



The emerging U.S. Air-Sea Battle (ASB) concept has been riddled with ambiguity.

Notwithstanding two semiofficial reports published by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments and the recent Joint Staff publication “Joint Operational Access Concept,”



the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) has not articulated in detail to what purpose, to what end, and to what degree is the ASB concept necessary.

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Instead, DoD’s strategic rationale is viewed in a broader context of restoring and sustaining a stable military balance in the western Pacific by strengthening deterrence vis-à-vis China, and providing U.S. allies with security assurances.

U.S. allies in East Asia, however, have not fully embraced the

concept nor the rationale behind it. Indeed, South Korea, Japan, Australia and other U.S. partners in the region have been relatively quiet on the implications of ASB, largely because the full extent of planned operational details has not been shared with them.

From the allied perspective, the main concern is whether ASB provides strategic reassurance or abandonment by the U.S. This is because at the operational level, ASB does not explicitly focus on defending and relying on proximate U.S. allied bases in East Asia, and could mitigate the U.S. forward-deployed presence the allies have depended on.

Moreover, U.S. allies in the region question whether and to what extent ASB foresees active allied participation in the envisioned “deep strike missions” targeting China’s surveillance systems and long-range missiles dispersed on its mainland.

With the prevailing emphasis in the media, think tanks and ultimately the military services on

decoding ASB, there has been a lack of awareness and attention paid to alternative strategies and concepts within the U.S. military.

Opponents of ASB point to the high risks of escalation in a potential conflict with China, including the possibility of a nuclear exchange.

Critics also say that implementing ASB would require substantial investment in the next generation of networked C4ISR systems, submarines and long-range conventional strike systems, including new stealth bombers and anti-satellite weapons, strike fighters and innovative unmanned technologies, all of which may not be affordable.

These questions propel interservice debates, which generate plausible conceptual alternatives. The Naval Postgraduate School and the Naval War College, for example, envision a Mutually Denied Battlespace Strategy (MDBS), a type of mutual anti-access/area-denial strategy.

The MDBS reverses the ASB concept by relying on U.S. mar-

itime superiority to deny access to Chinese warships in their own waters and commercial shipping in the surrounding oceans. In other words, the U.S. would limit the freedom of action of Chinese warships and commercial ships in the contested areas.

The U.S. office of the chief of naval operations is also considering a scaled-down ASB alternative that envisions less expensive stealth platforms, but higher sortie rates from proximate allied bases and the U.S. Navy’s aircraft carriers deployed in the Asia-Pacific.

The U.S. Army, meanwhile, is skeptical about the entire ASB concept as it neglects expeditionary and ground force elements. Instead, the Army is developing its own Joint Concept for Entry Operations that envisions amphibious, airborne and air assault operations to gain and maintain inland access to the adversary’s territory.

Notwithstanding the ongoing interservice debates within the U.S. military, the ASB concept will be tested and calibrated by changing

strategic realities, available defense resources and the operational experience of the U.S. forces.

While it is unclear whether or when the concept will be fully implemented amid varying institutional and organizational support, technological and budgetary requirements, and operational uncertainties, how the ASB concept is adapted will have significant policy implications for U.S. allies in East Asia. In this context, what’s missing in the ASB debate is allied participation.

Indeed, ASB’s operational uncertainty may translate into broader strategic uncertainty, possibly undermining future alliance credibility.

At the strategic level, the U.S. therefore needs to clarify the ASB concept in terms of its relevance to the new “rebalancing strategy” in the Asia-Pacific region, while at the operational level, the U.S. military needs to articulate particular aspects of the ASB in terms of future allied interoperability requirements and involvement.

Perhaps most important, the U.S. and China need to enhance their military-to-military cooperation to mitigate increasing strategic distrust. It is only then that ASB will avoid becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. □

Air-Sea Battle Debate

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