

United States refocuses Air Sea Battle Concept



Dr Carlo Kopp

The United States is currently in the midst of the largest single strategic reorientation, force structure change, and defence budget constriction observed since the end of the Cold War. Much of this change is effectively an abandoning of the dysfunctional “Gates Doctrine”, coinciding with what the State Department have publicly described as a “strategic pivot” reorienting both military strategy and diplomatic policy toward the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions.

The reorientation of United States policy reflects the basic reality that the economic centre of gravity in the developed world has shifted from the North Atlantic region to the Asia-Pacific-Indian region, as a result of pervasive industrialisation across Asia, but especially the growth of China and India.

During the Cold War era, the primary focus of United States military and diplomatic policy was Europe, which was facing a genuine strategic risk produced by Soviet expansionism. The United States maintained a significant capability and basing infrastructure across the West Pacific (WESTPAC) region primarily to force the Soviets to maintain significant capabilities in the Far Eastern provinces of Russia, adding this burden to the established Soviet commitment to threaten China in the Far East.

The end of the Cold War saw a significant drawdown of United States capability and basing in the WESTPAC region, with remaining capabilities maintained primarily to deter North Korea which was an ongoing source of strategic risk in Asia. Political disagreements with the Philippines led to the withdrawal from Subic Bay and Clark AFB, although the latter was accelerated by the eruption of Mount Pinatubo, which saw Clark AFB buried under volcanic ash.

By the late 1990s, the military growth of China was producing disquiet in Washington, and efforts were under way to align recapitalisation of the post Cold War force structure with the

unique needs of the WESTPAC theatre, inherently demanding of long range naval and air power. This produced considerable friction with China, further exacerbated after the fatal collision between an EP-3C signals intelligence aircraft and Chinese naval air arm J-8 Finback fighter.

The events of 911 threw this nascent planning effort into complete disarray. Afghanistan and then Iraq became the political and funding focal points and the Asia-Pacific was for all intents to be ignored. So bizarre had this become, that it is claimed that SecDef Rumsfeld’s office actually redacted drafts of the annual DoD China report to Congress, to remove any developments which

might shift the congressional focus away from the COIN centred “War on Terror”.

The enormous operational expenditures of conducting two concurrent major COIN campaigns, and much lower intensity operations in Africa, very quickly drove the United States into “strategic overstretch” and the need for funds quickly devoured what little fat remained elsewhere in the force structure, and very soon muscle was being sacrificed as well. Demand for replacement land vehicles hardened against IED attacks, replacements for Army and Marines Corp kit, and replacements for fatigued helicopters, bit into recapitalisation budgets. Increased Army and Marine Corps personnel numbers, exacerbated by personnel departures from Reserve and National Guard units, bit further into budgets. The Air Force was forced to downsize tactical fighter units to crew expanded Predator and later Reaper units. The Navy started investing in brown water Littoral Combat Ships. Recapitalisation of Air Force and Navy fleets was slowed, and key programs deferred and cancelled.

The fiscal woes coincided with other deeper problems. The rapacious finance industry, exploiting loopholes in mortgage legislation, lent well beyond reason, violating traditional protocols on investment security. Toxic investments were used to secure high risk investments, a practice emulated in the EU and resulting in the current global financial crisis. This was paralleled by

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unrestrained borrowing and spending by State Governments. With the US Dollar used as the global reserve currency, money was simply printed to address funding shortfalls. The result of this is the current United States debt crisis, where taxes raised will be inadequate to cover the annual interest repayments on federal and state government debt. The United States' fiscal woes are deep and to date, no corrective measures of substance have been adopted. Concerned observers in the finance and investment community continue to warn of the possibility of the US Dollar crashing. The United States fiscal problems have resulted in turn in the current military force structure downsizing, which coincides with the withdrawal from Iraq, and pending withdrawal from Afghanistan.

In an unprecedented move, President Barack Obama participated in a Pentagon media briefing on the 5th January, 2012, to release the new Defense Strategic Guidance document, entitled "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense". The document is a well structured and well argued map for a deep restructure of the force structure in place, primarily focussed on restoring the traditional United States model of defeating nation state opponents on the global stage: "As commander in chief, I am determined that we meet the challenges of this moment responsibly and that we emerge even stronger in a manner that preserves American global leadership, maintains our military superiority and keeps faith with our troops, military families and veterans".

The new refocussing will be centred on the "Asia-Pacific region", but also "to maintain progress in the Middle East, Central Asia and North Africa". A specific agenda is developing capabilities to defeat "anti-access technologies", a term which broadly describes the wide array of typically asymmetric denial capabilities developed by Russia and China specifically to deter and frustrate the use of United States air and naval power on the global stage.

The strategic pivot is now a decade overdue, given developments in Asia since the end of the Cold War, and many United States observers have described it as "too little, too late" given especially China's military growth. It also suggests that Al Qaeda's primary strategic achievement was not the intended conversion of the Islamic world to fascism, but the weakening of the United States relative to China, through delaying strategically critical adaptation and force structure investment for a decade.

To the credit of new SecDef Leon Panneta, regarded by many as a "hawk", the military downsizing is being performed in a structured fashion with some genuine effort invested in maintaining critical capabilities for the long term maintenance of the United States strategic position in the Asia-Pacific. Public briefings have repeatedly stressed that the focus of cuts is being determined by strategy rather than the traditional bureaucratic approach of equally trimming everything.

