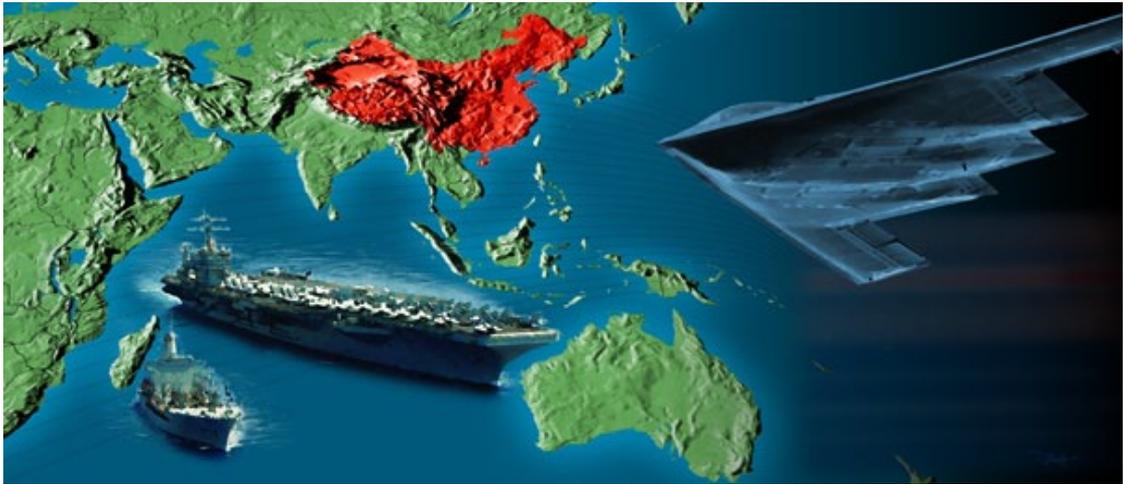


The Australian Factor in the United States' Western Pacific Strategy

Liao Kai



Recently, disputes concerning the South China Sea (SCS) have entered the world's spotlight. The United States has made multiple efforts to influence the Sino-Filipino and Sino-Vietnamese disagreements. On numerous occasions, US political and military leaders have expressed their resolve to defend the United States' interests in and sphere of influence regarding the Western Pacific. By the same token, the US military has engaged with its Asia-Pacific allies, including former foes, in a series of joint military exercises. China has strongly opposed any attempt to internationalize the SCS disputes and wishes to settle them through bilateral efforts. China regards the United States' entrance into this argument as a challenge to its interests and interference with Chinese territorial as well as foreign affairs. Though not clearly stating its stance on the SCS issue, Australia sent



troops to a joint military exercise with the United States and Japan in the SCS in July 2010. More recently, Australia allowed a US Marine force to stay permanently on one of its north coastal bases. China is likely to interpret all of these developments as acts of assisting the United States in tightening the “island chains.”

This article briefly identifies the strategic landscape around and beyond the SCS, discusses the US AirSea Battle concept, and then offers a detailed analysis of the Australian factor in this concept as well as the challenges it represents for China. Finally, the article proposes a course of action that China may take in handling the evolving SCS situation.

China's Interests in the South China Sea

To predict how the SCS disputes may evolve, one must understand how China views them, where its interests lie, and whether such interests are general or core in nature. First and foremost, China claims sovereignty over the large waters of the SCS as well as the Nansha (Spratly) Islands. However, rival neighboring states have not supported this claim. Indeed, disagreements about sovereignty over the SCS have existed for many years. After the discovery of a huge reserve of strategic resources under SCS waters, this contention quickly turned volatile. Second, the Nansha Islands flank China's passage to the Indian Ocean through the Strait of Malacca. Here the ramification is twofold: (1) Economically, China's trade relies heavily on this sea line of communications. Specifically, about half of the crude oil that China imports must pass through Malacca. (2) Strategically, if conflicts erupt—in particular, if the Strait of Malacca is blocked—China will lose a considerable part of its energy supply as well as its global exports, which in turn will choke China's continued development. Finally, the SCS forms a link of the so-called first island chain off China's shores. Failure to break this chain will prevent freedom of access to the Indian Ocean and further down the South Pacific. According to the *Washington Post*,



