Air Sea Battle: A Case Study in Structural Inattention and Subterranean Forces

Amitai Etzioni

*Armed Forces & Society* published online 14 September 2014
DOI: 10.1177/0095327X14548717

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://afs.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/09/10/0095327X14548717

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:
Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society

Additional services and information for *Armed Forces & Society* can be found at:

- **Email Alerts**: http://afs.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
- **Subscriptions**: http://afs.sagepub.com/subscriptions
- **Reprints**: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
- **Permissions**: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

>> OnlineFirst Version of Record - Sep 14, 2014

What is This?
Air Sea Battle: A Case Study in Structural Inattention and Subterranean Forces

Amitai Etzioni

Abstract
In response to China’s military modernization and growing anti-access/area denial capabilities, the US military has adopted an “Air Sea Battle” (ASB) concept entailing extensive strikes on the Chinese mainland. ASB has been embraced at the Pentagon and increasingly affects procurement decisions. Critics argue that ASB creates grave escalation risks and may incite an expensive arms race. Less discussed, but also of serious concern, is that ASB was adopted with little to no civilian oversight, in a case of “structural inattention.” This failure of civil–military relations derives from institutional factors such as the nature and composition of the White House staff, as well as from the administration’s pragmatic rather than strategic approach to China. It has also been facilitated by “subterranean factors” including the interests of influential military contractors and the military’s own inclination toward conventional warfare.

Keywords
air sea battle, China, civil–military relations, strategy

American threat assessments increasingly view China as a major threat to the United States’ role in the Asia-Pacific region, to its commitments to its allies, to its ability to maintain the international order that the US fosters, and ultimately
to the security of the United States itself. At the same time, the threat of terrorism has been downgraded.¹

The Pentagon reacted to this increased concern with China by preparing the Air Sea Battle (ASB) strategy (sometimes referred to as a concept, plan, or doctrine; from here on simply “ASB”) in case the United States engages in a major war with China. This article examines (a) the ways ASB was formulated and advanced, (b) what it informs us about US civil–military relations, and (c) the role of subterranean forces in the decisions involved.

The Development of ASB

Background

The United States maintains a global military presence. In East Asia, the US stations air and naval assets and tens of thousands of troops.² It has military alliances with Japan, South Korea, and Australia, and maintains close military relations with Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines.

Wary of encirclement, China has invested in military capabilities designed to prevent US forces from operating effectively near or over China.³ This “anti-access/area denial” (A2/AD) strategy entails missiles, submarines, air defenses, and fighter aircraft to exploit the vulnerabilities of US expeditionary forces, including America’s distance from East Asia and its reliance on satellite communications, fixed military bases, and air power. In particular, China has developed antiship missiles that threaten that centerpiece of US power projection, the aircraft carrier.

ASB: A Military Response

US analysts have warned that Chinese A2/AD assets constitute a “long-term threat to the credibility” of US commitments to local allies and regional stability.⁴ In the event of conflict with the United States over Taiwan, Chinese military doctrine calls for preemptive strikes on US bases in the western Pacific, while A2/AD assets prevent US forces from approaching China.⁵ The Pentagon’s think tank on emerging security threats, the Office of Net Assessment, warned the US might lose such a war.⁶

Such threat assessments led the US Pacific Air Force Command to advocate ASB.⁷ The 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review, which was approved by Defense Secretary Gates, lists “deterring and defeating aggression in anti-access environments” as one of the six key mission areas, and calls for a “joint air-sea battle concept . . . to counter growing challenges to U.S. freedom of action,””⁸ including by “adversaries equipped with sophisticated anti-access and area denial capabilities.”⁹ The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments¹⁰ released two reports, “Why AirSea Battle?”¹¹ and “AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept,” that fleshed out the ASB plan.¹² The opening of the “Multi-Service
Office to Advance AirSea Battle” in November 2011 marked ASB’s shift from the conceptual to the implementation phase (discussed subsequently).

ASB envisions “interoperable air and naval forces” executing “networked, integrated attacks-in-depth to disrupt, destroy, and defeat enemy anti-access area denial capabilities,” clearing the way for traditional expeditionary warfare to proceed safely. This would be accomplished by “attacking effectively first” against the Chinese mainland with conventional weapons like guided missiles and non-conventional ones like cyberwarfare. Thus, the first phase of ASB would involve “blinding” and “suppression” campaigns on key facilities including intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and “command-and-control networks,” as well as “long-range weapons that could target U.S. bases and carrier groups,” “the radar systems needed to cue them,” “Chinese satellites and anti-satellite weapons,” and “Chinese missile launchers.” The cumulative effect of these strikes is expected to degrade China’s extensive A2/AD and make it “extremely difficult” for China to organize its forces.

