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AirSea Battle As Presently Conceived

By *SWJ Editors*

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AirSea Battle As Presently Conceived

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In mid-December, a senior U.S. Navy official delivered a (not for attribution) **presentation** on the AirSea Battle concept at a Washington D.C. institute. While AirSea Battle was first introduced in early 2010^[1], official Department of Defense explanations of the concept have been minimal. In the absence of a comprehensive DOD summary, the void has been filled by service publications, defense media, and online journals. To date, the principal reference point has been two monographs published by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, "**Why AirSea Battle?**" (02/19/2010) and "**AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept**" (05/18/2010). Aviation Week produced a comprehensive **overview** in April 2011. By contrast, DOD **acknowledged** the Aug. 12 establishment of an "AirSea Battle Office" composed of 12 to 15 officers -- after the fact on November 9th. Defense media coverage ranged from **objective** to **underwhelmed**. The week prior to the presentation, Inside the Pentagon **obtained** a unsigned copy of a new Joint Staff publication entitled "Joint Operational Access Concept". In all, the dearth of information is surprising given previous Secretary of Defense Robert Gates's **depiction** of AirSea Battle as a concept with "potential to do for America's military deterrent power at the beginning of the 21st century what **AirLand Battle** did near the end of the 20th." As such, the December briefing provided a welcome introduction to AirSea Battle -- the presentation focused principally on its historical antecedents but it also succinctly summarized how the concept is expected to address current operational challenges associated with power projection. AirSea Battle, as currently conceived, represents a substantive (embryonic) attempt to address anti-access and area denial, but, as with many attempts by civilian and military department leaders, it may be hindered by the paucity of guidance from elected decision-makers as to America's national security objectives going forward.

The Core of AirSea Battle

At its heart, AirSea Battle is anticipated to be the basis for "winning a guided munitions salvo competition." The key aim is "to disrupt and destroy enemy A2-AD networks and their defensive and offensive guided weapons systems in order to enable U.S. freedom of action to conduct concurrent and follow-on operations." Winning is accomplished by employing both kinetic and non-kinetic means and by scouting the enemy's network, attacking effectively first, and coordinating operations and fires across dispersed forces.

The presenting official came to this summation by demonstrating how warfare has evolved from engagements between forces wielding massive unguided munitions. Whether thrown, shot, fired, or dropped, effective unguided munitions had to be delivered in mass to compensate for the low probability of striking the designated target.

Warfare began to transition away purely unguided munitions engagements during World War II when forces began fielding “battle networks” to sense enemy attacks earlier and coordinate defensive measures more quickly. Guided munitions made their appearance in the form of Imperial Japanese kamikaze attacks in the Pacific theater. The tactic fared well as a stratagem to overcome American networked defenses (and contrasted positively with massive American naval fires) demonstrating guided munitions could achieve comparable effects more efficiently, especially if delivered first.

The breakthrough, however, was underappreciated as the coinciding development and use of the atomic bomb demonstrated how a single munition’s explosive capacity could dwarf an entire arsenal’s firepower and eliminate the problem of missing the target. Instead of comprehensively exploring the potential of guided munitions, the American military established nuclear weapons as the basis for its offensive arsenal; the development of guided munitions occurred primarily only as part of integrated and computerized network defense systems.

The next catalyst to prompt the U.S. military to begin developing offensive guided munitions was the Vietnam War. American reliance on unguided munitions had two shortcomings. One, North Vietnamese air defenses employed guided missiles increasing the risk to American pilots loitering at length in order to discharge unguided bombs. Two, indiscriminate bombing campaigns resulted in massive civilian deaths, diminishing support for the American war effort domestically and abroad. The operational performance of guided munitions led the Department of Defense to launch in 1975 after the war’s end the Long Range Research and Development Planning Program. The priority was to provide American decision-makers with an alternative to choosing “massive nuclear destruction” as a course of action; as the path not yet taken, the Department would develop guided munition capabilities.

Initial progress was uneven as the main munitions-dependent services, the Navy and the Air Force, focused on service-specific tactical objectives, namely countering air and maritime platforms. Moreover, technology had not yet overcome limitations connected with the nature of delivery systems (carrier magazines, carrier-based air forces) or weather (laser-impeding clouds).

