

## **Japan's Response to New US Defense Strategy: "Welcome, but..."**

by Yoichi Kato

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The Japanese government welcomes the recently released US defense strategy because it rebalances the strategic focus toward the Asia-Pacific region. But the other focus of this new strategy — the so-called anti-access, area denial (A2/AD) capabilities of China which, the United States fears, could jeopardize its forward presence and freedom of action in the Western Pacific — does not get as much attention from Japan.

The new defense strategic guidance, "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense," has quickly gained currency in policy discussions in Japan after it was rolled out Jan. 5. Defense Minister Tanaka Naoki has said in the Diet that Tokyo welcomed it. He explained, for example, Jan. 31: "I understand that it indicates the United States attaches more importance to the Asia-Pacific region and enhances its regional presence. I believe it will be a significant contribution to the peace and security in this region."

But the other pillar of this new strategy, which is to maintain the credibility of US power projection capabilities in the face of the rapidly growing A2/AD threat, is seldom talked about in Japan. The recent development of an anti-ship ballistic missile by China, which is called an "aircraft carrier killer" or "game changer," draws special attention in the United States as a weapon system that could drastically enhance China's A2/AD capabilities.

Foreign Minister Gamba Koichiro is the only Cabinet minister who openly mentions "A2/AD." He told a news conference Feb. 8, when he announced the agreement with the US government to delink relocation of Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in Okinawa from the rest of the base realignment package, "Deterrence could arguably be enhanced, because, for example, the entire Asia-Pacific region could work together to deal with A2/AD challenges." He stopped short of describing A2/AD as a threat to Japan, nor did he mention Japan's strategy to counter such military capabilities. But this is more than his personal judgment. It seems to be an institutional attitude on the part of Tokyo, if not a conscious decision.

Japan's highest-level defense strategy, "National Defense Program Guidelines (NPDG) for FY 2011 and Beyond," does not contain a reference to A2/AD. Nor does the midterm defense program for FY 2011 to 2015. Neither document refers to Air-Sea Battle (ASB), an operational concept that the US Air Force and Navy have been developing to counter

A2/AD challenges by integrating capabilities in an unprecedented way.

The NPDG characterizes the main security challenge for Japan as "gray zone disputes" -- confrontations over territory or economic interests that do not by nature escalate into war. It advocates the build-up of a "dynamic defense force" to deal with them. Although China is referred to as "concern for the region and global community," and a deployment shift of Japan's Self-Defense Forces to "the southwestern region" is discussed, China's A2/AD capabilities are not clearly perceived as the major security challenge to Japan.

It is not that Japan is turning a blind eye to China's growing military capabilities, but the perception of such new capabilities as challenges to operational access is not widely shared. That is because Japan is located in the area where the United States says access could be denied in a contingency. A general in the SDF explains: "It is an American way of looking at the challenge. We are already here in Japan and have to fight to defend the country no matter what."

This is a stark contrast with US strategic guidance, which highlights Project Power Despite Anti-Access/Area Denial Challenges as a main mission for US armed forces. It names China and Iran as states that "will continue to pursue asymmetric means to counter our power projection capabilities." Since the United States is trying to reshape its joint force by 2020 and expects friends and allies like Japan to play a larger role, this perception gap regarding A2/AD could present a serious challenge if both countries are to converge defense strategies.

## **AIR-SEA BATTLE**

Although Japan does not necessarily share the threat perception of A2/AD with the United States, Japan has been paying an enormous amount of attention to development of the Air-Sea Battle concept. Indeed, some in the U.S. military argue that "Japan makes too much out of ASB."

ASB grabbed the attention of Japan's defense community when it debuted in the US Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) in February 2010. The reference to "anti-access and area denial capabilities" in QDR wasn't new — but ASB was.

It was only one paragraph long and simply explained that the Air Force and Navy were developing "a new joint air-sea battle concept" to defeat adversaries equipped with "sophisticated A2/AD capabilities" and to develop "future capabilities needed for effective power projection operations." Since this was the first instance in which the United States discussed actual ways and means of dealing with this challenge, many Japanese strategists thought this "joint air-sea battle concept" might change US strategy and military posture from the bottom up. It was quoted in Japan's annual defense white paper "Defense of Japan 2011."

