



USN photo by Mass Comm. Spec. 3rd Class Ryan J. Mayes

The AirSea Battle concept is becoming more of an operational reality with every passing day, senior USAF and Navy leaders now say. AirSea Battle ideas are being put to the test in a range of anti-access, area-denial (A2/AD) scenarios ranging from exercises to joint experiments and simple USAF-Navy coordination activities around the world.

But the fiscal climate for the Pentagon is worsening, and the military services are attempting to reset from more than a decade supporting irregular warfare operations. ASB advocates are now pushing back against criticism—from

inside and outside the Pentagon—suggesting the Air Force and Navy are too enamored with the concept.

“The US and our allies and our partners have interests and shared interests,” said Lt. Gen. Burton M. Field, the deputy chief of staff for operations, plans, and requirements on the Air Staff, in a joint talk with his Navy counterpart at the Air Force Association’s February Air Warfare Symposium in Orlando, Fla. Underpinning all of these, and the theme that pervades the January 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance, is what Field called “unimpeded access to the global commons”—that being air, space, the world’s waterways, and the

freedom to use space and cyberspace anywhere.

After the 2009 directive from then-Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates to work solutions for the concept, the Air Force and Navy “looked at each other and said we have a lot of capability between the two of us,” Field said—and thus ASB came to fruition. Much has occurred since the idea was drafted in a classified memo between the services and articulated in the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review which said the Air Force and Navy would develop a “joint air-sea battle concept for defeating adversaries across the range of military operations.” A great deal of time and effort

AirSea Battle's Battle

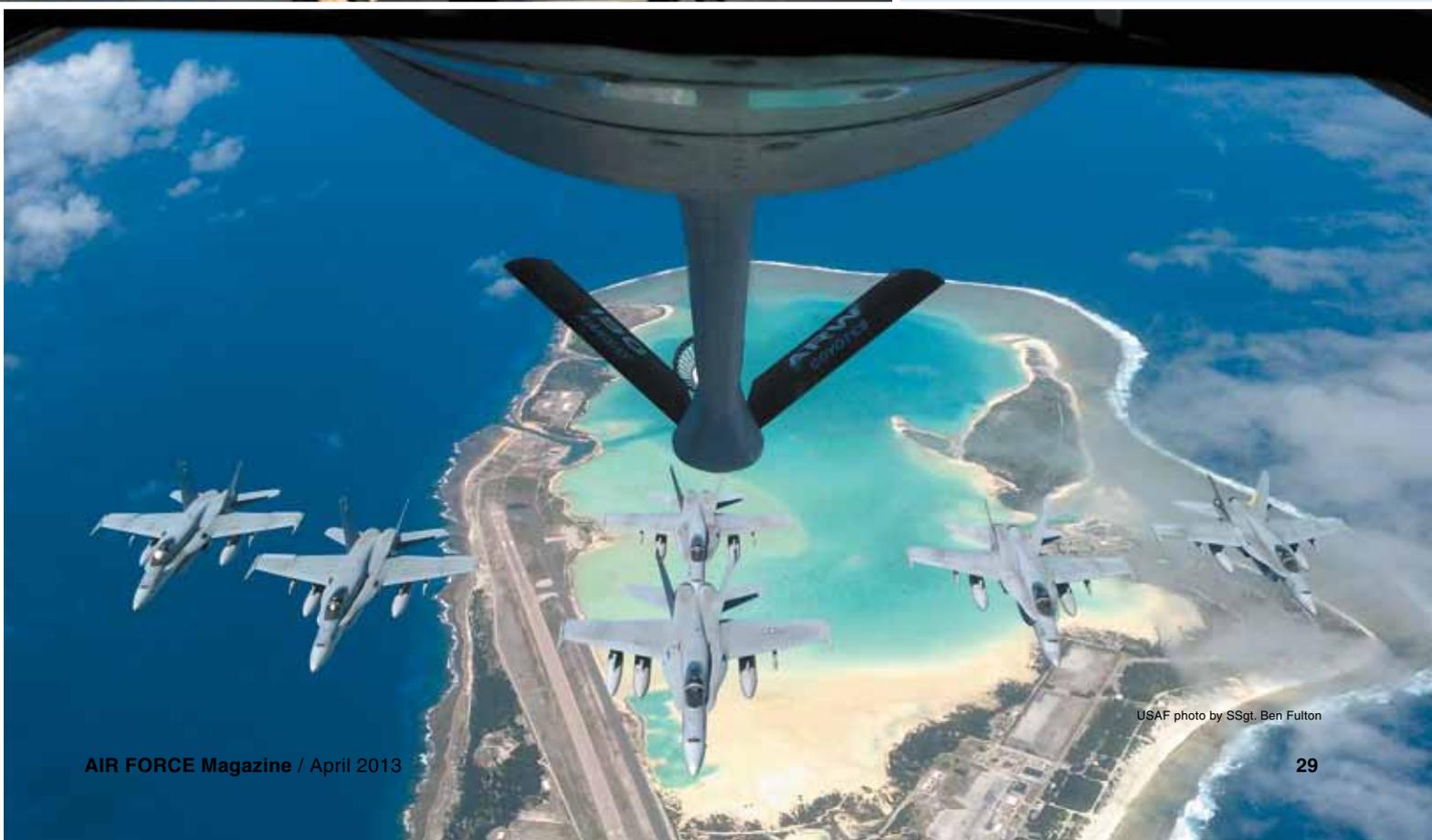
The air and maritime concept is maturing, but must fight off interservice rivalries and Pentagon politics.

