# BETWEEN PEACE AND THE AIR-SEA BATTLE

## A War at Sea Strategy

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> *"Land-sea wars" have significant maritime dimensions, with command of the sea posited by this study as mattering more than either [land combat] skill or strength. . . . [C]ommand of the sea is a preeminent form of power that determines the outcome of land-sea conflicts.*
>
> JOHN ARQUILLA

In a February 2012 article published in the *American Interest,* General Norton A. Schwartz, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force, and Admiral Jonathan W. Greenert, Chief of Naval Operations, provide solid justification for more closely integrating Air Force and Navy capabilities into an Air-Sea Battle strategy.[1] We applaud the Air-Sea Battle component as the most effective means of preparing for the most challenging conflict—full-scale conventional war. We propose, however, an intermediate strategy, one providing American leadership additional flexibility to avert the need to exercise the potentially escalatory strikes that the Air-Sea Battle strategy may require. Predicated on American relative strengths, particularly in the undersea domain, it is a "war at sea" strategy.

A war-at-sea strategy's purpose is to provide U.S. political leadership less intrusive ways to deter war and inspire allied engagement in peace. It is a maritime strategy confining conflict to the sea without land invasion or strike, thereby diminishing the threat of escalation. The strategy affords leadership the means to reinforce *any* relationship between the United States and China, whether cooperation, competition, confrontation, conflict short of war, or war. In this short article we describe the ends, ways, and means of the strategy, why its adoption provides more options for deterrence, and how it plays to American strengths.

### THE STRATEGY'S ENDS, WAYS, AND MEANS

The war-at-sea strategy's *ends* are to deter Chinese land or maritime aggression and, failing that, deny China the use of the sea inside the "first island chain"

(a conceptual line from Japan to Taiwan and the Philippines) during hostilities. The *ways* are distant interception of Chinese shipping, widespread submarine attacks and mining inside the first island chain, offensive attacks by a flotilla composed of small missile-carrying combatants to fight in the China seas and patrol vessels for maritime interdiction at straits and choke points, and Marine expeditionary forces positioned to hold the South China Sea islands at risk, with no intention of putting ground forces on China's mainland.[2] The *means* are a force structure with a better combination of conventional air forces, battle-group ships, and submarines, and a forward-deployed flotilla of U.S. and allied small combatants.

Thus, by plying long-standing American maritime strengths against China's dependence on the seas, the strategy is intended to retain our nation's peaceable influence in the western Pacific for many years to come.

The war-at-sea strategy is also, however, a catalyst for peacetime engagement. It implies an adaptable force structure, a deployment plan, logistics capability, and allied collaboration. Accordingly, a critical peacetime component includes engaging Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Philippines, South Korea, and Japan. While engagement may take many forms, increased maritime-security operations, especially with the flotilla, can aid these nations' maritime governance operations to counter terrorism, piracy, smuggling, and illegal, unregulated, and underreported fishing. These vessels would also prevent seabed exploration contrary to international law, while at the same time providing valuable tactical experience for the crews.

## MORE OPTIONS FOR DETERRENCE

The capacity for sea denial within the first island chain and executing a distant blockade would provide American leadership graduated options before undertaking the potentially escalatory step of strikes on mainland China. We believe that maritime options may be a more credible deterrent than Air-Sea Battle's deep-strike capability, if China perceives our leadership as being more willing to employ them in response to aggression within a maritime exclusion zone or in territorial disputes. A strategy of maritime interdiction or blockade has been criticized as too slow-acting. A war-at-sea strategy, however, affords time for passions to cool and 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—in other words, World War III. In addition, if potential allies within the Pacific basin realize we intend to exercise "at-sea only" strategic options that lessen the likelihood of Chinese attacks on their homelands, they may be more willing to maintain and expand partnerships with the United States.

A tenet of the maritime strategy is that no U.S. Navy actions will be initiated except in response to claims by China contrary to international law. Our emphasis on influence and peacekeeping embraces the notion that we stand ready to respond should China assert hegemonic claims that interfere with the freedom of the seas so aggressively that both commercial enterprises and sovereign governments expect the U.S. Navy to act in their behalf.

