

WHO AUTHORIZED PREPARATIONS FOR WAR WITH CHINA?

By Amitai Etzioni

Abstract— The Pentagon has concluded that the time has come to prepare for war with China, and in a manner well beyond crafting the sort of contingency plans that are expected for wide a range of possible confrontations. It is a momentous conclusion that will shape the United States' defense systems, force posture, and overall strategy for dealing with the economically and militarily resurgent China. Thus far, however, the military's assessment of and preparations for the threat posed by China have not received the high level of review from elected civilian officials that such developments require. The start of a second Obama administration provides an opportunity for civilian authorities to live up to their obligations in this matter and to conduct a proper review of the United States' China strategy and the military's role in it.

The U.S. Military/Civilian Relationships in Facing China

THE UNITED STATES IS PREPARING FOR A WAR WITH CHINA, a momentous decision that so far has failed to receive a thorough review from elected officials, namely the White House and Congress. This important change in the United States' posture toward China has largely been driven by the Pentagon. There have been other occasions in which the Pentagon has framed key strategic decisions so as to elicit the preferred response from the Commander in Chief and elected representatives. A recent case in point was when the Pentagon led President Obama to order a high level surge in Afghanistan in 2009, against the advice of the Vice President and the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan. The decision at hand stands out even more prominently because (a) the change in military posture may well lead to an arms race with China, which could culminate in a nuclear war; and (b) the economic condition of the United States requires a reduction

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in military spending, not a new arms race. The start of a new term, and with it the appointment of new secretaries of State and Defense, provide an opportunity to review the United States' China strategy and the military's role in it. This review is particularly important before the new preparations for war move from an operational concept to a militarization program that includes ordering high-cost weapons systems and forced restructuring. History shows that once these thresholds are crossed, it is exceedingly difficult to change course.

In the following pages I first outline recent developments in the Pentagon's approach to dealing with the rise of China; I then focus on the deliberations of the highest civilian authorities. These two sides seemed to operate in parallel universes, at least until November 2011 when the pivot to Asia was announced by the White House—though we shall see their paths hardly converged even after that date. I conclude with an outline of what the much-needed civilian review ought to cover.

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I write about the “Pentagon” and the “highest civilian authorities” (or our political representatives) rather than contrast the view of the military and that of the civilian authorities, because the Pentagon includes civilians, who actively participated in developing the plans under discussion. It is of course fully legitimate for the Pentagon to identify and prepare for new threats. The question that this article raises is whether the next level of government, which reviews such threats while taking into account the input of the intelligence community and other agencies (especially the State Department), has adequately fulfilled its duties. Have the White House and Congress properly reviewed the Pentagon's approach—and found its threat assessment of China convincing and approved the chosen response? And if not, what are the United States' overarching short- and long-term political strategies for dealing with an economically and militarily rising China?

In the Pentagon

Since the Second World War the United States has maintained a power-projection military, built upon forward deployed forces with uninhibited access to the global commons—air, sea, and space. For over six decades the maritime security of the Western Pacific has been underwritten by the unrivaled naval and air power of the United States. Starting in the early 1990s, however, Chinese investments in sophisticated, but low-cost, weapons—including anti-ship missiles, short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, stealth submarines, and cyber and space arms—began to challenge the military superiority of the United States, especially in China's littoral waters. These “asymmetric arms” threaten two key elements of the United States' force projection strategy: its fixed bases (such as those in Japan and Guam) and aircraft

carriers. Often referred to as anti-access/anti-denial capabilities (A2/AD), these Chinese arms are viewed by some in the Pentagon as raising the human and economic cost of the United States' military role in the region to prohibitive levels. To demonstrate what this new environment means for regional security, military officials point out that, in 1996, when China conducted a series of missile tests and military exercises in the Strait of Taiwan, the United States responded by sending two aircraft carriers to the South China Sea, a credible display of force that reminded all parties of its commitment to maintaining the status quo in the region.¹ However, these analysts point out, if in the near future China decided to forcefully integrate Taiwan, the same U.S. aircraft carriers that are said to have once deterred Chinese aggression could be denied access to the sea by PLA anti-ship missiles. Thus, the U.S.'s interests in the region, to the extent that they are undergirded by superior military force, are increasingly vulnerable.

