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Can the United States Command the Commons in East Asia?

AirSea Battle, Antiaccess/Area Denial, and the Future of Warfare in the Western Pacific

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This policy brief is based on "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia," which appears in the summer 2016 issue of *International Security*.

Bottom Lines

Western Pacific Military Prognosis. Today's U.S. command of the commons is unsustainable, but China lacks the power to assert military hegemony.

Implications for U.S. Allies. With astute policies, the United States can address China's antiaccess/area denial (A2/AD) capability. Chinese A2/AD need not become a decisive long-term threat to Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and the Spratly Islands.

Prudent U.S. Modernization. Enforcing a U.S. sphere of influence around allied landmasses and restricting China to its own sphere over the mainland will require new U.S. programs for longer-range anti-ship and anti-radar missiles; survivable airborne alternatives to space-based communications, surveillance, and navigation systems; and possibly a new U.S. anti-satellite system. The very ambitious AirSea Battle modernization agenda is unnecessary.



An amphibious assault vehicle exits the well deck of USS Tortuga for a joint amphibious assault exercise with the Royal Malaysian Navy as a part of the exercise Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) Malaysia 2013.

Background

The United States has long enjoyed “command of the commons”: worldwide freedom of movement on and under the seas and in the air above 15,000 feet, with the ability to deny similar freedom to enemies. This situation has contributed to a remarkable era of military primacy for U.S. arms against potential state rivals.

Many analysts fear that this era may be coming to an end in the Western Pacific. For more than a generation, China has been fielding a series of interrelated missile, sensor, guidance, and other technologies designed to deny freedom of movement to hostile powers in the air and waters off its coast. As this program has improved, so has China’s ability to restrict hostile access—a strategy known as antiaccess and area denial. Many experts believe that this A2/AD capability could eventually exclude the United States from parts of the Western Pacific that it has traditionally controlled. In fact, some fear that China will ultimately be able to extend a zone of exclusion out to, or beyond, what is often called the “Second Island Chain,” a line that connects Japan, Guam, and Papua–New Guinea at distances of up to 3,000 kilometers from China. A Chinese A2/AD capability reaching anywhere near this line would pose major challenges for U.S. security policy.

To avert this outcome, the United States has embarked on an approach often called “AirSea Battle,” or ASB. (The Defense Department recently changed the name of these activities and research to “Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons,” though many outside the government continue to refer to this program as “AirSea Battle.”) ASB

plans to restore U.S. military access by destroying or disabling the forces that China would use to establish area denial, many of which are based on the Chinese mainland, with some more than 2,000 kilometers inland. ASB would thus require a demanding military campaign to batter down A2/AD by striking targets far afield from the maritime domains to which the United States seeks access.

ASB has thus proven highly controversial. Many object to its likely cost. Others cite its potential for escalation: U.S. air and missile strikes against targets located deep inside the Chinese mainland could easily spur retaliation against U.S. or allied homelands and a possible nuclear war.

Western Pacific Military Prognosis

The need to incur any of these costs or any of these risks turns on the underlying question of exactly how effective Chinese A2/AD can become. Many mainstream arguments, on both sides of the debate, assume that A2/AD represents a substantial threat. ASB advocates would respond to this threat by battering it down; many ASB opponents would avoid it via a distant blockade of China at straits beyond A2/AD's reach; both sides of the debate tend to grant A2/AD an ability to deny U.S. access to large parts of the Western Pacific absent a massive U.S. offensive inland. But is this underlying military assessment sound? How far will ongoing technology trends allow either the United States or China to extend a zone of denial that excludes hostile forces but permits one's own forces to maneuver freely? Will such exclusion zones eventually extend far enough to threaten U.S. alliances? If so, which ones, and how gravely? Given these considerations, what is the best long-term U.S. military strategy for addressing China's evolving A2/AD capability?

Survivable long-range reconnaissance, surveillance, and target acquisition is both the heart of A2/AD and its binding constraint on effectiveness. Space-based radar is potentially effective in this role, but it is inescapably vulnerable in the long term; airborne radar protected by defensive surface-to-air missiles will eventually be the limiting factor on A2/AD's reach. In a long-run competition, such radars (together with the long-range precision missiles whose fire they direct) will give air and maritime defenders increasing advantages, but those advantages will be strongest over controlled landmasses and will weaken over distance.

What A2/AD can do, however, is to replace an era of U.S. command of the global commons with an era that sees more differentiated control—one that involves a U.S. sphere of

influence around allied landmasses, a Chinese sphere of influence over China's mainland, and contested zones covering much of the South and East China Seas wherein neither power enjoys wartime freedom of surface or air movement.

Implications for U.S. Allies

This assessment in turn implies that, with astute policies, the United States can reassure most of its allies in the region that China's growing A2/AD capability is not a long-term threat. Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines will be either mostly or entirely beyond the prospective reach of Chinese air and sea control.

Taiwan, by contrast, is well within the future reach of Chinese A2/AD in a way that U.S. arms could not likely prevent. For Taiwan—unlike Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines—U.S. military power probably cannot ensure access for seaborne trade as key Chinese technologies mature. This inability will not necessarily expose Taiwan to a credible invasion threat: the same technologies that enable Chinese A2/AD will enable Taiwan, with U.S. assistance, to extend its own A2/AD exclusion zone around the Taiwanese landmass in a way that will make a Chinese amphibious invasion prohibitively costly. But even though Chinese military shipping would not be able to survive long enough to sustain an invasion, China could prevent Taiwanese or neutral shipping from sustaining the Taiwanese economy. The fate of Taiwan in such a contest would rest, first, on the threat of distant blockade by the United States against Chinese seaborne trade and, second, on the relative vulnerability of an insular Taiwan and a continental China to trade cutoffs. If AirSea Battle could preempt Chinese A2/AD, this scenario could be avoided—but it cannot.

Prudent U.S. Modernization

Limiting Chinese A2/AD in the manner described above will require a combination of U.S. policy decisions and a handful of modernization initiatives. The United States will need a new, longer-range anti-radiation missile designed to destroy airborne radars from launch points beyond the radar's acquisition limit. It will also require new anti-ship missiles with the range to exploit U.S. target acquisition potential and enable the United States to establish its own A2/AD zone against China. And it will need an effective anti-satellite (ASAT) capability to neutralize any satellite-based sea surveillance systems that China may deploy, as well a policy that allows U.S. ASAT use in wartime. Moreover, the U.S.

military will have to limit its vulnerability to Chinese anti-satellite systems by improving airborne or other alternatives to the use of space for surveillance, navigation, communications, and targeting.

It is just as important, however, to be clear on what is not needed. In particular, the United States does not need to accept the costs and risks of AirSea Battle to maintain U.S. security in the Pacific, nor does it need to redesign the Navy and Air Force to cope with Chinese A2/AD. Several more limited, incremental changes are necessary, but transformational change is not required to meet the threat of A2/AD in the Western Pacific.

Related Resources

Roger Cliff, *China's Military Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Aaron L. Friedberg, *Beyond Air-Sea Battle: The Debate over US Military Strategy in Asia* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies Adelphi Series, 2014).

James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, *Chinese Naval Strategy in the Twenty First Century: The Turn to Mahan* (London: Routledge, 2008).

Jeffrey E. Kline and Wayne P. Hughes Jr., "Between Peace and the AirSea Battle: A War at Sea Strategy," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (Autumn 2012), pp. 35–40.

Evan Braden Montgomery, "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China's Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection," *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Spring 2014), pp. 115–149.

Jan Van Tol with Mark Gunzinger, Andrew Krepinevich, and Jim Thomas, *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010).

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