Dai Bingguo, state councilor of China, described the SCS as part of China's "core national interest" at his meeting with Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state, in May 2010.¹ Confirmation of this report could not be found in any official Chinese media, but there is no question that the SCS touches upon China's core interests. On another occasion, Adm Michael Mullen, former chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, heard his Chinese counterpart, Gen Chen Bingde, chief of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) General Staff, say that "China, together with its neighboring countries, has the wisdom and capability to appropriately handle SCS disputes. These disputes do not need the United States to bother with, all the less to worry about."² Obviously, General Chen was telling the United States not to poke its nose into the SCS disputes.

US Interests in the South China Sea and Possible US Intervention

Disregarding China's repeated warnings, the United States is determined to stay involved in the SCS disputes—a course of action that China believes will only complicate the situation, escalating rather than abating it. What are the United States' interests in the SCS controversy or the settlement thereof? In what ways will it stay involved?

The US military and think tanks generally consider the SCS vital to America's interests in the Western Pacific.³ In her visit to Hanoi in 2010, Secretary of State Clinton remarked that "the United States . . . has a national interest in freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea."⁴ However, China has always interpreted what the United States upheld as "freedom of navigation" as "freedom of espionage," under which the US military may maneuver freely along China's coast to gather intelligence and monitor Chinese military activities in the water and air. Also based on the argument of defending this freedom of navigation, the United States and its allies



are forming ever-tighter first and second island chains. To contain China's expansion into the Western Pacific, over the years, the US government and its military have progressively streamlined their strategies, the most current and systematic of which is AirSea Battle. The official stand-up of the AirSea Battle Office within the Pentagon on 9 November 2011 marked the latest development in making this concept a reality.

China's Perspective on the AirSea Battle

China has been able to sustain its growth momentum since the economic reform of 1978. Its national power continues to expand, as does its military power. Recently, China rose to second place in the world in terms of military expenditures. Strengthened by its growing economic and military power, China has become more confident in handling both international affairs and its own national defense. As a logical development, China has defined—and expanded—its national interests, accompanied by a more active defense strategy. Along these lines, China has participated in patrolling and convoying in the Gulf of Aden and in United Nations peacekeeping activities. Also noticeable is the fact that China is quickly improving its surface and subsurface fleet in both quantity and quality, as well as upgrading its antiship ballistic missiles, represented by the latest model DF-21D. Such efforts are broadly construed as increasing China's deterrence as well as its anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) capabilities in the Western Pacific. Expectedly, the current sole superpower feels the pressure and worries about imminent encroachment upon its national interests along the periphery of China and on the sea. The US military believes that the PLA is postured to threaten US freedom of action on several fronts. Specifically, America's military bases in Japan and Guam are no longer safe; US forces may not be able to hold back PLA forces in Western Pacific areas; and US command and control and reconnaissance space assets above the Western Pacific are also at risk of attack.⁵ To deter and

defeat China in the Western Pacific, the United States has proposed a number of counter-A2/AD strategies.

Among these, the AirSea Battle concept—supposedly first developed by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments—attracted most of the attention. Eventually, the US military adopted the concept's ideas, and key Asian allies of the United States supported it. This strategy assumes that during a China-US conflict in the Western Pacific, PLA forces would have the A2/AD capabilities to attack US bases in Guam and Japan, to launch full-scale information warfare, and to destroy the “ears and eyes” of US forces by means of antisatellite missiles and cyber attacks—the so-called assassin's mace. After studying the PLA's assassin's mace and borrowing from the AirLand Battle concept developed by the US military in the 1980s, US strategists formulated the AirSea Battle, which calls for combining air and sea powers into a coherent force and utilizing Asian allies in significant roles. Specifically, the first phase of US military operations would involve seizing and sustaining the initiative during the first wave of PLA preemptive attacks. In the follow-on stage of conventional operations, the US military would quickly “blind” the opposing forces' information and communication systems so as to thwart A2/AD efforts. AirSea Battle pursues the following course of action:

- Blind the opponent.
- Defend priority defense bases and military assets.
- Suppress the PLA's medium-range land-based ballistic and cruise missile forces.
- Strike the PLA's command and control, wide-area surveillance, and air defense systems
- Attack the PLA's surface and subsurface capabilities.
- Place serious strains on the Chinese economy, society, and leadership.⁶



In May 2010, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates remarked that “the agreement by the Navy and the Air Force to work together on an Air-Sea Battle concept is an encouraging development, which has the potential to do for America’s military deterrent power at the beginning of the 21st century what Air-Land Battle did near the end of the 20th.”⁷ In October 2010, at an annual meeting of US and Australian foreign and defense officials, Gates vowed to boost US military deployment in Australia and increase US-Australia defense ties.⁸ Just one year later, these two countries announced that Australia would provide a permanent base on its north coast for a US Marine force.⁹

Australian Defense Strategy and Its Role in the AirSea Battle

Descendants from the same Anglo-Saxon roots, Australia and the United States share many cultural and ideological identities. Australia has long remained a key US ally in the Asia-Pacific region under the Australia-New Zealand-United States (ANZUS) Treaty signed nearly 60 years ago. In every war launched or fought by the United States outside its borders, Australia offered unstinting support. Moreover, Australians attribute the peace in the region over the past decades mainly to the stabilizing force provided by the United States. In return, President George W. Bush in 2003 hailed Australia as its “sheriff” in Southeast Asia.¹⁰ Such close ties between these two nations make China very attentive to Australia’s strategic orientation. Although China and Australia in no way pose direct threats to each other and have no conflicts of interest, somehow Australia considers China a potential threat to its national security; furthermore, China is suspicious about the ANZUS and wonders how Australia would react to potential conflicts between China and the United States. Undoubtedly China understands that in any future China-US conflicts, Australia’s attitude would be important. Disregarding China’s scrutiny, Australia repeatedly identifies itself as a close ally of the United States. For example, during a speech at the Brookings Institution in 2010, Stephen Smith, Australian minister for



defence, assured the audience once again that “Australia is an ally that adds value. We’re not a consumer of United States security who imposes tough choices on the United States military and United States public policy.” However, Smith ended his speech by saying indignantly, “We value add and we do so from a vantage point of respect, not dependency.”¹¹ From this statement, one may infer that Australia wants to act as an independent state with independent foreign affairs and security policies—not as a blind follower of the United States. Australia chooses to align itself with the United States out of its own national interests. Then how does Australia, from its independent strategic and defense perspective, view China? And how does the Australian factor, or the role it plays, affect China—both geostrategically and militarily?

As suggested by the title of its defense white paper of 2009, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030*, Australia is aware that the future of its strategic outlook will be shaped by the global and regional distribution of political, economic, and military power; the transformation of major power relations in the Asia-Pacific region, especially the rise of China; and its relations with the United States.¹² Economically, China is Australia’s number-one trade partner. In other words, the Australian economy is closely tied to this trade relationship. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Australia has enjoyed a very strong export market of gold, coal, ore, and many other resources, thanks in large part to China’s rapid economic development and growing demand for resources. However, substantial gaps remain between these two countries in many areas, especially in culture and political systems. Such gaps widened in the last couple of years in the wake of China’s arrest of individuals employed by Rio Tinto, a British-Australian mining company, on corruption and espionage charges. Mistrust further deepened following revelations from WikiLeaks that former Australian premier Kevin Rudd apparently told Secretary of State Clinton “to be prepared to use force against China.”¹³ In terms of sea territory, Australia is certainly one of the largest nations in the world; therefore, freedom of the seas is paramount to Australia’s

economy and security. Claiming jurisdiction over 27.2 million square kilometers (half of which is “over ocean or sea”) or 5 percent of the planet, Australia must naturally defend and expand its national interests through the sea.¹⁴ A country with huge reserves of natural resources, Australia lacks only water and population—inherent vulnerabilities that render it a comparatively weak power economically, politically, and militarily. Consequently, Australians do not seem to have sufficient confidence in their own capabilities to defend the vast territory and resources they control.