Criticisms and Repositioning

Critics argue that ASB uses a sledgehammer where a scalpel is needed. By attacking numerous targets on the Chinese mainland, ASB aggravates the psychological and political factors that lead to escalation, threatening to turn a limited war into a ruinous and possibly nuclear war fought to achieve unconditional surrender. Even ASB’s proponents admit that attacking China’s intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capacity might undermine its early warning systems, leading to “an immediate effect on strategic nuclear and escalation issues.”

In addition to escalation, ASB critics argue that it risks aggravating what international relations theory refers to as the “security dilemma”—one state’s defensive measures may be perceived by another state as aggressive, leading the second state to take its own defensive measures that in turn alarm the first state, leading hostility and military procurement to spiral out of control. The United States might intend ASB to deter China from aggression against Taiwan or other Asian states, but the broad attacks on Chinese military capabilities that it entails could serve as a preemptive strike. From the perspective of China’s military in particular, ASB’s emphasis on systems able to target the Chinese mainland is aggressive and “bound to lead” to an arms race.

In response to these criticisms, the Pentagon “walked back” from the position that ASB specifically targets China. The Air Force Chief of Staff argued that ASB “is not the design for any particular region of the world” and the “inclination [of the press] to narrow down on a particular scenario is unhelpful.” “Unhelpful,” of course, does not mean wrong. In 2012, the Joint Staff subsumed ASB into the “Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC),” a “larger war-fighting context applicable anywhere in the world.” Officials have also been at pains to point out that the actual “Air Sea Battle Office” is small and has limited responsibilities.
As noted previously, however, ASB did originate in concept articles specific to China, and Pentagon officials continue to concede that ASB remains focused on China, the only potential adversary investing heavily in A2/AD aside from, to a “far lesser extent,” Iran and North Korea. Indeed, in numerous recent publications discussing ASB, by American military experts, China is clearly the target.

Is ASB Part of the “Pivot to Asia?”

In addressing the question of what the development of ASB informs us about civil–military relations in the United States—the question arises of where ASB fits into the general foreign policy of the United States with regard to China. This is crucial for the issue at hand, because for the civilian control to be effective, military strategies must fit into the nation’s general foreign policy.

The “Pivot to Asia” is viewed as a centerpiece of President Obama’s foreign policy in his second term. One may hence ask whether ASB is not part of this shift of attention and resources to the Far East. There are differences of opinion as to what the “pivot” really entailed. According to the speech writer who claims to have inserted the term into Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s October 2011 editorial America’s Pacific Century, it was merely a catch phrase and did not reflect any of the deliberations that typically precede major and even not so major policy decisions. The term was later adopted by the White House, critics argue, mainly as a part of the 2012 reelection campaign, both to distract attention from the failing wars in Iraq and in particular Afghanistan and to show that Democrats have a “strong” foreign policy. Defenders of the term point out that it is consistent with Obama’s identity as “America’s first Pacific president” and his longstanding belief that the world’s “center of gravity […] is shifting to Asia.”

In any case the pivot was not considered a major military drive but one that, according to the White House, involved more “attention” to the region, more high-level visits, more diplomatic initiatives, and some very minor military repositioning (such as the deployment of 250 Marines to Darwin, Australia, 2,600 miles from China) and four naval vessels to Singapore. This is a far cry from a major military commitment of the kind that ASB entails and the foreign policy implications of such a commitment.

Most telling, given the reactions to the pivot by worried European and Middle Eastern allies, and the countermobilization by China—the Obama administration dropped the term altogether, replacing it with “rebalancing,” which implies merely restoring the troop levels in the Pacific regions to what they were before the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. However aggressive one considers ASB, or essential and necessary—it entails a much greater military buildup than one folds into “rebalancing”.

ASB and Civil–military Relations: Structural Inattention

The article turns next to ask how ASB advanced beyond the kind of contingency plan that the Pentagon maintains for a large variety of possibilities—and toward
a major shift in procurement, weapon development, and force structure (outlined subsequently). This article first attempts to show that the Pentagon was able to proceed because the White House was otherwise occupied (Lack of Civilian Review subsection) and next compares this particular form of civil–military relations to other ones previously studied (Structural Inattention in Civil–military Relations Theory subsection); it then suggests that inattention was not inadvertent but structural (The Structural Sources of Inattention subsection); and finally asks what role vested interests played in the rise of the ASB (The Role of Vested Interests: Subterranean Forces subsection).

**Lack of Civilian Review**

An idealized model of civil–military relations would lead one to expect that (a) the military will be on the alert for new threats and prepare plans to respond to them; (b) such plans are in place for a large variety of threats; (c) before these plans can move from position papers to significant changes in the military arsenal (i.e., in procurement) and force structure and deployment, they will be reviewed by the White House and Congress; (d) in its deliberations the White House would draw on sources of threat assessments other than the military (e.g., the Central Intelligence Agency [CIA]) and other sources of ideas about the best ways to respond to the new threats, especially from the State Department and civilian think tanks; (e) Congress would help these deliberations by conducting hearings about US foreign policy options, and about changes in the military budget, procurement of weapons, and force structure; (f) the public would engage in ensuring its understanding and support for major changes in foreign policy, in particular when they may result in a major war. True, this ideal is rarely fully implemented; however, it still can serve as a measuring rod to assess how far actual civil–military relations deviate from the democratic ideal and allow one to specify in what particular ways such deviations occur.

