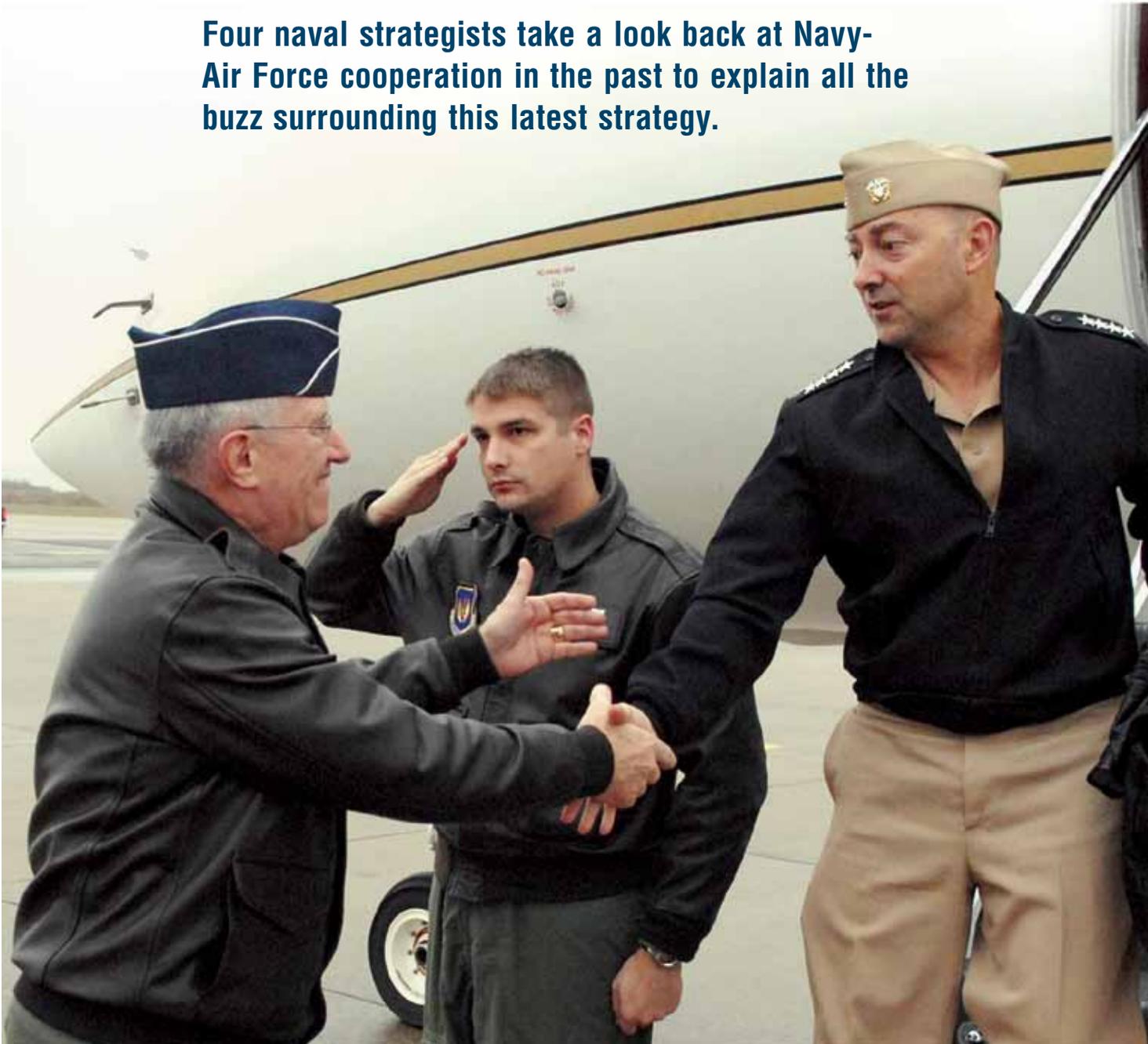


What's New About the **AIRSEA BATTLE CONCEPT?**

By Jose Carreno, Thomas Culora,
Captain George Galdorisi, U.S. Navy (Retired), and Thomas Hone

Four naval strategists take a look back at Navy-Air Force cooperation in the past to explain all the buzz surrounding this latest strategy.



