The Pacific Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpre20

The Pivot to Asia, Air-Sea Battle and contested commons in the Asia Pacific region
Matteo Dian
Published online: 06 Jan 2015.

To cite this article: Matteo Dian (2015) The Pivot to Asia, Air-Sea Battle and contested commons in the Asia Pacific region, The Pacific Review, 28:2, 237-257, DOI: 10.1080/09512748.2014.995124

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2014.995124

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.
The Pivot to Asia, Air-Sea Battle and contested commons in the Asia Pacific region

Matteo Dian

Abstract  The Pivot towards the Asia Pacific has been a key component of the grand strategy of the Obama administration. Militarily, the main challenge is represented by the Chinese capacity to erode the American ‘command of the commons’.

The United States have been developing a new operational concept, labelled ‘Air-Sea Battle’ (ASB) aimed at maintaining the capacity to project military power even if adversaries are able to deploy a sophisticated anti-access area denial strategy.

The implementation of ASB is likely induce Beijing to respond with a further acceleration of the process of modernisation of its armed forces.

Keywords  Pivot; Air-Sea Battle; anti-access; power projection; global commons.

Introduction  

The increasing focus towards the East Asia Pacific has been one of the distinctive features of the foreign and security policy of the Obama administration. Both President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton described this administration as the ‘first Pacific Presidency’, pointing at the renewed strategic relevance of Asia, coupled with the decreasing centrality of Europe in the global strategic equilibria. The new focus on Asia led to what has been defined as the ‘Pivot towards the Asia Pacific region’, namely a process of economic, diplomatic and military re-engagement and a renewal of the US commitment to the region.

The military dimension of the Pivot has been associated with the development and implementation of a new operational concept defined Air-Sea Battle (ASB), aimed at rebalancing the Chinese military ascendency and
to reaffirm the US primacy in the region as well as to confirm the American commitment to provide extended deterrence to the local allies.

The paper will describe the main tenets of this new operational concept and will explore the debate it has generated among scholars and practitioners. Moreover it will highlight the possible consequences the implementation of the ASB concept might entail, especially in terms of the bilateral relations with China.

The adoption of ASB is likely to worsen Beijing’s insecurity and fear of encirclement, accelerating the present security dilemma between China and the United States. Overall, the adoption of ASB by the Department of Defense highlights a problematic disconnection between the strategic aims of the Obama administration, namely maintaining the American primacy in the military, economic realms, while avoiding a fully fledged military competition with China, and the operation prescriptions contained by ASB (Etzioni 2013). This paper is divided into four separate sections. The first section will describe the nature and the extent of the ‘Pivot to Asia’ recently undertaken by the Obama administration. The second will high-light how US military planners and decision makers conceptualise the ‘command of the global commons’ as a necessary military precondition for both the US primacy and the durability of the current international order. Consequently, the perception of security threats is related to the capacity of a state to contest the command of the commons rather than the capacity or the will to harm the physical and economic security of the US and their allies. Increasingly, indeed, Washington is framing the capacity to negate the command of the global commons as a direct threat both to its role of public goods provider and to its global military primacy.

The third section will discuss the Chinese military rise, emphasising how Beijing’s anti-access area denial (A2AD) capabilities will largely shape future military competition between the United States and the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

The fourth part will describe the main features of this new operational concept and will highlight how the debate between scholars and practitioners has made visible the advantages and drawbacks the implementation of ASB might entail.

The Obama administration and the Pivot

The grand strategy of the Obama administration has been defined by two main axes. First, a phase of retrenchment marked by the reduction of the direct military exposure in the Middle East, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan. The second phase has been labelled ‘counterpunching’, namely an effort aimed at the reaffirmation of American influence and military presence in key regional theatres, especially where the US primacy is challenged by potential competitors (Drezner 2011).
The primary consequence of this grand strategy is the US re-engagement in the Asia Pacific region, also defined as the ‘Pivot to Asia’. Indeed, since the fall of 2010, senior representatives of the Obama administration, as well as the President himself, issued a series of announcements indicating that the United States would be intensifying its already considerable role in the Asia Pacific region.

Underlying the ‘Pivot’ is the recognition that a global power shift towards East Asia is changing the contemporary geopolitical realities. Therefore, the centre of gravity for US foreign policy and security strategy should be realigned accordingly (Layne 2012). As former Secretary of State Clinton clarified in her ‘Foreign Policy’ article dated November 2011, the Obama administration considers the Asia Pacific the region in which the future geopolitical equilibria will be decided (Clinton 2011). According to Clinton, Washington indeed dissipated too many resources in costly state building efforts in the Middle East, leaving possible competitors, such as China, to build up their capabilities and influence.

The Pivot has become the cornerstone of the grand strategy and has received political support by all government departments as well as by the Congress (Manyin et al. 2012). Additionally, it has been considered by a vast number of scholars and analysts as a timely adaption of the American strategy towards the changing international order and an appropriate response to the Chinese rise (Brimley and Ratner 2013; Brooks, Ikenberry and Wohlforth 2013).

Nevertheless a number of scholars and analysts have criticised the Pivot and underscored possible unwanted consequences of that strategy. Critics have argued that the Obama administration could antagonise China and ignite its deep seated fear of encirclement.