As far as one can determine from unclassified sources, ASB has not yet been subject to such a White House review, but is nevertheless, albeit slowly, evolving beyond a mere contingency plan or position paper to a major shift in the military’s arsenal, force structure, and deployment. With major arms systems already ordered to implement ASB and spending estimated to surpass US$500 million over the next decade (see subsequently for details), and major changes in force structure (cutting the Army and building up the Air Force and Navy), ASB is evolving way beyond a concept or contingency plan. It is proper to consider it as the implementation of a military strategy with clear goals and the lining up of the means needed to implement it.

Several detailed accounts have been published about deliberations in the White House on China during the period in which ASB was developed. None of them so much as mentions a review of ASB—or ASB even nominally—and all reveal that whatever amalgam of foreign policy decisions the White House was making in
this period with regard to China were not compatible with the foreign policy implications of ASB.

In his 618-page memoir, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates provides a very detailed account of his meetings in the White House and the lessons learned from them on civil–military relations. These include details about deliberation on numerous subjects such as the surge, changes in the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy, the closing of the Guantanamo Bay detention facility, and the controversy over the firing of General McChrystal among many others. ASB is not on the list of subjects discussed; it is not even mentioned once.

As far as the policies Secretary Gates pursued with regard to China, he reports that “improving the military-to-military relationship with Beijing was a high priority” for the administration. The United States sought to “build on previous cooperative exchanges” and “open a dialogue on sensitive subjects like nuclear strategy as well as contingency planning on North Korea,” in order to “prevent misunderstandings.”34 His most confrontational move entailed no more than encouraging China’s neighbors to “meet together” to increase their bargaining power relative to China.35

One might expect the Office of the Secretary of Defense to play an important role, along with the White House, in civilian oversight of the military, or at least to play an intermediary role between the White House and Pentagon. In this case, however, based on Gates’ detailed memoirs, one cannot but conclude that he was besieged by other issues and signed off on ASB without a careful review. There is no indication he raised the issue with the National Security Council.

Jeff Bader, who served as senior director for East Asian affairs on the National Security Council (NSC) from January 2009 to April 2011, released a book that reviews foreign policy during this period in 2012. He never mentions a review of a foreign policy that remotely resembles the one that ASB implies. Indeed, Bader does not mention ASB at all. Bader’s portrayal of the Obama administration presents an emphasis on cooperation with China. He reports that the principles of the Obama administration’s China policy are to “build a stable, predictable, and positive relationship with China, with substantial cooperation on political and security issues, progress on economic issues, and clarity on human rights issues” through “frequent and respectful [high-level] interaction,” “extensive strategic dialogue,” and, in the toughest language, “firmness when the Chinese appeared to be overreaching, or allies needed to be reassured.”36

David Sanger, who was chief Washington correspondent for The New York Times and who has access to top-level administration officials, wrote a book about the same period called Confront and Conceal. In Sanger’s reports about White House deliberations in the book, ASB gets the same amount of attention it gets from the sources previously cited—none. Sanger finds that Obama came to office determined to offer China “a stake in shaping the rules of the game that’s commensurate with being a rising economic power” in exchange for China playing by the existing rules of the international system, and to set a “tone of accommodation” by not discussing China’s human rights issues.37
Sanger believes that it was this soft line, as well as an arms deal with Taiwan, that encouraged China to more aggressively assert its territorial claims in the South China Sea in 2010. However, even then, Secretary of State Clinton—who closely followed the line set by the White House—encouraged China’s neighbors to express their growing dissatisfaction with China instead of doing so herself—because the administration “deliberately avoided [taking] the lead, in hopes of avoiding a narrative of superpower showdown.”

James Mann finds no discussion of ASB either, though he does elaborate further on the characteristics of Obama’s foreign policy relevant to China in his book, The Obamians. According to Mann, foreign policy often took a back seat to electoral considerations: Obama’s “speeches and rhetoric” on China, as on other issues, often did not “match his private views or policies,” and his advisors focused more on “what to say in public about foreign policy” in order to win elections rather than on “the nuances and subtleties” and “practical details of governance.”

James Steinberg, a highly regarded strategic thinker concerned with China, served both as Deputy Secretary of State and as a member of the NSC Principals Committee. In both roles, he advocated a policy of “strategic reassurance” that is highly incompatible with ASB. One may argue that his “softer” line on China lost, and he resigned from both positions, and those who favored a “tougher” line won, hence—the ASB. However, Hillary Clinton’s book Hard Choices makes it clear that even her harder line merely meant calling on various Asian nations to act together to counterbalance China—rather than for the United States to push back via a military buildup. The tougher line reflected the “leading from behind” posture that draws on a multilateral approach and capacity building of allies, rather than significant increases in the United States’s own commitment. For the United States, the focus should be, as President Obama put it, on nation building at home—and curtailing the military size and budget.