The Navy-Air Force AirSea Battle Concept (ASBC), modeled after the Army-Air Force Air Land Battle Doctrine of a previous generation, has been heralded by some as the answer to compelling strategic and operational challenges facing the U.S. military today. But is this really a new strategy? And old or new, will it help the United States deal with compelling world-wide issues?

Understanding where we have been may provide insight into where we can go and what we can accomplish with this concept. It may also prepare the Navy and Air Force for some of the likely as well as unintended consequences this concept may create.

Writing in a National Defense University National War College publication in 1992, then-Commander James Stavridis stated: “We need an air sea battle concept centered on an immediately deployable, highly capable, and fully integrated force—an Integrated Strike Force.”¹

As this quote—by now-Admiral Stavridis, the current Supreme Allied Commander Europe—suggests, neither the term “AirSea Battle Concept” nor the concept itself is brand new. Rather, this integration of sea and air forces has roots that extend back over a half-century.

Taking to the Air Against U-Boats

The first useful example of an ASBC occurred during the Battle of the Atlantic campaign to defeat German U-boats. By January 1943, more than 100 submarines were prowling the Atlantic Ocean. Their most effective hunting ground was in the so-called “air gap” between the southern tip of Greenland and the longest range of patrol aircraft based in North America. In this area, convoys relied on their own surface escorts for protection.

Previously, Atlantic convoys had often been routed around U-boats waiting to ambush them by using intelligence based on ULTRA decrypts of intercepted German radio communications. But before the Allies could

effectively pinpoint the locations of the U-boats using ULTRA, for three weeks in March 1943 wolf packs operating mostly in the air gap sank more than 20 percent of all Allied shipping plying the North Atlantic. During this same month British, Canadian, and American forces responsible for countering the U-boat threat put a plan in place to allocate a small force of very-long-range B-24 Liberator aircraft to cover the gap.



U.S. NAVAL INSTITUTE PHOTO ARCHIVE

A good early example of integrating sea and air forces took place in the North Atlantic in 1943, when very-long-range B-24 Liberator aircraft began covering Allied convoys operating in the “air gap” between Greenland and the limited radius of North America-based patrol aircraft. Today’s “salient question,” the authors ask, is how does such cooperation create efficiency and synergy?

When the B-24s and aircraft from the newly assigned escort carriers started covering convoys, the advantage tipped in favor of the Allies. In May 1943, the German Navy lost 47 U-boats in the North Atlantic. When this precursory ASBC was expanded in October 1943 to include long-range Allied patrol aircraft operating from the Azores, U-boats were at greater risk over even larger areas of the Atlantic.

In this long campaign, British, Canadian, and U.S. forces considered and implemented a number of other coordinated air-sea battle tactics, including: bombing the U-boat bases on the French coast; ambushing U-boats transiting the Bay of Biscay from the air; targeting the yards where they were built; and reinforcing surface convoy escorts with land-based blimps and seaplanes.

All of these efforts were part of an extended air-sea battle of attrition, where Allied air and naval units worked together to punch through an anti-access, area-denial envelope that German naval forces tried to impose on the North Atlantic sea lanes. Over the course of that long campaign, naval and air officers developed means of cooperation and coordination—especially of air assets—that prevailed. But it is important to understand that the Navy, by itself, was able then and is capable now to conduct an air-sea battle. The salient question is, to what extent did and does cooperation either make U.S. forces more efficient or create real synergy?

U.S. AIR FORCE (COREY CLEMENTS)

The commander of U.S. Air Forces in Europe (left), General Roger A. Brady, welcomes the commander of U.S. European Command and Supreme Allied Commander Europe, Admiral James Stavridis, on 10 November 2009 at Ramstein Air Base in Germany. As a Navy commander 17 years earlier, Stavridis envisioned “an Integrated Strike Force,” suggesting the AirSea Battle Concept (ASBC) isn’t really new.



FRED FREEMAN COLLECTION / U.S. NAVAL INSTITUTE PHOTO ARCHIVE

An effective Army-Navy air-sea campaign also worked in 1944, supporting Navy and Marine Corps amphibious forces in their invasion of targets around the Philippines. Here, infantry landing craft hug the beach at Morotai to protect landing troops, as fires rage farther ashore. Aircraft flying from this and other islands were able to penetrate Japanese defenses.