As Henry Kissinger pointed out, historically, the worse possible scenario for China has been encirclement by hostile great powers (Kissinger 2012). According to former Secretary of State, ‘Deterrent moves by the West may be interpreted in China as encirclement, and a vicious cycle can result’ (Kissinger 2011: 134). Kissinger stressed how all the Chinese military interventions after the communist revolution were inspired mainly by the attempt to avoid the encirclement by hostile great powers. Consequently, fostering the perception that the US and their allies aim to encircle China is the worst possible approach to US–Chinese relations. Robert Ross, another outspoken critic of the Pivot, stated that the strategy is based on a ‘fundamental misreading of China’s leadership’. China’s assertiveness would not originate from an increasing confidence and a growing power but from a sense of insecurity. Ross pointed out that the Obama administration has been overestimating Chinese military strength and while failing to appreciate that it feels deeply insecure and fears encirclement. The United States, according to Ross, should instead reassure China and try to enhance mutual trust and cooperation. On the contrary, the Pivot does not
recognise legitimate Chinese interests and tends to provide incentives for China to adopt a belligerent stance (Ross 2012).

Similar criticisms were expressed by other scholars, such as Boonie Glaser, who highlighted how the Pivot to Asia could aliment a security dilemma between the United States and China and will give more voice to whoever is inside the Communist Party to push an increasingly assertive and nationalist foreign policy agenda (Glaser 2012). The Pivot to Asia is a multidimensional strategy, encompassing diplomatic, economic and military aspects. Washington indeed recently undertook a significant diplomatic effort that led to a bilateral détente with former enemies, such as Myanmar and Vietnam and reinforcing existing alliances with Asia Pacific partners such as Japan, South Korea and Australia (Shambaugh 2013). Moreover, the Obama administration promoted a number of initiatives, such as the expansion of the Trans-Pacific Partnership aimed at re-establishing American leadership in economic and commercial fields (Slaughter 2012).

The third dimension of the Pivot is eminently military. The 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance confirmed this trend, stating that:

> U.S. economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia, creating a mix of evolving challenges and opportunities. Accordingly, while the U.S. military will continue to contribute to security globally, we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region. (US Department of Defense 2012)

The main element of instability over the longer term is represented by the military rise of China. Nevertheless, the Pivot to Asia, particularly in terms of its military dimension, is not dictated solely by the quantitative rise of Chinese capabilities (Friedberg 2011). The Pivot is rather tailored to contrast the threat represented by the particular path Chinese modernisation has assumed in recent years, as well as the aim to reaffirm American primacy in the region. In the next paragraphs, I will highlight how these developments are considered as a threat to American military hegemony. First, the Chinese anti-access strategy threatens to exclude US military forces from the vital area of the East Asia Pacific. This strategy is indeed considered a serious threat to the main military foundation of the US military primacy, namely what Barry Posen defined as the ‘command of the commons’ (Posen 2003). Second, this potential exclusion fundamentally inhibits the possibility of conducting military operations according to the present ‘American way of war’ in the region, stretching from the First Island Chain to the Indian Ocean.

**Contested commons and threat perception in the Asia Pacific region**

As scholarly analysis and official documents testify, the main underlying rationale of the military dimension of the Pivot is the necessity to reaffirm
US military primacy in the Asia Pacific and to ‘rebalance’ the Chinese build-up (Van Tol et al. 2010).

Before analysing the nature and extent of the Chinese military modernisation, it will be necessary to describe the way in which the US political leadership has conceptualised the nature of the challenges posed by the military ascendency of the PRC.

The perception of the threat posed by the Chinese military rise is not only related to the Chinese capacity to harm the physical security of the US or their allies, or to challenge the American primacy in the long term. The main challenge posed by the PRC is represented by its capacity to erode what Posen defined as the American command of the commons.

The commons typically refer to the sea, air, space and cyber domains through which information, goods, commerce and people move. As Posen himself clarified, the command of the commons does not mean that other states cannot use the commons in peacetime or cannot develop military capabilities that can move through or even exploit them. It rather refers to the capacity to control and to use the global commons militarily and to credibly threaten to deny their use to other states. Moreover, it implies that others would lose a military contest for the commons if they attempted to deny them to the US forces.

An examination of recent US national security documents highlights how the threat to the US access to the global commons has been rising as one of the top priorities for the foreign and defence policy community (Krepinevich 2010). Leaders and policy analysts are indeed increasingly restating the relevance of these domains for US security and remarking the urgency of the challenges posed by the contestation of the global commons.

For instance during a 2008 speech to the Air War College, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates stated that ‘Protecting the 21st century’s “global commons”—in particular, space and cyberspace—has been identified and adopted as a key task’ (Denmark et al. 2010).

The recent Joint Operational Access Concept 2012 reasserts power projection capability and free access to the global commons as key prerequisites to the maintenance of US primacy. The document indeed states:

As a global power with global interests, the United States must maintain the credible capability to project military force into any region of the world in support of those interests. This includes the ability to project force both into the global commons to ensure their use and into foreign territory as required. Moreover, the credible ability to do so can serve as a reassurance to U.S. partners and a powerful deterrent to those contemplating actions that threaten U.S. interests. (US Department of Defense 2012)

The perceived erosion of the US command of the commons is caused by three main long-term trends. Primarily, current levels of economic
globalisation make openness and security of the global commons vital for the stability of the global economic system. The security of the sea lines of communications as well as other domains, both physical and virtual, is an essential prerequisite for the stability of the present global order and the current level of international trade. Second, as a consequence of the revolution of military affairs (RMA), the ‘American way of war’ became more and more dependent upon the command of the commons to enable many aspects of its operations, from logistics, to command and control, to extended power projection (Gray 2005; Linn 2007).

