



(US Navy photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class John Philip Wagner Jr.)

The aircraft carrier USS *Carl Vinson* transits the Pacific Ocean 18 September 2014 during Valiant Shield, a biennial Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps exercise held in Guam. Valiant Shield exercises focus on proficiency in sustaining joint forces at sea, in the air, on land, and in cyberspace.

Air-Sea Battle and the Danger of Fostering a Maginot Line Mentality

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Since the Air-Sea Battle (ASB) concept is likely to remain an enduring feature of U.S. national security, it is fitting to consider its ramifications for the future of land power. Conceptually, ASB proposes a solution set regarding potential threats to the global commons (the land, sea, air, space, and cyberspace domains), in order to “preserve U.S. ability to project power

and maintain freedom of action.”¹ Accordingly, threats include the ever-increasing numbers and sophistication of missiles (e.g., cruise, ballistic, air-to-air, and surface-to-air), modern submarines and fighter aircraft, advanced sea mines, and fast-attack sea craft, as well as growing competition for space and cyberspace.



(U.S. Navy photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Trevor Welsh)

Ships from the *George Washington* and *Carl Vinson* carrier strike groups and aircraft from the Air Force and Marine Corps operate in formation 23 September 2014 following the conclusion of Valiant Shield in the Pacific Ocean.

The Air-Sea Battle Office argues that such technological capabilities in the hands of adversarial state and non-state actors can not only threaten the global commons but also can obstruct U.S. expeditionary operations by employing anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) strategies.² (Anti-access activities slow or prevent movement into a theater; area denial activities impede movement within a theater.)

To counter these threats, the ASB Office proposes the establishment of a joint Navy-Air Force capability—one that is networked, integrated, and designed to attack in depth—to accomplish the goals identified in the ASB lines of effort:

- ◆ Disrupt adversary command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
- ◆ Destroy adversary A2/AD platforms and weapons systems
- ◆ Defeat adversary-employed weapons and formations³

The ASB concept in itself seeks to create greater joint synergy and is ostensibly aligned with U.S. strategic planning documents. However, the ASB Office gives a

step further, calling for radical institutional changes in doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, and facilities to guide how the services organize, train, and equip.⁴ Naturally, the ASB Office denies it is calling for the creation of a “new force,” seeking only to reduce risk and increase flexibility for senior policy makers and joint force commanders. But, the concept relegates the Army and the Marine Corps to conducting stability operations or, at best, mopping up enemy resistance after the joint Navy-Air Force conducts the decisive operations. Hence, ASB is conceptually flawed because it violates unity of command and unity of effort.

In the process of making their case, ASB advocates cite some historical examples to underscore the relevance of ASB. The ASB Office references the AirLand Battle doctrine of the 1980s as a progenitor of ASB, though AirLand Battle was an operational-level response to Soviet massed mechanized operational maneuver and not a realignment of service roles and responsibilities. Air Force Gen. Norton A. Schwartz and Navy Adm. Jonathan W. Greenert add that the ASB concept is not new, recalling Navy and Air Force cooperation during the battle of the



(Getty Images photo)

Rows of rails for antitank protection were built along the Maginot Line to protect the French border from tank attacks (photo circa 1951).

Atlantic in World War II and the Doolittle Raid on Japan. Moreover, they cite examples of U.S. successes against A2/AD situations during the Berlin Airlift (June 1948 to May 1949), and the U.S. support to Israel during the 1973 Arab-Israeli War.⁵ They might have included U.S. Navy and Air Force cooperation during the War in the Pacific in World War II, in which both arms isolated Japanese-held islands in preparation for Marine and Army invasions. They might also have discussed how Allied use of tactical and strategic air power under the Transportation Plan successfully interdicted German reinforcements to the Normandy beachhead.⁶ In both cases, however, land power forces conducted the decisive operations, so their omission is understandable.

At the risk of sounding patronizing, it must be said that a little knowledge of history is almost as damaging as no knowledge. At least with no knowledge, policy makers view the future with a bit more trepidation and circumspection, as an unknown frontier to be crossed. Senior policy makers run great risks by causally reaching back to history as a guidepost for bold action without a full understanding of the context.

