

Comment on “Going Beyond ‘Air-Sea Battle’”¹

Several articles² have recently appeared about a new US military tactic known as the air-sea battle. It is not new since it has existed for several years, but it was accorded an extra boost with the recent media attention given to the South China Sea conflict, and is used to provide a rationale for US involvement in these disputes. The purpose of this commentary is to provide background information to make the tactic more understandable and also to comment on its viability in the absence of a clearly defined strategy for military involvement by the US in the Asia-Pacific region. A distinction between *tactic* and *strategy* is important to the second part of this objective and a brief statement may be useful in order to avoid confusion.

A strategy is sometimes defined in terms of a detailed plan to progress from the current position, call it point A, to another position that is visualised as a goal for the medium or long-term future, and call that point B. With this definition we are able to leave out goals that are short-term in nature – and refer to them as tactics – and we are also able to stipulate that both points are determined independently of the strategy. Added to that is perhaps the obvious conclusion that a viable strategy is not possible without defining point B, since it would then be a detailed plan to move from point A to nowhere in particular.

Point A will obviously depend upon the point in time at which a strategy and its attendant tactics were considered. Brett Friedman suggested that the major impetus for the Air-Sea Battle was the earlier development of a Navy and Air Force concept of operations associated with the proliferation of anti-access/area denial (A2AD) capabilities of possible enemies.³ Moreover:

This is nothing new, it has just been forgotten that there used to be something called “coastal artillery” that could block access and deny areas to ships in littoral regions. Coastal artillery was integral to the Confederate [States of America] isolation of Fort Sumter in the opening days of the Civil War and Turkish control of the Dardanelles during World War I, for example.

¹ Michael O’Hanlon and James Steinberg, “Going Beyond ‘Air-Sea Battle’”, *The Washington Post*, 24 August 2012. Available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/beyond-air-sea-battle-a-military-concept-that-challenges-policymakers/2012/08/23/8fd4f8fa-ed31-11e1-9ddc-340d5efb1e9c_story.html.

² Adam Entous and Julian E Barnes, “US Plans New Asia Missile Defences”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 August 2012. Available at: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390444812704577605591629039400.html>. Sam LaGrone, “Pentagon’s ‘Air-Sea Battle’ Explained. Finally”, *Wired*, 6 August 2012. Available at: <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2012/08/air-sea-battle-2/>. No author cited, “The China Syndrome: Air-Sea Battle is Now the Pentagon’s Priority but It Has Its Critics”, *The Economist*, 9 June 2012. Available at: <http://www.economist.com/node/21556587>.

³ Brett Friedman, “ABC: Easy as 1, 2, 3”, *Marine Corps Gazette*, 13 May 2012. Available at: <http://mcgazette.blogspot.com.au/2012/05/asb-easy-as-123.html>.

Jim Lacey⁴ indicated that in 2010 Robert Gates, the former US secretary of defence, asked the Pentagon for a comprehensive plan to ensure that the United States could maintain access to strategic waterways around the globe with a reduced defence budget. This established point A at about the same time as the White House released the 52-page document entitled “National Security Strategy”, dated 1 May 2010, and referred to hereinafter as NSS 2010. To develop a more complete context for the strategy it is convenient to compare it with the “National Security Strategy” issued by George W Bush in September 2002 (NSS 2002), which was about 6 months before he launched the invasion of Iraq.⁵

The objectives of NSS 2002 were apparently determined unilaterally, but “were open to all”.⁶

The US national security strategy will be based on a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests. The aim of this strategy is to help make the world not just safer but better. Our goals on the path to progress are clear: political and economic freedom, peaceful relations with other states, and respect for human dignity. And this path is not America’s alone. It is open to all.

To achieve these goals, the United States prepared to do the following:⁷

Champion aspirations for human dignity; strengthen alliances to defeat global terrorism and work to prevent attacks against us and our friends; work with others to defuse regional conflicts; prevent our enemies from threatening us, our allies, and our friends, with weapons of mass destruction; ignite a new era of global economic growth through free markets and free trade; expand the circle of development by opening societies and building the infrastructure of democracy; develop agendas for cooperative action with other main centres of global power; and transform America’s national security institutions to meet the challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first century.

In contrast, the focus of NSS 2010 gave explicit recognition to renewing American leadership but the aims or objectives of the report were sometimes blended with elements of strategy:⁸

Our national security strategy is, therefore, focused on renewing American leadership so that we can more effectively advance our interests in the 21st century. We will do so by building

⁴ Jim Lacey, “Air-Sea Battle: Blood and Treasury”, *National Review*, 14 December 2011. Available at: <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/285685/air-sea-battle-jim-lacey>.