To illustrate what inattention means, it is best to compare it to deliberations preceding decisions that did get attention. Most notable are the deliberations that preceded the 2009 decision to significantly increase the number of troops sent to Afghanistan, often referred to as the surge. They entailed twenty-five hours of meetings led by the president over three months, as well as congressional hearings and extensive media coverage and public debates. Other, less extensive deliberations accompanied decisions on whether to invade Iraq in 2003, the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, drone strikes and extrajudicial executions, and the National Security Agency (NSA) programs. Not only have the White House and Congress failed to review ASB, but there has also been little public debate over the concept. Whatever deliberations took place were largely confined to a small number of select military experts and foreign policy scholars.

**Structural Inattention in Civil–military Relations Theory**

Issues previously raised about civil–military relations have included military insubordination to civilian authorities (as many view General MacArthur’s conduct
during the Korean war\textsuperscript{46}; efforts by the military to constrain the president’s options, either by publicly revealing its own preferences (as some argue it did about the Afghan surge\textsuperscript{47}), or by using testimony before Congress to promote a strategy the military favored.\textsuperscript{48} Another issue has been excessive civilian micromanagement of the military (as some viewed President Carter’s role in the Iran hostage rescue\textsuperscript{49}). ASB does not resemble any of these cases, and instead represents a case of what might be called structural inattention by civilian authorities, the White House and Congress. By structural inattention, I mean that the civilian authorities did not pay attention to or evaluate ASB as it moved from a concept toward implementation of a strategy because of the ways civil–military relations are formulated. It was not accidental oversight, but one that reflects institutional factors, outlined subsequently.

In his groundbreaking “Theories of Democratic Civil–Military Relations,” James Burk distinguishes between two kinds of civil–military relations theories: more traditional ones that explain whether civilian or military elites are in command, and new ones that deal with civil–military relations in “mature democracies,” theories that explain the ways a military sustains and protects democratic values. The article belongs in Burk’s first category, as it deals with the old question of civilian control—focusing on the military’s threat assessment compared to those of other agencies reporting to the White House, especially CIA and State, and on whether the planned line of action was in line with White House China policy—and not with the promotion of democratic values, Burk’s second category.\textsuperscript{50}

In \textit{Common Defense}, Samuel Huntington asserts that military policy is the product of the competition of purposes among individuals and groups and is determined by politics rather than logic. Thus, according to Huntington, “In no case did military leaders initiate major new policies and in no case did they effectively prevent changes in old ones.”\textsuperscript{51} This position reflects Huntington’s general thesis that the military is a very patriotic institution that would not consider usurping civilian authority and that those missteps that occur are due to the “political” nature of the democratic institutions.\textsuperscript{52} It may at first seem that the rise of ASB is a counterfactual case to Huntington’s theory; actually, it shows that the military acted quite in line with his model. It identified a new threat and developed a response. It is the civilian institutions that failed to review it. The factors driving this inattention were only in part political; the other major factor, as we shall see, was organizational.

Peter Feaver’s application of game theory to civil–military relations, the agency theory, offers important insights into the sources of military conduct.\textsuperscript{53} Structural inattention suggests that Feaver’s approach, which assumes that actors are rational, would benefit from adapting, as have other social science disciplines, to the findings of behavioral economics\textsuperscript{54} that actors’ rationality is in fact limited. While “re-litigating” the question of the rationality of actors, which has been debated for decades, lies outside the scope of this article, it is worth noting that (i) actors’ goals are inherently nonrational in that they reflect in part the actors’ values, (ii) actors
are unable to process most information in a logical way, (iii) those who argue they do, achieve this conclusion by defining down rationality. At best, actors have a “bounded rationality”; that is, they act rationally with the parts of the information they can absorb and process—not with all that is available or is needed to make fully rational decisions. ASB is a case study in decision making when the governing agent is blind to relevant information not so much because it is not visible as because the agent’s limited processing capacity is overloaded with other information processing and decision making (evidence to follow subsequently).

Deborah Avant’s *Political Institutions and Military Change* correctly stresses the importance of institutional differences between American and British civil–military relations that derive from America’s strong separation of powers, in particular between the executive and the legislature. Indeed, her observations suggest that in the United States, it is almost impossible for the ideal model (depicted earlier) of civil–military relations to function—because the military must answer to two civilian masters that often have conflicting demands. The rise of ASB, however, does not reflect this structural conflict, because Congress did not pay much more attention to ASB than the White House. (Congress may have been more supportive of ASB because of the role played by vested interests discussed subsequently, but evidence to support this hypothesis is limited.)