The controversial Maginot Line is a case in point and stands as the greatest testament against the ASB concept. Conventional knowledge teaches that France attempted to protect itself from a German invasion by building a fortified line all along its northeast border. Yet, because the Maginot Line ended at the Luxembourg border, the Germans simply drove around it. While it is tempting to dismiss this as yet another example of a French debacle, the backdrop of the Maginot Line is much more complex.

The Maginot Line was much more than a fortified line; it was a mentality that national security could be assured with a silver bullet. The irony is that the Maginot Line performed exactly as intended, and a defense strategy built around it might have succeeded but for a series of incremental decisions in the interwar years that hollowed out the French army and the government's will to act proactively.

While U.S. policy makers may regard themselves as too savvy to fall into the same mental trap, ASB rests on the same reasoning that captivated French policy makers with the Maginot Line. Accordingly, the first part of this article touches on the salient thinking

behind France's decision to construct the Maginot Line and its deleterious effect on military readiness; how the Maginot Line undermined France's deterrence strategy, leading to a reliance on passive defense; and the fundamental reasons why the German offensive was decisive—it was not because the Germans simply drove around the Maginot Line. The second part examines how the sophistic arguments behind the Maginot Line have resurfaced in promoting ASB and the consequences if it is elevated to a national security strategy.

France's Security Challenge in the Interwar Years

Victory in World War I did not negate the fundamental security challenges facing France vis-à-vis Germany. Germany's industrial capacity, wealth, and population exceeded France's substantially. Whereas Germany avoided the ravages of war, France suffered horrendous damage. It was clear that without some militating modifiers, Germany would defeat France in a future war.

The Versailles Treaty established the first set of modifiers to keep Germany in a debilitated state:

German payment of reparations, limits on its military forces, German territorial losses, and Allied occupation of the Rhineland. Another set of modifiers included French alliances with the new states of Czechoslovakia and Poland, backed up perhaps by Russia, to threaten the heart of Germany in the event of war with France. The last modifier was the Maginot Line, begun in 1930.

Named after André Maginot, the French minister of war, the fortified line was intended to run from the Swiss border to the English Channel. While expensive, its cost would be offset by a reduced standing army. Conceptually, the small standing army occupying the ultra-modern Maginot Line would shield France during the initial phase of a conflict while military and industrial mobilization for a long war took place. The *pièce de résistance* of the Maginot Line was the promise of a cheap victory. Once the German army had bled itself white attacking the fortified line, the French army would launch a counter-offensive, crushing the remaining German forces and marching into Berlin. In light of these circumstances, Germany would be deterred from attacking France



(Photo by Denis Helfer, Wikimedia Commons)

A tank sits upon a hilltop display 22 March 2006 at the Casemate d'Esch (built in 1931), once part of the Fortified Sector of Hagenau, a section of the Maginot Line. It is now an artifact on display at the Ouvrage Schoenenburg Museum run by the Alsace Association of Friends of the Maginot Line.

and, should deterrence fail, defeated in an uneven war of attrition.

Along with the Czech-Polish-Soviet Alliance and Versailles Treaty, the Maginot Line created a strong sense of security for France, and here the seeds of a hollow military were sown.

A flurry of successive French governments continually retrenched defense expenditures—lowering readiness, slashing modernization, and further reducing the size of the army. At the time, policy decisions were based on the logic of the moment and implemented incrementally. The losses in World War I caused a drop in the birthrate, resulting in a deficit in the number of available conscripts in the 1930s. Economic, political, and labor upheavals compelled successive French governments to devote fewer resources to defense expenditures. Accordingly, cost overruns in fortification construction and diminished defense spending delayed the planned completion of the Maginot Line. Likewise, the French army received even less attention, but the government clung to the hope that once completed, the Maginot Line would obviate the need for high military readiness. Despite the fact that the French army retained a small core of professional soldiers, the larger part had rotted from disuse, and no amount of effort dedicated to mobilization would suffice to turn about this state of affairs quickly.

The Rising German Threat

As the 1930s unfolded, it bears reminding that France did not have the benefit of hindsight regarding Hitler's intentions. To many French officials, Bolshevism was a greater threat, so using Russia to balance against Germany struck them as unsavory. Restoration of the German empire occurred incrementally, slowly dismantling the restrictions of the Versailles Treaty; Germany resumed military armament in May 1935, reoccupied the Rhineland in May 1936, and annexed Austria in March 1938. None of these actions warranted a military response, and it is doubtful France could have mustered a military coalition in any case.