Two influential American military strategists, Andrew Marshall and his protégé Andrew Krepinevich, have been raising the alarm about China's new capabilities and aggressive designs since the early 1990s. Building on hundreds of war games played out over the past two decades, they gained a renewed hearing for their concerns following *Pacific Vision*, a war game conducted by the U.S. Air Force in October 2008. The game was financed in part by Marshall's Office of Net Assessment, a division of the Pentagon focused on identifying emerging security threats to the United States. *Air Force Magazine* reported at the time that the simulation convinced others in the Pentagon of the need to face up to China, and "[w]hen it was over, the PACAF [Pacific Air Force Command] staff set about drawing up its conclusions and fashioning a framework for AirSea Battle" — a plan to develop the new weapons and operation capabilities needed to overcome the challenges posed by A2/AD.²

With Marshall's guidance, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates instructed the Chiefs of Staff to begin work on the AirSea Battle (ASB) project and, in September of 2009, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz and Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Gary Roughead signed a classified Memorandum of Agreement endorsing the plan.³ ASB received Gates' official imprimatur in the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review which directed the U.S. military to "develop a joint air-sea battle concept . . . [to] address how air and naval forces will integrate capabilities across all operational domains — air, sea, land, space, and cyberspace — to counter growing challenges to U.S. freedom of action."⁴ In late 2011 Gates' successor, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, also signed off on the ASB and formed the new Multi-Service Office to Advance AirSea Battle. Thus, ASB was conceived, born, and began to grow.

AirSea Battle calls for "interoperable air and naval forces that can execute networked, integrated attacks-in-depth to disrupt, destroy, and defeat enemy anti-access area denial capabilities."⁵ The hypothetical battle begins with a campaign to reestablish power projection capabilities by launching a "blinding attack" against Chinese anti-access facilities, including land and sea-based missile launchers, surveillance and communication platforms, satellite and anti-satellite weapons, and command and control nodes. U.S. forces could then enter contested zones and conclude the conflict by bringing to bear the full force of their material military advantage. One defense think tank report, "AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept," acknowledges

that “[t]he scope and intensity of U.S. stand-off and penetrating strikes against targets in mainland China clearly has escalation implications,” because China is likely to respond to what is effectively a major direct attack on its mainland with all the military means at its disposal – including its stockpile of nuclear arms.⁶ The authors make the critical assumption that mutual nuclear deterrence would hold in a war with China. However, after suggesting that the United States might benefit from an early attack on Chinese space systems, they concede in a footnote that “[a]ttacks on each side’s space early warning systems would have an immediate effect on strategic nuclear and escalation issues.” “However,” they continue, “this issue lies beyond the scope of this paper and is therefore not addressed here.”⁷ Addressing the risk of nuclear war might

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be beyond the scope of that paper, but not of a proper review of ASB. Although the Chinese nuclear force is much smaller than that of the United States, China nonetheless has the capacity to destroy American cities. According to leading Australian military strategist Hugh White, “We can be sure that China will place a very high priority indeed on maintaining its capacity to strike the United States, and that it will succeed in this.”⁸ Given this, the United States’ development of ASB will likely accelerate China’s expansion of both its conventional forces and its nuclear, cyber, and space weapons programs. Joshua Rovner of the U.S. Naval War College notes that deep inland strikes could be mistakenly perceived by the Chinese as preemptive attempts to take out its nuclear weapons, thus cornering them into “a terrible use-it-or-lose-it dilemma.” That is, ASB is prone to lead to nuclear war.⁹

