The Third Offset Strategy in Historical Context

SWJ interview with Robert Martinage

Robert Martinage is a senior fellow at CSBA where he returned after five years of public service in the Department of Defense (DoD). From 2010-2013, Mr. Martinage served as the Deputy Under Secretary of the Navy, providing senior-level advice on foreign and defense policy, naval capability and readiness, security policy, intelligence oversight, and special programs. Appointed Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations, Low-Intensity Conflict and Interdependent Capabilities in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) in 2009, Mr. Martinage focused on special operations, irregular warfare, counter-terrorism, and security force assistance policy.

SWJ: Historically, what is the role of offset strategies in broader US grand strategies?

Robert Martinage: Since the end of the Cold War, there have been at least two occasions when the United States pursued an offset strategy. The first was President Eisenhower’s “New Look” in the 1950s and the second was the “Offset strategy” promoted by the Secretary Harold Brown in the 1970s. In both cases the fundamental challenge was the same: to offset the numerical advantage of Warsaw Pact forces by using a US technology advantage.

SWJ: What is the role of the offset strategy in deterring a competitor? How crucial was the second offset strategy in deterring and changing the calculation of the Soviet mass superiority vis-à-vis NATO? What was the effect of the second offset strategy for the Soviet perceptions?

Robert Martinage: The second offset strategy clearly influenced Soviet perceptions about deterrence. By demonstrating the capability to “look deep and shoot deep” into Warsaw Pact territory in the 1970s and 1980s, NATO called into question the underlying Soviet operational concept at the time for combined arms ground maneuver. Our growing ability to see deep into the Warsaw Pact territory and hold Soviet second echelon forces at risk caused a great deal of angst. The Soviets not only wrote about the problem in military journals, they also made focused investments and conducted field exercises to mitigate the impact of NATO “reconnaissance-strike” networks. It is very clear from the historical record that the Soviets were very concerned about these developments and actively took steps to counter them.

SWJ: In his latest book, Harold Brown remembers the fact that when he became Secretary of Defense in 1977 he concluded that “America and its allies needed to be able to deny or at least reduce Soviet confidence that it could roll over Western Europe in thirty days. (...) The US considered how to change the Soviet calculation that its military could accomplish a blitzkrieg victory in Western Europe.” Was the offset strategy the crucial variable that changed the Soviet calculus and stabilized the balance of power?
Robert Martinage: Based on historical documents that are now available, it did influence Soviet calculations about the balance of power and bolstered deterrence along the Central Front in Europe. It certainly sowed doubt in their minds about the feasibility of achieving the timelines underpinning their operational plans. Was the offset important in terms of stabilizing the situation in Europe? Yes, I think that is the case. The second offset strategy, however, was focused on a relatively narrow operational problem; specifically that NATO forces were outnumbered by roughly 3 to 1 along the Central Front in Europe. That said, it was a major strategic concern given the uncertain credibility of the US threat to escalate to the nuclear level in defense of Western Europe. In terms of addressing the underlying problem, the NATO conventional imbalance in Europe, the offset strategy was effective.

SWJ: Why is the traditional US power projection model in crisis? Why is the conventional US power projection challenged?

Robert Martinage: In large part the monopoly that we had on the second offset strategy (the networking of the intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance systems with precision strike capabilities) is slipping away. Prospective adversaries have watched how we project power over the last several decades, identified vulnerabilities and fielded reconnaissance-strike networks of their own to target US weaknesses.

And this new environment has troubling implications for the way the US has preferred to project power since the end of the Cold War. We now have four core operational problems that we have to address: one is that close-in theater bases (airfields, ports, ground installations) are increasingly vulnerable to precision attack; second, surface combatants including aircraft carriers operating in littoral waters are easier to detect, track, and attack at range; third, networked integrated air defense systems (IADS) are becoming more lethal in terms of both of their reach and their ability to counteract our defense systems that we may try to use (as a result non-stealthy aircraft are increasingly vulnerable to attack); and lastly, space (used for ISR, precision navigation and timing, and communication) is increasingly vulnerable to both kinetic and non-kinetic attack, and thus, is no longer a sanctuary. These are the four core problems that we need to address and that is why, in my view, countering them should be the focus of the third offset strategy. We need to “offset” the fielding of disruptive technologies, and anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) systems in particular, by prospective adversaries to restore and sustain US conventional power projection capability.

SWJ: To what extent are these maturing A2/AD bubbles a threat to the US ability to deter aggression vis-à-vis US allies? Is the credibility of US resolve/deterrence capital weakened?