Since the first Gulf War, the American forces have long used ‘sanctuary bases’. Main facilities including airfields and ports have been largely protected from serious attacks both during post-Cold War operations and during major conflicts during the Cold War. A common feature of US military intervention during, as well as after, the Cold War has been the build-up of large air ground forces near the theatre of operations. Another main characteristic of the US approach has been the ability to acquire full control of the air space, to attack key targets inside enemy airspace and to utilise combat aircraft to support ground operations. Especially after the Cold War, the US Navy and the Air Force have been accustomed to operate from sanctuary at sea, given the near absence of serious threats to aircraft carriers.

Emerging A2AD capabilities are explicitly designed to curb, or even negate, these key traditional elements of US power projection. The diffusion of A2AD capabilities will complicate the maintenance of forward presence, particularly the use of military facilities in the proximity of adversaries’ shores. Moreover, aircraft carriers may no longer be sufficiently survivable when operating within the reach of enemies’ area denial systems.

Similarly, US military dependence on relatively unrestricted access to both space and cyberspace has expanded enormously since 1991. Communications, command, control, computing, intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) systems, as well as precision-guided munitions are heavily dependent on high-bandwidth connectivity and satellites. These systems, in turn, are highly reliant on space-based assets that have also enjoyed the sanctuary status.

These non-traditional elements of power projection are increasingly contested. (Betz 2011) The dependence upon satellites makes them an attractive target. Similarly, the growing dependence on space and cyberspace entails a major vulnerability to weapons systems that American forces have increasingly utilised since the early 1990s.

Finally, technological progress and the diffusion of military innovations related to the RMA are lowering the threshold for potential adversaries to acquire A2AD capabilities, such as anti-ship missiles, anti-satellite weapons and cyber warfare capabilities (Watts 2011).
From this perspective, the military rise of China represents the main threat to the US command of the commons in the Asia Pacific region.

The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in fact has been acquiring increasingly sophisticated military capabilities and has begun to redesign its organisation in order to exploit the new military capabilities made available by the RMA.

Even though the PLA is not able to disrupt the US military access to commons on a global scale and for extended periods of time, vast investment in conventional and asymmetric A2AD capabilities has enabled it to challenge US freedom of action in specific regions such as the area within the First Island chain for at least limited periods of time.

China’s anti-access area denial strategy

American military strategists consider the Chinese A2AD capabilities as a primary threat to their capacity to project power in the Western Pacific. As a consequence of the development of these capabilities, US forces could find themselves locked out of the area between mainland China and the First Island Chain. Losing the capacity to project power in this increasingly relevant area would cause fundamental damage to the American military primacy, since the capacity to exercise extended deterrence and to protect Asian allies would be decisively hampered.

Since the 1995 Taiwan crisis, the PRC has been developing military capabilities aimed at contrasting the US capacity to project power in the South and East China Sea (Christensen 2011). The modernisation of the Chinese armed forces, and particularly of the People’s Republic of China Army Navy (PLAN) and People’s Republic of China Army Air Force (PLAAF), has been directed primarily at gaining superiority in a possible conflict over Taiwan, and secondly at acquiring the capacity to deny any opponent, and particularly the United States, access to the sea and air space within the area of the First Island Chain.

Chinese military doctrine, since the 1990s, evolved from Limited War Under High Technology Conditions (1991–2004), to Limited War Under High Technology and Information Conditions (2005–). This evolution implied the pursuit of a so-called ‘Revolution in Military Affairs with Chinese characteristics’ (Newmyer 2010). The manifestation of the latter doctrine consisted of a strengthening of the Navy, Air Force and Second Artillery Force, and the acceleration of the process of informatisation and modernisation of weaponry and equipment (Goldstein 2005).

There are three main trends of the Chinese modernisation programme that contributed to the formation of a gloomier threat assessment: the growth of China’s ballistic and cruise missile capabilities, the ongoing development of Navy and the technological development of the PLA Air Force (Blasko 2011).
Overall, these efforts are aimed at creating a potential ‘no go zone’, to deny to the United States the capacity to project power within the area of First Island Chain and to freely use the bases located in close proximity to Chinese territory.

According to the most recent assessments, the PLA gained the A2AD capabilities necessary to potentially degrade the US ability to operate in airfields near Chinese territory, to hinder the forward deployment within the area encompassing the First Island Chain and to prevent naval surface assets from operating in waters near the Chinese shores. Moreover, the PLA would be able to disrupt severely the command and control, early warning or supply capabilities for forward-deployed forces to a degree great enough to force potential combatants, such as the US military, to relocate to more distant locations (O’Rourke 2011; Bitzinger and Raska 2013).

In case of conflict, the PLA would exploit the main US weaknesses: the fact that US forces are accustomed to the use of sanctuary bases as well as the high reliance on satellites and electronic communications.

