



# AirSea Battle

**A new operational concept looks to prepare the US and its allies to deter or defeat Chinese power.**

By Richard Halloran



USN photo by Mass Comm. Spec. Seaman Danielle A. Brant

**A**fter three Air Force C-130 pilots and crews from Yokota Air Base in Japan finished an exercise called Cope West 10 in Indonesia in April, they wrote up evaluations of Halim Air Base and other airfields from which they had operated, assessing the condition of runways, reliability of electrical supply, safety of fuel storage, and adequacy of parking ramps.

Until now, that would have been a routine report to prepare for the next

rising military power. It envisions operations of USAF fighters, bombers, and missiles coordinated with Navy aircraft flown from carriers and land bases—plus missiles launched from submarines and surface ships. Nuclear war plans will also be folded into the AirSea Battle operation.

A question, however, has arisen over who will control the joint war. USAF expects the 613th Air and Space Operations Center of 13th Air Force at Hickam AFB, Hawaii, to be assigned

that task, but the Navy has traditionally been loath to give up control of its carrier air wings.

Moreover, the Navy has organized Maritime Operations Centers that would need to be meshed with USAF's AOCs, and Air Force and Navy sensors and communications gear that are not now compatible need to be made so.

At US air and naval bases in Japan, South Korea, and Guam, the evolving AirSea concept calls for hardening command centers, communication nodes, hangars and repair facilities, fuel tanks, electrical generators, warehouses, shipyard machine shops, and just about anything else that can be protected from missile attack. For runways and ramps that can't be protected, RED HORSE engineers are to be posted in protective shelters nearby from which they can swiftly emerge to repair damaged areas.

The plan even calls for developing new materials that will harden in far less time than ordinary concrete to make a damaged runway operational again.

Further, AirSea Battle will incorporate an "active" defense, employing a variety of measures to destroy enemy aircraft and missiles or to reduce the damage of such attacks. Active defense relies on aircraft, air defense weapons, electronic warfare, and cyber operations. In particular, AirSea Battle calls



USAF photo by A1C Cory Todd

**Left: USAF bombers, tankers, ISR aircraft, and fighters fill the flight line at Andersen. Below: Lt. Col. Robert McCrady reviews a flight plan with Indonesian pilots at the end of Cope West 10.**

time American airmen might use Indonesian air bases. With the emergence of a joint Air Force-Navy operational concept called AirSea Battle, however, intelligence on airfields has taken on new significance.

A critical element in the concept is to identify alternate airfields all over Asia that Air Force and Navy aircraft might operate from one day. US aircraft can be dispersed there, making life hard for a potential enemy such as China to select targets. Dispersed bases simultaneously would make it easier for an American pilot needing an emergency landing site to find one if his home base had been bombed.

AirSea Battle looks to prepare the US and its allies to deter or defeat China's

**Top left: Two B-52s take off from Andersen AFB, Guam. Left: An F/A-18 Hornet launches over the Pacific from USS George Washington.**



USAF photo by TSgt. Cohen A. Young

for greater emphasis on the development of ballistic missile defenses.

The purpose of AirSea Battle is clearly to deter China, with its rapidly expanding and improving military power, from seeking to drive the US out of East Asia and the Western Pacific. If deterrence fails, AirSea Battle's objective will be to defeat the People's Liberation Army, which comprises all of China's armed forces. The Obama Administration and the Pentagon contend that war with China is not inevitable, which may be so, but a memo outlining the purpose of a previous AirSea Battle wargame left no doubt that the US is preparing for that possibility.

"The game will position US air, naval, space, and special operations forces against a rising military competitor in the East Asian littoral with a range of disruptive capabilities, including multi-dimensional 'anti-access' networks, offensive and defensive space control capabilities, an extensive inventory of ballistic and cruise missiles, and a modernized attack submarine fleet," the memo read. "The scenario will take place in a notional 2028."

There is only one "rising military competitor in the East Asia littoral," and that is China. Long term, China offers the only real potential threat to US national security, far more than Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, or North Korea.

In perhaps the most remarkable expansion of military power since the US geared up for World War II, China has relied on its surging economy to provide double-digit annual increases in military budgets. The Chinese are fielding an array of advanced jet aircraft, anti-aircraft missiles, radar, anti-air and anti-submarine ships, and minelayers intended to deny US air and naval forces access to Chinese skies and nearby waters. They are building a blue-water Navy to project power eastward toward Alaska, Guam, and even Hawaii and south into the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.

### Coordinated Requests

AirSea Battle is not conceived as a "go-it-alone" initiative but one that will rely on allies in the Pacific and Asia, notably Japan and Australia, as US forces seek to overcome what is known in this region as the tyranny of distance. Americans who haven't traveled the Pacific often have no notion of how far apart things are. For example, it is twice as far from Tokyo to Sydney, Australia (4,921 miles), as from Washington, D.C., to San Francisco (2,442 miles).

