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U.S. model for a future war fans tensions with China and inside Pentagon

By [Greg Jaffe](#), Published: August 1

When President Obama called on [the U.S. military to shift its focus to Asia](#) earlier this year, Andrew Marshall, a 91-year-old futurist, had a vision of what to do.

Marshall's small office in the Pentagon has spent the past two decades planning for a war against an angry, aggressive and heavily armed China.

No one had any idea how the war would start. But the American response, laid out in a concept that one of Marshall's longtime proteges dubbed "Air-Sea Battle," was clear.

Stealthy American bombers and submarines would knock out China's long-range surveillance radar and precision missile systems located deep inside the country. The initial "blinding campaign" would be followed by a larger air and naval assault.

The concept, the details of which are classified, has angered the Chinese military and has been pilloried by some Army and Marine Corps officers as excessively expensive. Some Asia analysts worry that conventional strikes aimed at China could spark a nuclear war.

Air-Sea Battle drew little attention when U.S. troops were fighting and dying in large numbers in Iraq and [Afghanistan](#). Now the military's decade of battling insurgencies is ending, defense budgets are being cut, and top military officials, ordered to pivot toward Asia, are looking to Marshall's office for ideas.

In recent months, the Air Force and Navy have come up with more than 200 initiatives they say they need to realize Air-Sea Battle. The list emerged, in part, from war games conducted by Marshall's office and includes new weaponry and proposals to deepen cooperation between the Navy and the Air Force.

A former nuclear strategist, Marshall has spent the past 40 years running the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment, searching for potential threats to American dominance. In the process, he has built a network of allies in Congress, in the defense industry, at think tanks and at the Pentagon that amounts to a permanent Washington bureaucracy.



While Marshall's backers praise his office as a place where officials take the long view, ignoring passing Pentagon fads, critics see a dangerous tendency toward alarmism that is exaggerating the China threat to drive up defense spending.

"The old joke about the Office of Net Assessment is that it should be called the Office of Threat Inflation," said Barry Posen, director of the MIT Security Studies Program. "They go well beyond exploring the worst cases. . . . They convince others to act as if the worst cases are inevitable."

Marshall dismisses criticism that his office focuses too much on China as a future enemy, saying it is the Pentagon's job to ponder worst-case scenarios.

"We tend to look at not very happy futures," he said in a recent interview.

China tensions

Even as it has embraced Air-Sea Battle, the Pentagon has struggled to explain it without inflaming already tense relations with China. The result has been an information vacuum that has sown confusion and controversy.

Senior Chinese military officials warn that the Pentagon's new effort could spark an arms race.

"If the U.S. military develops Air-Sea Battle to deal with the [People's Liberation Army], the PLA will be forced to develop anti-Air-Sea Battle," one officer, Col. Gaoyue Fan, said last year in a debate sponsored by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a defense think tank.

Pentagon officials counter that the concept is focused solely on defeating precision missile systems.

"It's not about a specific actor," a senior defense official told reporters last year. "It is not about a specific regime."

The heads of the Air Force and Navy, meanwhile, have maintained that Air-Sea Battle has applications even beyond combat. The concept could help the military reach melting ice caps in the Arctic Circle or a melted-down nuclear reactor in Japan, Adm. Jonathan Greenert, the U.S. chief of naval operations, said in May at the Brookings Institution.

At the same event, Gen. Norton Schwartz, the Air Force chief, upbraided a retired Marine colonel who asked how Air-Sea Battle might be employed in a war with China.

"This inclination to narrow down on a particular scenario is unhelpful," Schwartz said.

Privately, senior Pentagon officials concede that Air-Sea Battle's goal is to help U.S. forces weather an initial Chinese assault and counterattack to destroy sophisticated radar and missile systems built to keep U.S. ships away from China's coastline.

Their concern is fueled by the steady growth in China's defense spending, which has increased to as much as \$180 billion a year, or about one-third of the Pentagon's budget, and China's increasingly aggressive behavior in the [South China Sea](#).

"We want to put enough uncertainty in the minds of Chinese military planners that they would not want to

take us on,” said a senior Navy official overseeing the service’s modernization efforts. “Air-Sea Battle is all about convincing the Chinese that we will win this competition.”

Like others quoted in this article, the official spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject.

A military tech ‘revolution’

Air-Sea Battle grew out of Marshall’s fervent belief, dating to the 1980s, that technological advancements were on the verge of ushering in a new epoch of war.

New information technology allowed militaries to fire within seconds of finding the enemy. Better precision bombs guaranteed that the Americans could hit their targets almost every time. Together these advances could give conventional bombs almost the same power as small nuclear weapons, Marshall surmised.

Marshall asked his military assistant, a bright officer with a Harvard doctorate, to draft a series of papers on the coming “revolution in military affairs.” The work captured the interest of dozens of generals and several defense secretaries.

Eventually, senior military leaders, consumed by bloody, low-tech wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, seemed to forget about Marshall’s revolution. Marshall, meanwhile, zeroed in on China as the country most likely to exploit the revolution in military affairs and supplant the United States’ position as the world’s sole superpower.