While historians would connect the dots of aggression after the war, at the time German diplomacy rested on redressing the grievance of self-determination. The victors of The Great War cited self-determination to

justify the dismemberment of the German and Austro-Hungarian empires. Hitler in turn used self-determination as his justification to annex all ethnic German territories into a Greater Germany.

The annexation of the Sudetenland in October 1938 was more than a betrayal of allied Czechoslovakia; the loss of this fortified zone removed the last conventional deterrent against German aggression toward France. Given their geostrategic positions, France and Czechoslovakia could act in concert to occupy the German military-industrial heartland, quashing Hitler's aspirations. With the elimination of Czech interference, Germany no longer faced multiple dilemmas, permitting it to pursue its aggressive agenda unfettered.

Unquestioned faith in the Maginot Line uncoupled France's reliance on deterrence and balancing alliances to check German militarism. France stood as a bystander as Germany invaded the rest of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 and signed the Russo-German Non-Aggression Pact in August 1939, simply playing out the drama before the German invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939. Deterrence had failed, so the security of France rested completely on a passive defense.

The Wehrmacht (German armed forces) took advantage of its military experiences in Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Denmark, and Norway to hone joint operations. By the time Germany launched its invasion of the Netherlands, Belgium, and France on 10 May 1940, the Wehrmacht was a well-oiled military machine. In contrast, the Western allies had virtually no military experiences since World War I. The tranquility of the French colonies and the anti-war sentiment during the interwar years lulled France into perceiving war as unthinkable, hence not worthy of preparation. To use a sports analogy, the Wehrmacht was playing college varsity football, while the West was playing high school junior varsity.

Fall Gelb (Plan Yellow)—the German Offensive in the West

Despite the host of post-war accounts, the Maginot Line actually could have functioned as envisioned. While the Maginot Line extended only as far as the Luxembourg border, the combined British-French-Belgium forces were theoretically sufficient to cover the northern gap, defending key choke points. Also theoretically, the defense could have stanchied or significantly delayed the German offensive to prolong the war sufficiently for the allies to

marginalize German military advantages. As an aside, the Allies had nine months to mobilize and prepare for the war but wasted this precious time, which was characterized as the *Sitzkrieg* (the sitting war).

The Dyle Plan was not fundamentally flawed.⁷ The Allied forward occupation of the line generally along the Dyle River did shorten the front substantially. Nevertheless, the failure to anchor the southern flank on the Maginot Line, thereby leaving the Ardennes region essentially undefended, was an unnecessary risk, which presented the Germans with the opportunity to execute an operational envelopment. Nevertheless, even without this blunder, the German army and Luftwaffe so outclassed the Allies, a German decisive victory was probably inevitable, though not quite so swift.

The basic idea behind the Maginot Line made strategic sense in that it promised to provide immediate defense of France with a smaller army than was hitherto possible. Its deterrent effect was not tied as much to the restrictions of the Versailles Treaty and alliances as it was to a modern army maintaining a high state of readiness.

Had the French army assiduously retained this capability, the French government could have exercised the option to intervene at any point before and including the Sudetenland crisis. As part of its risk assessment, the German government correctly assessed that the French army was a hollow force and the Maginot Line a self-imposed prison.

The Air-Sea Battle Nostrum

Like the proponents of the Maginot Line, ASB advocates demonstrate a mentality that national security can be assured with a silver bullet; they vow to protect American vital interests most assuredly with joint naval and air power. Currently, ASB is only a concept. However, as political and economic pressures mount, the temptation to elevate it into a strategy will increase correspondingly. The result will be a much smaller active Army with a ceiling well below the proposed 490,000 end strength. As a hedge, ASB advocates will argue that in the case of a major conflict, the federal government can mobilize the U.S. Army National Guard and Reserve.

Although future events are impossible to predict with exactitude, governments do exhibit patterns of behavior, especially if too focused on the exigencies of the moment.

Political, economic, and social turmoil create stresses that demand solutions, and silver bullet solutions are the most enticing. What the Maginot Line promised France, ASB promises America: an economical and pristine way to secure national security interests without becoming embroiled in a protracted land conflict. However, the reality is that an air-sea-centric strategy unbalances U.S. national security policy.

