

Critical Military Issues: The Rebalancing Strategy and Naval Operations

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I. Introduction

Michael McDevitt assess US Force posture in East Asia. He concludes, "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, and in peacetime undermine its credibility as capable ally...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."

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II. Report by Michael McDevitt

Evolving US Force posture in the Asia-Pacific

In November 2011 the Obama Administration announced a rebalancing of its strategic focus away from the wars of the Middle-East to the Asia-Pacific and Middle East regions. It also announced that this new strategic rebalancing, or pivot, included an integrated mix of diplomatic, economic, budgetary and security related initiatives. While the economic initiatives that are focused on trade are perhaps the most important, it has been US defense posture changes in East Asia that have received the most attention because “rebalancing” has been widely interpreted as a US response to the military rise of China. While this is broadly accurate, the strategy is also intended to reassure US friends and allies that the US is not in decline, and despite budgetary pressures intends to continue to be a force for stability in East Asia for the foreseeable future.

Also announced were specific force posture changes that build upon initiatives taken during the Bush Administrations second term. Specifically, the United States announced that over the next seven years it intends to gradually increase the overall percentage of US navy ships assigned to the Pacific Fleet to 60 %. Today, the Pacific Fleet is already home to 55% of today’s navy. When you do the math this is not a huge shift in forces. The US Navy currently has 285 ships, of which 157 (55%) are in the Pacific Fleet. In 2019 the Navy hopes to have 300 ships--60 percent equals 180 for the Pacific Fleet. So, the rebalance will result in a net increase of around 23 ships by the end of this decade. Four new small frigates, known as Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) will be in Singapore, but other than Guam, and perhaps Japan, it is not likely that many of the remaining increase in naval presence will be permanently stationed in East Asia because of the combination of worries about Chinese reactions and physical shortfalls in available facilities to support modern warships. One exception to this assertion relates to the planned increase in Marine Corps presence in Australia. This is likely to eventually cause an increase in amphibious ships permanently in the Western Pacific—with Guam, or Australia as possible homeports. More important than these specific shifts.

The Evolving Strategic Setting: China moves to Sea.

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.

Beijing also had plenty of historic motivation. China’s “Century of Humiliation” started in in the mid-19th 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 only defending its interests, 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? Implicitly, the security dimension of the rebalancing strategy has to be able to address this point, if the strategy is to be considered viable by America's allies and friends in the region.

The long term US response

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) disrupting 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, and in peacetime undermine its credibility as capable ally. 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.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Nautilus Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this report. Please leave a comment below or send your response to: napsnet@nautilus.org. Comments will only be posted if they include the author’s name and affiliation.

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