In recent years, as the growth of China’s military has outpaced most U.S. intelligence projections, interest in China as a potential rival to the United States has soared.

“In the blink of an eye, people have come to take very seriously the China threat,” said Andrew Hoehn, a senior vice president at Rand Corp. “They’ve made very rapid progress.”

Most of Marshall’s writings over the past four decades are classified. He almost never speaks in public and even in private meetings is known for his long stretches of silence.

His influence grows largely out of his study budget, which in recent years has floated between \$13 million and \$19 million and is frequently allocated to think tanks, defense consultants and academics with close ties to his office. More than half the money typically goes to six firms.

Among the largest recipients is the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, a defense think tank run by retired Lt. Col. Andrew Krepinevich, the Harvard graduate who wrote the first papers for Marshall on the revolution in military affairs.

In the past 15 years, CSBA has run more than two dozen China war games for Marshall’s office and written dozens of studies. The think tank typically collects about \$2.75 million to \$3 million a year, about 40 percent of its annual revenue, from Marshall’s office, according to Pentagon statistics and CSBA’s most recent financial filings.

Krepinevich makes about \$865,000 in salary and benefits, or almost double the compensation paid out to the heads of other nonpartisan think tanks such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Brookings Institution. CSBA said its board sets executive compensation based on a review of salaries at other

organizations doing similar work.

The war games run by CSBA are set 20 years in the future and cast China as a hegemonic and aggressive enemy. Guided anti-ship missiles sink U.S. aircraft carriers and other surface ships. Simultaneous Chinese strikes destroy American air bases, making it impossible for the U.S. military to launch its fighter jets. The outnumbered American force fights back with conventional strikes on China's mainland, knocking out long-range precision missiles and radar.

“The fundamental problem is the same one that the Soviets identified 30 years ago,” Krepinevich said in an interview. “If you can see deep and shoot deep with a high degree of accuracy, our large bases are not sanctuaries. They are targets.”

Some critics doubt that China, which owns \$1.6 trillion in U.S. debt and depends heavily on the American economy, would strike U.S. forces out of the blue.

“It is absolutely fraudulent,” said Jonathan D. Pollack, a senior fellow at Brookings. “What is the imaginable context or scenario for this attack?”

Other defense analysts warn that an assault on the Chinese mainland carries potentially catastrophic risks and could quickly escalate to nuclear armageddon.

The war games elided these concerns. Instead they focused on how U.S. forces would weather the initial Chinese missile salvo and attack.

To survive, allied commanders dispersed their planes to austere airfields on the Pacific islands of Tinian and Palau. They built bomb-resistant aircraft shelters and brought in rapid runway repair kits to fix damaged airstrips.

Stealthy bombers and quiet submarines waged a counterattack. The allied approach became the basis for the Air-Sea Battle.

Think tank's paper

Although the Pentagon has struggled to talk publicly about Air-Sea Battle, CSBA has not been similarly restrained. In 2010, it published a 125-page paper outlining how the concept could be used to fight a war with China.

The paper contains less detail than the classified Pentagon version. Shortly after its publication, U.S. allies in Asia, frustrated by the Pentagon's silence on the subject, began looking to CSBA for answers.

“We started to get a parade of senior people, particularly from Japan, though also Taiwan and to a lesser extent China, saying, ‘So, this is what Air-Sea Battle is,’” Krepinevich said this year at an event at another think tank.

Soon, U.S. officials began to hear complaints.

“The PLA went nuts,” said a U.S. official who recently returned from Beijing.

Told that Air-Sea Battle was not aimed at China, one PLA general replied that the CSBA report mentioned

the PLA 190 times, the official said. (The actual count is closer to 400.)

Inside the Pentagon, the Army and Marine Corps have mounted offensives against the concept, which could lead to less spending on ground combat.

An internal assessment, prepared for the Marine Corps commandant and obtained by The Washington Post, warns that “an Air-Sea Battle-focused Navy and Air Force would be preposterously expensive to build in peace time” and would result in “incalculable human and economic destruction” if ever used in a major war with China.

The concept, however, aligns with Obama’s broader effort to shift the U.S. military’s focus toward Asia and provides a framework for preserving some of the Pentagon’s most sophisticated weapons programs, many of which have strong backing in Congress.

Sens. [Joseph I. Lieberman \(I-Conn.\)](#) and [John Cornyn \(R-Tex.\)](#) inserted language into the 2012 Defense Authorization bill requiring the Pentagon to issue a report this year detailing its plans for implementing the concept. The legislation orders the Pentagon to explain what weapons systems it will need to carry out Air-Sea Battle, its timeline for implementing the concept and an estimate of the costs associated with it.

Lieberman and Cornyn’s staff turned to an unsurprising source when drafting the questions.

“We asked CSBA for help,” one of the staffers said. “In a lot of ways, they created it.”

Julie Tate contributed to this report.

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