In addition to Japan continuing to host American forces, AirSea Battle calls for greater integration of Japan's Self-Defense Forces with US forces stationed in that country, particularly

in intelligence and warning systems. Japan would be asked to continue contributing to the development of ballistic missile defenses and to increase its own air defenses. AirSea Battle would call on Japan to expand its anti-submarine barriers down through the Ryukyu Islands in southwestern Japan and into the Sea of Japan. Political turmoil in Tokyo today will make that coordination difficult, to say the least.

In contrast, the alliance between Australia and the US, resting on a foundation laid down during World War II and continuing ever since, is less likely to be affected by political changes in the government. Thus, AirSea Battle would have the Australians develop anti-ship cruise missiles and to erect long-range radar that would improve coverage in the southern hemisphere. The Australians take a special interest in the Southwest Pacific region that can be helpful to the US. Overall, Australia provides the alliance with strategic depth.

AirSea Battle calls on the Air Force and Navy to devise a division of labor to eliminate duplication in resources and equipment. The two services, for instance, have begun planning for a new joint air launched cruise missile to replace the aging AGM-86 and BGM-109 Tomahawk. So far, only relatively small

**Below: Two Chinese J-10A fighters head out heavily armed with air-to-air missiles.**



Photo by Weimeng



USN photo by Mass Comm. Spec. 3rd Class Matthew Jackson

**Adm. Robert Willard.**

## Who Controls AirSea Battle?

A key player in executing AirSea Battle would be Adm. Robert F. Willard, who leads US Pacific Command from his headquarters in Honolulu. After taking command last fall, Willard set up five focus groups to examine PACOM's strategy toward China, India, and North Korea, treaty partners and friends from Japan to Singapore, and transnational issues such as terror, piracy, drug smuggling, and human trafficking.

"This is what combatant commanders across the globe should be attending to," Willard said in an interview. Most American military leaders are comfortable with day-to-day operations, he said, but needed "more of a focus on alignment with our national strategies and policies and more of a focus on understanding the strategies and policies of our regional counterparts."

Elaborating later, Willard seemed cautious about how AirSea Battle would fit into his vision for PACOM. He said he had been briefed on the concept, and "I expressed some issues with what I heard, especially with regard to their ability to adapt whatever their concept derives to the ground forces." Willard contended that "the AirSea Battle construct will unquestionably need to integrate with what our Marine forces bring to the game," and because the battlespace "includes the littorals, what the Army brings to the game is important, too. So there is a great deal of work yet to do to see if this concept really reveals something that will be useful."

Willard, a naval aviator (as is the Pacific Fleet commander, Adm. Patrick M. Walsh), was asked who controls AirSea Battle. "It's presumptive to get into the command relations debate now when the concept is in fledgling development," he said.

"I need to see where and how it's intended to be adapted, and then we can talk about the command relations," he added.

change has been spent for wargames and research. Those engaged in AirSea Battle say that coordinated requests will go forward in the Fiscal 2012 budget. A good portion of that will go into joint training and robust wargames.

Even as the Pentagon is contemplating AirSea Battle to deter or defeat China, the US has been seeking stable, working military relations with the PLA. At the annual Shangri-La gathering of Asian and Pacific military leaders in Singapore in June, Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates said the US wanted "sustained and reliable military-to-military contacts at all levels that reduce miscommunication, misunderstanding, and miscalculation. There is a real cost to the absence of military-to-military relations. I believe they are essential to regional security—and essential to developing a broad, resilient US-China relationship that is positive in tone, cooperative in nature, and comprehensive in scope."

At the same time, Gates has been publicly supportive of the AirSea Battle venture. In the Quadrennial Defense Review published in February, he said the Pentagon was directing "more focus and investment in a new air-sea battle concept, long-range strike, space and cyberspace, among other conventional and strategic modernization programs."

The precedent for AirSea Battle was AirLand Battle, an Army-Air Force ef-

fort in the 1980s to dissuade the Soviet Union from striking through the Fulda Gap in Germany and seeking to drive to the English Channel. Gen. Colin L. Powell, onetime corps commander in Germany and later Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had said the US might resort to nuclear arms if NATO could not stop the first two waves of the Soviet force.

### No Fait Accompli

The concept of AirSea Battle is being forged in a collaborative effort of Pacific Air Forces, the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, and the Pentagon's influential Office of Net Assessment.

AirSea Battle was begun under the former PACAF commander, Gen. Carrol H. Chandler, now vice chief of staff of the Air Force. CSBA is a Washington think tank with close ties to the Pentagon, two of its chief researchers, Jan M. van Tol and Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., having worked in the Office of Net Assessment, while Mark A. Gunzinger was engaged in drafting the Pentagon's Defense Planning Guidance and Jim Thomas toiled on the Quadrennial Defense Review. The Office of Net Assessment, often labeled the Defense Department's internal think tank, has been led for nearly 40 years by Andrew W. Marshall, considered to be among the nation's foremost strategic thinkers.

Over the last three years, the collaborators have staged a half-dozen wargames to scope the tasks of AirSea Battle and have sent their findings to the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, Gen. Norton A. Schwartz, and the Chief of Naval Operations, Adm. Gary Roughead. Schwartz and Roughead signed a memorandum of understanding in September to proceed on AirSea Battle. Each appointed a team of four O-6s to draft tentative doctrine to govern AirSea Battle.

