

## **Australia and Air-Sea Battle** by Ben Schreer

*Dr. Ben Schreer ([benjaminschreer@aspi.org.au](mailto:benjaminschreer@aspi.org.au)) is Senior Analyst Defence Strategy at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI). He is the author of the ASPI study 'Planning the unthinkable war: AirSea Battle and its implications for Australia.'*

According to the Chief of US Naval Operations Adm. Jonathan Greenert, Air-Sea Battle (ASB) is a centerpiece in the Navy's "pivot" to Asia. Designed to counter the PLA's growing "anti-access/ area-denial" challenge to forward operating US forces, Asian allies are expected to play a key role in supporting and implementing the concept. This includes Australia, one of America's closest allies in the region. However, the US would be ill advised to take Australia's support for granted. Indeed, Washington needs to do much more to explain Air-Sea Battle's rationale to Canberra.

In theory, Australia could make a vital contribution to Air-Sea Battle. Apart from providing political support, Canberra could offer US forces greater strategic depth through access to Australian facilities. The current build-up of a 2,500-strong US Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) in Darwin comes to mind. The technologically sophisticated Australian Defence Force (ADF) could also contribute to a "distant blockade" of PLA vessels in Southeast Asian strategic chokepoints, which is one element of ASB. Some Australian supporters have even argued for the development of long-range strategic strike assets for US-led operations in Northeast Asia.

To be sure, the emergence of a credible US warfighting concept to provide deterrence and reassurance in the face of China's military rise is in Australia's strategic interest. Moreover, contrary to widespread criticism Air-Sea Battle can make a positive contribution to a changing US-China deterrence relationship through signalling resolve and capability to project military power into areas contested by the PLA. In the event of conflict, no Chinese leader can discount the possibility that the US military would not be engaged, which could lead to Beijing exercising restraint. To realize the concept's potential; a number of key issues need to be addressed, however.

First, the US needs to provide allies such as Australia with a detailed, classified briefing about the specifics of Air-Sea Battle. Strangely enough, the Pentagon set up an Air-Sea Battle office to facilitate the concept's implementation. US Congressmen talked about its centrality to reassuring allies. Yet, the official document remains classified, leaving allies wondering what Air-Sea Battle was about or, more precisely, what was expected from them. They do not believe US insistence that the concept is not about deterring and fighting a potential war with China. What they are left with is the 2012

Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC) and the 2010 Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment (CSBA) report that provide some idea about what is being discussed inside the Pentagon. But allies want and deserve more knowledge on ASB. In this context, the Pentagon should also provide Australia and other allies with a declassified version of the concept.

Second, Australia would want to see a clearer link between Air-Sea Battle and US grand strategy for dealing with China's rise. A domestic debate about the implications of Beijing's growing power for Australia's US alliance is in full swing. Voices that argue Australia could end up having to choose between Washington and Beijing have not gained traction among the government, Parliament, and the strategic bureaucracy. Nevertheless, a widespread impression exists that by turning the PLA into the Pentagon's default adversary, Air-Sea Battle is part of an emerging US containment strategy against China. While this doesn't reflect actual US China policy, a US grand strategy that nests ASB into a broader policy framework would demystify the concept. In other words, how does ASB contribute to broader US policy objectives in Asia, including in comparison with alternative approaches?

Third, fully embracing Air-Sea Battle at this point interferes with Australia's interest in developing closer strategic interactions with China. Australia is not a front-line state in the US-China strategic competition, unlike Japan and Taiwan. Last month, Prime Minister Julia Gillard went on a much-reported trip to China where Beijing agreed to an annual high-level strategic dialogue and participation in military exercises. The upcoming Australian Defence White Paper will also strike a much more conciliatory tone toward China compared to its 2009 predecessor. For many in the Australian strategic community, ASB is best suited for a future Asian Cold War scenario and thus counterproductive to attempts to integrate China into a new Asian security framework.

Fourth, Australian strategic policy-makers assume that independently of any public commitment to Air-Sea Battle Australia could make a useful contribution to a (however unlikely) US-China military conflict. Canberra could provide the US with greater strategic depth, for example through upgrading Sterling Naval Base in Western Australia. The ADF could also provide niche military capabilities such as tanker aircraft, electronic warfare assets and fighter aircraft to backfill for US capabilities engaged in direct combat. Finally, given its proximity to Southeast Asia it could play a key role in closing off sea lanes of communications in maritime chokepoints.

Fifth, behind closed doors the US and Australia should start extensive discussions on the implications of Air-Sea Battle for the alliance. Apart from the strategic issues outlined

above, a number of operational issues should be put on the agenda. For example, what role could the MAGTF and US Air Force elements rotating through Australian bases play in a future ASB context? To what degree could the ADF be integrated into a Southeast Asian Air-Sea Battle framework? How to secure a sufficient degree of interoperability between the ADF and US forces given that ASB aims at an even higher degree of integration among US forces and the use of all domains of warfare, including cyber space?

In conclusion, like many Asian allies Australia is still sitting on the fence when it comes to Air-Sea Battle. While it recognizes the need to readjust US military doctrine to strengthen conventional deterrence in the Asian theatre, Canberra is yet to be persuaded that ASB offers a good solution to the military challenge posed by China.

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

***Applications are now being accepted for the resident Sasakawa Peace Foundation Fellowship. Details, including an application form, can be found at the Pacific Forum web site [www.pacforum.org](http://www.pacforum.org)***