In the end, the decisive factor was the continuing competition with the USSR. Soviet military theorists, led by Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, readily recognized command and control systems networked via computer systems and armed with guided munitions could usher in a “military technical revolution” in warfare. Faced with a potential Soviet “reconnaissance-strike complex,” the American military responded by beginning to examine full how campaign planning and execution could capitalize on capitalize on guided munitions (as well as digital networks). Meanwhile, technology finally advanced whereby new munitions would be less costly and more precise. Doctrinal application occurred with the formulation of AirLand Battle.

Operational validation occurred in the victory over Iraq in 1991. After Operation Desert Storm, “the defining battle” in the words of the presentation, relying principally on unguided munitions would have been inconceivable for any of the services. As successive charts demonstrated, the American reliance on guided munitions increased in volume, proportion, and precision over the time period leading up to Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003.

For American adversaries, the only conventional countermeasures available at the time entailed denying American battle networks the information needed to execute strikes (deception, jamming) or mitigating the effect of executed strikes (moving assets below the surface or hiding among the civilian population). Adversaries could seek nuclear weapons but not without a substantial commitment of resources and

inevitable attention from the United States.

While American military dominance was assured during this period, the advantage would ultimately be fleeting. Invariably, the underlying technology spread and adversaries -- state and non-state -- have developed or acquired commensurate capabilities and are prepared to deny the American military the freedom of action to which it has been accustomed. Referring to slide 26, the presenting official noted how the cumulative effect of layered SAM, fighter, ship, and missile assets would curtail the maneuver space for American forces.

It is in this context the presenting official returned to the opening premise of AirSea Battle as a means for assuring American power projection in an era of guided munitions.

If Adversary X (and the presenting official repeatedly stressed the concept is not premised on a specific country) employs anti-access area denial measures, then AirSea Battle will have shaped operational planning and resulted in capabilities whereby American forces can neutralize the enemy's network and attack first. By first defeating an enemy's targeting capabilities and delivery systems (as well as demonstrating the ability to mitigate or sustain a strike), the United States will retain the requisite operational freedom of action. "Air Sea Battle will soon be a necessary precursor before deploying the remainder of the joint force."

American decision-makers concerned anti-access and area denial measures would thwart deployed forces or allies worried the United States would not contest such measures would be assuaged.

In this regard, winning the guided munition salvo competition is ultimately about deterring adversaries and re-assuring allies.

The presenting official acknowledged the concept principally remains a joint Navy-Air Force endeavor but speculated a successful AirSea Battle concept could prompt exploration of a successor ground force doctrine -- an "AirLand Battle II." The presenting official commented the Marine Corps would be the "bridge" for the eventual incorporation of the Army; whether this incorporation would be into ensuing conceptual development or (later) operational planning was not explained.

Critical to the success of AirSea Battle is "scouting" whereby American forces have successfully established the scope and scale of the enemy's battle network. The presenting official indicated intelligence would be integral to successful scouting and made a brief (but unintentionally) pointed reference to network operational capability. Whether this signifies the use of indigenous service capabilities or the newly established Cyber Command is unknown.

In discussing new platforms and weapons, the presenting officials stated the Department must sustain its investment in directed energy and electronic warfare -- otherwise, the American military will be at a distinct disadvantage in the future.

In discussing present assets, the presenting official asserted the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Program is proceeding satisfactorily^[2] and stated it will provide capabilities consistent with AirSea Battle as currently conceived. Moreover, the presenting official contended the aircraft would be purchased by allies throughout the region, providing a complementarity that is rarely available.^[3]

AirSea Battle as a Joust?

If a future operational challenge will entail overcoming anti-access and area denial measures via the employment of guided munitions, then AirSea Battle's focus on neutralizing the enemy's battle network and striking first with long range guided munitions appears appropriate -- if it indeed can be accomplished. Each side will still be holding the other at bay with an integrated battle network and guided munitions, just as the Soviets had contemplated earlier (see below left). Revisiting the Soviet

rendition, one is possibly reminded of the medieval joust (see below right). Two opponents, each armed with “long-range” weapons and each trying to exploit very narrow margins for victory.