In *The Sources of Military Doctrine*, Barry Posen compares the importance of organizational influences and balance-of-power considerations in the formation of military doctrine. For Posen, “organization theory suggests that states will adopt strategic doctrines that emphasize the offensive; remain stagnant when changed circumstances call for innovation; and are not harmonized with national political objectives,” while balance of power theory predicts the adoption of “innovative doctrines” that “vary with circumstances” between “deterrent, defensive, or offensive orientations” depending on “which is most appropriate to current conditions and national goals.” Structural inattention in the case of ASB has elements of both theories: organizational factors played a key role, and an offensive theory was adopted that was not harmonized with national objectives, yet balance of power considerations clearly motivated ASB’s framers.

Risa Brooks in *Shaping Strategy* argues that when the differences in preferences between the civilian and military authorities are high, this leads the military to hoard information, engage in “maverick initiatives,” and internally stress loyalty over competence in promotions. Indeed, ASB may have been advanced in part as a response to the fact that the US military faced cuts in its size and budget following the ending of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the White House preference for domestic expenditures. Moreover, a considerable number of Republicans, concerned with the deficit, voted for general budget cuts that included reductions in defense spending. ASB provides the military with a new major mission. However, there is no hard evidence to show that this is a major reason ASB was promoted as distinct from rising threat assessments of China.
The Structural Sources of Inattention

Sigmund Freud held that there are no accidents; behavior that seems accidental or irrational actually makes sense once we understand the underlying, subconscious forces that shape it. The same rule Freud observed about people also applies to societies. Societal formations and public policies that seem manifestly irrational often reflect the subterranean forces that shape them.

Structural inattention in the case of ASB seems in part due to the ways the White House is staffed. The White House is depicted by some as an “imperial” presidency that disregards the legislature, acts on its own, and unduly intervenes in matters best left to the professionals in various agencies, the military included. Others have depicted the White House as weak, giving orders that agencies, including the military, ignore.

Less attention has been paid to the fact that the president’s staff is small, including 460 White House staff in total (as well as about 350 staff supporting the National Security Council), which is very small compared to the 24,000 strong Pentagon staff. During the year the author served in the White House, several staff members were charged—each with “shadowing” four agencies, aside from other duties. Staff was augmented by personnel “detailed” from other agencies for short periods to the White House, typically three months which could be extended to a maximum of six months. These people were often among those the agencies were most willing to lend to the White House because they were not high performers, and by the time they were trained to perform their White House jobs, they already had to leave. Moreover, the regular White House staff is chosen in part based on political considerations, personal loyalty, and services during the election campaigns, and not necessarily because of their professional expertise. The White House staff is also under great pressure to react to daily events, with the urgent driving out the important, and they tend to be exhausted from working long hours, weekends, and holidays. In this context, a change in course by an agency, such as the Pentagon, which is not flagged by that agency or by dramatic events or some scandal, can often escape review by the White House for long periods of time.

In addition, Jeff Bader describes the White House as largely reactive, driven by events. For example, when the Dalai Lama wanted to meet with President Obama during an October 2009 visit to the United States, the Obama Administration delayed the meeting until 2010 in order to avoid offending the Chinese prior to Obama’s November 2009 visit to China. When the meeting finally took place, it was held in the less formal Map Room rather than the Oval Office.

For ASB to be properly reviewed, one would have to ask what the overall strategic position of the United States is with regard to the rise of China. There are some strategies into which ASB might fit well, and some which it would deeply undermine. For instance, ASB could gain approval if the White House (and Congress) had concluded that China was threatening core to US interests and that, in the longer run, a military confrontation with China was most likely unavoidable.
Some political theorists make this argument based on the “Thucydides trap,” and others because of their analysis of China’s development, its rising power, and its assertive policies. (One should note that even in this case, ASB would have to be compared to other military strategies, most particularly to the one that advocates blockading China rather than engaging in all-out war.)

At the same time, ASB would be either rejected or greatly scaled back and its implementation delayed, if the civilian authorities conclude that the preferred way to deal with China is to embrace the strategy, advocated by Zbigniew Brzezinski and Henry Kissinger, of granting China a considerably greater regional role (somewhat like the sphere of influence the United States carved out for itself in the Western Hemisphere under the Monroe doctrine), let alone if the United States went as far as treating China as a partner in the world order (a concept referred to as the “G2”).

However, the Obama White House has often been criticized for not developing an overarching foreign policy strategy in general (and not just with regard to China). Indeed, the president prided himself on being pragmatic, that is, responding to each challenge on its account. In particular, the Obama White House has not sorted out what its China policy is, oscillating between calls for cooperation and comanagement of world affairs—and calls for China to respect human rights and the international order. Nor has there been a significant public debate with China comparable, for instance, to the debate about the ways to respond to the Iranian nuclear program or the provocations of North Korea.

