

## The Evolving Maritime Security Environment in East Asia: Implications for the US-Japan Alliance

by Michael McDevitt

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The big news from the recently concluded Annual Security Consultative Committee between Japan and the United States, the so-called “2+2 meeting,” was that movement of Marines stationed in Okinawa to Guam was delinked from relocating the Marine Corps Air Station at Futenma to a less congested area.

This is a welcome development because it should permit senior officials in both Japan and the United States to focus alliance attention where it belongs: on the most significant security challenge facing the alliance – the ongoing change in the maritime strategic balance in East Asia.

For half a century, the military balance of power in East Asia was unchanged. The continental powers of East Asia, the Soviet Union and “Red” China, were effectively balanced by the offshore presence of the United States and its island and archipelagic allies. Neither side in this balance had the ability to project decisive conventional military power into the realm of the other – the continent was dominated by the continental powers, while the maritime littoral was the province of the maritime powers led by the United States.

This balance began to change about 16 years ago when China had the political motivation and the economic resources to begin to address what has been a historic strategic weakness – its vulnerability to military intervention from the sea. The political motivation for Beijing was provided by fears that newly democratic Taiwan was moving toward de jure independence and the PLA, short of nuclear escalation, was essentially powerless to prevent it, particularly if the United States elected to militarily support such a course of action.

### Why is China moving to the sea?

Beijing also had plenty of historic motivation. China’s “Century of Humiliation” started in in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century with its defeat in the Opium War by the British, who came from the sea. Over the decades China was repeatedly humiliated by foreign powers that exploited China’s weakness along its maritime approaches. A reading of US Seventh Fleet operations in the Taiwan Straits during the 1950s, when multicarrier Task Forces operated with impunity, overflying Chinese coastal cities, is a vivid reminder of Beijing’s incapacity regarding its seaward approaches.

A combination of factors related to security has combined to form the strategic motivation for a historically unique Chinese defense perimeter that extends hundreds of miles to sea. These factors include: the issue of Taiwan itself, the fact that the vast majority of China’s unresolved security issues are maritime in nature, the reality that its economic development depends upon imports and of raw materials and exports of finished goods that travel mainly by sea, and, perhaps most importantly, the fact that China’s economic center of gravity is located along its Eastern seaboard.

### If China is defending its interests, why is this a problem?

By moving its defenses far to sea, China is effectively undermining the traditional maritime-continental balance that has provided the security and stability that have fueled the Asian economic miracle of the last 30 years. As China improves its defenses, it is making the security situation of the countries that live in the shadow of China worse. It is creating what academics call a “security dilemma” – one country’s defenses become so effective its neighbors fear for their own security.

In 2001, the US Department of Defense began to publicly fret about this situation, characterizing the military problem as “anti-access” and “area denial.” These terms make sense since they accurately describe the desired military objective. The Chinese have also coined a term to describe what they are trying to achieve militarily: PLA strategists refer to it as “counter intervention operations.” In practical terms, this refers to the knitting together of a large submarine force, land-based aircraft carrying anti-ship cruise missiles, and in the near future, ballistic missiles that have the ability to hit moving ships. These capabilities all depend on a very effective ocean surveillance system that can detect and accurately locate approaching naval forces.

Whether we call the PLA’s emerging capability anti-access/area denial (A2AD in the Pentagon’s lexicon) or the “counter invention operations,” the desired strategic outcome is the same – keep US naval and air forces as far away from China as possible. The strategic implication of this for China’s neighbors, many of who depend upon the US to underwrite their security as alliance or strategic partners, is obvious. If “we” get into a confrontation with China, we may not be able to depend upon the United States *to be able* to support us.

China says that it is only trying to defend itself and redress a historic weakness. Besides, Beijing argues its strategic intentions are clear: China is on a path of peaceful development and is not a threat to its neighbors. I believe that China’s leaders believe this. The trouble is that, as any strategist will argue, intentions can change in an instant; what really matters are the military capabilities that China will possess when its counter-intervention force is completed. Will China be able to defeat US forward deployed forces and

prevent additional forces from the United States from reaching East Asia in case of conflict?

### **The US has faced the A2AD problem before**

This is the third time in the last 75 years that the United States has faced the problem of an Asian power attempting to keep US naval forces at bay. The Imperial Japanese Navy's General Staff developed a plan for dealing with the US Pacific Fleet known as the "Gradual Attrition Strategy" (*Zen Gen Saku Sen*). This plan used long-range aircraft and submarines to locate the approaching US Pacific Fleet, and then attack it first with submarines and then land-based naval aviation based on various Japanese Mandate Pacific islands. The hope was that the US fleet would be sufficiently worn down that Japan's main force could defeat it somewhere in the Philippine Sea. It took the United States 30 months (December 1941 – June 1944) to defeat this strategy.

The second time the US faced a similar A2AD problem was during the last two decades of the Cold War. The Soviets (in both the Atlantic and Pacific) foreshadowed the PLA's "counter-intervention operation" with a concept based on very good ocean surveillance to locate approaching US naval forces and then vector submarines and long range-land based bombers to the attack. Both submarines and bombers were armed with a variety of anti-ship cruise missiles that would be employed in massed raids. Happily, the US never had to face the Soviet anti-access capability in combat. The US Navy response to the massed cruise missile problem was the development of the AEGIS combat system, which remains the gold-standard for dealing with cruise missiles.

### **What the US is doing today**

The US response to the challenge posed by the PLA's "counter-intervention operation," was unveiled in the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review. It announced that the US Air Force and US Navy had combined to develop a new operational concept known as Air Sea Battle (ASB). ASB aims to counter any anti-access threat in the world, including that posed by China. Details of this concept have for understandable reasons remained highly classified, but recent statements by the heads of the Navy and Air Force have indicated that ASB will focus on three lines of effort: (1) defeating enemy surveillance systems as surveillance is the back-bone of any anti-access system. If you can't locate an approaching naval force you can't attack it; (2) destroying enemy launching systems so precision weapons cannot be launched (during the Cold War this was known as shooting at archers not at arrows); and, (3) defeating enemy missiles and other weapons. This means shooting them down, or decoying them away.

### **Implications for the future**

It is unlikely that China will halt development of what it considers necessary for its defenses. It is also clear that the United States does not intend to sit idly by and permit the introduction of military capabilities that could deny it access to East Asia in a time of conflict. Thus, it seems likely that for the foreseeable future the region will witness a "military capabilities competition": as China introduces capabilities that could deny access, the US, probably via the Air Sea Battle

concept, will introduce capabilities that will assure access. It will be a period of competing strategic concepts – assured access vs. denied access, complemented by the introduction of military capabilities by both sides necessary to accomplish those ends.

For the US-Japan alliance, the prospect that any maritime operation in the western Pacific will soon be contested in times of conflict creates a new context for the division of roles and missions. Today's division of labor, characterized as "shield and spear" responsibilities, where Japan is the "shield" defending Japanese home territories, while the US acts as the "spear" that attacks Japan's attackers needs to be reconsidered. A successful "counter intervention operation" could blunt the US spear. What can Japan do to help prevent that from taking place? This is a serious topic for both strategic and operational discussion.

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