Aircraft and Amphibs in the Philippines

Another useful illustration is the effective air-sea campaign waged in and around the Philippines in late 1944 by U.S. Army and Navy aircraft and Navy and Marine Corps amphibious forces. U.S. carrier task forces and U.S. Army long-range, land-based air forces struck distant Japanese bases and made it difficult for the Japanese to reinforce their air assets in the Philippines. Moreover, the 7th Fleet escort carriers directly under General Douglas MacArthur's command provided fighter and attack support in a display of real integration.

The key factor—well understood by both Army and Navy planners—was the critical role long-range, land-based aviation had in expanding the offensive air envelope under which amphibious forces operated. Accordingly, the Army and Navy assaulted the islands of Biak and Morotai before moving on to Leyte because air units flying from those islands were crucial to the penetration of Japanese defenses in the Philippines.

Thus, Navy and Army air assets complemented each other to accomplish critical operational tasks to support campaign victories in both the Atlantic and Pacific theaters during World War II. The precedent had been set, crucial

lessons learned, and the power and synergy of the combined land- and sea-based air forces established.

Why the AirSea Battle Concept?

Earlier this year, Todd Harrison wrote the following in *The New Guns Versus Butter Debate*, published by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA): “The fiscal reality is that in a flat or declining budgetary environment, [the DOD] cannot continue to do both [fund personnel accounts as well as acquisition accounts] to the same extent it does today.”²

Throughout the Cold War, the potential fight on the plains of Europe dominated U.S. strategic thinking. The military element of this strategy, primarily carried out by the Army and Air Force, had by the 1980s evolved into what became known as the AirLand Battle Doctrine. The doctrine led to new operational concepts that recognized an emerging threat based on Soviet numerical superiority coupled with a narrowing technological gap. A memorandum cosigned by the Army and Air Force chiefs outlined steps to achieve procurement and operational synergies to restore conventional warfighting capabilities after the Vietnam War.

But for nearly a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, U.S. military-strategic planners had little motivation to develop a broad fighting doctrine, and the services had even less incentive to collaborate.

The one notable exception to this came during Operation Desert Storm. But in that case, the opposing air and sea forces were minimal and the core doctrine only tangentially employed. By the early 1990s, analysis by the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment began to examine whether a "dramatic shift in the character of military competitions was underway." Their prescient conclusion now resonates as they highlighted the real possibility of the rise of potential challenge from a "peer competitor" (i.e., China) and a "second order challenge from a 'non-peer' competitor" (i.e., Iran).³

Pentagon strategists examining the changing nature of warfare were given new impetus by the congressionally mandated National Defense Panel (NDP) 1997 report's conclusion that "The United States 'must radically alter' the way in which its military projects power."⁴ However, this momentum slowed as the attacks of 9/11 dramatically changed the focus of the U.S. military to the exigencies of a war on terrorism.

The Timeline, China, and the Economy

By the end of the first decade of the 21st century several trends converged that demanded a new focus on an ASBC. One was the Obama administration's shift in emphasis away from the war on terrorism and its decision to draw down the U.S. commitment to Iraq and Afghanistan on a finite timeline. A second was the startlingly rapid rise of China over this decade. As the head of Pacific Command, Admiral Robert Willard, has noted, "Elements of China's military modernization appear designed to challenge our freedom of action in the region."⁵ And a third was the unanticipated economic recession faced by the United States.

On the heels of the deepest economic crisis since the 1930s, and with the federal budget deficit running in excess of \$1.5 trillion in Fiscal Year 2010, the age-old "guns versus butter" debate has brought into sharper focus the consistent theme that the U.S. military may not have the strategic assets needed to deter, and if necessary prevail, against a high-end

peer competitor like China. A key assumption underpinning the ASBC is that without better coordination between and among the U.S. military services, especially the Navy and the Air Force, this outcome is all but guaranteed. Moreover, the concept will have limited or no effect unless these joint air and naval planners tie actual operational requirements to specific capabilities.