## A MARITIME STRENGTH: UNDERSEA CAPABILITIES

By exploiting our superior undersea forces within the first island chain, we neutralize China's advantage of its extensive cruise and ballistic-missile antiaccess forces. U.S. and allied submarines, operating where large U.S. surface ships would be at risk, deny Chinese submarines, warships, logistic ships, and commercial traffic safe passage through the East and South China Seas. A combination of the following activities affords American policy makers an array of choices:

- The "shock" destruction of a prominent Chinese warship, like that of the Argentine cruiser *General Belgrano* by HMS *Conqueror* in 1982, making clear the Royal Navy's intention to enforce a maritime exclusion zone around the Falkland Islands
- Tracking and sinking all Chinese submarines at sea except ballistic-missile-carrying boats
- Sinking Chinese surface warships at sea
- Mining some or all Chinese warship bases and commercial ports, with our submarines or unmanned underwater vehicles
- After establishing exclusion zones for all commercial shipping, sinking anything found inside them, while preserving routes for innocent, friendly traffic into East Asian states.

***Flotilla Capabilities.*** Augmenting our undersea forces with small, missile-carrying surface combatants will challenge China's targeting capabilities, even supposing it would expend its advanced ballistic and cruise missiles on such low-value targets. We draw from workshop discussions—with representation from the Naval Postgraduate School and the Naval War College—to suggest three prominent employments:

- Hit-and-run raids on Chinese seabed exploitations that are contrary to international law
- Escort of vital shipping into friendly ports, especially in the South China Sea
- Augmentation of Japanese patrol vessels to constrain illegal interference by China near the Senkaku Islands.

What would the flotilla look like? In rough terms, we envision individual small combatants of about six hundred tons carrying six or eight surface-to-surface missiles and depending on soft kill and point defense for survival, aided by off-board manned or unmanned aerial vehicles for surveillance and tactical scouting.[3] To paint a picture of possible structures, we contemplate as the smallest element a mutually supporting pair, a squadron to comprise eight vessels, and the entire force to be eight squadrons, of which half would be in East Asian waters. The units costing less than $100 million each, the entire force would require a very small part of the shipbuilding budget.[4]

***Maritime Interdiction or Blockade.*** Interdiction would in most instances be our first action to indicate the seriousness of the U.S. government in response to interference with free trade or other belligerent actions by China contrary to international law or conventions. Maritime interdiction can be graduated from a small number of inspections through seizure of select cargoes, such as crude oil, up to a full blockade. We envision blockade as imposed at the Singapore, Sunda, and Lombok Straits, as well as, to the extent feasible, the Luzon Strait. Carrier battle groups can safely cover these interdiction operations. To be most effective, cooperation of Japan and Singapore will be essential, and that of Indonesia and the Philippines desirable. If the interdiction moves away from choke points—for example, off the coast of Burma—aerial surveillance from littoral combat ships, land bases, or both seems desirable.

***Holding the South China Sea Islands at Risk.*** The presence of Marine expeditionary forces and their amphibious ships station forward in the western Pacific provides a unique capability to keep Chinese-held South China Sea islands, particularly those in dispute, at risk. During peacetime, their presence, by balancing force in the region and signaling American commitment, may motivate peaceful resolutions to disputes over exclusive economic zones; increase engagement opportunities exercises with the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Singapore; and provide an asymmetric threat in response to a Taiwan invasion. In the event of war these expeditionary forces would deny use of South China Sea islands and exploration of the seabed through quick-reaction raids, land-to-sea missile attacks from concealed sites, ground and air surveillance, and other collaborative island employment with allies.

***Less Reliance on Communications.*** Our undersea forces will be less vulnerable to cyber and electromagnetic attack by operating in ways that exploit the "silent service's" long-standing advantages. Flotilla ships would operate in stealthy, semi-silent fashion as MGBs, MTBs, and PT boats have done in the past. Tactically offensive, yet operationally defensive, the war-at-sea strategy leverages

the stronger form of warfare at sea, the offense, and allows for less concern on command-and-control interruption as it promotes individual and independent tactical actions for cumulative effect. Conventional air and sea forces that must employ active modes of search and communication will at first be assigned to support the distant blockade, thereby keeping them outside Chinese antiaccess and area denial targeting. If Chinese land attacks on U.S. or allied forces ashore require the United States to reply with the Air-Sea Battle's deep strike capabilities, then our ships and aircraft would move into position to execute their missions with well-rehearsed methods of deception and networking.