Robert Martinage: It is absolutely a problem in terms of maintaining a credible deterrence posture and preserving the confidence of our allies in our ability to meet our security commitments. This is something that we need to address. The heart of deterrence is an adversary’s perception of our capability and willingness to carry out whatever our deterrence threat is. That deterrence threat is now being increasingly called into question because of the anticipated costs and the mounting risk associated with the “traditional” US approach to power projection. So to reassure our allies and deter prospective adversaries it is imperative to think how we might project power differently to mitigate, neutralize, or evade A2/AD threats.

SWJ: You have emphasized that the credibility of US deterrence is a function of the existence of capability and the political will to use these capabilities. Today, in a world of maturing A2/AD regional bubbles, the capabilities so crucial to US deterrence capital are increasingly in question. We have a capability gap. In addition, lately we’ve seen US unwillingness to use force in particular crises like Ukraine or Syria. Can these trends (maturing A2/AD coupled with US unwillingness to use force) shape a perception that the US credibility in general and the credibility of US deterrence in particular are in question?
Robert Martinage: I am not sure that our power projection capabilities are the reason why we were reluctant to engage in either Syria or Ukraine. There are other factors at play in those regions. But to your point, if it is perceived that our capability to project power is waning for whatever reasons and the apparent cost of US intervention increases over time because of these growing threats, there is a possibility that adversaries may believe that the United States may be self-deterred from engaging in conflicts around the world. When it comes to deterrence, perception is reality. So whether the United States in fact lacks the capability and willingness to honor its security commitments matters less than what our prospective adversaries believe to be true.

SWJ: How would you assess the threat that A2/AD capabilities pose for the global commons placed in the proximity of anti-status-quo competitors?

Robert Martinage: Because of the reach of the systems associated with an A2/AD network, they definitely pose a threat to the freedom of operations in the global commons: at sea, in the air, in space and cyberspace. All of these domains are threatened.

SWJ: To what extent can the regional commons (like sea lanes) be disrupted under an A2/AD umbrella? Can an anti-status-quo competitor, under an A2/AD shield, disrupt the freedoms associated with the global commons?

Robert Martinage: Current and anticipated A2/AD capabilities could be used to target the commons on a regional basis. While A2/AD networks are often thought about in terms of their impact on military forces, they could also be used to threaten or disrupt commercial traffic in heavily travelled sea-lanes, as well as in international airspace. Indeed, they could also be used to disrupt civilian communications through space and under the sea, as well as critical information-enabled civilian infrastructures.

SWJ: The outcome of the democratization of PGM technology is that many regional powers have been able to develop A2/AD bubbles to counter the US traditional approach to projecting power. Should we perceive this 3rd offset strategy effort as aimed to overcoming the A2/AD bubbles, to defeat them, to demonstrate that you have the ability to breach/break the A2/AD shield?

Robert Martinage: I think the core question is how do we project power credibly and effectively. In some cases that may mean countering and rolling back an adversary’s A2/AD capabilities, their reconnaissance-strike networks. But this may not always be the case. In some other cases, it could be rendering A2/AD networks irrelevant by projecting power in a different way. The third offset strategy should not be a symmetric response to A2/AD challenges, but rather a coherent concept along with associated enabling capabilities to restore and sustain conventional US power projection capability. Countering A2/AD threats may be necessary, but it is not sufficient; it is a means to an end—and that end is holding at risk targets that the adversary values or his war-fighting capabilities.

SWJ: In the ‘70s we were talking about the Air Land battle doctrine. Now we are talking about Air Sea battle concept. But these are operational concepts that by themselves are not enough to make a difference. They need game-changing capabilities. Should we see the offset strategies as necessary complements of these operational concepts?

Robert Martinage: In my mind the core question is what is the operational problem that we are trying to address? What are we trying to offset? In my view, what we are trying to offset are our adversaries’ capabilities (including A2/AD) that call into question US power projection capability. If that is the problem then there are many potential operational concepts for addressing it, of which Air Sea battle is one. Once you’ve decided on how you want to deal with that problem, you need the enabling capabilities to make that operational concept real. So the first step is to correctly identify the problem, come up with
operational concepts for addressing the problem, and develop and field whatever capabilities are needed to implement those concepts.

SWJ: Deterrence is a two-level game: deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment. Should the US master both levels? Have US resources to do both? Should we have a balance?

