

The Air-Sea Battle Concept

Throughout the history of warfare, adversaries have endeavored to deny each other freedom of action and access to areas where operations could be mounted that threaten campaign objectives.

This fundamental of warfare was vividly highlighted during Operation DESERT STORM in 1991, when the access granted by allies and partners was exploited by the overwhelming capabilities of the U.S. military to quickly liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. In the aftermath of DESERT STORM, it was apparent to many potential adversaries that it would be inadvisable to oppose the U.S. in a force-on-force conflict, and they explored how to disrupt U.S. power projection through means designed to complicate both movement to and maneuver within an area of mutual interest. These two elements of an adversary's comprehensive warfare strategy are referred to as "anti-access" and "area denial" or "A2/AD".

Over the past two decades, the development and proliferation of advanced weapons, targeting perceived U.S. vulnerabilities, have the potential to create an A2/AD environment that increasingly challenges U.S. military access to and freedom of action within potentially contested areas. These advanced systems encompass diverse capabilities that include ballistic and cruise missiles; sophisticated integrated air defense systems; anti-ship weapons ranging from high-tech missiles and submarines to low-tech mines and swarming boats; guided rockets, missiles, and artillery, an increasing number of 4th generation fighters; low-observable manned and unmanned combat aircraft; as well as space and cyber warfare capabilities specifically designed to disrupt U.S. communications and intelligence systems. In combination, these advanced technologies have the potential to diminish the advantages the U.S. military enjoys in the air, maritime, land, space, and cyberspace domains today. If these advances continue and are not addressed effectively, U.S. forces could soon face increasing risk in deploying to and operating within previously secure forward areas--and over time in rear areas and sanctuaries--ultimately affecting our ability to respond effectively to coercion and crises that directly threaten the strategic interests of the U.S., our allies, and partners.

Air-Sea Battle

Appreciating the need to address the growing challenge posed by the emerging A2/AD environment, the Secretary of Defense directed the Department of the Air Force and the Department of the Navy to develop an Air-Sea Battle Concept. In response, the services designed an operational concept, focused on the ways and means necessary to neutralize current and anticipated A2/AD threats, to ensure our Joint force maintains the ability to project power and protect U.S. national interests.

The Air-Sea Battle Concept centers on networked, integrated, attack-in-depth to disrupt, destroy and defeat (NIA-D3) A2/AD threats. This approach exploits and improves upon the advantage U.S. forces have across the air, maritime, land, space and cyberspace domains, and is essential to defeat increasingly capable intelligence gathering systems and sophisticated weapons systems used by adversaries employing A2/AD systems. Offensive and defensive tasks in Air-Sea Battle are tightly coordinated in real time by networks able to command and control air and naval forces in a contested environment. The air and naval forces are organized by mission and networked to conduct integrated operations across all domains.

The concept organizes these integrated tasks into three lines of effort, wherein air and naval forces attack-in-depth to disrupt the adversary's intelligence collection and command and control used to employ A2/AD weapons systems; destroy or neutralize A2/AD weapons systems within effective range of U.S. forces; and defeat an adversary's employed weapons to preserve essential U.S. Joint forces and their enablers. Through NIA-D3, air and naval forces achieve integrated effects across multiple domains, using multiple paths to increase the resilience, agility, speed and effectiveness of the force.

Air-Sea Battle is a limited operational concept designed to address an adversary's A2/AD capabilities. It is not a concept aimed at any particular potential adversary, nor a campaign plan designed to accomplish a specific national objective. Instead, it is a concept that will spark innovation and development of the means to support future operations. The Air-Sea Battle Concept identifies the actions needed to defeat A2/AD threats and the materiel and non-materiel solutions required to execute those actions.

Implementing the Air-Sea Battle Concept

There are three key components to implementation of the Air-Sea Battle Concept by the Department of Defense. The first is institutionalizing the concept. An enduring Air-Sea Battle Office, manned by representatives from all four services, has been established to facilitate further concept exploration, refinement and validation. The second component is service alignment, which will be achieved through adherence to the concept's operational design and description of how capabilities shall be integrated to defeat A2/AD threats. The final component of implementation is the completion of ASB Concept initiatives, comprised of Doctrine, Organization, Training, Materiel, Leadership & Education, Personnel, and Facilities (DOTMLPF) solutions that have been collaboratively developed. These carefully considered initiatives, once implemented, will provide capabilities which are complementary where appropriate, redundant when mandated by capacity requirements, and fielded with integrated acquisition strategies that seek efficiencies where they can be achieved.

While Air-Sea Battle is fiscally informed, the concept was not prompted by fiscal constraints. Prudent efficiencies are a consideration of Air-Sea Battle, but some redundancy and overmatch is necessary in specific areas to lower risk to mission and to forces conducting those missions. The Air Force and Navy Departments would likely have pursued Air-Sea Battle solutions independently, but the accelerating A2/AD threat to global stability demands a smarter, more integrated approach. Air-Sea Battle Concept solutions must and will be collaboratively implemented by the Air Force and Navy Departments.

Regardless of anticipated advancements in A2/AD threats, implementation of the Air-Sea Battle Concept will ensure the U.S. can gain access and project power in defense of U.S. interests and those of our allies and partners.