In this context, AirSea Battle presupposes a parity between the American military and an enemy’s military (even though little evidence suggests parity indeed exists). Again, the Soviets realized the incorporation of precision weaponry would expand the battlespace and assumed the United States was moving in the same direction. Developing an equivalent reconnaissance-strike complex would have been their attempt to deter an anticipated American advantage.

Accordingly, a face-off between opponents with integrated battle network and guided munitions is an instance of mutual deterrence. AirSea Battle seeks to resolve this standoff by placing a tremendous premium on defensive measures and sustaining superior maneuverability and speed. If a future operational challenge will entail overcoming anti-access and area denial measures, then AirSea Battle’s focus on neutralizing the enemy’s battle network and striking first with long range guided munitions appears appropriate -- if it indeed can be accomplished.^[4]

As depicted by the presentation, the Soviets conceived of the reconnaissance-strike complex as a maritime application. The Americans, in contrast, developed its complex to support ground operations in Europe.

At that time, the technology supported only short range combined ground and air operations in a confined geographic space. In the present, the Department of Defense will need to develop and procure long-range systems and, emphatic disclaimers aside, the expected battlespace will adversaries along the combined enormity of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, more than 86 million square miles and approximately 126,000 miles of coastline.

The corresponding number of targets and platform requirements may dwarf what can be attained in the near to medium future. As Mr. **Robert Haddick** of Small Wars Journal has pointed out in recent articles, the current configuration of forces in the Western Pacific may simply preclude a quick resolution of any engagement. Moreover, the military services will have to accept inevitable “large cultural changes” if its members are to accomplish the tall tasks laid out in AirSea Battle, whether it is operating new remotely-piloted long-range systems or synchronizing previously independent planning and programming.

Warning of inevitable cultural changes and expecting adaptation by the warfighter brings to mind (again) the **admonition** of Air Force COL John Boyd: “Machines don’t fight wars, people do, and they use their minds.” The warfighter should not have to adjust to accommodate organizational integration or anticipated platforms -- organization and platforms should.

The Imperative of Broader Structural Restructuring

AirSea Battle is a laudable attempt to address a nettlesome operational challenge, but amidst severe budgetary challenges and the continuing need for reform, the concept should be concomitant with a broader restructuring of American forces.

In a recent **Joint Force Quarterly** article, retired U.S. Army COL Doug MacGregor outlined force design options warranting additional attention.

In line with the premium placed on maneuver and speed arising from the above salvo competition, COL MacGregor calls for a force structured and equipped for dispersed mobile warfare inside an integrated maneuver-strike-intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR)-sustainment complex that combines ground maneuver forces with strike, ISR, and sustainment capabilities from all of the services. In COL MacGregor's estimation, military establishments that integrate functions and capabilities across service lines while simultaneously eliminating unneeded overhead not only are less expensive to operate and maintain, but are also likely to be far more lethal.

Again, the US military should be inspired by its former Soviet foe and similarly establish a unified military command structure that compels the integration of core service capabilities under a single operational commander, which permitted the maximization combat power (land, sea, and air) where it was needed and minimization where it was not needed. Accordingly, a future force would combine strike and maneuver into a single joint operation inside a joint task force command under a lieutenant general or vice admiral. Subordinate commanding major generals would separately be responsible for maneuver, strike, sustainment, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR). Additionally, COL MacGregor recommends establishing a new self-contained mission-focused capability package -- a Combat Maneuver Group (CMG) of 5,000- to 6,000-man under the command of a brigadier general and capable of limited independent action that "eliminates unnecessary command levels and drives jointness to a much lower level." In the aggregate, the future force would feature reduced command overhead^[5] combining with existing single-service echelons transitioned into a flatter, multi-service integrative structure to maximize ready and deployable combat power.

Beyond Structural Reform -- Defining Red Lines

COL MacGregor's recommendations center principally on ground forces and he contends sea control is no longer a mission demanding a large surface fleet. To ensure access in the same battlespace AirSea Battle is being designed to address, the United States should instead rely on a nuclear submarine fleet employing long-range sensors, manned and unmanned aircraft, communications, and missiles.