But a long silence followed the ASB's debut. The next official words came more than a year later. In November 2011, the Defense Department (DOD) announced the stand up of the ASB Office and that development of this concept would now enter the implementation phase. The concept statement was completed, they said, but it has not yet been released. Even the government-to-government level briefing lagged. This lack of clarity left Japan confused and frustrated.

The defense strategic guidance, released by Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta on Jan. 5 with President Barack Obama at his side in the Pentagon briefing room, did not refer to ASB. The SDF took immediate notice. The DOD's explanation was "ASB is not a strategy."

Twelve days later came the Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC). It is a vision of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Martin Dempsey, *on how a US joint force can secure operational access* under the A2/AD environment. In this document, ASB was mentioned but stripped of "joint" from its name and described as "a limited operational concept" along with others, such as "entry operations" and "littoral operations."

The word "joint" has a special, powerful meaning for the US military. According to the Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, "(It) connotes activities, operations, organizations, etc., in which elements of two or more Military Departments participate." According to the definition, "the Air-Sea Battle concept" is "joint" by nature. Then, why these changes?

Some in the US defense community speculated that these changes were indications of a "downgrading" of the ASB concept as a result of an inter-service turf battle between Air Force/Navy vs. Army/Marine Corps.

After the rollout of these two documents, the *China Daily* put its own spin on developments: "In order to adapt to the new situation and further cut military spending, the US has abandoned the Air-Sea Battle concept for now."

Rear Adm. John Miller, special assistant to the deputy chief of naval operations for strategy, policy and operations, clarified the situation in a recent interview with *The Asahi Shimbun*. He explained, "What it (the strategic guidance) did say was A2/AD and that is what ultimately ASB concept is about." He also said, "ASB was never intended to be 'joint,' therefore it is not downgraded."

In addition to these changes in wording, the magnitude of the historic defense spending cut in the United States added to uncertainty surrounding the future of this new operational concept. At one point, some Japanese government officials were discussing if this concept was dead or alive.

Japan and the rest of the region had to wait until a magazine essay by both Gen. Norton Schwartz, Chief of Staff of the US Air Force, and Adm. Jonathan Greenert, Chief of Naval Operations, was published Feb. 20 to feel the strong pulse of this concept again and learn more specifics.

The essay also revealed the strong sense of crisis on the part of the US military leadership as indicated in the following passage: "If America appears unable or unwilling to counter

an adversary's anti-access military capabilities, its friends and allies may find US security assurances less credible, leading some of them to seek accommodation with aggressors or alternate means of self-defense, including weapons of mass destruction."

## WAY AHEAD

Toshimi Kitazawa, Japan's defense minister when the current NDPG was rolled out in 2010, explained the reason why the ASB concept was not included: "There has not been anything made concrete yet."

Within the Japanese government there was also hesitation to make China an enemy by signing off on a new operational concept at such an early stage. But now that the US has virtually declared that A2/AD is the primary challenge to US power projection capabilities and that the ASB concept would be implemented to counter this challenge, there is not much room left for Japan to hold off its decision.

Both governments have started negotiations to work out a new agreement on base realignment in Japan. They will also talk about the more fundamental topics of "deepening the alliance" to go through this time of strategic transition.

In 2010, one of the top defense strategists in Tokyo indicated that the absence of A2/AD and ASB in the NDPG did not matter much because what Japan would and could do were apparent regardless of this new US concept, he said. He identified the following steps: (1) hardening existing bases; (2) enhancing anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities; and (3) ballistic missile defense (BMD) capabilities. Some of the A2/AD challenges can be dealt with by these three initiatives. They do not, however, address newer additions, such as cyber- and space attacks.

Another Japanese government official points out that Japan has become a "front-line state" in its true sense, facing challenges directly from China across the East China Sea and being in an area where the operational access of US forces could be limited or even denied. That makes it necessary for Japan to come up with its own "front-line state defense strategy" beyond jumping on the bandwagon of US regional strategy.

Japan can no longer avoid discussions about A2/AD challenges both within the country and with its only treaty ally, the United States. What is questioned, however, is not just Japan's response to the Air-Sea Battle concept, but more fundamentally Japan's comprehensive strategy toward China.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*

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