A USAF HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopter lifts off from USS Nimitz during the Joint Task Force Exercise in November 2012. During JTFEX, Air Force assets trained in a threat environment unlike recent operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Below, a formation of Navy F/A-18s approaches a USAF KC-135 for refueling over Wake Island in the Pacific.

By Marc V. Schanz, Senior Editor

has been spent working on ASB—both in and out of the Pentagon—and on what it aims to do, senior officials say. Now it must become operational if it will be credible.

Rear Adm. Bruce E. Grooms, the Navy's assistant deputy chief of naval operations for operations, plans, and strategy, spoke alongside Field in Orlando, where they gave some of the most wide-ranging comments on the progress of ASB to date by senior uniformed officials. The ASB concept, the pair argued, is far larger than discussions often centering on platforms such as bombers or ships. It is about connectivity and networks and being able to understand each other when it comes time to fight. This is why experimentation has focused a great deal on networks, understanding them and linking them with existing capabilities within each service culture.



USAF photo by SSgt. Ben Fulton



USAF Capt. Justin Pavoni checks maintenance books before a mission during Razor Talon at Seymour Johnson AFB, N.C. The exercise tested cutting-edge operational concepts from AirSea Battle.

“It would be great if a submarine captain ... could poke his head above water ... and say, ‘Hey, I need to use a [remotely piloted aircraft] to make this happen,’” said Field. Cross-service communication and coordination, whether a sub captain using USAF remote assets, or Aegis ships providing “third-party targeting” information to fighters or bombers, are concepts which will only work if they are exercised and practiced, he added. Until you have the links and the tactics, techniques, and procedures, “it’s not going to happen,” Field said.

Grooms commented that ASB is forcing a great deal of new thinking about how air and maritime forces interact with each other. “We’re in a different world now,” he said. Fiscal limitations and the need to be interoperable are part of the testing and experimentation phase of ASB. Since 2010, working with Gates, then his successor Leon E. Panetta and Deputy Secretary of Defense Ashton B. Carter, both services have refined the concept, making it more detailed, Grooms said. “But you reach the point where the words on paper are important, but what are the tangible things you are doing to bring warfighting forward in ways that resonate?” he asked rhetorically.

USAF and the Navy are addressing this, the pair noted—working out concepts and initiatives from ASB across the force,

down to the wing level and not letting it get bottled up in the Pentagon.

Several exercises and events have taken place in just the last six months. In November last year, the Air Force’s 563rd Rescue Group deployed more than 150 personnel to NAS North Island, Calif., to participate in the US Third Fleet commander’s Joint Task Force Exercise, a final predeployment certification for the *Nimitz* carrier strike group. During the exercise, USAF assets were put through new maritime scenarios in threat environments vastly different from operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. HC-130Js dropped pararescue jumpers to rescue isolated personnel. Air Force HH-60 Pave Hawks then picked them up. Another scenario included a simulated attack on a carrier group and recovery of personnel from the aftermath. The Air Force’s 55th and 66th Rescue Squadrons also conducted their first-ever maritime gunnery exercise to validate new tactics, techniques, and procedures for opposed, overwater recovery operations.

The Task Ahead

In early February, off the coast of North Carolina, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, and Royal Air Force aircraft held a multinational exercise and planning effort—Razor Talon—employing new operational concepts from AirSea Battle. Six RAF Typhoon aircraft participated in

the exercise, which addressed gaining entry into contested airspace while destroying or disabling air-to-air and surface-to-air threats. The RAF’s inclusion was a noticeable event, and Field confirmed close allies now share in the ASB discussion as well. “We are going to operate in coalitions, ... so we want to bring them into meetings with us,” Field said. But exercising is where the dividends will pay off. “When we are able to go out and train in reality, we can work some of these [issues out],” he said.