In stark contrast, China is a crowded country hungry for resources and not very far from Australia. The vigilant Australians, therefore, cannot help worrying that, some day in the future, when China gains freedom of action over the SCS, it may expand further down to approach Australia, posing a more imminent threat to its national security. A poll reveals that 55 percent of Australians consider China the most important economic power in the world. Meanwhile, 57 percent believe that “the Australian government is allowing too much investment from China.” In other words, the majority of Australians are concerned about the flood of investment from China. Forty-four percent of them feel that “China will become a military threat to Australia in the next 20 years” while 55 percent disagree.¹⁵ Although many Australian analysts understand the importance of China to the Australian economy and trade as well as to global antiterrorism, when it comes to discussing the rise of China, they become more concerned.

So we see that, economically, Australia is already interwoven with China, but at the psychological level, its people are divided about their feelings towards the Chinese. Geologically, Australia is positioned where the Indian Ocean meets the Western Pacific. The northwestern coastal line of Australia almost touches the edge of the Indian Ocean, beyond which lies the SCS. By establishing a US joint or combined facility in Australia, the United States gains yet another forward base. This base, compared with those in distant Hawaii, facilitates logistics

in the event of an SCS conflict. Equally important, as compared to Japan and Guam, Australia remains outside the range of most of the PLA's land- or sea-launched missile attacks. The Australian base not only facilitates the operation of US deployed forces in SCS conflicts but also will play a significant role in potential Indian Ocean conflicts. Its strategic location, inland depth, natural affinity with the United States, and psychological suspicion about China, make Australia an ideal ally of the United States. In the US strategy for the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean and, in particular, for dealing with China, the Australia-US alliance will only grow closer and more important. In his book *AirSea Battle* (2010), Jan van Tol clearly states that "*AirSea Battle is not a US-only concept. Allies such as Japan and Australia, and possibly others, must play important enabling roles in sustaining a stable military balance*" (emphasis in original).¹⁶ In this proposed AirSea Battle, Australia is expected to provide the United States with strategic depth, participate in gaining the command of the sea, support US forces in their operations in the eastern Indian Ocean and SCS, and assist US forces by diverting some PLA attacks.

If conflict erupts between China and the United States, China's trade with the United States and Japan would likely shrink dramatically. The US military would focus on cutting China's trade with the outside world, including choking Malacca and some other straits within Indonesia territory, to stop China from navigating into the Indian Ocean. Blocking the Strait of Malacca—not a difficult task for the US military—would force China to remap its line of transportation to the south through the Sunda Strait and Lombok Strait, both of which are situated to the northwest of Australia (see figure on the next page). Coincidentally, careful readers may also find in the defense white paper of 2009, mentioned above, that Australia stepped up its security measures. Although their previous approach called for securing territory from the sea only, Australian military leaders have now adopted a dual-denial strategy that includes both sea- and air-denial capabilities. Furthermore, Australia's strategic scope has expanded to the eastern Indian Ocean.¹⁷