As current U.S. technologies and force structures are unable to carry out this hypothetical campaign, its architects urge investments in penetrating, long-endurance ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) and strike capabilities; aerial tankers; and forward base hardening. Strategists have also encouraged the Navy to “develop and field long-range/endurance UUVs [Unmanned Undersea Vehicles] for multiple missions germane to intelligence preparation of the undersea battle space” and recommended that the Air Force and Navy stockpile precision-guided munitions (PGM) “in sufficient quantities to execute an ASB campaign.”¹⁰ ASB also involves a considerable shift of budgetary priorities from the Army and Marines to the Navy and Air Force. A review of the FY 2013 Defense budget finds that “[t]he new budget also shifts the balance of funding among the Services according to the new strategic guidance, which calls for a greater reliance on air and sea power as part of the pivot to the Asia-Pacific region.”¹¹ While all branches face spending cuts, the Army will experience the steepest reduction (8.9 percent); the budgets of the Air Force and Navy/Marines shrink by 5.8 and 4.3 percent respectively. Although this force restructuring initially led to strong protests from the Army, in late 2012 it began carving out its role in the ASB plan.¹²

AirSea Battle is already beginning to shape acquisition decisions. General Schwartz writes that, “The first steps to implement Air-Sea Battle are already underway here at the Pentagon. In our FY 2012 and FY 2013 budgets we increased investment in the systems and capabilities we need to defeat access threats.”¹³ Admiral Greenert points to the investments in anti-submarine warfare, electronic warfare, air and missile defense, and information sharing, that were included in the President’s 2012 budget as one aspect of ASB’s implementation and notes that the 2013 budget “sustains these investments and really provides more resilient C4ISR [Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance] investments.”¹⁴ The *New York Times* reported that the new Littoral Combat Ship (LCS), which is able to deftly navigate shallow coastal seas, is “central to President Obama’s strategy of projecting American power in the Pacific.”¹⁵ So far, two of the planned fifty-five LCSs have been completed, and the first will be deployed in Singapore in 2013. A press report in August 2012 stated that “the Air-Sea Battle concept has prompted Navy officials to make significant shifts in the service’s FY2014-FY2018 budget plan, including new investments in ASW, electronic attack and electronic warfare, cyber warfare, the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF), the P-8A maritime patrol aircraft, and the Broad Area Maritime Surveillance (BAMS) UAV [Unmanned Aerial Vehicle].”¹⁶ Some point out that many of these weapons would have been ordered even if there was no ASB, and that some purchases merely constitute technology updates. However, it is also true that a smaller defense budget means making choices about the allocation of resources, and evidence suggests that the Pentagon has made the hardware of ASB a high priority.

In addition, a 2012 report by the Congressional Research Service on the implications of Chinese naval modernization disclosed that there has been a “redeployment of various advanced U.S. nuclear submarines and Aegis SM-3-based missile defense vessels to the Pacific in close cruising distance to China and North Korea. Other vessels in the Pacific were recently moved to Guam and Hawaii to presumably cut transit time to areas of possible conflict. All of this would be helpful if AirSea concepts are employed.”¹⁷

Some argue that ASB is merely a limited ‘operational concept.’ However, insofar as it is influencing the Pentagon’s ‘hardware’ purchases and is transforming force structure, ASB is moving beyond its conceptual stage. Moreover, even if it is merely a highly influential concept, it still merits high-level review.

One should note that several officials also maintain that ASB is not aimed at China. At a background briefing on ASB one Pentagon official stated, “It is not about a specific actor. It is not about a specific actor or regime.”¹⁸ General Norton Schwartz has said that questions about China’s place in the concept are “unhelpful.”¹⁹ However, the consensus of most observers is that “Air-Sea Battle is billed as the answer to growing anti-access/area-denial capabilities generically, but as everyone knows, specifically China,” as former Marine Corps officer J. Noel Williams put it.²⁰ And according to a senior Navy official overseeing the forces modernization efforts, “Air-Sea Battle is all about convincing the Chinese that we will win this competition.”²¹

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Indeed, as far as one can determine, the Pentagon decided to embrace the ASB concept over alternative ways for sustaining U.S. military power in the region that are far less likely to lead to escalation. One such is the “war-at-sea” option, a strategy proposed by Jeffrey Kline and Wayne Hughes of the Naval Postgraduate School, which would deny China use of the sea within the first island chain (which stretches from Japan to Taiwan and through the Philippines) by means of a distant blockade, the use of submarine and flotilla attacks at sea, and the positioning of expeditionary forces to hold at-risk islands in the South China Sea. By foregoing a mainland attack, the authors argue that the war-at-sea strategy gives “opportunities for negotiation in which both sides can back away from escalation to a long-lasting, economically disastrous war involving full mobilization and commitment to some kind of decisive victory.”²² In the same vein, the “Offshore Control Strategy” put forward by National Defense University’s T. X. Hammes, “seeks to use a war of economic attrition