Second, the PLA writings identify the denial of information collection, as vital to the successful prosecution of a modern high-technology war. The PLA writings indeed identified the American C4ISR system as a ‘military nerve centre’. Therefore, a considerable part of the anti-access strategy is aimed at denying sanctuary status both in the cyber and in the outer space domains, since US communication and control systems heavily rely on the free access of such. In the case of conflict, the PLA would indeed attack both the US computer networks and satellite systems. Consequently, the PLA is developing sophisticated cyber warfare capabilities, investing in computer network operation capabilities and forces. As far as the outer space domain is concerned, China has been building a substantial number of anti-satellite weapons and thus it might soon be able to damage or destroy several satellites upon which the US military heavily depends (MacDonald 2008).

As a consequence of these trends, as a recent report of the influential Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) argued, ‘US force structure will be compelled to pay an increasingly high — and perhaps prohibitive — price should Washington attempt to conduct traditional types of power-projection operations’.

Moreover,

the workhorses of traditional US power-projection operations, […] will likely find themselves either sitting on the sidelines in the early stages of a conflict, or suffering high levels of attrition. In either case, their deterrent value will have declined precipitously. (Van Tol et al. 2010)

The Obama administration is trying to react to the challenges posed by these new Chinese capabilities with a number of initiatives. It reaffirmed and reinforced the existing security alliances with Asian partners. Second,
it implemented the process of revision of the American forward deployed presence in the area, which had been initiated by the Bush administration.

At the same time, the Department of Defense has developed a new operational concept labelled ASB, which is aimed at reaffirming the American command of the commons and at contrasting the Chinese A2AD strategy. ASB has been accepted and formally approved both by Robert Gates and Leon Panetta and confirmed by Chuck Hagel. However, presently it has not been formally approved by the Congress nor by President Obama.

**Air-Sea Battle operational concept**

The formulation and the implementation of the ASB operational concept has constituted a core element of the military dimension of the Pivot (Bitzinger and Raska 2013). It is important to notice that inside the administration, key proponents of the Pivot, such as Hillary Clinton, Kurt Campbell or Thomas Donilon did not initially consider ASB to be a ‘third arrow’ of the Pivot together with the process of economic and diplomatic re-engagement in the region. The concept has been elaborated primarily by those within the department of defence and the military with the decisive intellectual influence of analysts such as Andrew Marshal and Andrew Krepinevich. The new concept informed and conditioned the main military choices the administration and the Pentagon undertook since the Pivot was announced. ASB constitutes a response to what armed forces and defence planners in the United States have considered as a main strategic threat, namely the diffusion of A2AD capabilities, and the consequential erosion of the capacity to project power globally for the United States.

ASB has provided a clear operative blueprint aimed at reaching part of the strategic purposes associated with the Pivot, such as maintaining the American primacy in the Asia Pacific region and reassuring the Asian allies of the intentions of the United States. Moreover it constituted a coherent response to the challenges to the American command of the commons.

Most importantly, even if the Obama administration has never considered the ASB and the Pivot as politically and strategically coupled, Beijing perceived it as an integral part of the Obama administration’s approach to Asia, identifying it as a military blueprint to counter the Chinese ascendency (Swaine 2012).

ASB is an operational concept focused on the development of integrated air and naval capabilities aimed to maintain the capacity to project military power even if the adversaries are able to deploy a sophisticated A2AD strategy.

The 2010 US Quadrennial Defence Review (QDR) officially announced that the Department of Defense was developing a new operational concept aimed at addressing ‘how air and naval forces will integrate capabilities across all operational domains – air, sea, land, space and cyberspace – to counter growing challenges to US freedom of action’ (The White House
Later a new document, the Joint Operational Concept clarified the main military aim of ASB concept as

to improve integration of air, land, naval, space, and cyberspace forces to provide combatant commanders the capabilities needed to deter and, if necessary, defeat an adversary employing sophisticated anti access, area-denial capabilities. (U.S. Department of Defense 2012)

The concept was officially announced in spring 2011 by then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. The details of the official version remain classified. However, shortly afterwards the CSBA published a long monograph describing a possible version of the ASB. Moreover, in 2013 the Air-Sea Battle Office released a short summary of the classified version of the concept (Air-Sea Battle Office 2013).

In order to clarify the content and the strategic consequences of the ASB concept it will be necessary to specify what an operational concept is, and its main aims. First, the main purpose of an operational concept is to provide a long-term vision on how military forces and their methods of operations develop, constituting a framework for joint allocation of resources and mechanisms to influence the future force structures. As defined by the US Army Field Manual,

The operational level of war uses available military resources to attain strategic goals within a theater of war. Most simply, it is the theory of larger unit operations. It also involves planning and conducting campaigns. Campaigns are sustained operations designed to defeat an enemy force in a specified space and time with simultaneous and sequential battles. The disposition of forces, selection of objectives, and actions taken to weaken or to outmaneuver the enemy all set the terms of the next battle and exploit tactical gains. (U.S. Department of Defense 1982)

Examples of operational concepts include the AirLand Battle concept and the Operational Maneuver from the Sea, the Soviet Union’s Deep Operations and Nazi Germany’s Blitzkrieg.