The White House staff did not include major strategic thinkers concerned with China. Jeffrey Bader, a consummate diplomat, scoffed at the very idea of an overall strategy, arguing that “presidents and nations have no choice but to react to developments as they occur,” while strategy documents “are tucked away in safes and rarely referred to again, certainly not in times of crisis.” Bader quotes an NSC official that “in reality, there’s no such thing as strategy,” just “a series of tactical decisions.” Lacking a strategic basis on which to judge ASB contributed to the inattention.

Hugh White points out that, lacking an overarching foreign policy strategy with regard to China, the United States is “sliding toward rivalry” with China “by default.” White argues that US leaders have yet to, but must, “explain what China’s rise means, the different options which America has in response, what those different options would cost, and which is best for America.” Asked by the chairman of the House Seapower Subcommittee to discuss China’s growing naval power, a series of experts including representatives from the Congressional Research Service, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, and Navy admitted the United States lacks a strategy.

One should note that there are strong forces that agitate against developing strategies, defined here as overarching sets of articulated goals and means for accomplishing them, based on articulated principles. Formulating such a strategy tends to please one part of the political spectrum but antagonizes the other, while a
considerable measure of vagueness allows all parts to assume that their concerns will be taken into account. And a strategy quickly turns into a measuring rod, used to assess whether or not an administration is following it closely, which is often not possible. This is the case, for instance, when US administrations commit themselves to supporting democratic regimes overseas, but end up working with autocracies. The reluctance to articulate a strategy is a general subject that need not be explored here other than to note that the fact that ASB did not find a “home” in any strategy is far from an unprecedented event.

The Role of Vested Interests: Subterranean Forces

The structural civilian inattention to the adoption of ASB is also driven by subterranean forces. The situation is akin to a medical specialist who reads an X-ray and concludes that it justifies a costly operation, which is driven both by his legitimate interpretation of the X-ray (despite the fact that it can also be read as benign)—and the fact that he benefits financially from every intervention. Threat assessments can be legitimately read to suggest that China might pose a threat to American interests, especially if these are broadly defined, and at the same time, decisions as to how to react to them can be influenced by various special interest considerations.

Before discussing an outline of the subterranean forces, it is useful to point out that some argued that ASB is “more rhetorical than material” or even a “fantasy.” Actually, although at an early state of implementation, ASB is becoming an “operational reality” which deeply affects numerous vested interests.

One factor is what sociologists found as the tendency of organizations to engage in goal succession. That is, when the goals assigned to an organization are accomplished, rather than disbanding or greatly scaling back, it often formulates new missions. Famously, after the highly successful March of Dimes helped eradicate polio in the United States, it adopted the new mission of preventing birth defects. After the winding down of two major wars in the Middle East, with no other major war in sight, a president who declared that the war against terror was largely won, a public very weary of military engagements overseas and antiterrorist measures at home (as revealed in the reaction to revelations about the actions of the NSA), and growing political pressures to reduce the budget—even of the military—the Pentagon has an objective need for a new mission. ASB is an answer to this need whether or not that need played a key role in formulating it.

Another factor is the large outlays that are involved. Some reliable estimates indicated that ASB would entail spending US$524 billion in military research and development (R&D) and procurement through 2023. The required weapons, according to Congressman J. Randy Forbes and analyst Eldridge Colby, would include additional Virginia-class submarines and new technologies designed to “sustain our undersea-warfare advantage”; future aircraft with novel capabilities designed to meet “emerging threat environments in the Western Pacific,” including additional long-range bombers that would improve on the B-2; new “credible
kinetic and non-kinetic means to deter potential adversaries from extending a conflict into space”; a “new generation of offensive munitions”; and greater spending, generally speaking, on “cutting-edge and next-generation technologies.”

Mark Gunzinger, who shares the same concerns, coauthored a document with Jan Van Tol, Andrew Krepinevich, and Jim Thomas on ASB in which the authors recommended a host of military expenditures, including “long-range penetrating and stand-off [electronic warfare]-capable platforms (manned and/or unmanned)”; “quantity obscurants, decoys, and false target generators for both offensive and defensive [electronic warfare] missions”; alternatives to GPS navigation [to reduce the] United States’ reliance on GPS for its “precision guided weapons”; directed-energy weapons (DEW); additional unmanned undersea vehicles for intelligence purposes; new mobile mines “deployable by submarines and stealthy Air Force bombers”; “Stockpiling” precision-guided weapons; and additional air tankers. Considerations related to ASB have also led the Navy to prioritize building new missile destroyers. Finally, though Van Tol et al. warn against dependence on “relatively short-ranged land- and sea-based tactical aircraft,” the F-35 fighter in particular has become a pillar of ASB, making up the largest part of projected related spending.

Corporations that specialize in serving the military find themselves in a similar situation as the Pentagon, as the wars in the Middle East are ending. They too have objective interests in new missions and outlets for their production capacities. ASB’s long shopping list provides for such outlets.