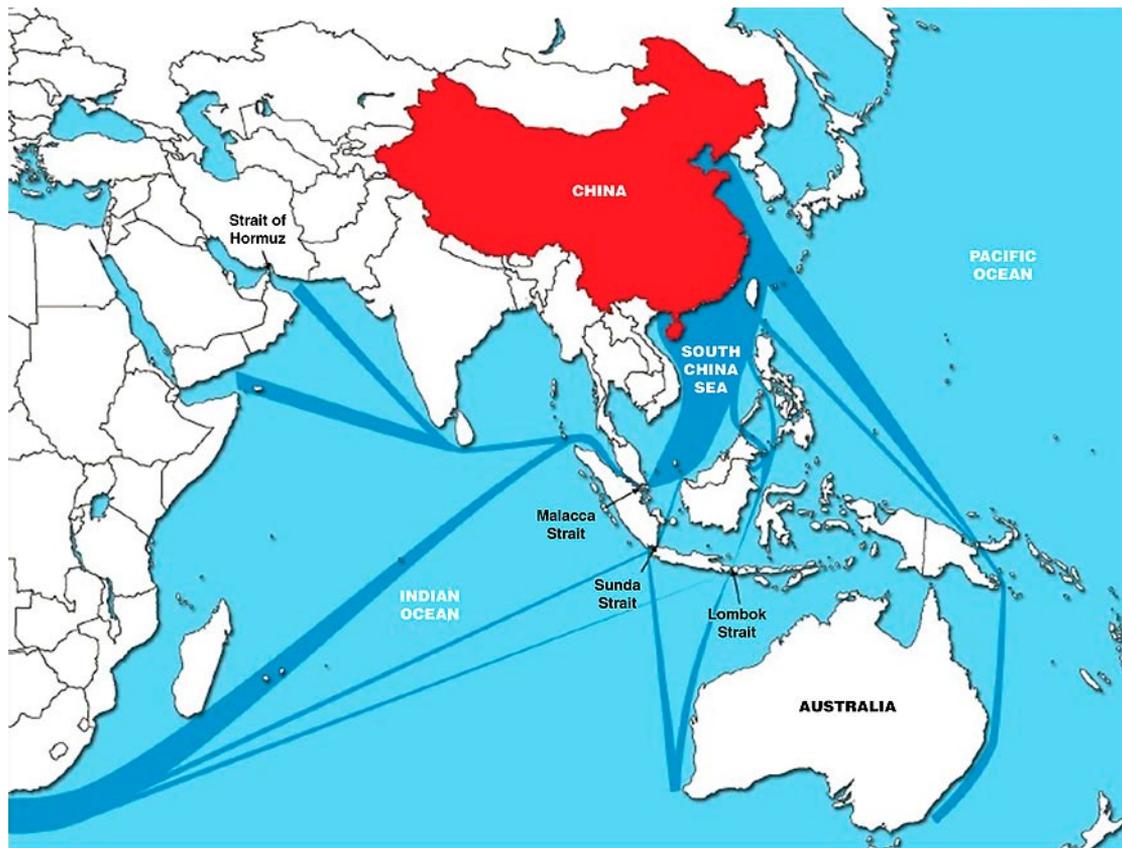


Figure. China's sea lines of communications. (Adapted from Jan van Tol with Mark Gunzinger, Andrew Krepinevich, and Jim Thomas, *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept* [Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010], 77, <http://www.csbaonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/2010.05.18-AirSea-Battle.pdf>.)

A number of influential Australian defense analysts hail the concept of AirSea Battle. Publications by Australia's military and defense researchers in the last couple of years coincide with that country's defense development, revealing that it is stepping up military preparation for a concerted AirSea Battle. For example, the 2009 defense white paper clearly states that in the upcoming years Australia will bolster its military capabilities. Specifically, the Australian government "has com-

mitted to real growth in the Defence budget of 3 per cent to 2017–18 and 2.2 per cent real growth thereafter to 2030.”¹⁸ In 2010, Australia’s military expenditures reached a new high of 24 billion (US dollars), ranking number 13 in the world.¹⁹ Prof. Ross Babbage, an adviser to that defense white paper, further suggests that, in addition to military strikes, allied states must launch a “widespread counter-trade campaign” against China. Such an action would cut China’s trade and monetary transactions, in particular choking its access to energy and raw materials from Europe and the Middle East and, if necessary, interdicting its fleets “in distant locations, such as in the South East Asian maritime straits.” He predicts that this “would result in very serious damage to the Chinese economy and, indeed, fundamental risks to the ruling elite itself.”²⁰ Although this prediction itself merits serious questioning and although the Australian economy would suffer substantially because of these actions, Babbage’s viewpoint does suggest that the Air-Sea Battle concept, along with its hidden hostility against China, is gathering support from the United States’ Asian allies.