Adversaries constantly probe for weaknesses, testing American resolve and capabilities. A probe could be limited territorial aggression, intimidation of neighbors through military posturing, or covert (including proxy) wars. The unilateral use of air and sea power in such cases is very rarely effective. From the U.S. perspective, once committed to ASB, senior policy makers would find the use of ground forces antithetical to the accepted strategy, and since the probe is usually minor, not worth mobilizing land forces. If history is any guide, the accumulation of power eventually turns minor probes into major threats. The U.S. Cold War containment strategy was predicated on countering Soviet probes all along the periphery. Without land power, containment would have failed.

The ASB concept suggests that the era of great power threats is over and the United States would have sufficient time to mobilize if its interests were threatened. As a counterpoint of fact, however, the Third Reich represented no threat in 1935 but became a regional threat with the seizure of the Sudetenland in 1938, and it became a global threat in 1940 with the fall of France—a period of only five years. Admittedly, few countries can match the unique circumstances that made the Third Reich a virulent threat to global security, but even lesser adversarial powers require vigilance, and stalwart land power is the sentinel. To maintain readiness, land power forces require the continuous cultivation of human capital for sound leadership, the maintenance of highly trained and skilled soldiers, and the ability to plan and execute intricate operations. Once an army falls below a certain threshold of manpower, regeneration of the force takes months, even years, depending on the level of mobilization, before it is prepared to conduct successful military operations. If senior policy makers begin to view mobilization as a process akin to making sausage, the result will be a return to the meat-grinder wars so often experienced by the U.S. Army.

Like the French army in the interwar years, the deterioration of U.S. land power could remain imperceptible for years, especially if no military threats materialize. Similar to French political decisions during the same period, national security policies are rarely sweeping; instead, they chip away incrementally at readiness, end strength, and modernization. At some point, the institutional Army could be negatively impacted, relegated to an insignificant role in national security policy formulation. If the American public perceives the Army as playing an insignificant role in national security, the recruitment and development of future leaders dedicated to the study and practice of land power could become a challenge. Within a couple of generations, the body of military expertise on land power, which senior policy makers need to make informed decisions, could atrophy.

The two areas most likely to be affected by a deterioration of U.S. land power would be in headquarters and logistics. When cuts are made, headquarters suffer first. In times of crisis, as experiences during World War II and the Korean War attest, staff officers cannot be thrown together and expected to function as a team quickly. If trained staff officers are a deficit, the creation of headquarters teamwork will take even longer, and unity of command will ultimately suffer.

To preserve a modicum of combat capability, the Army will next cut into combat support and combat service support. One of the great strengths of the United States is its military logistical capabilities. This applies not only in times of conflict but also during humanitarian assistance and disaster response operations. While the Navy and Air Force can rightly claim they can provide logistical support to a theater, only the Army has the capability and capacity to deliver logistical support into the interior (i.e., beyond the ports of debarkation). Decreasing this support will cause U.S. global influence and prestige to suffer correspondingly.

The argument that ground forces of other countries can substitute for U.S. ground forces has little basis of proof. Except in some cases of counterinsurgency, friends and allies are highly unlikely to join coalitions and alliances without the involvement of U.S. ground forces because these are a guarantee of U.S. commitment and a tangible willingness to share risks. This commitment also demonstrates to adversaries the degree of U.S. resolve.

Early during the Cold War, for example, the United States deployed four divisions into Europe under NATO

to bolster the U.S. security guarantee. In view of the purported 150 Soviet divisions in Eastern Europe, the security commitment was more political and psychological than physical. Despite their relatively small size, the presence of U.S. ground troops provided indispensable assurance to the European allies that the United States would not withdraw its support, thereby leaving them in the lurch. Along with the Marshall Plan, the U.S. military presence undergirded European confidence so they could focus on economic and political recovery instead of obsessing over potential Soviet subversion, intimidation, and aggression.⁸ Neither the nuclear umbrella nor the promise of air and sea power could have instilled this confidence.

The intellectual flaw in ASB lies in its essential framework. It is a tactical-operational concept masquerading as a strategy, although it denies this intent. It is like claiming AirLand Battle of the 1980s was a replacement for the containment strategy of the Cold War. Since ASB is tied to the pivot to the Pacific Rim, it leads to the larger question of whether China is an ideological threat to democracies, which demands a strategy of containment, or merely an economic competitor.⁹ China may be both, but that dialogue has yet to take place and be explained to the American people and other nations. The Pacific Rim might be economically important to the United States, but so are Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas. How does a military shift promote global trade? Until these strategic issues are aired, pivoting to the Pacific region is placing the tactical cart before the strategic horse.