## WISHING DOES NOT MAKE A STRATEGY

The assertions in favor of developing a war-at-sea strategy are hypotheses. Further analysis, war gaming, and policy discussions must be united to answer the following questions:

1. Can the United States effectively deny China's use of the South and East China Seas in the event of all-out war at sea without attacks on land-based forces by either side?
2. Before the war-at-sea strategy is adopted for the indefinite future, the United States must confirm the affordability of the Navy forces that would create a maritime no-man's-land within the first island chain. What do the time-phased, programmatic details look like?
3. Attacks on bases would be an expansion of the war to the land, so the more secure the bases the less temptation to attack them. Where are the best locations at which to base submarines and support flotilla operations?
4. Can China counter this war strategy by threatening attacks off U.S. west coast ports and in the Pacific trade routes, essentially implementing a war-at-sea strategy of its own?
5. For what other combat and noncombat operations might the flotilla be more cost-effective than traditional battle-group combatants? Patrolling and fighting in coastal waters will continue to be the most frequent tasks for the twenty-first-century U.S. Navy. Until we can carry part of the burden with our own flotilla, we must rely on our partners around the world or employ more expensive, multipurpose, blue-water combatants for maritime security operations.
6. Will a war-at-sea strategy have a better chance to deter, delay, or constrain conflict with China than land-attack strategies?

7. Last, how do we disseminate the change of structure of our strategy in a way that maintains influence in the western Pacific? We suggest, for unity of effort among the U.S. armed forces and our partners in Asia, that the strategy be openly published. China will not like it, but it is a peacekeeping strategy, not at all a manifest for aggression.

## CONSUMMATION

We have cited Professor John Arquilla on the significance of sea power, as Arquilla's analysis looks at land-sea wars after 1815. He gives the classic nineteenth-century maritime strategists' advocacy of sea power fresh credibility by validating the continuing efficacy of maritime superiority in contemporary times with current data and quantitative analysis.

Close integration between U.S. air and maritime forces with resilient communications and the ability to attack in depth are desirable goals for both the Air-Sea Battle and war-at-sea strategies. Our emphasis is on America's maritime superiority, ways to exploit it, and by implication the hazards to the nation and the world should it be lost. Inserting a war-at-sea strategy as an intermediate step preceding the threat of full conventional war—and adjusting force structure to achieve it—will provide American leadership a more robust portfolio for engaging China and strengthening our alliances in the emerging age of the Pacific.

### NOTES

1. Norton A. Schwartz and Jonathan W. Greenert, "Air-Sea Battle," *American Interest,* 20 February 2012. The epigraph is from John Arquilla, *Dubious Battles: Aggression, Defeat, and the International System* (Washington, D.C.: Crane Russak, 1992).
2. The flotilla of small vessels as an entirely new component for inshore operations was popularized by Sir Julian Corbett in *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* in 1911. He foresaw the inability of battleships—the "capital ships" of their day—to operate inshore in the face of the evolving threat of torpedo boats and submarines. See pp. 121–23 of the 1988 republication of Corbett's masterwork by the Naval Institute Press.
3. For comparison, a PHM (or patrol combatant hydrofoil, a type discarded by the U.S. Navy in 1993) carrying four Harpoons displaced 250 tons; coastal patrol ships (PCs) now operating in the Persian Gulf are of either three or four hundred tons; and the coastal minesweepers (MSCs) once stationed in Sasebo, on Kyushu, in Japan, displaced 450 tons.
4. For example, supposing a unit cost of eighty million dollars in series production and assuming a mere *ten*-year service life, a force of sixty-four vessels would cost about $500 million per year to sustain, or a bit over 4 percent of the probably diminished Ship Construction (Navy), or SCN, budget.

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