to bring about a stalemate and cessation of conflict” by establishing a distant blockade and a maritime exclusion zone within the first island chain, while dominating the surrounding waters “to ensure the continued flow of trade to our allies while tightening the blockade against China.”²³ This would not bring a decisive victory, but would allow the United States to achieve its objectives of protecting its allies and maintaining free access to sea lanes, while giving China space to back down.

Several defense analysts in the United States and abroad, not least in China, see ASB as being highly provocative. Former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General James Cartwright stated in 2012 that, “AirSea Battle is demonizing China. That’s not in anybody’s interest.”²⁴ An internal assessment of ASB by the Marine Corps commandant cautions that “an Air-Sea Battle-focused Navy and Air Force would be preposterously expensive to build in peace time” and if used in a war against China would cause “incalculable human and economic destruction.”²⁵

Several critics point out that ASB is inherently escalatory and is likely to accelerate the arms race in the Asia-Pacific. China must be expected to respond to the implementation of ASB by accelerating its own military buildup. Chinese Colonel Gauyue Fan stated that, “If the U.S. military develops AirSea Battle to deal with the [People’s Liberation Army], the PLA will be forced to develop anti-AirSea Battle.”²⁶ Moreover, Raoul Heinrichs, from the Australian National University, points out that “by creating the need for a continued visible presence and more intrusive forms of surveillance in the Western Pacific, AirSea Battle will greatly increase the range of circumstances for maritime brinkmanship and dangerous naval incidents.”²⁷

Other critics argue that ASB operates in a strategic vacuum. Hammes maintains that “ASB is the antithesis of strategy. It focuses on the tactical employment of weapons

systems with no theory of victory or concept linking the Air-Sea approach to favorable conflict resolution.”²⁸ Dan Blumenthal of the American Enterprise Institute agrees that, “ASB is an operational concept detached from a strategy As a result, the U.S. is both making commitments to Asia that it may not be able to afford and articulating a high-risk operational doctrine that does not answer basic strategic questions.”²⁹

As I see it, the implied strategy is clear: ASB planners aim to make the United States so clearly powerful that not only would China lose if it engaged militarily, but it would not consider engaging because the United States would be sure to win. Krepinevich holds that ASB achieves both deterrence through denial, “designed to convince a would-be aggressor that he cannot achieve his objective, so there is no point in trying,” as well as deterrence through punishing, “designed to persuade him that even though he may be able to achieve his objective, he will suffer so much as a result that his anticipated costs will outweigh his gains.”³⁰ The imagined result of ASB is the ability to end a conflict with China in much the same way the United States ended WWII: The U.S. military defeats China and dictates the surrender terms.

This military strategy, which involves threatening to defeat China as a military power, is a long cry from containment or any other strategies that were seriously considered in the context of confronting the USSR after it acquired nuclear arms. The essence of the Cold War was mutual deterrence, and the conflict was structured around red lines that not only the Warsaw Pact forces were not to cross (e.g., by moving into the NATO controlled areas) but that the NATO forces were also committed to respect by not crossing into the Soviet realm that included Eastern Europe and East Germany. (This is the reason the United States did not help the freedom fighters who rose against the Communist regimes in Hungary and Czechoslovakia.) First strike (nuclear) strategies were foresworn and steps were taken to avoid a war precipitated by miscommunications, accidents, or miscalculations. In contrast, ASB requires that the United States be able to take the war to the mainland with the goal of defeating China, which quite likely would require striking first. Such a strategy is nothing short of a hegemonic intervention.