Robert Martinage: The bedrock of deterrence is increasing an adversary’s perceived costs of taking some actions and reducing the perceived benefits of attempting to do so. And there are various ways to do that. I think there is merit in putting more reliance on deterrence by denial, reducing a prospective aggressors’ confidence that they can achieve their war ends in the first place. But another tool in the toolbox is increasing the anticipated costs of aggression in other ways, thereby affecting both sides of the cost-benefit calculus. I think that, in most respects, the force that you build to have the capability to deter by denial can also be leveraged to deter by a credible threat of punishment.

SWJ: Do you see also for NATO the need for starting to think in these terms and even develop its own offsetting strategy? My sense is that its power projection model is based on the assumption of a highly permissive environment.

Robert Martinage: NATO and other US allies and partners around the world will hopefully be integrated into whatever this third offset strategy becomes and will be part of the solution of how we can project power effectively around the world together. At the same, we need to remember that this is not a national defense strategy or a national security strategy. The objective of the “third” offset strategy, at least in my view, is not to address every national security challenge that we and our allies face, but rather to restore the credibility of conventional U.S. power projection capability. There may be some challenges that are better suited to the skill sets of our allies, some that we address together, and others that are tackled primarily by US forces. There is a panoply of national security challenges out there. We need to look at what makes sense across the whole spectrum.

SWJ: I am asking this question related to NATO because the outcome of the latest summit of the alliance in UK was very interesting. In order to strategically reassure its Eastern Flank, the alliance promised a very fast reinforcement force that will be able to project its power in 48 hours in case something is happening. I am combining this particular outcome with the crisis of the traditional power projection model, including the crisis of the assumptions at the center of it. In the end the assumption of a highly permissive environment is also at the core of the NATO’s power projection model. In particular NATO assumes that will have enough time to project its power in a highly permissive environment. But Russia is developing its own A2/AD reach in the Baltic and Black Seas, across NATO’s Eastern Flank. How appropriate do you see this traditionalist power projection model compared with what Russia is fielding?

Robert Martinage: Russia is developing a number of capabilities that appear to be aimed at countering the traditional US approach to power projection. To the extent that an offset strategy down the road provides options for projecting power that are more difficult for Russia to counter, that would be very useful. It would strengthen conventional deterrence. I am agreeing with you, but I think that the challenge that Russia is presenting right now in Europe is more at the sub-conventional threat level, and thus, can’t be answered adequately through conventional deterrence and power projection capabilities alone. This is another type of challenge that we need to address--not just in Europe, but also in the South China Sea.

SWJ: Yes, but a sub-conventional, little green men type of scenario in the Baltic States under the protection provided by an A2/AD umbrella is not unreasonable, it is not out of the question. And in that particular case a NATO Response Force (NRF) might not be able to be projected on the ground because of a highly A2/AD non-permissive environment. At that point NATO deterrence capital will be in question. NATO needs to be able to put at risk the A2/AD capabilities of the competition and must be able to access the theater. At the same time, as you have emphasized, sub-conventional type
of scenarios shouldn’t necessarily be answered through power projection, but this means that NATO should forward station sub-conventional capacities in the Baltic States. On the other side, if NRF is not forward deployed before the actual crisis, to deter a crisis, it may never be able to be deployed because of the A2/AD umbrella, so giving Russia the opportunity of a territorial fait accompli that would be difficult to reverse.

Robert Martinage: I agree with the core logic of your argument. Current and emerging Russia A2/AD capabilities threaten nearby ports, airfields, and fixed ground installations—which could make NATO reinforcement in a crisis risky, difficult and almost certainly time consuming. “Rolling back” Russia’s A2/AD network could not be achieved quickly and would be fraught with escalatory risk as well. Accordingly, the best option to deter Russian sub-conventional aggression in the region might be to enhance the self-defense capabilities of the Baltic States and other regional allies and partners. This might be achieved through smart investments in their own “A2/AD” capabilities like SOF and paramilitary forces, mobile air defenses, coastal defense networks, advanced mines, and man-portable anti-tank weapons that could be bolstered in peacetime by forward-deployed NATO assets. The most relevant NATO forces will likely be those that are on the ground prior to a crisis. While the U.S. military, and the Army in particular, has shifted from a forward-based garrison force toward an expeditionary one since the end of the Cold War, the maturation and diffusion of A2/AD threats may cause the pendulum to swing back in the other direction—especially for ground forces.