To what extent this plan survives Congress remains to be seen. Many programs which are strategically irrelevant in the Asia-Pacific, where future conflicts will be dominated by "high end" capabilities, are being retained, and the battlefield interdiction F-35 Joint Strike Fighter is but one example. The "porkbarrel" agenda is well established in the Congress, and non-viable programs have been difficult to kill off since the Cold War, where employment is sacrificed as a result. By the same

token, critically important capabilities have tended to lose badly in this game, where the porkbarrel has favoured other less important programs.

What is evident is that a great many COIN optimised and Cold War mainstay capabilities are headed into mothballs – the AMARC facility will soon filling up with A-10 Thunderbolts, older model MQ-1 Predators, older C-5A Galaxies, and older tactical fighters, while naval mothball moorings will be filling with older surface combatants.

The new Air-Sea Battle Concept was released in May, 2011, and in many respects is the model around which many aspects of the Defense Strategic Guidance document and subsequent restructuring were modelled.



THE AIR-SEA BATTLE CONCEPT

The best concise summary of the Air-Sea Battle Concept was produced by the newly formed Air-Sea Battle Office, intended to facilitate integration and development of the new concept:

"The Air-Sea Battle Concept centers on networked, integrated, attack-in-depth to disrupt, destroy and defeat (NIA-D3) A2/AD threats. This approach exploits and improves upon the advantage U.S. forces have across the air, maritime, land, space and cyberspace domains, and is essential to defeat increasingly capable intelligence gathering systems and sophisticated weapons systems used by adversaries employing A2/AD systems. Offensive and defensive tasks in Air-Sea Battle are tightly coordinated in real time by networks able to command and control air and naval forces in a contested environment. The air and naval forces are organized by mission and networked to conduct integrated operations across all domains."

"The concept organizes these integrated tasks into three lines of effort, wherein air and naval forces attack-in-depth to disrupt the adversary's intelligence collection and command and control used to employ A2/AD weapons systems; destroy or neutralize A2/AD weapons systems within effective range of U.S. forces; and defeat an adversary's employed weapons to preserve essential U.S. Joint forces and their enablers. Through NIA-D3, air and naval forces achieve integrated effects across multiple domains, using multiple paths to increase the resilience, agility, speed and effectiveness of the force."

"Air-Sea Battle is a limited operational concept designed to address an adversary's A2/AD capabilities. It is not a concept aimed at any particular potential adversary, nor a campaign plan designed to accomplish a specific national objective. Instead, it is a concept that will spark innovation and development of the means to support future operations. The Air-Sea Battle Concept identifies the actions needed to defeat A2/AD threats and the materiel and non-materiel solutions required to execute those actions."

In short, the essence of the model is the coordinated use of air and naval power to overcome capabilities used to deny access to and operations within a theatre of operations.

While the rhetoric has correctly argued the ASB concept is universal and not focussed on any single opponent, the reality is that the primary investor in A2/AD capabilities over the last decade has been China. The Chinese reaction to the public release of the ASB was in the simplest of language, toxic.

This is not surprising, since the ASB is essentially a delayed strategic response by the United States to the PLA's massive and sustained development and deployment of A2/AD capabilities since the 1990s. If the ASB is implemented properly, it nullifies much or all of the PLA's A2/AD investments, and reverses the strategic balance in the Asia-Pacific-Indian region away from China.

While China has been the single largest investor in A2/AD capabilities, it is not the only one. Russia has made a major investment in such capabilities to keep United States and NATO air power out of its areas of interest, and has widely exported these capabilities, primarily to nations with strategic agendas unfriendly to the West, including Venezuela, Syria, and Iran where not explicitly embargoed. Russian clientele also includes a range of other former Soviet client states, many of which are at best ambivalent to the West. Even if China were not a major investor in this area, A2/AD capabilities would remain a major strategic issue for the United States.

The principal practical challenge faced by the United States in implementing the ASB concept is the defacto collapse of the recapitalisation funding base, with remaining funding in many instances already committed to "cuckoo in the nest" porkbarrel programs which are politically protected either by the executive or the legislature, or both. As a result there is almost no flexibility in resources for new investments, while funds are being siphoned off to feed strategically irrelevant and wasteful programs to appease commercial interests via their political proxies, in the executive or the legislature, or both.

The abject lack of interest in actual strategic realities and related capability needs, through much of the United States political system, and many parts of the bureaucratic apparatus, both preoccupied with short term funding and partisan agendas, is by far the greatest single obstacle the United States will confront in attempting to implement the new ASB concept.

In one or another form the ASB will see changes in the United States force structure. The question for Australia will be how to best position itself in the new and evolving environment, so that its capabilities are assets rather than liabilities to the ANZUS alliance. While most new capabilities to be developed by the United States for the ASB will be highly coherent with capabilities needed for the defence in depth of Australia's sea-air gap, Defence in Canberra have spent a decade rejecting exactly such capabilities as unsuitable or not required, and have persistently rejected the notion that the ADF force structure is anything other than quite perfect as it is now planned to be. This yields little cause for optimism about the future of the ADF force structure in the brave new world of the Asia-Pacific-Indian Air-Sea Battle.

Further Reading: <http://www.csbaonline.org/publications/2010/05/airsea-battle-concept/>