When Andrew Krepinevich suggested that ASB is simply seeking to maintain stability in the Asia-Pacific, he was asked if this “stability” really meant continued U.S. hegemony in the area. He chuckled and responded, “well, the nations in the area have a choice: either we are number one or China [is] – and they prefer us.”³¹ Actually, most of the nations in the area prefer playing the big powers against each other rather than joining a particular camp. They greatly benefit from trade and investment from China and, at the same time, most are quite keen to receive security backing from the United States. And they realize that in a case of conflict between the United States and China, they stand to lose a great deal. (A common saying in the area: “When the elephant and tiger rumble, the grass gets trampled.”) Most important, one must ask if there are other strategies that do not operate on the assumption that our dealings with China represent a zero-sum game. For instance, one should consider if there are strategies in which the superpower pursues its interests by accommodating a rising power – especially when this power is mainly a regional one – by allowing it an increased sphere of influence. This is the way Britain, once a superpower that relied greatly on naval power, accommodated a rising upstart – the United States.

The White House and Congress

To judge by several published reports which will be discussed in greater detail below, including those by government “insiders,” there is no indication – not a passing hint – that the White House has ever considered earnestly preparing the nation for a war with China. Nor is there any evidence that the White House has compared such a strategy to alternatives, and – having concluded that the hegemonic intervention implied by ASB is the course the United States should follow – then instructed the Pentagon to prepare for such a military showdown. Indeed, as far as one can determine at this stage, the White House and State Department have engaged in largely ad hoc debates over particular tactical maneuvers, never giving much attention to the development of a clear underlying China strategy. True, some individuals in the State Department and White House pursued engagement and cooperation, and others advocated ‘tougher’ moves that seem to reflect a vague preference for containment. However, neither approach was embraced as an overarching strategy. The November 2011 presidential announcement that the United States was beginning a “pivot” from the Near to the Far East may at first seem to suggest that a coherent stance on China had coalesced within the administration. We will see shortly that this is not the case.

One major source of information regarding the development of China policy in the Obama White House is an insider’s report fully dedicated to the subject at hand, *Obama and China’s Rise* by Jeffrey A. Bader. Having served as senior director for East Asian affairs on the National Security Council from January 2009 to April 2011, Bader reports in great detail on how the Obama administration approached China policy. When Obama was still a Senator campaigning in the 2008 election – the same time the Pentagon was launching the ASB mission – his philosophy was to engage the nations of the world rather than confront them; to rely on diplomacy rather than on aggressive, let alone coercive, measures; and to draw on multilateralism rather than on unilateral moves. Following his election, the President’s key staffers report that, with regard to China, containment was “not an option,” nor was the *realpolitik* of power balancing embraced. Instead, the administration pursued a vague three-pronged policy based on: “(1) a welcoming approach to China’s emergence, influence, and legitimate expanded role; (2) a resolve that a coherent stance on China eventually coalesced to see that its rise is consistent with international norms and law; and (3) an endeavor to shape the Asia-Pacific environment to ensure that China’s rise is stabilizing rather than disruptive.”³²

Once in office, the administration’s main China-related policy questions involved economic concerns (especially the trade imbalance, currency manipulation, and the dependence on China for the financing of U.S. debt), North Korea’s development of nuclear arms and missiles, sanctions on Iran, Tibet and human rights, and counterterrorism. The fact that China was somewhat modernizing its very-backward military is barely mentioned in the book-length report. There is no reference to ASB or to the strategy it implies as being considered, questioned, embraced, or rejected – let alone how it fits into an overarching China strategy, which the Obama administration did not formulate in the first term.

Moreover, Bader's account leaves little doubt that neither the Obama White House nor State Department ever developed a coherent China strategy. In effect, key staff members scoffed at the very idea that such overarching conceptions were of merit or possible (as opposed to reactive responses to ongoing developments). The Obama team, Bader notes, "fine-tun[ed] an approach" that avoided the extremes of, on the one hand, relying "solely on military muscle, economic blandishments, and pressure and sanctions of human rights," and on the other, pursuing "a policy of indulgence and accommodation of assertive Chinese conduct."³³ Not too hot, not too cold makes for good porridge, but is not a clear guideline for foreign policy. In May 2013, *The Economist* summarized the administration's China policy, or lack thereof, reporting, "First dubbed a 'Pacific pivot,' the strategy was later rebranded as a 'rebalancing.' Vague references in speeches by Mr. Obama's administration have not been fleshed out by any document (indeed [. . .] the Pentagon has more detail on China's strategy than its own)."