SWJ: We see the salami-slicing tactics that China is employing in South China Sea using sub-conventional and civilianized means. But if we look in the Black Sea, especially after the annexation of Crimea, Russia is aiming to transform the Black Sea in a some sort of A2/AD lake, a no go area for NATO naval presence. Having in mind what happened in South China Sea and having an A2/AD umbrella over its head, can Russia be emboldened to try insidious/crippling aggressions in territorial waters and the EEZ of the Black Sea territorial states (for whatever reasons-energy is just one such reason) or against the regional commons? A kind of little green men scenario on the sea. Can an A2/AD actor feel emboldened to use unconventional tactics when it is confident enough that the other part doesn’t have the right strategy or capabilities to counteract this?

Robert Martinage: Prospective adversaries could develop A2/AD capabilities to provide an umbrella under which they could conduct sub-conventional operations and use the subversive tactics that you suggested. The goal would be to deter conventional intervention by external powers by driving up their anticipated costs of doing so. This is a very reasonable observation. The solution might be a different type of ground force that is survivable and can fight that subversive, sub-conventional aggression underneath an adversary’s A2/AD umbrella. Such a force—probably comprising a large proportion of SOF and paramilitary units—would survive through mobility, dispersion, camouflage, concealment, decoys, and selected active defenses. I think it would be valuable, however, to also develop options to hold an adversary’s A2/AD umbrella at risk, so if the stakes were high enough, you could dismantle it, enabling allied operations at both the sub-conventional and conventional levels. In general, it makes sense for smaller countries facing military coercion by larger powers, like Russia or China, to invest in local A2/AD capabilities of their own in order to raise the costs of any potential aggression against them.

SWJ: You have emphasized this ability of putting in danger the A2/AD umbrella of the competition. Doesn’t this ability of holding at risk core land-based capabilities of the competitor makes the security dilemma more unstable by providing incentives for preventive strikes?

Robert Martinage: Can you credibly execute whatever your deterrent threat is? Do you have the capabilities and the means to do what you say? If you don’t have that, it is unlikely that your prospective adversaries will be deterred. The second question is: what are the implications for crisis stability of the
current situation? If an adversary has a strong incentive to strike preventively in a crisis to gain an advantage that is clearly not a desirable strategic situation. And I think that increasingly may be the situation we find ourselves in because of our vulnerability in space, because of the vulnerability of close-in bases and ports, and because of the vulnerability of surface ships in nearby littoral waters. This is a situation that increases crisis instability. The steps for reducing that vulnerability have the second-order effect of increasing crisis stability. Right now, however, if we are faced with a serious crisis in the Western Pacific or Europe, we will surge forces into vulnerable forward bases. Instead of being stabilizing, reassuring allies, and deterring aggression, a surge deployment may actually incentivize an adversary to strike US forces preemptively to prevent them from being brought to bear.

SWJ: It took a cycle of 10 years to develop the capabilities that restored US deterrence capital. So we might have another 10 years cycle in front of us. Does this mean that A2/AD adversaries might use this window of opportunity for probing how far they can go with their crippling/insidious aggressions under the shelter of their A2/AD bubble?

Robert Martinage: They could be and I think, to some degree, the third offset strategy it is late to need. It is something that we should have initiated at least a decade ago. So it is time to get going. There are things that we could do in the near term that would steadily improve our situation, things that would put us on the right road forward.

SWJ: In both East China Sea and South China Sea we can see maturing a very interesting trend-the civilianization of revisionism or better said the using of unconventional/irregular ways and means for advancing low-cost revisionism. China is using “civilian” elements and the cabbage strategy “in the vanguard of offensive military operations designed to seize and hold territory” (as Robert Haddick put it). But in both cases we can’t really point to a traditional category of a lawful combatant that can trigger a conventional response. What can be done in order to deter and counteract such measures short of war, without escalating to the conventional level and in way that preserves the credibility of US resolve?

Robert Martinage: I agree that China’s use of “lawfare” and civilianized, gray-zone aggression is a growing strategic concern. In my view, this is a challenge that is beyond the scope of the “third” offset strategy, which again, I believe should focus narrowly on restoring US conventional power projection capability and capacity. To deter and counter gray-zone aggression, our regional allies and partners may need to expand their options for responding with civilian means by, for example, expanding their coast guard fleets and paramilitary forces. That said, conventional power projection forces are still relevant. It is not an accident that China’s Coast Guard vessels in the South and East China Seas are routinely shadowed by gray hull warships. US and allied conventional power projection forces need to provide a survivable, credible “backstop” to “civilian” units responding to gray-zone aggression.