The danger is a misplaced focus. Just as Bolshevism mesmerized France for much of the interwar years, the pivot to the Pacific Rim might prove irrelevant or even detrimental to U.S. national security in the long run. While the Pacific region is particularly suited to the type of conflict the Navy and Air Force wish to fight, future events might not be so accommodating. If ASB should prove to be a blunder, the Air Force and Navy have very little skin in the game. It will be the men and women of the ground forces who will bear the brunt of the strategic error.

Conclusion

Military historian John Toland once wrote that history does not repeat itself; human nature does. So it is with the Maginot Line and Air-Sea Battle mentalities. The first promised the German army would be bled white

on the border, while the interior of France remained unscathed by war. The second promises that the era of protracted land conflicts is over, and that America will remain untouched by war. While there is a tendency in defense studies to repeat assertions to the point they gain general acceptance, history's rejoinder is reality—the stuff debacles are made of.

The major flaw of the Maginot Line was not in its construction but in French policy decisions, which eroded military readiness to the point that France's army became a hollow force. Hitler's early probing revealed the deplorable state of France's military, nullifying the deterrent value of the demilitarized Rhineland and the alliances with Czechoslovakia and Poland. During the defense of France, the Maginot Line did permit the French army to conduct an economy of force along the German border in order for the army, along with the British and Belgian forces, to achieve sufficient mass in Belgium. Untested, untrained,

and outclassed, the Allied armies collapsed at first contact and never recovered during the campaign for France.

Despite protestations to the contrary, proponents of ASB are promoting a gimmick that seeks to obviate the necessity of protracted land warfare. Like the Maginot Line concept, once policy makers commit to it, the result will be a gross imbalance of U.S. military forces. The atrophy of U.S. land power may not become apparent for years, but the rot will be absolute. Ancillary capabilities—stability operations, humanitarian assistance, and disaster response—will slough off; next, logistical and combat support capabilities will attenuate; finally, land forces will be expected to perform missions as in the past but will suffer egregious losses as mounting deficiencies manifest.

As with all ideas that sound cogent at cocktail parties, there is always the hangover to contend with the next morning. U.S. policy makers need to be skeptical—very skeptical. ■

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Notes

1. U.S. Department of Defense, *Air-Sea Battle: Service Collaboration to Address Anti-Access & Area Denial Challenges* (Washington DC: Air-Sea Battle Office, 12 May 2013), 1-2, <http://www.defense.gov/pubs/ASB-ConceptImplementation-Summary-May-2013.pdf> (accessed 6 November 2014).

2. *Ibid.*, 2.

3. *Ibid.*, 4-5, 7.

4. *Ibid.*, 7-9.

5. Norton A. Schwartz and Jonathan W. Greenert, "Air-Sea Battle," *The American Interest* website, 20 February 2012, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/articles/2012/02/20/air-sea-battle/> (accessed 6 November 2014).

6. The Transportation Plan, operationalized from March to June 1944, was designed to prevent the Germans from rushing reinforcements to the Normandy beachhead. As such, air power isolated the Normandy area by targeting select urban and rail centers, bridges, and other transportation nodes.

7. The Dyle Plan envisioned a joint British-French movement into Belgium once the German offensive began. The strategy served two purposes: first, to shorten the front along good defensive terrain; and second, to ensure French territory was not

subjected to the same type of devastation as suffered during World War I.

8. The European Recovery Program (Marshall Plan) was designed to assist in the reconstruction of Europe and to restore confidence in the European people. Marshall believed that the restoration of European economies would create greater political stability, thereby countering the allure of Soviet socialism. Funding of \$13 billion resulted in a rejuvenation of European industrialization, increased corporate investments, stimulation of the U.S. economy, and increased trade between North America and Europe. Ultimately, the goal was economic integration and political unification of Europe.

9. Tyrone C. Marshall Jr., "Pentagon Official Explains Asia-Pacific Focus," U.S. Department of Defense News, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=117989> (accessed 16 January 2015). The pivot to the Pacific Rim implies a shift in U.S. strategic priorities and resources. In view of the importance of Asian trade and markets to U.S. economic interests, the pivot would assure these markets remain secure from instability or aggression. In view of the vast sea areas, air and sea power would serve as the logical services to this end.