

## **AirLand Battle and Modern Warfare**

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This paper is about AirLand battle and its application in modern warfare. The topic of AirLand battle has lain dormant for over a decade, as the United States has been immersed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today, the theory is again under consideration. This is happening for three reasons. First, the rise of competitors for the United States means that future wars will not simply be irregular. How to fight a conventional war is again a major question. Second, in this context, the US Army is reconsidering its role in US defense and reassessing its doctrines. Third, AirLand Battle has received increased attention because of the introduction of a sister doctrine—AirSea Battle—which attempts to use some aspects of AirLand Battle.

This paper will explain AirLand Battle and its applicability to the current strategic environment. It will also discuss whether amphibious warfare fits the current strategic environment, specifically because certain forms of amphibious warfare are similar to AirLand Battle and AirSea battle raises the possibility of amphibious operations. After this section, the paper will discuss the possible uses of AirLand battle and amphibious operations in East Asia. Finally, the paper will discuss AirSea Battle. The main points of the paper are:

- 1) AirLand Battle is unsuited to the modern strategic environment
- 2) Amphibious operations will be used in a very limited fashion in the future
- 3) In East Asia, both AirLand Battle and amphibious operations are suited for very limited or defensive operations.
- 4) AirSea Battle makes sense as a means of degrading the systems of an enemy on the offensive. The rapid breakdown of an opponent's anti-access network, on the other hand, is unlikely because inflicting such damage on the territory of a nuclear power is highly risky.

### **AirLand Battle**

AirLand battle, also known as maneuver warfare, was adopted as the tactical and operational approach of the US Army and Marine Corps in the 1980s. It was meant to allow outnumbered US forces to prevail against the Soviet army in Europe. In looking for a way to fend off the Soviets, progressive US Army officers called for a new doctrine that would outmaneuver rather than try to defeat them through superior firepower. An intellectual movement preceded AirLand Battle's adoption, heavily influenced by the desire in the US Army to get away from the irregular way of war of Vietnam. The 1973 Yom Kippur War fed heavily into the development of the doctrine, as did German blitzkrieg tactics of the Second World War.

AirLand battle seeks to decisively defeat enemy forces through placing them in a disadvantageous position on the battlefield. Rather than frontal assaults or cautious advances, daring and mobile flanking movements, encirclements, infiltration tactics, or airborne assaults

seize the initiative and attack the enemy where least expected. For example, Liddell Hart's indirect approach called for unexpectedly hitting enemy weak points in order to break through his front. Optimally, enemy positions are then attacked successively and lines of communications and command centers are destroyed as friendly forces drive forward in an "expanding torrent." Maneuver warfare is highly risky. Its ultimate goal is to come to grips with the enemy. The fate of a nation is potentially staked on a single battle. Examples of maneuver warfare are Napoleon's campaigns, German blitzkrieg operations during the Second World War, MacArthur's Inchon operation, Israeli operations in the 1967 Six Day War, and the 1991 Gulf War. AirLand Battle and maneuver warfare became especially popular in the US armed forces in the late 1970s as a decisive and relatively low-casualty method for thwarting a Soviet invasion of Western Europe.

AirLand Battle's theoretical foundations were meant to address a very specific threat: a Soviet conventional offensive into Western Europe. In the mid-1970s, the United States Army knew that NATO would be vastly outnumbered fighting a Soviet invasion of Western Europe. NATO was technologically superior but not enough to offset the Soviet Union's numerical superiority. Predictions were that the Soviet Union could capture much of Europe. In execution, AirLand battle meant mission tactics, in-depth defense, counterattacks, and trying to achieve breakthroughs. It also meant deep missile and air strikes into Eastern Europe. Such strikes were meant to disrupt reserve Soviet echelons that would be advancing to join the battle. AirLand Battle was US Army doctrine. The extent to which the US Air Force would have followed this scheme, versus their own, in the event of war is open to question.

AirLand battle was never implemented against the Soviet Union. It was used against the Iraqis in 1991 and again in 2003 with great effect. The Iraqis, of course, were hardly the Soviet Union. As official doctrine, AirLand Battle was superseded in 2001 by "full spectrum operations" and later by "decisive action" and "combined arms maneuver." In these forms it remains the dominant method for waging conventional war in the US Army and US Marine Corps.

Today, AirLand battle is useful as a tactical doctrine, but not as a strategic, or even an operational approach. The nature of modern warfare constrains the use of AirLand battle, especially against a nuclear power. Since 1945, maneuver warfare in all its forms has been useful in a circumscribed set of circumstances: specifically, in conventional wars in which the risk of escalation is low. It has been much less useful in conflicts involving a high risk of escalation or against unconventional methods of warfare.

### Nuclear escalation

Nuclear war makes the kind of bold armored dashes envisioned in AirLand battle incredibly risky. The only reason that the United States could attack Iraq as it did is that America's wars there never faced a credible risk of great power war. Consequently, AirLand Battle could be used there without risk of a great power conflagration, with all its nuclear connotations. AirLand battle in China or North Korea would be an entirely different affair. It would invite nuclear retaliation or at least escalation. After all, it was this kind of operation that provoked China's entry into the Korean War in 1950.