Australia has never clarified its stand in the possible US-China conflict. On the one hand, Australia has expressed its concern about China’s expansion, as is explicitly mentioned in its defense white paper of 2009.²¹ Also, in the joint communiqué of the Australia–United States Ministerial Consultations signed by US and Australian defense officials in November 2010, the two nations commit themselves to closer cooperation in the sea, air, space, and cyber domains. Australia will allow more US installations on its land and will permit the United States to use more ports, bases, and other facilities.²² The Australian Defence Ministry confirmed that in June 2010, a special team from the US Air Force arrived in northern Australia to survey “Exmouth’s top-secret Harold E. Holt base” for possible expansion of US space “surveillance of Chinese satellites and submarines.”²³ On the other hand, when challenged about circumstances in which “Australia might say no to the United States when it comes to some kind of military situation in East Asia or the Asia-Pacific,” Minister for Defence Smith responded, “I made the point in my speech that Australia has stood shoulder-to-shoulder



with the United States in every conflict the United States has been involved in since World War II. . . . But on every occasion that we made a decision to enter into a conflict, we made that decision on the basis of what we regarded Australia's national interest and national security interest to be."²⁴

Furthermore, Australia's defense white paper of 2009 takes a similar position on this issue: "The Government recognises that Australia can and should play its part in assisting the United States in dealing with global and regional security challenges. . . . However, we must never put ourselves in a position where the price of our own security is a requirement to put Australian troops at risk in distant theatres of war where we have no direct interests at stake."²⁵ So, as this policy document indicates, Australia is still wavering strategically as to which course to take. Australians keep asking themselves whether the country should continue to rely on the United States for regional stability and security and what Australia should do to strengthen its own defense capabilities and develop a modern, self-reliant force. Yes, Australians are suspicious of, and in some cases dislike, China. Regardless, they are also keenly aware that China's importance to the Australian economy is growing.

Another dilemma arises from the Australian government's desire to remain shoulder-to-shoulder with the United States even though it is not confident that this big brother will remain dominant in the Western Pacific for the next 20 or so years. Similarly, the Australian government wants to strengthen its military cooperation with the United States, but it faces two hurdles. First, nearly half of the population opposes a substantial US military presence on its soil (55 percent support and 43 percent oppose, whereas 20 percent strongly support and 22 percent strongly oppose).²⁶ Second, the currently ruling Labour Party seems less enthusiastic about allowing US troops to stay in Australia. That country may choose to support both China and the United States in jointly transforming the regional order, or it may decide to help the United States remain the dominant power. Either way, its decision will



have enormous strategic implications for both China and the United States as well as the region. All things considered, China should pay close attention to trends within the Australian defense strategy and to the development of Australia-US military cooperation.

Suggestions for China's Decision Makers

This article suggests that Chinese decision makers take a three-phase approach—near term, midterm, and long term—to mitigate the strategic challenges China faces in the Western Pacific.

Near Term

First, China should refrain from taking measures that might cause tensions to flare into military conflicts over the SCS. Meanwhile, China should persist in solving SCS disputes through bilateral, rather than multilateral, negotiation and in all cases try to stop these disagreements from becoming internationalized. While not interfering with the internal affairs of other nations, China must also not allow a third party to meddle in any bilateral consultation between itself and rival neighbors over territorial disputes. Recent tendencies indicate that the United States or some member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) might propose an ASEAN-China bilateral negotiation or a multiparty negotiation with US participation. If strained by these proposals, China should try to divert the pressure through economic and diplomatic channels. For example, China might encourage more friendly ASEAN states (Myanmar, Cambodia, etc.) to put forward counterproposals. Moreover, using all necessary economic and diplomatic means, China should try to persuade Australia to keep its military cooperation with the United States within an appropriate scope, not going so far as to become part of the AirSea Battle. The fact that Australia recently consented to “a significant increase in the presence of United States Marines rotating through Australia's Robertson Barracks” seems to indicate that Australia has chosen to partner with the United

States in the AirSea Battle presumably designed against China.²⁷ Already in a passive status, China should make the best use of Australia's assurance that an Australia-US military alliance is not targeting China. Furthermore, China should propose or agree to proposals about joint military exercises with Australia—both as a gesture of goodwill and a means of curbing any military actions against China.