The ASB is clearly inspired by the AirLand Battle, the operational concept adopted by the United States and other NATO members in the last decade of the Cold War. Both concepts reflect the exigency to close a period of doctrinal and operational focus on asymmetric conflicts and counter-insurgency in order to strengthen the US capacity to exercise extended deterrence against a peer competitor and to face a possible symmetric war scenario (Skinner 1988). The AirLand Battle concept was developed in the late 1970s in response to growing Soviet conventional superiority on the European Central Front faced by NATO countries. It
emphasised ‘deep defence’, a high degree of mobility and ‘deep strikes’ far into enemy territory behind the front lines of battle.

Eventually, AirLand Battle contributed to strengthen deterrence in the Central European Theatre during the last decade of the Cold War and influenced the operational planning that led to success during the 1991 Gulf War (Lock Pullan 2005).

The elaboration of an ASB concept is a deliberate effort to replicate this success. Officially it is not exclusively directed against the PLA and its A2AD capabilities, but rather aimed at ‘preserving US ability to project power and maintain freedom of action in the global commons’ (Air-Sea Battle Office 2013). However, the CSBA papers, that describe the new operational concept extensively, mention the Chinese A2AD strategy as a main target of ASB (Van Tol et al. 2010; Krepinevich 2010). In addition to that, the ASB concept appears to be tailored to the Chinese A2AD capacities and on the geographical and physical characteristics of East Asia and the First Island Chain. Moreover, presently, China is the only country that owns the military capabilities to implement an anti-access strategy. As a consequence we can induce that the new concept is aimed at strengthening extended deterrence in the Asia Pacific region and limiting China’s capacity to blackmail or coerce the Asian allies of the United States (Blumenthal 2013; Etzioni 2013). The main concern of the US strategists is to maintain the effectiveness of extended deterrence in the region and prevent China from turning its increased military capabilities into the capacity to blackmail or coerce East and South East Asian allies of the United States. Moreover, ASB should provide a useful operational guidance in case deterrence would fail.

However, as it happened with AirLand Battle, ASB could provide operational guidance for other military operations in other theatres in the future (Williams 2011).

The core idea of ASB is preserving the capacity to defeat aggression and maintain an escalation advantage despite the presence of advanced A2AD capabilities.

The main purpose of the new operation concept is developing a ‘networked and integrated force capable of attack in depth to disrupt, destroy and defeat adversary forces’ (Air-Sea Battle Office 2013: 4). Consequently the concept envisages a highly sophisticated military posture capable of striking into the enemy’s territory, suppressing C4ISR systems and missiles stations, as well as other systems capable of impeding US power projection (Krepinevich 2010; Air-Sea Battle Office 2013; Bitzinger and Raska 2013).

Doing so, the United States could maintain operative access within the area of the First Island Chain and strengthen their capacity to exercise extended deterrence in the region.

Under the ASB concept, the US military planners identified four main areas of competition between the PLA A2AD network and the American forces: battle network vs. counter-battle network; missile attack vs. missile
defence; air superiority vs. air defence; sea and undersea control vs. sea (and undersea denial); and force sustainment vs. counterforce sustainment.

The first area is characterised by the US effort to develop capabilities aimed at maintaining operational US battle networks while trying to disrupt or degrade the Chinese C4ISR networks. Both sides would indeed attempt to execute ‘blinding campaigns’ with the aim to negate their adversary’s vital ISR information, degrading its command and control networks while protecting its own capabilities. The US would immediately conduct space and cyber operations, since success or failure in these domains would have substantial second-order effects on the competition to exercise control in other domains. Blinding the Chinese battle networks is a fundamental prerequisite for ASB’s success. China would find it extremely difficult to organise forces after such an attack. In case of a successful blinding campaign, PLA missiles would indeed be a ‘shot in the dark’.

The second area is missile attacks vs. missile defence. A pre-emptive missile attack against US bases is considered one of the first steps of a possible Chinese attack, immediately after the attempt to blind the US communication system through cyberwarfare and attacks to the satellite systems (Chase, Erickson and Yeaw 2009).

Therefore, degrading the Chinese capacity to strike with intermediate range missiles and anti-carrier teleguided missiles is a key ASB line of operation. Against the threat posed by the Chinese second artillery, the ASB concept foresees two main countermeasures. The first is the enlargement and the enhancement of the present West-Pac ballistic missile defence system. This system is however considered to be efficient only to counter a limited ballistic attack since it can be saturated by the contemporary launch of an elevated number of warheads. Given the limited efficacy of missile defence systems, two other countermeasures are proposed. First, the Pentagon is redesigning the US military presence in the area in order to avoid the concentration of all the US military assets in a small number of main bases, thus reducing the forces’ vulnerabilities to a missile attack (Berteau and Green 2012). This process, yet envisaged in documents, such as the Global Posture Review (US Department of Defense 2004) established different kinds of bases: main operating bases, with permanently stationed combat forces and robust infrastructure, and forward operating sites, defined as expandable ‘warm facilities’ maintained with a limited US military support presence, and possibly prepositioned equipment (Flournoy and Davidson 2012).