The root of the problem, in theoretical terms, is that AirLand battle is modeled on pre-1945 methods of warfare which sought to annihilate an opponent, specifically the opposing state. Although AirLand Battle can be applied toward more limited aims, its means—armored thrusts, bold flanking maneuvers, rapid advance and pursue—all drive toward an aim of annihilation. At the very least, an opponent may fear that his annihilation is the goal. In the face of annihilation, nuclear use becomes thinkable. Hence AirLand battle is inherently risky when confronting a nuclear power—or even an ally of a nuclear power. In fact, it is so risky that any head of state will think twice before using it.

Since 1991, this constraint has only strengthened. The number of nuclear powers has increased. Israel, North Korea, Pakistan, and India are nuclear powers. Iran may soon join the club. Above all, China is far more powerful today than twenty years ago and more sensitive to maintaining influence beyond its borders. This means the areas in the world where an opponent can be decisively defeated are shrinking. It is not just war against one of these nuclear powers that is dangerous. War against one of their allies is risky as well. A nuclear power is unlikely to watch a major ally fall without starting an international crisis or intervening itself. In the current strategic environment, AirLand battle faces a nuclear constraint that was temporarily muted between 1991 and 2010.

#### Unconventional war

The other constraint on AirLand battle is unconventional war, whether called guerrilla warfare, insurgency, or irregular war. Lesser powers will resort to irregular/unconventional war rather than fight a major power head on. During the Cold War, unconventional warfare gained prominence in the form of guerrilla warfare. Unconventional operations, such as terrorism, guerrilla warfare, or civil unrest, eschew the dogma of defending terrain and fighting large battles. Guerrilla warfare is based on avoiding battles with the enemy, and, instead, wearing him down through ambushes and minor raids. Against concentrated offensives, guerrillas evade contact rather than confront superior firepower. In other words, not only is AirLand battle unlikely to be feasible against nuclear powers and their allies, is also unlikely to be feasible against lesser powers.

This type of warfare has been at the forefront of strategic debates since 2003. Its usefulness as a weapon of the weak against the strong is well-known. Weak and developing countries shy away from facing technologically or numerically superior opponents face to face on the battlefield. Furthermore, if the model of the Cold War repeats itself, even nuclear powers will prefer to confront opponents using guerrilla proxies rather than face them in conventional war. China, the Soviet Union, and the United States all followed this strategy in the Cold War. Recently, Pakistan and Iran have done the same against India and Israel respectively. We can expect unconventional and irregular war to continue to play a large role in future conflict, including in East Asia.

#### **AirLand Battle and Amphibious Warfare**

The same two constraints affect amphibious warfare, which would almost certainly be

necessary if AirLand battle were ever to be executed in East Asia. Amphibious warfare has often been considered one way of conducting maneuver warfare. Indeed, the 1950 Inchon landing is often cited as a model of maneuver. The Japanese landings in Singapore would be another outstanding example. For over a decade, the US Marine Corps has looked at ways to make amphibious warfare more decisive and maneuver-oriented. Concepts such as Operational Maneuver from the Sea stand out.

The history of the Cold War provides several examples of how the risk of escalation constrained amphibious warfare. Inchon is actually the perfect case to show why maneuver warfare and amphibious warfare can be very dangerous strategically. General Omar Bradley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said in March 1949 that the A-bomb precluded major amphibious landings from ever happening again. Various commentators have since disdained his comment because the Inchon landing occurred just 18 months later. The Inchon landing facilitated the annihilation of the North Korean armed forces and enabled the United Nations Command to invade North Korea. However, rather than prove the continued usefulness of amphibious warfare, Inchon actually demonstrated its limitations. The historical research of Chen Jian shows that the Inchon landing directly contributed to the Chinese decision to intervene in the Korean War. Mao and the Chinese leadership found the potential annihilation of the North Korean Army very threatening. The Soviet Union, also fearing North Korea's defeat, supported the Chinese intervention. Consequently, Mao decided to enter the war.

After Inchon, US generals forswore amphibious assaults in Korea during the war. Nor is Inchon the only example of the risks of bold amphibious maneuvers. The nature of the Anglo-French attack on Port Said also contributed to the escalation of the Suez Canal crisis. And in Vietnam, numerous plans to attack the North Vietnamese coastline were scuttled out of fear that China would be provoked into entering the war.

None of this is to disregard amphibious warfare. The need to deploy troops from the sea to land certainly remains. Its use, however, will probably be limited to set objectives that do not risk escalation, such as capturing islands or reinforcing an ally already engaged in a defensive battle (such as Taiwan). The Cold War witnessed a substantial number of amphibious assaults in regions of low salience to superpower interests: Grenada, amphibious assaults in South Vietnam, the Falklands, and Indian landings in East Pakistan in 1971.

