



Summary: This paper explores how China's disruptive progress in the field of anti-access and area denial is driving a profound shift in U.S. force structure and planning in the Asia-Pacific. At the heart of Washington's military "pivot" toward Asia is a revolutionary new concept: AirSea Battle. This paper seeks to examine the future role of the Indian Ocean in the event of a Sino-U.S. conflict. It contends that the world's third largest body of water, hitherto largely ignored, will morph from a peripheral flank to the Western Pacific Theater of Operations to form the wider front of AirSea Battle.

The Wider Front: The Indian Ocean and AirSea Battle

by *Iskander Luke Rehman*

In response to China's rapid pace of military modernization and progress in the field of anti-access and area denial (A2/AD), the Pentagon has been working for the past three years on a revolutionary new concept: AirSea Battle. AirSea Battle, first articulated by the Washington, DC-based Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments in May 2010, aims for greater cross-domain synergy, envisioning a more seamless integration of air and naval forces in order to operate with greater ease and proficiency in some of the world's most heavily contested environments. Both Beijing and Tehran's progress in the field of anti-ship missiles, mine warfare, and precision-guided munitions (PGMs) have engendered an unprecedented degree of vulnerability for U.S. naval and air assets. If the United States can no longer project power into certain regional theaters without incurring prohibitive costs in blood and treasure, there is a genuine risk that certain regional powers with revisionist ambitions may achieve the sanitization of their maritime neighborhoods through the erection of no-go zones, and the neutering of smaller, weaker, neighboring states. They may also feel

increasingly emboldened to wreak havoc via proxy and/or subconventional warfare.

Although the U.S. Department of Defense has thus far eschewed framing the concept in stark, zero-sum terms, it is clear that the concept has two overriding strategic goals — offsetting Beijing's military modernization on one hand, while retaining the ability to project force into the Persian Gulf and Iranian hinterlands on the other. This article seeks to examine the role of the Indian Ocean in AirSea Battle.¹ It contends that the Indian Ocean will morph from its position as a peripheral flank of the Western Pacific Theater of Operations (WPTO) to form the wider front of AirSea Battle, where China, the United States, and various regional actors will vie for tactical primacy and greater strategic depth. As China's A2/AD complex extends from land to sea, and from east to west, the Indian Ocean risks becoming an equally contested, albeit less congested, zone of operations

¹ As of now, no declassified version of the AirSea Battle Concept has been released to the public. This article draws therefore on CSBA's aforementioned monograph for its analysis, available at <http://www.csbaonline.org/publications/2010/05/airsea-battle-concept/>

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for the U.S. Navy. Its formidable centrality, which places it between the narrow, tension-ridden waterways of the Persian Gulf and the seething cauldron of the South China Sea, should also place it at the heart of an unalloyed Indo-Pacific AirSea Battle Concept.

Maritime Mad Max

The Indian Ocean, which forms the world's third largest body of water, has reemerged as a major hub of maritime trade. More than half of the world's container traffic, and 70 percent of the world's total traffic in petroleum products passes from the Strait of Hormuz to the Strait of Malacca. Approximately 80 percent of all trade conducted across the Indian Ocean is extra-regional in nature, which has prompted some to designate it as this era's great oceanic "highway."² China's "Malacca Dilemma" is well known. Over 53 percent of its oil now stems from imports, the vast majority of which is seaborne. If current trends continue, by 2030 Beijing will import over 80 percent of its oil, a great share of which will flow from the Middle East and Africa. Beijing's growing dependency on Indian Ocean sea lanes has led some of the more virulent critics of AirSea Battle, and of what they perceive as its lurking escalatory dynamics, to fall under the sway of what one could term the "distant energy blockade option." Their argument is, rather than risk open confrontation with China in its own maritime backyard, why not strangle them from afar i.e. in the Indian Ocean?³

An energy blockade of China, however, would only have a peripheral impact on the conduct of operations. After all, a large portion of China's oil and natural gas is still produced and refined indigenously (approximately 47 percent), or imported overland from Russia. In order to really turn off the oil tap, the United States and its allies would need to conduct crippling strikes against pipelines and refineries situated on the Chinese mainland, thus bringing the problem of escalation control and crisis management back to the fore. Furthermore, there is the oft neglected issue of

² Michael J. Green and Andrew Shearer, "Defining U.S. Indian Ocean Strategy," *The Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2012, 35:2, pp.175-189.

³ One of the more vocal members of the distant energy blockade school of thought is Professor Douglas C. Peifer. Echoing the injunctions of the great English maritime thinker Corbett at the dawn of World War I, Peifer insists that the U.S. fleet should focus on staunching China's sea-borne energy supplies rather than on immediate tactical victory. See Douglas C. Peifer, "China, the German Analogy and the New AirSea Operational Concept," *Orbis*, Winter 2011, 55:1, pp.114-131.