⁵ Faiz Shakir, “A Timeline of the Iraq War”, *Think Progress*, 17 March 2006. Available at: <http://thinkprogress.org/report/iraq-timeline/>.

⁶ NSS 2002, Chapter 1: Overview of America’s International Strategy. Available at: <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/print/index.html>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ NSS 2010, Chapter 1: Overview of National Security Strategy”, p. 1. Available at: http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf.

upon the sources of our strength at home, while shaping an international order that can meet the challenges of our time. This strategy recognises the fundamental connection between our national security, our national competitiveness, resilience, and moral example. And it reaffirms America's commitment to pursue our interests through an international system in which all nations have certain rights and responsibilities. This will allow America to leverage our engagement abroad on behalf of a world in which individuals enjoy more freedom and opportunity, and nations have incentives to act responsibly, while facing consequences when they do not.

There are substantial differences between the two documents that define a different starting point for each (the two points A). This is conveyed in a subsection of Chapter 2 of NSS 2010 called "The Strategic Environment – The World as It Is". A new point B is then defined by the next subsection, "The Strategic Approach – The World We Seek". However, the differences between the worldview that was sought in NSS 2002 and that of NSS 2010 are difficult to discern, largely because they are treated in different ways. In NSS 2002 the "world we seek" was considered to be the consequence of realising the stated goals by following principles that were enunciated for each goal. NSS 2010 gives a more detailed worldview for the future, but this becomes a disadvantage in trying to discern the path from point A to point B, since the latter breaks in numerous, sub-points. And the associated principles are sometimes phrased in vague terms.

Max Fisher, writing for *The Atlantic*, gives a brief summary of statements made by other analysts in order to point out what each liked about NSS 2010.⁹ It is convenient to look at these highlighted opinions in order to raise a subsequent question: Can we visualise all of these "good features" being achieved simultaneously?

1. *NSS 2010 looks beyond counterterrorism.* The strategy argues that preserving American leadership depends upon learning to accept and manage the rise of many competitors and it dismisses as too narrow the earlier notion that fighting terrorism should be the "overarching objective".

2. *NSS 2002 explicitly stated that the US would never allow the rise of a rival superpower,* whereas NSS 2010 argued that while the US faces no real military competitor, global power is nevertheless becoming increasingly diffuse, and to succeed "we must face the world as it is".

3. *NSS 2010 changes "pre-emptive strikes" to "pre-emptive engagement"* by projecting a different image of America to focus on common interests and rule-of-law principles rather than on large military footprints and the projection of military power.

⁹ Max Fisher, "How Obama's National Security Strategy Will Define American Power", *The Atlantic*, 27 May 2010. Available at: <http://www.theatlanticwire.com/politics/2010/05/how-obama-s-national-security-strategy-will-define-american-power/24279/>.

4. NSS 2002 rearticulates the notion of “Pax Americana”, which originally meant American Peace, to “shore up and prolong America’s liberal primacy”.
5. NSS 2010 seeks to maintain American power in the international stage during an era that is far more complex than was previously anticipated.
6. NSS 2010 focuses on “home-grown” terrorists and recognises that Americans can be recruited and “radicalised” by al Qaeda through the Internet.

Return now to the question: Can we visualise all of these “good features” being achieved simultaneously? The answer is that simultaneity is extremely unlikely to occur without a solidly based set of priorities. At a minimum, among these six “good features” which is the most important and which can be most effectively achieved first? These would seem to be particularly important questions during the current, and perhaps extended, period of fiscal austerity.¹⁰

James Holmes expressed an opinion that the air-sea battle concept must be about China since “military planners are negligent if they don’t plan against the toughest challenge elected leaders may order them to face”:¹¹

For instance, the US Navy planned for war with Britain's Royal Navy well into the interwar years. No one wanted or expected an Anglo-American conflict, but the Royal Navy remained the gold standard for naval power. It only made sense for the US Navy to measure itself against the most exacting standard available while hedging against the unexpected.