The emphasis reflects a final matter AirSea Battle does not address and, admittedly, probably should not have to address. AirSea Battle is a means for militarily contesting impeded access but whether it will be sufficiently decisive is (again) unknown; does its conception imply a readiness on the part of the elected national decision-makers to proceed up the escalatory ladder?

Returning to the likely battlespace and, by extension, supposable adversaries in the form of China and Iran, have decision-makers clearly laid out the national interest and what constitute the basis for war?

Is China's pursuit of increased flexibility in the western Pacific Ocean a critical threat to American interests? If the matter is the forcible re-unification of Taiwan, yes; if the matter is increasing naval capabilities to preclude reliance on a foreign power's navy to safeguard its burgeoning maritime trade interests, then perhaps not. (Moreover, the guided munition salvo competition is going to occur over the territory of critical American allies like [Japan](#) -- have decision-makers broached the matter?)

Is Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons a critical threat to American interests? Yes, but has the continued absence of diplomatic and trade relations and sole reliance on military posturing facilitated American objectives? The past decade in Afghanistan and Iraq has demonstrated the limitations of applying principally military forces and resources to American foreign policy challenges. Although reductions must occur in the Department of Defense budget, decision-makers will still have to retain a modicum of diplomatic and intelligence capacity to compensate for the retreat of "military forward" presence; hopefully not all budget reductions will be reserved for deficit reduction.

In closing, AirSea Battle is a laudable attempt to address the continuing challenge of the asymmetric approaches an adversary will undertake to undermine U.S. objectives. Nonetheless, effective employment of this concept may deter would be adversaries and assure allies, but guidance at the presidential level must be forthcoming to answer how the nation proceeds should such circumstances prove short-lived.

[1] The AirSea Battle concept made its official debut in February 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review **Report**. It was identified as the means for defining how air and naval forces would “integrate capabilities across all operational domains” and “guide the development of future capabilities needed” for deterring and defeating aggression in anti-access environments, a key element to “rebalance the force.”

[2] The assertion was untimely as it came amidst the release of an internal Department of Defense report detailing significant problems in the program (Source: Project On Government Oversight: F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Concurrency Quick Look Review ([URL](#)))

[3] Japan recently **decided** to acquire the aircraft for its air force.

[4] Whether the Soviets ever figured out to triumph in the collision of reconnaissance-strike complexes is unknown -- they never had the chance. Moreover, after the Soviet collapse, reconnaissance-strike complexes have only been employed against significantly inferior opponents.

[5] COL MacGregor recommends reducing the number of geographic combatant commands to four; **as previously submitted**, the number of geographic combatant commands could alternatively be reduced to two.

About the Author



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Available online at : <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/airsea-battle-as-presently-conceived>

Links:

{1} <http://smallwarsjournal.com/author/swj-editors>

{2} <http://houseofmarathon.blogspot.com/2011/12/111231airseabattleaspresentlyconceived.html>

{3} <http://goo.gl/n5sVu>

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<https://docs.google.com/a/smallwarsjournal.com/document/pub?id=1mRAILCOKxI1L7DaxYhIQ0UVBYnv3vQN0Uk609z>

{5} <http://www.csbaonline.org/publications/2010/02/why-airsea-battle/>

{6} <http://www.csbaonline.org/publications/2010/05/airsea-battle-concept/>

{7}

<http://www.aviationweek.com/aw/blogs/defense/index.jsp?plckController=Blog&plckBlogPage=BlogViewPost&plckPostId=Blog%3a27ec4a53-dcc8-42d0-bd3a-01329aef79a7&plckPostId=Blog%3a27ec4a53-dcc8-42d0-bd3a-01329aef79a7Post%3aa1b659b1-0e9c-47f4-8339-eb3826fc0361&plckScript=blogScript&plckElementId=blogDest>

{8} <http://www.defense.gov/releases/release.aspx?releaseid=14910>

{9} <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=8201708>

{10} <http://defense.aol.com/2011/11/10/air-sea-battle-whats-it-all-about-or-not/>

{11} <http://goo.gl/yPZsi>

{12} <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=63035>

{13} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AirLand_Battle

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{23} http://www.defense.gov/qdr/images/QDR_as_of_12Feb10_1000.pdf

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{25} <http://www.pogo.org/resources/national-security/f-35-jsf-concurrency-quick-look-review-20111129.html>

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