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China's growing oil reserves. Energy analysts believe that once China has finished filling its strategic oil reserves in 2020, it will hold about 500 million barrels, roughly equal to three months of its current imports. A blockade would therefore only have a chance of bearing fruit after more than three months, which, by most modern standards, is a protracted campaign. By AirSea Battle or Chinese standards, that is an eternity, an eternity during which the blockading task force could have helped supplement the ships directly engaged in the conflict that would have sparked the blockade in the first place.

The AirSea Battle Concept recognizes the potential merits of a distant blockade but argues that its focus should be on comprehensively blocking all maritime shipping in and out of Chinese ports, rather than on simply stemming the flow of Beijing's seaborne energy supplies. This could be accomplished without adding considerable strain to the overall war effort by employing smaller, more vulnerable vessels ill-suited for the risk-laden combat environment of China's near seas. The deft exploitation of every contour of the Southeast Asian maritime map would render the task easier by effectively channeling Chinese merchant traffic through meandering funnels and narrow chokepoints. In order to be able to shield such an operation from Chinese retribution, however, the United States and its allies would need to operate beyond the deeper southern reaches of the South China Sea, where China's lack of capabilities in terms of sustained air support and open-ocean anti-submarine warfare would give it a severe disadvantage.⁴

Beijing, for its part, could decide to exploit the strategic depth proffered by the wider expanses of the Indian Ocean in order to conduct its own form of trade warfare against the United States and its allies. While China could with

⁴ For more on China's glaring weaknesses in anti-submarine warfare, see the excellent study by Owen R. Cote, Jr. of MIT, "Assessing the Undersea Balance between the U.S. and China," *SSP Working Paper February 2011*. Online, available at http://web.mit.edu/ssp/publications/working_papers/Undersea%20Balance%20WP11-1.pdf

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difficulty marshal the resources to erect its own full counter-blockade, it could also opt for the forward-deployment of wolf-packs of nuclear attack submarines in the Indian Ocean. Marauding Chinese subsurface assets could then be unleashed to wage a loose form of *guerre de course* against cargo vessels bound for Australia, Japan, or Taiwan, harassing U.S. naval task forces, and conducting “deep thrust” mining operations close to the Strait of Hormuz or along Australia’s northwestern seaboard.

India and the Need for a New Strategic Compact

The AirSea Battle concept evokes the possibility of carrying out peripheral operations in order to secure “rear areas,” and mentions that Australia could assist the United States by conducting its own support operations within the Indian Ocean. Canberra’s fleet, while projected to grow in both size and capability, would still only be able to exert a very limited form of sea control in certain areas. In order to truly exert sea control over an emerging secondary maritime front, the United States would need to rely on the support of a larger resident power — India. By enhancing cooperation with the United States in fields such as maritime domain awareness and subsurface surveillance in regions such as the Andaman Sea, and by jettisoning its traditional reluctance to share hydrographic data, India could emerge as a vital stabilizing flank. India’s military presence in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, a 466 mile long chain of islands that straddles the western approaches to the Malacca Straits, has been equated by some Chinese naval analysts to the formation of a metal chain, which could be used to “lock China out” of the Indian Ocean.⁵ The islands’ formidable strategic

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⁵ See my interview of Professor Toshi Yoshihara of the U.S. Naval War College on the matter. Online, available at <http://indiangeopolitics.blogspot.com/2012/03/interview-of-professor-toshi-yoshihara.html>

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location was duly noted by the Japanese during WWII, who seized the sparsely populated archipelago in order to radiate air power out into Southeast Asia and the Bay of Bengal. By negotiating access to dual-use infrastructure in the Andaman and Nicobar islands, perhaps under the professed aim of cooperating with New Delhi in regional aid and relief operations, or in anti-piracy efforts, the United States could exert a greater degree of sea control on both sides of the Malacca straits. For instance, Washington could periodically rotate unarmed drones on and off Car Nicobar, and then employ these unmanned systems to drop sonobuoys (small expendable sonar systems) or unmanned undersea vehicles into contested waters, helping pinpoint any Chinese submarines transiting via the Malacca Straits during the Anti-Submarine Warfare phase of the AirSea Battle Campaign.

For the time being, however, New Delhi’s staunch attachment to strategic autonomy forbids it from even entertaining the notion of aligning with Washington, let alone entering a formal military alliance. This does not mean, however, that with time both democracies could not enter into an informal entente, or come to a form of tacit strategic compact. Indeed, while India’s stance would preclude any possibility of it directly participating in combat operations, it is not inconceivable that New Delhi might, in the future, choose to provide logistical support to crippled U.S. vessels, or decide to help provide U.S. merchant ships safe passage in the event of a Sino-U.S. conflict.

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There are two ways by which the United States could come to rely on Indian assistance in the event of a conflict with China. The first involves a simple barter of information — New Delhi could rely on U.S. space-based intelligence on Chinese troop deployments in the event of a Sino-Indian border conflict, and in exchange the United States would have access to Indian maritime surveillance. Another, more meaningful, way to deepen military cooperation would be to emphasize the shared nature of the Chinese anti-access threat. After all, both nations operate blue-water, carrier-centric navies whose continued ability to project power risks being negated in the face of potential adversaries growing A2/AD capabilities.