Air-sea battle is therefore construed as a war game, the purpose of which is to test the preparedness of the US military for a broad range of possible contingencies. But it can also be viewed as a deterrent or, even stronger, as a threat. This has overtones that linger from the Cold War era.¹² Consider this statement from NSS 2010 (p. 43):

We will continue to pursue a positive, constructive, and comprehensive relationship with China. We welcome a China that takes on a responsible leadership role in working with the United States and the international community to advance priorities like economic recovery, confronting climate change, and non-proliferation. We will monitor China’s military modernisation program and prepare accordingly to ensure that U.S. interests and allies,

¹⁰ Fisher also noted this point and attributed it to Andrew Exum in an interview by Abu Magawama and published by the Centre for New American Security, 27 May 2010. Available at: <http://www.cnas.org/blogs/abumuqawama/2010/05/national-security-strategy.html>. Note that Exum was of the view that “strategy is, in part, about setting goals, prioritising them and matching resources to each of them.

¹¹ James R Holmes, “Top 5 Obstacles to Air-Sea Battle”, *The Naval Diplomat*, 20 August 2012. Available at: <http://thedi diplomat.com/the-naval-diplomat/2012/08/20/top-5-obstacles-to-airsea-battle/>.

¹² Refer to <http://www.accci.com.au/CommentonHMASStirling.pdf>.

regionally and globally, are not negatively affected. More broadly, we will encourage China to make choices that contribute to peace, security, and prosperity as its influence rises.

In the absence of a definite plan or strategy as to how such encouragement will be managed, or at least to rule out what is not to be included in such a plan, Chinese as well as others can be forgiven for believing that any encouragement will be backed by threats of air-sea battles. This and other similar objections to the concept of sea-air battles motivated O'Hanlon and Steinberg to write the comment that is cited in footnote 1 above. Their principal concern was the potential impact of these objections:

The challenge for policymakers is not to discard it and replace it with something more seemingly benign but to place it within a broader security strategy for the Asia-Pacific region that preserves stability and protects US interests without becoming unduly confrontational.

What might that "broader security strategy" include? O'Hanlon and Steinberg tell us only that a task should be taken up by those "worried about the risks of rivalry and war ... to place military innovation efforts in a broader political strategy that recognises the benefits of Chinese-US cooperation as well as the mutual risks if competition turns into rivalry or conflict." Why not give the task to those who advocate the sea-air battle concept, rather than to those who oppose it?

James Holmes stated the need for a strategy somewhat differently (citation in note 11 above):

Devising an overarching strategic framework for likely theatres—whether it's waging "war by contingent" along an adversary's coastlines or essaying "offshore control" of his shipping to squeeze him economically—constitutes the sternest task before US leaders. Otherwise Air-Sea Battle will remain a concept in search of its larger purpose.

We might suggest that such an strategic framework should ensure approximately equal space for diplomatic engagement as for military tactics, and the former should begin with training diplomats to listen instead of lecturing. This is apparently a problem for Australia as well. At a recent meeting of the Australian Institute of International Affairs,¹³ the institute's national president, John McCarthy, referring to the announcement by President Barack Obama last November that the US would station 2500 marines in Darwin for six months every year, said that Australia missed an opportunity to have handled the issue better:

The Chinese and the Indonesians could have been forewarned, very seriously, two or three days before, and explained very very carefully at a very senior level what it all meant. None of that was done.

¹³ Reported by Hamish McDonald, "Call for a New Approach to Asia Relations", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 August 2012. Available at: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/call-for-new-approach-to-asia-relations-20120824-24ru2.html#ixzz24hJCl5j>.

An anonymous comment appended to an article by Micah Zenko is worth mentioning.¹⁴ It was brief and to the point:

I work at USAID and I always ask the same question you just did.. what if country x doesn't want to? Answer: Then you need to help them understand why they should want to.

USAID is the official aid agency of the US Government, rather than a storehouse of diplomats, but the comment nevertheless characterises the way in which diplomacy has degenerated. The main point of this comment is that to go beyond air-sea battle it is necessary to first go beyond the "National Security Strategy" of 1 May 2010 and develop *meaningful* strategy rather than describe desirable objectives. Otherwise, it becomes a goal without a plan, which does not rule out air-sea battles or any other military tactics.

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NB: This document was amended slightly since 28/07/2012 to correct keying errors and to improve the flow of the text but it was not substantially updated to include sources of information since that date. Such an update is being planned.

¹⁴ Micah Zenko, "US National Security Strategy: Rhetoric and Reality", Council on Foreign Relations, 15 August 2012. Available at: <http://blogs.cfr.org/zenko/2011/08/15/u-s-national-security-strategy-rhetoric-and-reality/>.