

# Don't Fear the Air/Sea Battle Concept

Written by Harry Kazianis

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HARRY KAZIANIS, AUG 20 2011

Much has been made recently in multiple publications about the possible escalatory nature of fighting Chinese anti-access tactics with a concept of "Air/Sea Battle". Very little exact information about the plan is known to the public, yet speculation has remained rampant. Many scholars have theorized about the plan with one scholar making a reference that it could start a US/China nuclear exchange if conflict were to escalate to a high enough state.

These are certainly chilling concepts, however we have seen this plan before. Air/Sea concepts are not an exact war fighting plan. They are part of a strategy that dates back to the days of World War II when allied forces used the combined resources of naval squadrons and air assets to hunt down and destroy Nazi U-Boats. One could even argue US actions in the opening attacks of the Libyan conflict that used combined US B-2 bomber, US SSGN missile attacks and drone strikes are a form of Air/Sea battle strategy.

The concept at its core is attempting to create synergy between armed forces in combining their offensive capabilities as seamlessly as possible. Air/Sea Battle is more of a *way to fight* than a firm *plan to fight*. In military terms this is usually referred to as an operating concept. Dr. Milan Vego in a recent article in the US Naval Institutes *Proceedings* explains,

"In the U.S. military, the term "operating concept" is used to refer to the application of military power within a certain framework, regardless of the objective to be accomplished. It does not pertain to a specific level of war, and is generic or universal in nature."

Air/Sea battle operating concepts can be implemented against any possible adversary and in various escalatory environments if adopted correctly and not just China. In theory, the adoption of greater coordination and tactics between the US Navy and Air Force could be used in any area where conflict occurs on the high seas and in the air. It can be adapted to fight in high intensity great power war or smaller conflicts, such as the case in Libya. A recent article in *Aviation Weekly* put it best:

"(Air/Sea Battle)So it is not about fighting China, but maintaining a military balance to sustain stability in the region—but *it is a military concept* for combat operations, which responds to visible Chinese developments and China's lack of transparency about strategy and intentions."

While the Air/Sea battle concept could be highly escalatory in nature, it is surely one of many war fighting scenarios US strategic planners have developed. Such a strategy of attempting to unify the combined power of the US Navy and Air Force to maximize combat effectiveness is a sound strategy, especially in an era of decline budgets and shrinking R&D dollars.

It is more than likely that US planners have multiple strategies at their disposal to handle the vast expanses of tactical contingencies that may develop if a possible conflict with China were to develop. Ambiguity is important when crafting war fighting operational concepts. Ambiguity and secrecy are key. While the concept of Air/Sea battle is one of such strategies, it more than likely one of many that will never be full detailed, unless war does break out. One need not fear a "concept". One would need to fear how that "concept" is deployed in war fighting.

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The following is an excerpt from the forthcoming policy analysis from the Foreword Report:

” Harsh Realities, Alliances, and Strategic Ambiguity:US Policy Choices in East Asia.”

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### **About the author:**

Harry serves as Editor-In-Chief for The Diplomat as well as a CSIS: WSD Handa Fellow. He has served in the past as Deputy Editor for e-IR. He specializes in security studies with a keen interest in modern Chinese military strategy and foreign policy. Harry has written in publications including The Diplomat, East Asia Forum and the Foreword Report.