The draft doctrine will undoubtedly be sandpapered for many months before an agreement is reached.

Based on PLA writings, researchers at CSBA have discerned a likely Chinese strategy for seeking to drive US forces out of the western Pacific, a strategy they say "mimics the Imperial Japanese strategy of 1941-1942."

The Japanese mounted the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, intending to destroy the US Pacific Fleet. Simultaneously, the Japanese Army invaded the Philippines and broke out of northern Vietnam to transit across Thailand into what is now Malaysia and on to Singapore. They took what is now Indonesia, critical islands in the South Pacific, and threatened Australia, then marched to the gates of India. Japan intended to present the Western powers with a fait accompli and sue for peace. That strategy, however, failed.



**An A-10 readies for takeoff on the runway at Osan AB, South Korea, during an operational readiness exercise.**

China, say the researchers, may be planning a pre-emptive missile strike intended to destroy US air bases at Osan and Kunsan in South Korea; Misawa, Yokota, MCAS Iwakuni, and Kadena in Japan; and bases on the US island of Guam, plus US naval bases at Yokosuka and Sasebo in Japan. South Korean and Japanese forces would be attacked. Chinese missile, naval, and air forces would try to keep other US forces out of range, to disrupt US command lines, and to block logistic resupply.

“The overall strategy may be to inflict substantial losses on US forces, lengthen US operational timelines, and highlight the United States’ inability to defend its allies,” the CSBA analysts wrote. “Once this is accomplished, the PLA could assume the strategic defense and deny reinforcing US forces access to the theater until the US determines that it would be too costly to undo what would, in effect, be a fait accompli.”

If the Chinese attack, AirSea Battle would have US forces begin an active defense, disperse aircraft and ships, and rely on hardening and resilience to ride out and to recover from the assault.

The US and its allies would initiate a “blinding campaign” to knock out Chinese reconnaissance aircraft, surveillance satellites, and long-range, over-the-horizon radar. B-52 bombers and Ohio-class submarines, both armed with conventional cruise missiles, would seek to suppress further Chinese missile salvos and aerial assaults.

Gradually, the US would gain the initiative in the air, on the sea’s surface, and in the undersea domain, relying on

the better quality of US aircraft, ships, and submarines and the superior training of airmen, sailors, and submariners.

American forces from the continental US would begin to flow into the Pacific to enter a protracted campaign. A “distant blockade” against Chinese shipping would be started in the East and South China Seas and the Strait of Malacca and other passages, as Chinese industry is heavily dependent on imports. That would be easier than a close blockade just outside Chinese ports.

### **Basing Options Abound**

A sustained logistic flow from the US into the Pacific would be built up, and industrial production of weapons, equipment, and especially precision guided munitions would be stepped up.

A complicated aspect of AirSea Battle will be identifying alternate air bases such as the one the C-130 crews operated from in Indonesia and then gaining long-term access to them. For many bases, the State Department may be required to negotiate agreements permitting US aircraft to fly in on short notice. That may stir diplomatic trouble as some nations worry that the Chinese will object.

In addition, funds may be required to bring the condition of some airfields up to snuff.

High on the list of basing possibilities are air bases the US has used in the past, such as Clark Air Base in the

Philippines, dating back to 1903. The Philippine government and the volcanic eruption of Mount Pinatubo caused the US to leave Clark in 1991, but the base’s runways have been scrapped off, and the airfield is occasionally used by US forces passing through the Philippines.

In the Northern Marianas, airfields on Saipan and Tinian were built by naval construction battalions (Seabees) during World War II. Airfields at U Tapao and Korat in Thailand were built by the Thais but upgraded and expanded by the US during the war in Vietnam.

Air bases in northern Australia have been used for joint exercises.

An intriguing possibility might be Tan Son Nhut, the airport near Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) in Vietnam, built by French colonials in the 1930s and expanded by the US during the war in Vietnam. It is now the major civilian airport in southern Vietnam.

Similarly, the Vietnamese port at Cam Ranh Bay, the finest in Southeast Asia, was a stopping place for a Russian fleet on the way to disaster at the hands of the Japanese in the Battle of Tsushima in 1905. Japan used it to prepare for its drive into Southeast Asia during World War II, and the US enlarged it during the Vietnam War. Whether the Vietnamese, who don’t much like the Chinese but see no need to anger them, would allow US warships to use the port is open to question.

US military leaders have been cultivating Indian military leaders for several years and might ask for access to the many airfields there. In Pakistan next door, the US used a military airfield at Peshawar, in the Northwest Frontier province, as a base for U-2 intelligence flights over the Soviet Union for three years until Francis Gary Powers got shot down in 1960.

Although AirSea Battle has China in mind, American political leaders have publicly maintained that the US is not seeking to contain China.

An American aviator, however, pointed to a map marking air bases from Osan in South Korea, to Korat in Thailand, to Peshawar in Pakistan, and asked: “It does sort of look like a picket line, doesn’t it?” ■

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