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A closer reading of these lines, as well as similar statements issued by the administration that were often fashioned as strategic positions, reveals them to be vague and open to rather different interpretations. They seem more like public rationales than guidelines capable of coordinating policies across the various government agencies, let alone reigning in the Pentagon. The overarching ambiguity is captured by Bader, who first reports that, "[f]or China to directly challenge America's security interest, it would have to acquire ambitions and habits that it does not at present display. The United States should not behave in a way that encourages the Chinese to move in that direction." Then, just pages later, he concludes that "the United States needs to maintain its forward deployment, superior military forces and technological edge, its economic strength and engagement with the region, its alliances, and its enhanced relationships with other emerging powers. Chinese analysts are likely to consider all these traits to be hostile to China."³⁴

Another book describing the same period, *The Obamians: The Struggle Inside the White House to Refine American Power*, by James Mann, reveals that although President Obama sought to engage China, his administration was increasingly 'irked' by various Chinese moves, from its assertive declarations about the South China Sea to the cyber-attacks assumed to originate from within its borders. In response, the Obama Administration is reported to have 'stiffened' both its rhetoric and diplomatic stance towards China. For example, in response to Beijing's pronouncement that the South China Sea represented one of China's 'core interests,' Secretary of State Clinton told an audience at the 2010 ASEAN meeting that freedom of navigation in the seas was a 'national interest' of the United States. She also delivered a speech criticizing China's abuse of Internet freedom and argued that such nations "should face consequences and international condemnation." It is reported that State Department officials, who generally sought to avoid conflict with China, "absolutely hated" the speech.³⁵ If such a speech caused

its conclusions or in any way made a part of the process.”⁴⁰ In the same month, Sen. Lieberman (I-CT) co-sponsored an amendment to the Fiscal 2012 Defense Authorization Bill that required a report on the implementation of and costs associated with the AirSea Battle Concept. It passed unanimously, but as of April 2013, such a report has yet to be released.⁴¹

In the public sphere there was no debate—led by either think tanks or public intellectuals—like that which is ongoing over whether or not to use the military option against Iran’s nuclear program, or the debate surrounding the 2009 surge of troops in Afghanistan. ASB did receive a modicum of critical examination from a small number of military analysts. However, most observers who can spell the ins-and-outs of using drones or bombing Iran—have no position on ASB or its implications for U.S.-China relations and the world order, simply because they do not know about it. A December 11, 2012 search of Google brings up 15,800,000 hits for “U.S. drone strikes”; a search for “AirSea Battle”: less than 200,000. In Googlish, this amounts to being unknown, and suggests this significant military shift is simply not on the wider public’s radar.

The Pivot: An Exception that Proves the Rule

In November 2011, President Obama announced that, with the wars in the Middle East coming to a close, his national security team was to make the U.S. “presence and mission in the Asia-Pacific a top priority.”⁴² At first blush it might seem that this dramatic change in strategic focus was very much in line with the one the Pentagon has been developing intensely since 2008. In reality, this rebalancing can be interpreted in several ways—none of which support the conclusion that the pivot amounted to an endorsement of ASB.

One possible view of the pivot is that it was very much in line with the President’s long-standing view—one he expressed even before he was elected—that Asia, as the heart of the global economy, was of growing importance to the United States. Hence, as he was freeing the United States from its engagement in Iraq and from Afghanistan, the time had come to shift priorities. Moreover, immediately after declaring the Asia-Pacific a top priority, Obama assured that “reductions in U.S. defense spending will not—I repeat, will not—come at the expense of the Asia-Pacific . . . we will allocate the resources necessary to maintain our strong military presence in this region.”⁴³ At the same time, the United States secured an agreement with Australia which provided for the rotation of 2,500 Marines through the northern port city of Darwin and announced that 60 percent of the Navy would be positioned in the Pacific by 2020—up from 50 percent moves highlighting that there were indeed a few military accouterments to the pivot.