There is no single Military–Industrial Complex or Iron Triangle in the United States, as some critics from the left hold. There is no one power elite that meet at night in a motel in Arlington to decide what the military should purchase and how to divide the spoils, or how to promote a strategy that favors its interests. There are, though, a number of military–industrial–congressional alliances that, while competing with each other, do jointly affect US foreign policy and tilt it toward the Far East and away from the Middle East.

A major reason the focus on the Far East is preferable from the viewpoint of such major alliances is that preparing for war in this region is capital-intensive, while wars in the Middle East—fighting terrorists and insurgents—are labor-intensive. Counterinsurgency operations like the Iraq and Afghanistan wars require high troop levels. The main forces used were the Army (Special Forces included), Marines, and CIA. These forces spend a greater part of their budget on personnel costs (salaries and benefits) and use relatively low-cost equipment. Although some corporations specialize in service provisions to these troops and in supplementing them with private contractors, large defense contractors like Lockheed Martin gain little from funds allotted to military salaries and benefits.

By contrast, the major forces to be used in the Far East are those of the Air Force and Navy. These are capital-intensive services that use relatively little labor and buy aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, fighters, and bombers, all manufactured by the private sector at high cost. The business model of major defense contractors,
including Lockheed, Boeing, Northrop Grumman, and General Dynamics, relies on capital intensive rather than labor-intensive expenditures.93

Next, corporations can gain a monopoly or at least a duopoly in the production of many of these so-called big ticket items because the nature of the market discourages competition. The market for major weapons systems is characterized by high entry costs, technical complexity, “winner-takes-all” competitions, and increasing emphasis on versatility rather than diversity of platforms, which facilitates consolidation and even monopolies among producers of such systems (particularly aircraft).94 By winning the contract in 2001 to design and manufacture the Joint Strike Fighter, for example, Lockheed Martin positioned itself as the monopoly player in advanced fighter aircraft. Along the same lines, Huntington-Ingalls has a monopoly on building and servicing US aircraft carriers, and a duopoly (along with General Dynamics) on Navy submarines. Such a position gives producers of major systems certain advantages, as it is difficult for the government to cancel a program if there is no alternative. Despite the technical issues, delays, and cost overruns associated with Lockheed’s F-35 stealth fighter, for example, the Pentagon has little choice but to work with Lockheed for a weapon system that officials consider indispensable.95

One should note in this context that although corporations always played a role in these matters, their leverage over Congress has increased in recent years following several major decisions by the Supreme Court that allowed corporations, in effect, to give unlimited campaign contributions to members of Congress.96 Political scientists differ a great deal in their conclusions about the effects of such campaign contributions. It would take us far afield to sort out in the context of this article, what the “true” answer is, if there is one. However, one should note that some highly regarded scholars find a “robust relationship between defense earmarks and campaign contributions from defense political action committees,”97 while “even after controlling for past contracts and other factors, companies that contributed more money to federal candidates subsequently received more contracts.”98

In short, the kind of military procurement and force structure ASB entails, and the kind favored by major corporations, are one and the same. This was confirmed by an interview with a high-ranking Pentagon official from the Bush Administration; with an official of the Clinton Administration (who has since dedicated his work to the study of the military); and with a designer of ASB.99

The military’s procurement preferences often line up in ways that parallel those of large defense manufacturers. In his insightful essay “Silicon, Iron, and Shadow,” retired US Army Lieutenant General David Barno lays out the three forms of war.100 He points out that the US military strongly prefers to fight World War II-style conflicts in which the naval, air, and land forces of one nation are clearly arrayed against another—what Barno calls “iron wars.” In the words of former Defense Secretary Gates, conventional war is in the military’s “DNA,” leading to a misconception that “if you train and equip to defeat big countries, you
can defeat any lesser threat’’—ignoring the lessons of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Vietnam. Thus, the military, defense contractors, and Congress fight to retain “the big procurement programs initiated during the Cold War” and drag their feet in preparing for asymmetric conflicts against terrorists and insurgents, or what Barno calls “shadow wars.” It was in this sense that, in February 2014, Undersecretary of Defense Kendall referred to the US military as “distracted” by counterinsurgency and at risk of losing its technological superiority. This proclivity further reinforces the preferences for fighting in the Far East over the Middle East. ASB is a form of Iron war suited for the Far East.

**Conclusion**

The argument here advanced is not that ASB is being implemented solely or even mainly because of subterranean forces. Its slow move from a concept to implementation reflects the fact that threat assessments of China can legitimately be interpreted as a major cause for concern and that it is the mission of the US military to prepare for the eventuality that a war with China will evolve. The argument is that once it has been suggested, the subterranean forces are much more likely to support and promote it than oppose it because of the nature of their interests and the way ASB is constituted. And the fact that ASB is the kind of mission that subterranean forces favor makes it much more likely that it will be implemented than if these forces opposed it. This can be readily understood if one considers what the fate of the ASB would be if it entailed major cuts in the procurement of capital-intensive weapon systems, and entailed cutting the budgets of the Navy and the Air Force and increasing the budgets of unconventional American forces needed to fight asymmetric (shadow) wars.