### **AirLand Battle in East Asia**

In South-east and East Asia, there are a limited number of scenarios which AirLand battle could foreseeably be used, either by the United States or an Asian state. An offensive into North Korea is not one of them. Such an action would be incredibly risky since North Korea possesses nuclear weapons and China's policy on Western presence on its borders is unclear at best. Nor is AirLand battle inside China itself a likely contingency. The more likely scenarios are:

- 1) Counteroffensive operations inside South Korea against a North Korean invasion
- 2) Counteroffensive operations inside Taiwan against a Chinese invasion of Taiwan

3) Counteroffensive operations against incursions by China or an ally into Burma, Thailand, or Vietnam.

Even these operations would be more limited than the doctrinal concept of AirLand battle. Deep strikes into the attackers' own territory in order to disrupt his reinforcements would have to be forsworn.

In any East Asian or South-east Asian conflict, other forms of warfare will be more likely than AirLand battle. Unconventional wars, especially by proxy, top the list. They are easier to execute and can result in the fall of an opposite country with very little risk of nuclear confrontation. Heightened skirmishes and raids along borders, such as between China and India or China and Russia, are another very likely form of warfare. They will often occur short of declared war. On the land, if there is open war, long low-level attrition through limited assaults and limited air strikes, perhaps along a front but equally in a series of hybrid conventional-guerrilla attacks is more likely than AirLand battle. Of most concern to great powers, naval warfare probably is possible. Skirmishes between aircraft and smaller ships over disputed territory is most likely but larger fleet-actions and bouts of submarine activity are also possible. Naval warfare is contained enough to limit the risks of escalation, unless nuclear-missile submarines are at risk.

### **AirSea Battle**

This brings us to AirSea Battle. In 2010, the United States Defense Department came up with a new concept known as AirSea Battle, partly influenced by AirLand Battle. AirSea Battle was created to counter the "anti-access defense networks" that countries such as Iran and China now employ. These networks are anti-ship missiles, air defense systems, aircraft, cyberspace systems, and submarines. In sufficient numbers, they make it dangerous for a surface navy to approach the coast of the country they defend. AirSea Battle envisions forward air defense systems, deep air and missile strikes, surveillance, and anti-submarine operations in order to break apart an opponent's anti-access systems.

For the most part, AirSea Battle is vastly different from AirLand Battle. AirSea battle is more of a form of attrition than maneuver. It seeks to wear down the anti-access defense networks over time. It does not seek break through it decisively in some form of maneuver warfare. Ground forces play a minimal role in the concept, although amphibious operations and special operations are not excluded. AirSea Battle resembles AirLand Battle in two ways. First, it calls for a high level of cooperation between the services. Second, it calls for deep strikes against an opponent, specifically to disrupt command and control and destroy aircraft and anti-ship missiles. As Dr Jerry Meyerle wrote in *Foreign Policy* in June 2013: "Air-Sea Battle calls for integration of naval and air forces to destroy enemy missiles and other high-end capabilities intended to deny freedom of movement to U.S. ships and aircraft. These plans call for over-the-horizon precision strikes with long-range missiles, bombers, and stealth fighters."

Because of its endorsement of deep strikes, AirSea Battle shares some of the escalatory risk of AirLand Battle. Missile and air strikes against a nuclear power raise the chances of

confrontation and escalation. It would be hard to justify such risk unless a major ally was under attack and at risk of total defeat. Select and graduated strikes might be conducted as part of crisis bargaining or in order to knock out a particularly high value target. Sufficient attacks to degrade anti-access capability, however, are hard to imagine. Aircraft, anti-ship missiles, radar stations, and small headquarters are numerous. Knocking them out would require an expansive air campaign. The country under such attack might view the attack as putting its nuclear capabilities at risk and then raise the ante.

Other aspects of AirSea Battle are far less risky. Anti-submarine operations and air defense operations would bear little risk of escalation, especially if focused on the territories under attack. In this sense, a protracted AirSea Battle campaign could be a likely form of warfare over the next decade.

### **Conclusion**

These two constraints—nuclear power and irregular warfare—leave AirLand battle suited only for proxy wars against the limited number of non-great powers that would attempt to fight Japan or the United States conventionally, as Iraq did in 1991 and, to a lesser extent, in 2003. AirLand battle is a throwback to the Second World War. Modern warfare is more likely to involve guerrilla warfare and counterinsurgency, precision air campaigns, limited naval battles (both ship-to-ship and shore-to-ship), and special forces operations. Conventional ground operations may still occur but they will be limited in means and ends; AirLand battle a select tool for a specific problem, rather than a general method of war.

AirSea Battle is better suited for modern warfare because it is based on attrition, not decisive maneuver. It can be graduated to reduce the risk of escalation. Yet proponents of AirSea Battle must too acknowledge that strikes against a nuclear power's territory are unlikely to occur and thus so is the disruption of such an opponent's anti-air defense network. The bottom line is that all warfare is shaped by the over-riding nuclear environment. Decisive battle and decisive victory is no longer likely in great power war.