Faced with a rising threat of peer and near-peer competitors with alarming anti-access/area-denial capabilities—as well as long-term budget pressures—the ASBC can be viewed as greater than an attempt to do more with less. Rather, it is a return to historical precedents when, like today, compelling strategic and operational realities forced U.S. naval and air forces to work together in a truly *integrated* fashion to project power against a determined foe. But a skeptic who doubts the ability of the current procurement system to respond in a meaningful way to this rising challenge may opine that the ASBC will only result in a rearrangement of existing doctrine and systems and not be a truly adaptive and dynamic approach.

Just What *Is* the AirSea Battle Concept?

Also earlier this year, the CSBA published *Air Sea Battle: A Point of Departure Operational Concept*, which stated: "The most important question proponents of the AirSea Battle Concept must answer is whether the concept would help to restore and sustain a stable military balance in the Western Pacific."⁶

At the request of Secretary of Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Gary Roughead and Air Force Chief of Staff General Norton Schwartz



Admiral Robert Willard, Commander, U.S. Pacific Command (left), meets on 4 June with Assistant Secretary of Defense Robert Sher (center) and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates at the Asia Security Summit in Singapore. According to Admiral Willard, "Elements of China's military modernization appear designed to challenge our freedom of action in the region." This is one trend that demands a new focus on the ASBC.



US AIR FORCE (ARACELI ALARCON)

The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments says ASBC proponents must determine “whether the concept would help to restore and sustain a stable military balance in the Western Pacific.” Such regional stability was the order of the day on 7 May, when this Air Force F-16 deployed to the Republic of Korea from Misawa Air Base, Japan.

directed an effort to explore how U.S. air and naval forces could combine and integrate their capabilities to confront increasingly complex threats to U.S. freedom of action.⁷

To gain a global perspective, this joint team interviewed each U.S. combatant commander to understand the scope of threats they are likely to face over the next 10 to 20 years, particularly at the “high-end of warfare.” Government officials have been keen to point out that the ASBC is not aimed at any particular country or region. But ultimately, the goal is to identify how combined Air Force and Navy capabilities can address these threats.⁸

After months of teasers and speculation in defense journals and conferences, the release of the 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR)* provided greater clarity on the scope and *raison d’être* behind this concept. As part of its guidance to rebalance the force, the *QDR* directed the development of the air-sea battle concept to:

[Defeat] adversaries across the range of military operations, including adversaries equipped with sophisticated anti-access and area denial capabilities. The concept will address how air and naval forces will integrate capabilities across all operational domains—air, sea, land, space, and cyberspace—to counter growing challenges to U.S. freedom of action.⁹

Protecting Power-Projection Capability

Independent analysts have been less reticent in naming specific regional adversaries. Two studies by the CSBA highlight the efforts of China and Iran as catalysts behind the concept. As the first of these studies lays out, both nations are investing in capabilities to “raise precipitously over time—and perhaps prohibitively—the cost to the United States of projecting power into two areas of vital interest: the Western Pacific and the Persian Gulf.”¹⁰ By adopting anti-access/area-denial capabilities, these potential adversaries seek to deny U.S. forces the sanctuary of forward bases, hold aircraft carriers and their air wings

at risk, and cripple U.S. battle networks. In other words, strike at the weak point of U.S. power-projection capability. To be effective, the ASBC must change that through a combination of capabilities and operational warfighting. If it doesn’t, adversaries will still be able to deny access to U.S. forces.

In its second study, *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept*, CSBA analyzes possible options to counter the anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) threat posed by the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA). First and foremost, CSBA argues, the AirSea Battle Concept should help “set the conditions” to retain a favorable military balance in the Western Pacific.¹¹ By creating credible capabilities to defeat A2/AD threats, the United States can enhance stability in the Western Pacific and lower the possibility of escalation by deterring inclinations to challenge the United States or coerce regional allies.¹²

The precise nature of the ASBC will not be known until Pentagon planners complete their work. But based on the broad outlines of the CSBA’s *Point-of-Departure Operational Concept* study, it is likely that in the initial stages of hostilities the United States would need to withstand an initial attack and limit damage to U.S. and allied forces while executing a blinding campaign against the PLA battle networks. However, the need to withstand an initial attack is a potential flaw in the CSBA plan. Prudence and technical reality would suggest that the ASBC should find a way to make U.S. forces less visible and targetable while retaining the ability to be forward with credible combat power. Being less visible and targetable raises the risk of initiating a first strike and contributes to deterring a potential foe.