This system would spread the forces into several peripheral facilities while maintaining a certain degree of power projection capability even if the major hub bases are damaged. Another countermeasure is the development of a missile counterforce able to ‘kill the archer not the arrow’, namely to damage the PLA missile arsenal before the PLA missiles could hit US bases and ships.
The third area of competition is air-superiority vs. air defence arena. As the PLA’s A2AD architecture matures, penetrating Chinese air space and reaching strike relevant targets will be increasingly difficult. Moreover, the PLA is acquiring sophisticated weapons platforms, such as fifth generation aircraft and S-300/400 SAM anti-aircraft systems. Consequently, the use of aircraft carrier within the area of the First Island Chain will be reduced to a minimum, since such ships represent high value targets for the Chinese Second Artillery and their medium range missiles. The fourth dimension of the ASB concept is sea and undersea control vs. sea denial. In this respect, the main objective of ASBattle is to ensure the operational access to US surface and submarine assets at an affordable cost, and to avoid being locked outside of the First Island Chain. Since the modernisation and the expansion of the PLAN, and particularly the Chinese submarine forces, represents the cornerstone of the Chinese A2AD capabilities, the neutralisation or the degradation of the Chinese undersea and surface network is one of the priorities of a hypothetical conflict carried out under the ASB concept. ASB foresees the creation of anti-submarine barriers along the Ryukyus islands, across the Luzon Strait and through the Philippine Islands. The exploitation of these natural chokepoints would considerably delay the creation of a maritime ‘no go zone’ for US naval forces. A further element of the sea control dimension would be the capacity to apply a distant blockade around the First Island Chain, disrupting the Chinese sea lines of communications (SLOCs) and allowing the bulk of the US forces to gain access to the First Island Chain.

The last dimension of the ASB concept is the so-called ‘force sustainment vs. counterforce sustainment’. This dimension deals with the problem of operational logistics and sustainment weaknesses due to the distance of the possible theatre of conflict from the continental United States. In order to overcome these logistical problems, the US forces would rely on bases and logistical support provided by allied states, such as Australia, and other partners such as India and the Philippines. The diplomatic efforts of the Obama administration have been also aimed at securing logistic cooperation of these allies both in peacetime and in case of military contingencies. The adoption of ASB has had major consequences both on the American military budget and on procurement. The allocation of resources has been shifting in favour of the Air Force and the Navy to the detriment of the Army and the Marine Corp, reversing a trend initiated with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In 2011, the Obama administration announced a sharp reduction of the military budget with cuts of 250 billion dollars in the period between 2012 and 2017 and 489 billion between 2012 and 2022. The announcement of these cuts has made the influence of the new concept more evident.

The five-year budget plan released in 2012 foresaw a reduction of men under arms and an increased emphasis on technology. The plan reflected the declining importance of counter-insurgency in favour of new exigencies
such as the contrast to anti-access strategies and the new shift of geographical focus from the Middle East to the Asia Pacific. As a result the Navy and the Air Force have been comparatively less affected by the cuts. All the ‘big winners’ of the budget struggle are somehow related to the ASB. The new plan indeed foresees the confirmation or the expansion of the funding for new platforms such as a new long-range stealth bomber, the KC-46 tanker refuelling aircraft and X-47B drone. Moreover the procurement of other platforms such as the P-8 patrol aircrafts and Virginia class submarines, Ford class aircraft carriers and Predator and Global Hawk drones has been maintained or increased.

A recent report of the Center for a New American Security confirmed this trend, highlighting that the Department of Defense has given priority to the development of capabilities functional to ASB including long-range strike, stealthy platforms, robust and survivable C4ISR networks and ballistic missile defence. Specific investments have included research into carrier-based unmanned combat air vehicles, upgrades to standard missile-3 missile defence and cyber warfare (Barno et al. 2013). According to recent figures, the Department of Defense will spend up to 268 billion dollars between 2010 and 2016 on R&D and procurement related to ASB.

However as the same report highlighted, the ASB could become ‘a catch-all justification for weapons programs that the services do not want cut’. The Air Force and especially the Navy have been exploiting the new concept to navigate through budget cuts and confirm heavy investments in platforms which would not be survivable in A2AD environments or are not consequential to the operative exigencies of ASB such as Ford Class aircraft carriers and Littoral Combat ship (Barno et al. 2013: 21).

The announcement and the adoption of ASB stimulated a widespread controversy within the American institutions and armed forces.

ASB has been officially endorsed by Robert Gates and Leon Panetta. In 2012, Vice Chiefs of Staff of all the four services of the US armed forces approved a memorandum, which established a framework to implement ASB with the aim of developing the capacity to overcome sophisticated anti-access strategies and preserve freedom of action in the global commons (Air-Sea Battle Office 2013).

Despite the approval of the Pentagon and the strong support of the Navy and the Air Force the new operational concept has been facing consistent opposition within the government, in Congress and even between other branches of the armed forces. The House Armed Service Committee in its FY 2014 National Defense Authorisation Act advanced a number of concerns about the concept and the efficacy of the newly established ASB Office in advancing interoperability and cooperation between Navy and Air Force (US House of Representatives 2013). In addition to that, the Army and Marines have expressed their concerns about the shift of resources towards the Navy and the Air Force caused by the adoption of ASB. Moreover, ASB has not been fully approved by the President.
The adoption of ASB also generated a considerable debate between scholars and analysts.