Critics attacked this take on the pivot from two vantage points. Some saw it as hollow, “all hat and no cattle” as one Texan military officer put it in a private conversation with the author. Sending some 2,500 Marines adds little to overall U.S. forces in the area, which already amount to some 320,000 troops. Some of those Marines are actually being moved away from Okinawa to Australia—some 2,600 miles from China. The re-berthing of a few ships does not display a significant power shift. All the rest of the pivot was—to parrot a criticism often raised against Obama—eloquent talk with little follow-through.

Others see the pivot as merely political maneuvering during an intense election campaign, undertaken to fend off the GOP's repeated charge that the Democrats are soft on defense. The Obama administration removed U.S. troops from Iraq, but the unstable Iraqi regime – tilting toward Iran and refusing to allow the United States to keep bases in Iraq – made it difficult to present the withdrawal as a victory. The great difficulties the administration encountered in Afghanistan and Pakistan also did not make for a compelling election picture either. Furthermore, the Arab Awakening was looking more and more like a loss for the United States at least in the short run. Nations that used to be reliable allies, in particular Egypt, were (and continue to be) in a state of disarray, and the turmoil in Syria presented the war-weary United States with only poor options. In this context, shifting attention from the Near to the Far East, in which the United States could throw its weight around – at least in the short term – was a safe bet, as long as it involved only a few new outlays and mainly the repositioning of assets already in hand let alone the implementation of the AirSea Battle concept.

Moreover, in November 2012 during the only presidential election debate dedicated to foreign policy, no reference was made to preparations for a war with China. Governor Romney repeatedly stated that he was going to be tougher on China than President Obama by declaring it a currency manipulator on his first day in office – a hard line stance but one focused exclusively on economic matters. President Obama cited the increased trade sanctions bought against China by his administration and said that his “pivot” policy sent a “very clear signal” to China that the United States is and will remain a Pacific power.⁴⁴ But no more.

In short, however one interprets the “pivot” to Asia, it clearly does not constitute an endorsement, let alone the implementation of the AirSea Battle concept, and the strategy it implies.

In Conclusion

I am not arguing that the U.S. military is seeking out war or intentionally usurping the role of the highest civilian authorities. Information about the rise of China as an economic and military power is open to a range of interpretations. And the Pentagon is discharging its duties when it identifies new threats and suggests ways to respond to them. Moreover, civilians – including two Secretaries of Defense – have endorsed ASB and arguably the strategy it implies. But while ASB should not be dismissed on the grounds that it is merely an attempt to secure a mission and funds for the military, there is room to question whether the threats have been overstated and to ask if the Pentagon-favored response is the right strategy. The time has come for the White House and Congress to reassess both the threat and the suggested response.

Four areas ought to be considered in such a review process: (i) While the *economy* of China does not by itself determine its military strength, it does constrain its options. One would be wise to take into account that China's per capita GDP is far below that of the United States, and that to maintain support, the Communist Party needs to house, feed, clothe, and otherwise serve four times more people than the United States – on top of dealing with major environmental strains, an aging population, a high level of

corruption, and growing social unrest.⁴⁵ (ii) The *military* modernization of China often provokes concerns that it is ‘catching up.’ Although it is true that China has increased military spending, the budget for the PLA started well behind that of the U.S. military and China’s defense spending is still dwarfed by that of the United States. (iii) Moreover, whatever its capabilities, China’s *intentions* are relevant. China shows little interest in managing global affairs or imposing its ideology on other nations. Instead, China has shown a strong interest in securing the flow of raw materials and energy on which its economy depends. However, the United States can accommodate this core interest without endangering its security by facilitating China’s efforts to secure energy deals in the global marketplace and pathways for the flow of resources (by constructing pipelines, railways, and new ports in places such as Pakistan) – rather than seeking to block them. (iv) Finally, it is widely agreed that the United States can no longer afford to fight two major wars. Hence, one must note that the most urgent threats to U.S. security are – almost all of which can be found in the Near and Middle – not Far – East.⁴⁶

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– Daniel Tam Claiborne served as Lead Editor for this article.

NOTES

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² Richard Halloran, “PACAF’S “Vision” Thing,” *Air Force Magazine*, January 2009, available at <http://www.airforce-magazine.com/MagazineArchive/Pages/2009/January%202009/0109vision.aspx>

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