Grooms noted the Navy would be part of the Feb. 25 to March 15 Red Flag air combat exercise at the Nellis Range in Nevada, and it would involve a “scenario we will test to see if [an AirSea Battle] concept will work, to carry it forward to the next level.” Combatant commands are also working on cooperation between air and maritime components and on integrating cyber and space control into these operations. Field pointed to examples of partnerships between Pacific Air Forces and the US Pacific Fleet recently.

Turning the concept into operational reality is only part of the task ahead, those close to AirSea Battle deliberations point out. AirSea Battle’s main developers—who occupy a small office of less than 20 personnel in the bowels of the Pentagon—are also partially engaged in a multifront struggle, both inside and outside the building. USAF and Navy staff officers and officials are now trying to push back against what they see as a good deal of obfuscation and confusion about the office and its activities—what is

perceived as an often intentional attempt to mischaracterize the concept for parochial service-driven agendas. “There are a lot of misperceptions about AirSea Battle in general,” Grooms told the audience in Florida. “This is not a strategy in and of itself developed in the confines of the Pentagon that ... excludes what is happening in the real world.” ASB is not an operational plan, not “just about China,” and not an opportunity for resource-hungry program offices to have a “Christmas tree to hang their particular items on,” he said bluntly during his talk. “It is not a resource grab and it is not something just to keep us busy in the Pentagon.”

The tension behind Grooms’ sentiments comes from the concept’s objectives coinciding with an extended drawdown period, as the US pulls back from Afghanistan and the services take stock of their roles and missions in a strategy zeroing in on access and operating in denied areas. While ASB is technically a concept office with no budget authority of its own, the fact that it was built outside of the Joint Staff’s requirements process is telling—and not accidental, several officials asserted. A “unique aspect of AirSea Battle office is the absence of a designated ‘joint’ boss,” former Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton A. Schwartz wrote in *The Journal of International Security Affairs* in late 2012. “The services are committing their own equities to this organization’s efforts and calling for their respective staffs to work with the office.”

Since the office’s emergence from the last QDR, criticism and skepticism has surfaced surrounding its purposes and intent. “For all of you who have spent any quality time in Washington, it’s hard to hide anything,” Grooms said. “In our view, misperceptions are not [necessarily] a bad thing. ... It’s not necessarily an incentive ... for us to disabuse all those misperceptions.” While there are many in the services who do “get it and do understand it,” there are lots of others who are watching who should be kept guessing, he observed. “Do we want to clarify every single detail? Probably not,” he said.

For those working inside the Pentagon on the problems posed by AirSea Battle, the perspective is a bit more unique. According to several sources, Gates and his team assembled the concept and the joint USAF-Navy memo codifying it, in order to avoid getting bogged down in the Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System (known as JCIDS) of the JCS—turning the idea into a “purple” mess.

“We’ve tried to keep it small,” Grooms said. “As you could imagine, we could

get mired in the bureaucracy of process. Here’s a great concept; let’s talk about it for hours and hours. ... But we understand what we need to do.” The ASB office, as currently constructed, reflects Grooms’ approach. It is led, alternately, by an Air Force colonel and a Navy captain and staffed with experienced officers across a multitude of fields—from intelligence to programming and other areas.

Skeptics Abound

As opposed to a sprawling war plan, the actual ASB classified document is a little under 50 pages, according to staff officers who work with the concept.

Gates, then Panetta, wanted to work some really hard problems to inform decisions about resourcing and program priorities, said several staff officers involved. AirSea Battle was the vehicle for examining these issues, at least as they pertain to anti-access and area-denial challenges. To avoid having the office slowed down in the

DOD joint bureaucracy, Gates made sure ASB was segregated from it. Until now, it has largely succeeded in this aim. One staff officer wryly observed that if your average person looked at a diagram of the JCIDS process, they’d be hard pressed to find a more anti-access environment laid out in any war plan.

Peel back just a few layers of the criticism of ASB, however, and it is impossible to separate its discussion from interservice rivalries. The ground services, several staff officers remarked, are not eager for a frank discussion about comparative capabilities in the A2/AD environment because this forum is not one they are well-positioned for in a strategy seen as favoring the air and sea domains.

The Army and Marine Corps have made no secret of their skepticism and frustration with AirSea Battle and have voiced opinions publicly and in private increasingly in recent months. Now that the Pentagon is drawing back from manpower-intensive

A B-52 is flanked by USAF, US Navy, Australian, and Japan Air Self-Defense Force fighters during Cope North, a multilateral and joint service exercise.

Photo by Jim Haseltine





USN photo by Mass Comm. Spec. 1st Class James Kimber

An Air Force CV-22 Osprey hovers over a US Navy ballistic missile submarine, USS Wyoming, just before performing a proof-of-concept personnel evacuation mission.

counterinsurgency wars, the manpower bill is hitting the ground services first. The Army is drawing down from 570,000 soldiers to an estimated 490,000 by Fiscal 2017, while the Marines are going from just over 202,000 to 182,100 by the end of Fiscal 2016.