Its supporters pointed out several benefits of ASB. First it confronts the most important strategic challenge the US forces are presently facing: preserving the command of the commons and preserving the capacity to project power even in the presence of strong anti-access capabilities.

This would fundamentally contribute to the enhancement of extended deterrence, particularly in the Asia Pacific region. Consequently, it can help to preserve the present balance of power, negating China the possibility to blackmail and coerce the Asian allies of the US, ultimately fostering regional and global stability. These analyses are grounded on theories of deterrence, highlighting the relevance of firm commitments to maximise extended deterrence.

A clear blueprint for extended deterrence, announcing a strong resolve and a clear signalling by the US and the allies would be a stabilising factor for the region. On the contrary, an alliance demonstrating a lesser resolve would send a message that could undercut credible threats and credible assurance, making coercive diplomacy less effective and increasing the risk of miscalculations leading to a war (Gartzke 1999).

The Chief of Staffs of the Navy and the Air Force, General Schwartz and Admiral Greenert in their joint article on *The American Interest* listed other virtues of ASB, such as operational and organisational integration and jointness. The ASB plan foresees joint operations in which the Navy and Air Force would create a tightly coordinated network, cooperating to defeat adversaries’ anti-access capabilities through air, sea, space and cyberspace. These new levels of interoperability would also affect training and procurement, maximising the efficiency of the two services and reducing budget misallocation (Greenert and Schwartz 2012).

The debate on ASB has also highlighted several possible drawbacks. A first line of criticism has stressed the fact that the new operational concept would encourage an acceleration of US defence spending and stimulate the development of several new platforms in high tech (and high cost) sectors, such as unmanned submarine vehicles, missile defence, stealth bombers and ballistic missiles among others. The debate indeed stressed both the fiscal burden that the ASB would impose and the fact that it seems to represent a way to secure the political support of the ‘industrial military complex’ (Barnett 2010).

Other scholars such as Amitai Etzioni highlighted how ASB and, more in general the approach proposed by the Pentagon’s military planners, has not been fully ratified by the civilian authorities. Over the longer term this would create a problem of civilian control of the military (Etzioni 2013).

Operatively, ASB has been criticised because it foresees a rapid escalation and it would impede any control or limitation of a military crisis. Under the guidance of ASB, the US forces would respond to a localised threat to American military assets, targeting an adversary’s military
platform. Namely in case of a crisis with China they would target and possibly pre-emptively suppress missile launchers well inside Chinese territory as well as degrade satellites and C4ISR systems. In this way any potential limited crisis could escalate to an extended conflict. Instead of a tit-for-tat retaliation in front of an aggressive act, ASB proposes a massive retaliation against the command and control systems and other military installations which could be located in the heart of enemy’s territory. In this way any crisis is likely to escalate without control. This represents an inherent danger, making the resolution or the limitation of a possible conflict more difficult (Freedberg 2011).

Other critics have highlighted that ASB could have also another unintended destabilising effect, diminishing the credibility of an American retaliation. An operational concept that leads to a rapid escalation directed towards the nerve centres of the enemy’s military infrastructure assumes the will of the political leadership to escalate any possible conflict, excluding the option of a limited, proportional reaction.

As Richard Bitzinger recently put it, in case of a crisis in the South or East China Sea ‘would the U.S. really initiate deep strikes on Chinese territory, and, if so, under what conditions? How “scalable” is ASB as a response, especially after launching initial attacks on the Chinese mainland?’ (Bitzinger and Raska 2013). Failing to provide the decision makers with a flexible and tailored military response would undercut the capacity to effectively threaten military retaliation and consequently diminish the capacity to exercise deterrence.

In other terms, ASBattle could suffer from the so-called ‘tripwire’ problem: during the Cold War AirLand Battle was conceived as a reaction to the Soviet forces breaking into the European Central front. In the maritime environment of the Asia Pacific is not clear which red line the Chinese should cross in order to trigger an American response with the deep strikes foreseen by ASB (Schreer 2013).

Other critics have argued that, envisaging a continued and visible presence of US forces and more invasive forms of surveillance, ASB would contribute to the proliferation of bilateral crisis and naval incidents, increasing the possibility for military brinkmanship.

Moreover, the ASB emphasis on pre-emption would reduce the time available for decision makers in a possible crisis. The new operation concept indeed calls for strikes on the Chinese mainland and particularly on the C4ISR systems and sites where missile launchers are located. Such an attack could easily be misinterpreted with an attack aimed at degrading the Chinese nuclear retaliatory options and consequently could trigger a Chinese nuclear response (Rovener 2012; Etzioni 2013).

More generally, a fundamental flow of the ASB is the fact that it lacks any reflection upon the strategic relevance of nuclear weapons in the Asia Pacific theatre, assuming that nuclear deterrence would hold even in case of a massive conventional confrontation. China, since it first acquired
nuclear capabilities in 1964, has been developing a nuclear posture aimed at minimal deterrence, emphasising survivability and retaliatory power of its atomic arsenal after a first strike (Fravel and Medeiros 2010). The CSBA paper assumes that China even in case of a conflict that had extended to its territory would maintain this approach. ASB, listing the destruction of the Chinese missile sites and launchers and the degradation of the C4ISR as main priorities may undermine the sense of security that the ‘minimal deterrence’ posture used to create. A pre-emptive strike on PLA long-range ballistic missiles would entail a ‘use it or lose it’ dilemma, augmenting the danger of nuclear escalation, especially because nuclear and conventional launch sites can be indistinguishable. Inadvertent escalation would be especially likely in the case of disruption to the command and control networks.