**Acknowledgment**

I am indebted to Rory Donnelly for research assistance and to Lawrence Korb and Dov S. Zakheim for interviews about the Military Industrial complex.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Notes**

1. The 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) viewed terrorist groups as the “greatest threat” to US security, while the 2013 NIE listed cyberattacks and cyberespionage before terrorism, and President Obama indicated in May 2013 that al-Qaeda now posed a
“localized” threat in the Middle East and Africa. In one later speech, a May 2014 commencement address at West Point, Obama stated that “for the foreseeable future,” terrorism remains “the most direct threat to America at home and abroad.”


15. See, for example, Joshua Rovner, “Air Sea Battle and Escalation Risks,” Changing Military Dynamics in China Policy Brief 12, 3-4, accessed May 30, 2014, http://igcc.ucsd.edu/assets/001/503563.pdf. Standard International Trade Classification (SITC) and the Naval War College, January 2012 (The use of a “blinding attack” to intentionally confuse and deceive China increases (1) “misperception,” the difficulty for China of interpreting or trusting “signals of restraint and declarations of limited intent,” and thus negates incentives to exercise restraint; (2) “attribution bias,” China’s distrust of intentions since an attack on the Chinese mainland would seem disproportionate; and (3) “prospect theory” or “loss aversion,” China’s fighting harder due to “actually [facing] a significant loss, rather than simply failing to gain some limited objective.”)

16. Ibid. (Political factors aggravating escalation include (1) fears “that regime change will be the penalty for losing” and (2) “the issues at stake [being] wrapped up in nationalism or ideological principles that inflate [their] value.” For China, a war over disputed territory would raise both issues. Taiwan’s future in particular is a deeply emotional issue in China, and the government in Beijing considers Taiwan a core interest. As the Chinese Communist Party has effectively abandoned communism and its “ideological claim to legitimacy,” its authority now rests on a combination of nationalism and economic growth. If China faces an economic slowdown, the Communist Party of China (CCP) might thus be more aggressive on issues related to nationalism, such as territorial disputes, in order to rally support. At the same time, it would be less likely to survive the kind of humiliating loss that air sea battle, which aims to blind and suppress the Chinese military, might inflict, and thus more likely to escalate the conflict.)

17. See, for example, Hugh White, The China Choice (Collingwood, Australia: Black, 2012): 73-78.

18. Tol et al., AirSea Battle, 66.


21. Ibid.
29. Name disclosed to editor of Armed Forces & Society.
30. See, for example, Andrew J. Nathan, “Easy Target,” American Review, 2012, accessed May 30, 2014, http://americanreviewmag.com/stories/Easy-target (“Also useful in Obama’s upcoming campaign will be the strategic pivot to Asia [which] is more symbol than substance [but] stands ready for use as a campaign tool if needed to shield the President from charges of weakness toward China”).


38. Ibid., 391.

39. Ibid., 242.

40. Ibid., 394.

41. Ibid., 69


46. Although even the US military has suffered from rank insubordination at times, the most prominent example being Gen. MacArthur’s open dissent during the Korean war, which led to his relief by President Truman.


58. See, for example, Feaver, “Crisis as Shirking,” 407-34 (“The military’s reluctance to embrace the Somalia, Bosnia, and Haiti missions has been well documented”).


60. Gates, Duty, 587.


68. “Interview With Henry Kissinger; Interview with Zbigniew Brzezinski,” CNN, January 23, 2011 (“But my sense is that at least those who shape policies in both countries now realize that there is a kind of de facto partnership between China and America, and that it is in our mutual interest for the disagreements not to get out of hand.”); Alex Stark, “Review—Strategic Vision,” E-International Relations, March 29, 2012 (the United States must “disentangle which aspects of China’s external ambitions are unacceptable and pose a direct threat to vital American interests, and which aspects reflect new historical geopolitical and economic realities that can be accommodated, however reluctantly, without damage to key U.S. interests”).


74. This is particularly ironic, given that the subtitle of Bader’s book is “an Insider’s Account of America’s Asia Strategy.” See Bader, Obama and China’s Rise, 140.
75. White, The China Choice, 2.
76. Ibid., 170-71.
86. Tol et al., AirSea Battle, 2010.
to reach ‘80 percent’ of that service’s total budget by the end of the decade” compared to 50–70 percent for the military as a whole in the same time period).


99. These sources wished to remain anonymous. Their names were disclosed to the editor of the *Armed Forces & Society* Journal.


**Author Biography**

**Amitai Etzioni** is a university professor and professor of international relations at The George Washington University. He is the author of numerous books including *Hot Spots: American Foreign Policy in a Post-Human Rights World, From Empire to Community, Security First, Political Unification Revisited, and The Common Good.*