SWJ: But can this sub-conventional civilianized, gray-zone aggression be emboldened and incentivized by an environment shaped by a growing A2/AD umbrella and the impossibility of power projection in a conventional way?

Robert Martinage: It would only embolden sub-conventional or gray-zone aggression if the opposing power (and its allies) lacked either countervailing “gray zone” capabilities OR their own A2/AD umbrella at the conventional level. As a general rule, with deterrence, it is strategically ill-advised to allow an adversary to have unmatched access to rungs on the escalatory ladder. If two large powers, for example, possessed roughly comparable conventional surveillance-strike capabilities, which can be used offensively or defensively, they might well be deterred from attacking each other directly. Under those circumstances, the perceived probability of achieving one’s war aims at an acceptable cost and risk would likely be low.
Either power, however, could resort to sub-conventional aggression, irregular warfare, and proxy wars to advance their security interests and secure their political aims less directly. Their temptation to do so, however, would depend upon their estimation of their rival’s ability and willingness to match them at that level of conflict.

SWJ: Which are the US competitive advantages that if leveraged wisely could give the foundation of a new offset strategy?

Robert Martinage: The core problem is that adversaries that have developed reconnaissance-strike complexes able to target the key nodes upon which our current conventional power projection model is based. The question is: how do we regain our advantage? My view is that we have enduring advantages in five areas: unmanned operations, extended-range air operations (with a focus on long-range capabilities), low-observable air operations, undersea warfare and complex systems engineering. We need to play to our strengths by building upon and leveraging those advantages.

SWJ: The balance between short range and long-range capabilities favors massively the short-range platforms. Should this reality be massively changed in favor of long-range capabilities?

Robert Martinage: Everything is a function of balance. We are out of balance between short- and long-range air power. We are out of balance with respect to capabilities that can operate in permissive vs. non-permissive environments. We are probably out the balance between manned and unmanned to some degree as well. The question is how far should the pendulum swing in the other direction to strike a more appropriate balance? We need to reduce investments in force structure and modernization in capability areas where we are oversubscribed, where we have more capacity than we need, and funnel those freed up resources to areas where we are underinvested. So it is more of a portfolio shift rather than just an addition.

SWJ: Forward deployed forces remained a key signature of US regional postures. Will this core feature remain the case under what you referred to as the GSS?

Robert Martinage: A global surveillance strike or “GSS” architecture will need a high-low mix of capabilities, just like in the 1970s offset strategy. There are places around the world where forward-based forces and non-stealthy platforms will be perfectly adequate. There are other places in the world where we may need more stealthy, longer-range platforms and increasingly operate under the sea. Again it should be a balance. But if we look at our defense portfolio, what we have and what we are planning to build for the next 20 years, it is mostly focused on permissive environments and not enough on non-permissive ones.

SWJ: The US military does not face only a capability (operational) problem, but also a capacity (size) problem. Will the US military have the resources to remain full spectrum, able to respond both to insurgency/asymmetric type of scenarios (so not repeating the mistakes that it did after Vietnam focusing mainly on Soviet Union) but also to high-end A2/AD threats?

Robert Martinage: The Joint Force should remain full spectrum capable. The Joint Force should provide as many options as possible to senior political and military leaders. We need to maintain ready crisis response forces, counterinsurgency capabilities, ones for sub-conventional warfare for scenarios that we see in the South China Sea and Ukraine, SOF for global CT operations, a balance between permissive and non-permissive conventional capabilities, and so on. Ultimately, it is not a matter of either or, but a question of balance and equilibrium in the Joint Force portfolio across the spectrum of conflict.

SWJ: A lesson of the past offset strategies is that the White House, DoD and the Congress were on the same page. It’s true that those were also bipartisanship-oriented times. We have a wonderful offset team at the top of DOD today. Through their background Ash Carter (he is to some extent the apprentice of William J. Perry) and Bob Work are uniquely qualified to drive and lead an offset strategy. Do you see today the political foundation that could provide a sustainable foundation for
the third offset strategy?

Robert Martinage: I am cautiously optimistic. I think the big challenge is going to be articulating a compelling strategy and vision over the next 18 months to 2 years. Whatever the third offset strategy turns out to be, it is not going to be fully realized by any stretch of the imagination over the next 2 years. If the strategy is compelling and decision-makers are convinced that it makes sense, then I think that regardless of whether the next Administration is Democratic or Republican, it will continue to be developed and implemented. But this means that we need to get the strategy right in the first place. That is why the work that DoD is engaged in right now with the Defense Innovation Initiative and the third offset strategy, in particular, is so critical.

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