The last drawback of the ASB, and perhaps the most relevant, is the fundamental dissonance with the current US grand strategy, which considers China both as a political and military competitor and a partner in the economic and diplomatic realm (Clinton 2011). As Barry Posen highlighted,

ASB is based on a not realistic worst case scenario […] The CSBA used to be office of threat inflation. It goes well beyond exploring the worst cases… They convince others to act as if the worst cases are inevitable. (Jaffe 2012)

The Pivot to Asia foresees a mixed approach with China. As several recent accounts testify, the Obama administration is trying to achieve a ‘fine tuning’ between positive and negative incentives. This effort is aimed at maintaining the American strategic and economic leadership, while avoiding turning the Chinese rise into a fully fledged security dilemma (Bader 2012). The ASB concept, on the contrary, considers China as a ‘Cold War type’ enemy, and foresees a fully fledged military competition between the PRC and United States a likely outcome. This completely ignores the high degree of interdependence characterising the bilateral relations between Washington and Beijing and the fact that the American grand strategy has never described China as simply an adversary but also a necessary partner in economics and global governance.

Supporters of ASB have replied that an operational concept eschews politics and does not establish the political aims to be reached. It only provides a framework and the procedures for the employment of military means to accomplish strategic objectives. However, the fact that weapons procurement, overseas posture and military to military relations with allied armed forces are increasingly shaped by the ASB, deeply influences the Chinese perception of the American intentions.

Most importantly, Beijing perceived the sum of the Pivot and the ASB as a form of containment of the Chinese rise. As Kissinger stated ‘they see the United States as a wounded superpower determined to thwart the rise of
any challenger [...]. No matter how intensely China pursues cooperation, some Chinese argue Washington’s fixed objective will be to hem in a growing China by military deployment and treaty commitment, thus preventing it from playing its role as Middle Kingdom’ (Kissinger 2012). Recent analyses of the Chinese governmental and non-governmental opinions on the Obama administration highlighted that Beijing sees ASB as an integral part of the Pivot to Asia and that it perceives the two as aimed at preventing the Chinese rise through military means (Swaine 2012). They evidenced how Beijing feels threatened both by ASB and the Pivot, and perceives the new American approach as an attempt to encircle and contain the Chinese rise.

Consequently, ASB over the long term will stimulate an acceleration of the Chinese military modernisation and probably a further reinforcement of the PLA’s anti-access strategy within the First Island Chain, generating a dangerous spiral of military build-ups and attempts to demonstrate resolve and commitment, involving not just China and the United States but also other Asian countries.

Conclusion

The Pivot to Asia is surely one of the most relevant developments for recent US foreign and security policies. On the one hand, it reflects the adaptation of the US strategic priorities to the global power shift towards East Asia. On the other hand, it underlines the fact that, at least from the military point of view, the Chinese rise and particularly the acquirement of A2AD capabilities are becoming the main priority of US military planning.

The conceptualisation of the Chinese threat as a threat to the US command of the commons highlights how the US defence community considers the American military primacy a fundamental prerequisite for the present international order. Consequently, the capacity to overcome anti-access strategy becomes fundamental to the provision of extended deterrence, the guarantee of alliance credibility and the continued security and stability of the entire region. The new operational concept is logically and strategically coherent with this perception and to the priorities stemming from them.

ASB has represented a relevant part of the military dimension of the Pivot since it influenced the most relevant choices in terms of military posture and procurement in the region.

In practice, even if it was not in the intentions of the main architects of the security strategy of the Obama administration, the Pivot and ASB have been perceived, especially by the Chinese leadership as being part of the same strategy. This perception, as well as perceptions of the ASB itself, is likely to bring a number of unwanted consequences.

First the pursuit of a stable and mature relationship of cooperation with China is fundamentally at odds with military efforts to maintain the command of the commons within the First Island Chain. Second, ASB is
operatively very dangerous because it does not provide a credible solution for the American decision makers to be able to operate a flexible response without unleashing a general conflict with China. Third, it is likely to stimulate the Chinese military to look for new solutions aimed at enhancing their anti-access capabilities.

More in general the perception of any threat to the American command of the commons as a threat to the American primacy and interests appears strategically and politically disconnected from the search for a stable and mutually advantageous relationship with China, a country which in the future is likely to increasingly consider the American military presence at a small distance from its shore as a form of intrusion.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note

1. Anti-access generally refers to those actions and capabilities, usually long-range, designed to prevent an opposing force from entering an operational area. Anti-access actions tend to target forces approaching by air and sea predominantly, but also can target the cyber, space and other forces that support them. Area denial refers to those actions and capabilities, usually of shorter range, designed not to keep an opposing force out, but to limit its freedom of action within the operational area. Area-denial capabilities target forces in all domains, including land forces. The distinction between anti-access and area denial is relative rather than strict, and many capabilities can be employed for both purposes.

References