Many Army and Marine Corps officials appear nervous about conversations in the Pentagon dominated by A2/AD issues. They are making sure they are part of the discussion—and now have representatives in the ASB office.

The Army also revealed last fall it would soon stand up an Office of Strategic Land Power, incorporating US Special Operations Command, the Army, and the Marine Corps, in a move several Navy and Air Force officers see as a check on ASB.

“Those who want to assume away a need for ground force capability—I don’t agree with that,” Army Chief of Staff Gen. Raymond T. Odierno said in a November 2012 discussion at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. “I think it’s a very dangerous, dangerous road for us to go down.”

Odierno said the new OSLP will look at what future conflicts mean to the ground forces: “What are the characteristics and capabilities that we want?” he asked.

The OSLP is only the most recent manifestation of the ground services attempting to grapple with A2/AD ideas. In March 2012, the Army and Marine Corps released “Gaining and Maintaining Access” (GAMA), a doctrinal concept to explain how the two services “project and sustain power, anywhere in the world.” The 20-page document highlights a raft of operations they argue will be necessary in the future, such as seizing or occupying terrain in maritime chokepoints, providing strategic “stay-

ing power,” and neutralizing “landward threats to access.”

The Marine Corps in particular has treaded a careful line in public.

“I wouldn’t characterize it [as] we are skeptical of the concept, but it is not a strategy,” USMC Lt. Gen. John E. Wissler, deputy commandant for programs and resources, said in October 2012 to a Capitol Hill audience of reporters. ASB is a piece of capability the military has to pay attention to, he said, but it should not be made into something it is not designed for.

The Fight We Are In

“It is not ... a nose-on-nose fight between air and sea forces. The joint force has a piece to play in this,” he said. “Our concern is that people will try to take what is a concept and assume it is a strategy and decide that that’s a focus as to what needs to take place, for what needs to take place in the future.”

In private, several Marine Corps officials admit they are not enamored of the idea. Focusing on China is unhelpful, poses nuclear escalation dangers, and ignores the “fight we are in”—irregular warfare and pop-up crises such as Mali and Libya.

One senior defense official repeated a frequent charge leveled by Army and Marine Corps officers, calling the concept a thinly veiled “TOA grab”—a bid for the Air Force and Navy to seize larger shares of the Pentagon’s total obligational authority. Under this theory, AirSea Battle will inordinately consume funds intended for the rest of the military force in the out-years. The Marines Corps and Army, the official argued, would fight hard to make their case in budget battles they see as inevitable in the “Tank,” the nickname for the service Chiefs’ meeting room in the Pentagon.

The jockeying of the land services somewhat misses the point, several charge, as AirSea Battle and GAMA are both concepts nested under the JCS’s “Joint Operational Access Concept.” JOAC is Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Army Gen. Martin E. Dempsey’s attempt to get a “joint” way ahead for A2/AD problems. But some see this as the JCS reasserting its influence and putting limits on what ASB can accomplish.

“I don’t think there’s an intention to minimize the scope of AirSea Battle,” said Marine Lt. Gen. George J. Flynn, the director of the JCS force development activities office, during the rollout of JOAC in early 2012.

“We’re talking about the need for other concepts beyond [AirSea Battle], whether it be entry operations, whether it be littoral operations, whether it be sustained land operations,” Flynn stated. “It’s being integrated into what the Chairman’s priorities are. ... His responsibility is joint force capability, not service capabilities.”

Defenders of the ASB office’s work respond to all of this with a simple rejoinder: Air, space, and sea superiority are essential to any military success in the future.

“If air and naval forces cannot establish control of the air, space, cyberspace, and maritime environments, or if they cannot sustain deployed forces, no operational concept is tenable. If ground forces cannot get to the fight or be sustained, ... they will fail to serve the vital interests of America, our allies, and the international system,” wrote Navy Capt. Philip Dupree and USAF Col. Jordan Thomas. Dupree and Thomas are their respective service leads for the ASB office and were writing in a June 2012 *Armed Forces Journal* article.

Still, in the operational realm, the Navy and USAF have a “long list” of items the services need to implement in order to see ASB to fruition, Field said. Some are contentious issues on how to actually link the forces of the two services together, he said at AFA’s symposium. “What’s the appropriate way to do that, the appropriate medium for that?” he asked.

But practice will perfect ASB’s ideas in the real world, he said—and not exercising these concepts will have serious consequences for its viability. “If you can’t fly and you can’t steam and you can’t turn on your radar, then it’s kind of hard to execute anything,” Field said—before adding a blunt warning.

“If we’re not flying and not steaming and not turning on radars, what this will be is an intellectual exercise.” ■