China should develop the capacity in the process to hit US cities, then these Asian littorals would question the credibility of an ally, however powerful, to put its own population in line for them. All this could result in an unwarranted

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<sup>17</sup> ‘US AirSea Battle concept targeting China’, *Peoples Forum* (27 April 2011), [www.peopleforum.cn/viewthread.php?tid=89782&extra+page%3D1](http://www.peopleforum.cn/viewthread.php?tid=89782&extra+page%3D1). Accessed on 4 June 2011.

destabilisation of an otherwise fairly stable region. To prevent this from happening, all major actors involved must therefore be circumspect and take special care. The room for unintended consequences will be large. Signals given and received, and perceptions in this connection, will be key in shaping behaviour. Henry Kissinger had once written, ‘Confrontation with China should be the ultimate recourse, not the strategic choice.’<sup>18</sup> Wise words from a vastly experienced and intensely pragmatic thinker.

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<sup>18</sup> H. Kissinger, *Does America Need A Foreign Policy: Towards Diplomacy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), p.136.