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Indeed, India's navy faces strikingly similar threats to its U.S. alter ego, albeit on a much smaller scale. Pakistan, since independence, has opted for a strategy of offensive sea denial, heavily dependent on the use of submarines and anti-ship missiles, in order to offset its neighbor's conventional naval advantage. This asymmetric strategy is currently being pursued through the induction of fast-attack craft with anti-ship missiles, and via an ever growing inventory of land-based, Chinese-made anti-ship cruise missiles. The Pakistani Navy also hopes to add six more submarines equipped with Air Independent Propulsion and cruise missiles to its fleet. Meanwhile, the growing range and sophistication of China's anti-access systems risks having a negative impact on the maritime balance of power in the Indian Ocean. If deployed by Second Artillery Brigades stationed in the western reaches of the Tibetan plateau, or from the hills of Yunnan, China's DF-21 D anti-ship ballistic missile could encompass most of India's maritime backyard under its extended threat envelop. Judging by the Pentagon's latest report on Chinese military power, the Chinese missile strike range already casts its shadow over large swathes of the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. In

the future, this capability could be harnessed by Beijing in order to provide a protective umbrella to its vessels operating in the Indian Ocean, or to shield its Pakistani ally's assets during an Indo-Pakistani conflict. Employed in a more offensive manner however, it could be utilized to sink Indian destroyers or aircraft carriers, or to target India's coastal infrastructure.

China's Second Artillery could also be called upon to launch attacks on naval assets from the U.S. Fifth Fleet, particularly if they were found to be steaming across the Indian Ocean from Bahrain with the aim of supplementing the action of their brothers in arms in the Pacific. Furthermore, both India and the United States must also contend with the possibility of Chinese long-range aircraft conducting lightning raids on shipping from airfields in Yunnan or Aksai Chin, from where they could encompass large tracts of the Indian Ocean within their extended strike radius. As China's precision-strike complex gradually extends from east to west and arches its way over the entire Indian Ocean basin, AirSea Battle can no longer afford to focus almost exclusively on the WPTO, while relegating a seemingly placid Indian Ocean to the periphery. AirSea Battle's future is a decidedly Indo-Pacific one, and in light of such a disturbing evolution it seems only natural that each ocean's strongest residing democratic power should seek to join hands in a more meaningful defense partnership.

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The Neglected Fulcrum

Diego Garcia, a small, horseshoe shaped slab of coral along the warm southern rim of the Indian Ocean, has allowed the United States to project power into Southwest Asia for decades. Before being relocated to Qatar in 2005, B-1, B-2, and B-52 bombers stationed on the island took part in Operation Enduring Freedom and both Gulf Wars. In upcoming decades, Washington should seek to buttress its Pan-Asian two-ocean strategy by hardening its presence on one of its most centrally located nodes, and by reviving its diplomatic efforts to acquire logistical hubs and monitoring sites in some of the more remote, but strategically well-placed, patches of paradise dotting the region. One such example is the island nation of the Seychelles, courted by both Moscow and Washington in the late 1970s and 1980s, and that now finds itself at the epicenter of budding rivalries once more. The drone bases which the United States has quietly sprinkled across remote African locales such as Ethiopia and Somalia over the past few years could also serve the useful dual function of enabling long-range drone strikes not only against Sub-Saharan Al Qaeda affiliates, but also against Chinese naval task forces operating in the Western Indian Ocean.

Finally, as the U.S. Air Force seeks to add a greater long-range strike component, it would be well-advised to place one or two squadrons of next-generation long-range stealth bombers on Diego Garcia. Such a force would be able to prosecute a wide range of targets within a sweeping arc, ranging from the rocky heights of the Zagros Mountains to the sandy wharves of Hainan, thus adding a welcome Indo-Pacific hue to one of the Pentagon's most transformational intellectual efforts.

About the Author

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About the Young Strategists Forum

The Young Strategists Forum aims to develop a new generation of strategic thinkers in the United States, Europe, and Asia through a combination of seminars, simulations, and study tours. The project is led by transatlantic fellow Daniel M. Kliman with non-resident senior fellow Aaron Friedberg serving as faculty. The first Young Strategists Forum was convened in Japan with the support of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation. This initiative is part of GMF's Asia Program, which addresses the implications of Asia's rise for the West through a combination of convening, writing, strategic grants, study tours, fellowships, and partnerships with other institutions. For more information, see <http://www.gmfus.org/asia>.

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About The Sasakawa Peace Foundation

The Sasakawa Peace Foundation (SPF) is a private non-profit organization established in September 1986. It seeks to contribute to the welfare of humanity and the sound development of international community, and thus to world peace, through activities that foster international interaction and cooperation.