Failing deterrence, the ASBC assumes that a conflict with China would involve a protracted campaign where U.S.-led forces would then sustain and exploit the initiative in various domains, conduct distant blockade operations against ships bound for China, maintain operational logistics, and ramp up industrial production of needed hard-

ware, especially precision-guided munitions. However, it is important to note that in a shorter (and perhaps more likely) conflict, blockade, logistics, and procurement will have minimal impact on the outcome.

The Strategy

But it is the ways Navy and Air Force assets would provide mutual support in this campaign that can make the ASBC, if it evolves in a manner that many strategic thinkers believe it should, a modern-day equivalent of some of the innovative strategies and tactics employed by U.S. air and sea forces in World War II. If the ASBC evolves as the CSBA study suggests, Navy and Air Force planners may evolve a strategy in which:

- Air Force counter-space operations would blind PLA space-based ocean surveillance systems to prevent the PLA from targeting Navy surface assets, providing the Navy with operational freedom of maneuver.
- Navy Aegis ships would supplement other missile-defense assets in Air Force forward bases in the Western Pacific.
- Long-range penetrating strike operations would destroy PLA ground-based, long-range maritime surveillance systems and long-range ballistic-missile launchers to expand the Navy's freedom of maneuver and reduce strikes on U.S. and allied bases. Concurrently, Navy submarine-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR)

and strike support against PLA integrated air defense systems would pave the way for Air Force strikes.

- Navy carrier-based fighters' progressive rollback of PLA manned and unmanned airborne ISR platforms and fighters would secure the forward operation of Air Force tankers and other support aircraft. This would require the Navy to rethink its current inventory of missiles, jammers, and decoys.

- Air Force aircraft would support the antisubmarine warfare campaign through offensive mining by stealthy bombers and persistent non-stealthy bomber strike support of Navy ships conducting distant blockade operations.¹³

The evidence also suggests that this ASBC *will*, indeed, gain traction throughout the U.S. military. Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Mike Mullen has already put his imprint on the concept. Speaking at the U.S. Air Force Academy graduation and commissioning ceremony earlier this year he noted, “[The ASBC] is a prime example of how we need to keep breaking down stovepipes between services, between federal agencies, and even between nations.”¹⁴

Implications of an Evolving Concept

According to CSBA's study, *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept*, “The Defense Department's Program of Record forces and current concepts



U.S. AIR FORCE (J. RACHEL SPENCER)

One of the highest-powered leaders to “put his imprint on the concept” is Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen, who noted during his commencement and commissioning address at the U.S. Air Force Academy this year that it “is a prime example of how we need to keep breaking down stovepipes.”

of operations do not accord sufficient weight to the capabilities needed to successfully execute an AirSea Battle campaign.”¹⁵

However the elements outlined here combine to form a coherent ASBC, myriad strategic, institutional, and programmatic implications, both understood and unintentional, will arise. These will vary depending on the concepts envisioned and the course adopted. A sampling of a few that may immediately surface include:

Naming Names—U.S. policy toward China has been centered on managing the “peaceful rise” of this emerging peer competitor across a broad range of issues. Moreover, the United States has been careful not to paint China as a threat or engage in activities that could lead to an arms race. This may be changing, and the development of the ASBC may contribute to this change.

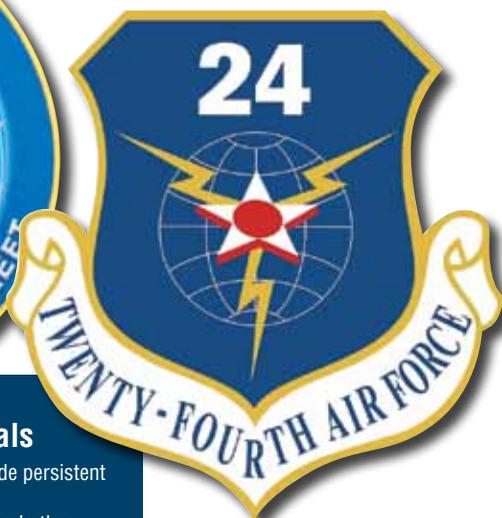
By actively and publicly planning, training, and equipping a joint air-sea force to confront even something as benignly described as a “pacing threat,” the United States is implicitly challenging China’s military influence in Asia. It is one thing for the independent thinkers at CSBA to issue a set of reports and conceptual papers on the ASBC; it is quite another for Navy and Air Force staffs to collaborate on a comprehensive approach to counter PLA systems, doctrine, and operational plans.

