

US Analysts Debate Plans for War Against China

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Global Research, February 10, 2014

[World Socialist Web Site](#)

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Last November's declaration by the Chinese government of an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) reignited a debate within a narrow circle of American strategic analysts—most of whom have served in the military and various government positions for the Bush or Obama administrations. Summing up its content, one of its participants last year characterised the debate as “the war over war with China.”

The provocative flying of US military aircraft through China's ADIZ by the Obama administration and the Japanese government posed the possibility of armed clashes in East Asia. This fact prompted renewed criticism of the current US military doctrine, known as AirSea Battle, on the grounds that its tactics make “escalation” to the point of nuclear war a virtual certainty.

Two critics from the RAND think tank, David Gompert and Terrence Kelly, described AirSea Battle last August in the following terms: “US forces would launch physical attacks and cyberattacks against the enemy's ‘kill-chain’ of sensors and weaponry in order to disrupt its command-and-control systems, wreck its launch platforms (including aircraft, ships and missile sites) and finally defeat the weapons they actually fire. The sooner the kill-chain is broken, the less damage US forces would suffer, and the more damage they will be able to inflict on the enemy.”

Gompert and Kelly noted that Chinese military planning would take into account that the US twice launched pre-emptive air assaults on Iraq, in 1991 and 2003, to wipe out its command-and-control and limited air defence systems. The very conception of destroying China's defensive network before it could retaliate, they commented, meant that “with the advent of AirSea Battle, there is the danger that the US and China are both moving toward military postures and embracing operating concepts—if not war-fighting plans—that create spiralling incentives to act first.”

In other words, a clash last November between US and Chinese aircraft in the ADIZ could have prompted either side to launch a full-scale military response before the other did—up to the point of a desperate Beijing regime deciding to use its nuclear arsenal before it was wiped out by US strikes.

The issue in this debate is not whether United States should be actively planning and preparing for a war on China. The strategists involved take it as a given that the US should use its military might to maintain the dominant position it has held in the Asia Pacific and internationally since the end of World War II.

As Seth Cropsey of the Hudson Institute, another critic of AirSea Battle, told a US Senate subcommittee last December: “With China, our objective ought to be to prevent the rise of

an Asian hegemon, a power that would destroy the current US alliance system in Asia, dominate the world's most populous region economically and militarily, and perhaps extend itself into Eurasia and beyond."

The differences among the analysts are solely over the methods to be employed to contain, and if necessary, crush China as a potential rival to US hegemony.

The alternative being advocated, supposedly to lessen the likelihood of a nuclear holocaust, is largely based on a document written in 2012 by Thomas X. Hammes, titled "Offshore Control: A proposed strategy for an unlikely conflict."

Hammes, a former marine colonel, authored several books on counter-insurgency warfare. He came to prominence in 2006 when, alongside two other ex-military officers, he criticised the conduct of the Iraq invasion and called for Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's resignation. In 2011, Hammes authored criticisms of the Obama administration's escalation of the war in Afghanistan, calling it a "failure in the making." Currently a senior research fellow at the National Defense University, he has published several articles since December promoting his "Offshore Control" plan.

In summary, Hammes proposed in 2012 that the US repudiate direct attacks on targets located on the Chinese mainland and focus instead on preparing for an economic blockade of China, which is included within AirSea Battle but only as a secondary aspect.

Offshore Control, he wrote, "seeks termination of the conflict on US terms through China's economic exhaustion without damage to mainland China's infrastructure or the rapid escalation of the conflict... It recognises the fact that the concept of decisive victory against a nation with a major nuclear arsenal is fraught with risks, if not entirely obsolete."

Hammes advocated that the US military instead "cripple China's export trade, which is essential to China's economy." This would involve sinking or intercepting and turning back vessels—in other words, what in peacetime would be piracy on a mass scale. He noted that "80 percent of China's imported oil transits the Straits of Malacca. If Malacca, Lombok, Sunda, and the routes north and south of Australia were controlled, these shipments could be cut off," causing a massive energy crisis.

Australia, which is crucial to the Pentagon's war plans, is central to Offshore Control. One of the major "advantages" that Hammes cited for his strategy was that "the only bases the United States requires to sustain the operation are either on US territory or in Australia." The US would not require its facilities in Japan, South Korea or elsewhere in Asia. Countries across the region, he declared, would be "free to declare their neutrality" and stay out of the war—with the exception of Australia, which he simply assumed would loyally function as the main staging base and ally in the US military efforts to collapse the Chinese economy.

Hammes concluded: "Rather than seeking a decisive victory against the Chinese, Offshore Control seeks to use a war of economic attrition to bring about a stalemate and cessation of conflict with a return to a modified version of the status quo."

A self-confessed supporter of the Offshore Control plan, Mark Morris of the National War College, detailed the envisaged scenario last November:

"War starts and the United States and its allies begin offshore controlling. Chinese seaborne

imports and exports are reduced drastically. Factory production drops and millions of workers are laid off; soon the numbers soar to tens of millions and perhaps a hundred million... When jobs are not found, they start protesting... Now the Chinese Communist Party is faced with tens of millions of unemployed protesters. It will try to blame some enemy that can't be seen... Not believing the party, discontent grows and protests increase. The Chinese Communist Party orders the People's Liberation Army to break the blockade, but the People's Liberation Army-Navy replies that China doesn't have the right type of Navy for that and are unable to comply with the orders. Discontent grows and protests become more worrisome to party leaders. The Chinese Communist Party declares that it has taught the foreign dog a lesson and seeks a [peace] conference at Geneva."

Among Hammes's assumptions was the "high probability that a conflict with China would be a long war" that "would result in massive damage to the global economy." In plain language, a blockade of the country where over 15 percent of the world's gross domestic product is produced, and which is the largest trading partner of at least 77 other countries, would shatter globally integrated finance, production and trade. It would trigger an economic depression, wipe out trillions of dollars in assets and destroy tens of millions of jobs. Hammes made the bizarre suggestion that, amid such a socio-economic catastrophe, "maritime geography would allow the rest of the world to rebuild trading networks without China."

Hammes detailed the range of military and diplomatic responses that China was likely to make, which included possible attacks on Japan and South Korea, a full-scale invasion of Taiwan, challenges to the "legality of the blockade" and efforts to "bring European nations to pressure the United States to cease interfering with trade."

Hammes's central assumption was that the Chinese ruling elite would not retaliate with its nuclear arsenal against US and Australian attempts to destroy the country's economy because "no-one can win a major nuclear exchange."

Such an assumption is unjustifiable. US imperialism has attempted to economically strangle a rival before, provoking a full-scale war in which every weapon available was used. In June 1941, the US placed an oil embargo on Japan, demanding that it withdraw its forces from China and French Indo-China. The Japanese ruling elite, confronting the prospect of economic collapse and unprepared to accept US terms, responded with the attack on Pearl Harbour and the invasion of South East Asia to try to gain a quick strategic advantage. The Pacific war was marked by savagery on both sides and ended with the US dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Today, there are simply no grounds for assuming that a blockade of China would not trigger acts by the besieged Beijing regime that would lead to all-out war, including the use of nuclear weapons by both sides.

The documents being produced by US analysts are a staggering insight into the mind-set of individuals whose strategic views heavily influence the decisions of the American government. They are calmly debating how to fight World War III and plunge the world's population into an abyss. While they ardently profess that they do not want a nuclear war, they are prepared to risk provoking one. In the final analysis, they consider it a better outcome than US imperialism losing its global dominance.

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