**Air-Sea Battle Debate**

**Operational Consequences and Allied Concerns**

By Michael Raska, a research fellow at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

The emerging U.S. Air-Sea Battle (ASB) concept has been riddled with ambiguity. Notwithstanding two semiformal 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. Instead, DoD’s strategic rationale is viewed in a broader context of fostering and sustaining a stable military balance in the western Pacific by strengthening deterrence vis-à-vis China, and providing U.S. allies in East Asia, however, have not fully embraced the concept or the rationale behind it. Indeed, South Korea, Japan, Australia, and India, among 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 commercial implications 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 clear 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 prompt inter-service debates, which generate plausible conceptual alternatives. The Naval Postgraduate School and the Naval War College, for example, envision a Mutually Defined Battlespace Strategy (MDBS), a type of mutual anti-access/area denial strategy. The MDBS reverses the ASB concept by relying on U.S. maritime superiority to deny access to Chinese warships in their own ports and commercial areas 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 envisages 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 negates preemption and ground 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 inter-service debates, 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 various institutional and organizational support, technological and budgetary requirements, and operational uncertainties, the concept as 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 relevancy. On 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.

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**Amid The Headlines, a Promising Partnership**

By Pauline Joon, a contributing editor at Asia Times Online, and published in Asian Weekly.

While most media attention in the United States has focused on the upcoming presidential election, a significant development in U.S. foreign policy with the countries of the Middle East region has emerged and been largely overlooked.

On the margins of the U.N. General Assembly in New York City last month, the U.S. and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) held a second meeting of the U.S-GCC Strategic Cooperation Forum and signed the U.S-GCC “Framework Agreement for Trade, Economic Investment and Technical Cooperation.”

These two important milestones indicate a positive American policy trend toward strengthening strategic and commercial partnerships with friendly countries in regions experiencing political turmoil and economic diversification simultaneously — especially in the Middle East.

GCC countries in particular have emerged as key strategic partners to the U.S. in maintaining regional security and, increasingly, in boosting U.S. allies in the region in the face of threats from Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and other fellow GCC countries are working hand-in-hand with the U.S. and other countries to leverage their central geographic location and ambitious economic development plans to play a larger role in global security and economic affairs.

In particular, the UAE has served as America’s top export destination in the Middle East over the past three years and is crucial to multilateral security efforts and regional economic prosperity. Strategically, the U.S. and the UAE regard each other as key partners in the maintenance of regional trade and energy security in the Gulf, the global fight against terrorism and nonproliferation, and the global efforts to provide humanitarian aid to communities in war-torn countries.

Today, American and Emirati soldiers work together alongside NATO allies to provide humanitarian and security services to communities in turbulent Afghanistan, share key intelligence vital to the security of the Arabian Gulf, and train together to ensure a unified front against threats from the region and global security.

Economically, the U.S. is keen to strengthen commercial ties with the GCC countries, especially in the context of the GCC’s economic development goals, including those underlined in the UAE’s well-planned economic development strategies. Under these plans, the UAE continues to execute on the development, with the help of the U.S. and other nations, of key global economic sectors, including commercial aerospace and defense, health care, tourism, infrastructure, media and energy (including renewable and civilian nuclear).

Each of these sectors presents a dynamic opportunity for American investment and partnership over the next several decades. In recognition of the country’s emergence as a key strategic and commercial partner, the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Ministry of Foreign Affairs established the U.S.-UAE Economic Policy Dialogue (EPD) in March. The EPD, a formal, bilateral discussion between U.S. and UAE government officials, was created to raise the profile of the economic relationship and boost joint coordination of international trade, energy and border security while supporting entrepreneurship and innovation. The recent trend toward closer coordination between the U.S. and its partners in the Arab world is promising. Continuing to harmonize economic development efforts and security efforts between our two communities will prove instrumental in maintaining peace in the region and supporting economic recovery here at home.

For American commercial defense companies, the continued growth of cooperation in the Middle East region will provide unique business development opportunities to service the region and access key markets around the world. Partner, overlapping areas of trade and defense coordination with Gulf countries in particular will prove central to future U.S. public and private sector interests.

To underscore and support enhanced cooperation, the U.S. administration should prioritize outstanding defense and security sales requests from partners in the Gulf region and beyond. New air and missile defense sales, Navy modernization programs, new fighter purchases and advanced munitions buys are being considered by our key Gulf partners.

Benefits from sales to these countries would be enormous. On one hand, billions of dollars from the sales would directly support tens of thousands of American jobs. On the other, the sales would significantly enhance defense and security capabilities of America’s partner countries, which could be critical to meeting regional security threats, including Iran.

Efforts to increase and maximize interoperability between U.S. and Gulf partner military forces would prove a potent force multiplier to our own forces in the region — not to mention the cost savings to the U.S. taxpayer derived from the increased burden-sharing by our Gulf partners. Furthermore, as the U.S. draws down its troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, Gulf partners have the potential to deploy more security and humanitarian forces abroad and assume greater leadership roles in helping to guide the country’s current and future security transitions.

As Election Day in the U.S. approaches, one thing is clear: Whoever occupies the White House over the next four years should continue to bolster and enhance emerging U.S.-GCC relationships, particularly those with the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, and consider them a centerpiece of America’s trade and foreign policy toward the region.