Reassurance—A growing perception on the part of U.S. allies and potential partners in the region is that American naval and air forces have not kept pace with expanding Chinese military capabilities.

The premise of the ASBC in fact rests on this trend. With this perception, countries have started to rethink their political, economic, and military strategies to ensure their continued security and independence as U.S. will, capacity, and capability wane. A serious, sustained commitment to ASBC will reinforce credible U.S. combat power and will assuage and persuade both friend and foe of America’s commitment to the region. However, failure

to fully embrace and enact the ASBC could have opposite and unforeseeable strategic consequences.

Dispersed Basing—A critical implied task in articulating the operational construct of the ASBC will be to find ways to reduce risk to both land and sea air bases, to minimize the impact of early



AirSea Battle Concept Fundamentals

- Omnipresent unmanned combat air systems to provide persistent intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR)
- Full development of unmanned underwater vehicles and other persistent unmanned underwater systems
- Configuration, load out, or perhaps even saliency of *Nimitz/Ford*-class nuclear-powered aircraft carriers in this particular context
- Rethinking of the size and structure of the amphibious force (despite their current role in humanitarian assistance/disaster relief)
- Increased, sustainable, and survivable aerial refueling capacity if the need for persistent manned aircraft is still deemed critical
- Significant increase in long-range ISR assets like Global Hawk, with increased range and sensors
- Less emphasis on short-range Navy fighters (Super Hornets and Joint Strike Fighters)
- A radical new look at mission modules for the Littoral Combat Ship (decoy, deception)
- Potential capping or slight drawdown of special operations forces
- Increased emphasis on submerged precision strike (more nuclear-powered guided-missile submarines (SSGN) conversions or SSGN follow-on)
- Increased emphasis on Electronic Warfare
- A geographic shift to the “One Hub” posture of the Center for Naval Analyses Tipping Point paper
- A joining of 10th Fleet and the 24th Air Force to address joint cyber and command-and-control issues

salvo strikes, and to persist in any protracted war longer than a couple of weeks. Beyond extensive hardening and rapid runway repair, dispersal may emerge as an effective operational approach likely to be considered.

But dispersal is not without its challenges. Domestic political objections in countries where the United States will desire multiple basing options, including the creative approaches of the Cold War such as highway-runways and concealed operating bases for vertical short-takeoff and landing aircraft, will be high. Even in countries where the

United States currently has basing rights, such as Japan, the political challenges will be immense. Moreover, countries that sign on to this plan know they are certain targets and may calculate that the costs of allowing this basing plan outweigh the benefits. And to be truly effective, maintenance, logistics, and personnel must be made mobile to support this scheme, which rapidly becomes a very expensive approach that might best be tackled another way.

Beyond Purple to Cobalt Blue—Another key to the success of the ASBC will be institutionalizing a close collaborative relationship between the Navy and Air Force beyond the initial exhilaration of the ASBC’s maiden release. The model for this is the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act that forced cooperation among all the services using clear incen-

tives tied to promotion of the officer corps. For the ASBC to sustain a protracted pattern of cooperation, an institutionalized cadre of officers, planners, and procurement specialists must be put in place. Otherwise, the services will fall back into their familiar patterns of competition.

Where the Family Shops—It is too early to tell what impact the ASBC will have on procurement and the focus of the industrial base. If the plan calls for a refinement of legacy systems, then the impact could be light. But if the ASBC introduces a radical approach, the impact could be quite large, even if this change is more evolutionary than revolutionary. This would be good news for some and troubling news for others.

The ASBC is as much about developing credible combat power and the military doctrine to support it as it is about long-term competition. Thus, any concept must analyze the holistic impact and strategic costs to sustain and win the long-term competition with any peer or near-peer state. While the adjustments to doctrine, operational plans, and system acquisition resulting from the ASBC are yet unknown, ultimately the ASBC must be more than simply a sharing of assets or cooperation for its own sake. It must integrate some unique set of capabilities from both services to create real synergistic effects that neither service can accomplish individually. ⚙️

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