Midterm

China should prepare middle- and long-term strategy from a perspective that opposes the AirSea Battle. For instance, “blinding,” mentioned repeatedly in the concept of AirSea Battle, is supposedly the US military's most favored tactic for gaining the initiative. To counter this attempt, the PLA should augment protection of its information and communication network, along with redundant backups. Doing so will ensure that the PLA can withstand the first wave of strikes without having its eyes “blinded.” Additionally, the British Royal Navy's blockade during World War I may inspire US forces to cut off China's sea line of transportation “with an eye toward exerting major stress on the Chinese economy and, eventually, internal stress.”²⁸ To counter this action, China should enhance its relationship with Central Asian countries to obtain their guaranteed oil and gas supply. Further, China may rebuild the “silk road” (a land route along which China started trade with Central and South Asian countries in the first century), making it an important “land line of communication” or a secured backyard. More importantly, China should continue its close partnership with Myanmar and Pakistan. This comprehensive approach will effectively dissolve any “internal stress” caused by the sea blockade. In fact, China has been executing this farsighted strategy and has made substantial progress. In the last three decades, it has not stopped building economic cooperation with the Central Asian states, Pakistan, and Myanmar, constructing cross-boundary railways and highways as well as laying oil and gas supply pipelines. The current deeply frayed relationship between Pakistan and the United States following the killing of Osama bin Laden and, more recently, of two dozen Pakistani servicemen by



North Atlantic Treaty Organization helicopters and jets has opened yet another window of opportunity for China.²⁹ By seizing this opportunity and filling the vacuum, Chinese leaders can keep this traditional ally more firmly on their side.

Long Term

China should actively continue its participation in operations sponsored by international organizations. Moreover, following the example of the United States, through peacekeeping, antiterrorism, counter-piracy, and humanitarian-relief activities, the PLA will gain valuable experience in overseas operations—essential to the strengthening of its sea and air powers. China can also explore the ongoing global economic crisis, renting and refurbishing foreign ports at strategic locations as well as increasing military cooperation with traditionally friendly states. One recent instance involved a proposal to set up an antipiracy base in Seychelles. China can also introduce other nations, such as Indonesia, Mauritius, and Fiji, into its calculus by aiding these countries economically and considering how to build military cooperation with them, possibly building a naval base or an intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance facility at some point in time. In short, China must have a secured sea line of communications (the so-called string of pearls) from the SCS all the way into the Indian Ocean. By thoroughly analyzing the US forces, both their strengths and vulnerabilities, and maximizing its own advantages, China can avoid defeat in a future conflict.

To some degree, Australians' vigilance towards China is triggered by the latter's aggressive procurement of resources from their country. By diverting its resource investments to more regions and countries, China could enjoy the twofold benefit of (1) mitigating the risk of relying too heavily on only a few sources of supply and (2) making nations like Australia understand that national interests are often reciprocal. China should devote an equal effort to building mutual confidence and reducing suspicion through more frequent dialogue and cultural ex-



change. As both the Australian defence minister's speech at the Brookings Institution and the Australian defense white paper of 2009 advised, China needs to increase "openness and transparency" in relation to capabilities and strategic doctrine.³⁰ China must reach out, engage, and explain persuasively the purpose of increasing its defense budget so as to establish mutual trust and address the concerns of its neighbors, both close and distant. Just as Australia is preparing for the decades-long strategic transformation in Asia, so will China have to adopt a long-term strategy that engages Australia on the one hand and, on the other, makes Australia fully aware that China is closely watching its strategic preparation and military cooperation with the United States.

To remain in concord with the South Asian countries, China should continue to use its political and economic prowess—including regional or bilateral cooperative and consultative platforms—to build conflict-prevention mechanisms. The Shanghai Cooperative Organization serves as good model that China can employ to set up similar venues for settling various disputes. Furthermore, through explicit diplomatic means, China must ensure that its neighbors clearly understand Chinese core values and interests and that they must not encroach upon them. At the same time, China (as it has always done) should remain determined to defend its core values and interests by all viable means, including force if necessary. China does not have to care too much about negative comments on increases in its defense budget. A defense budget of roughly 2 percent of the national gross domestic product (GDP) is actually small, particularly when measured per capita or compared to the gigantic US defense budget. In the coming years, China may gradually increase its defense budget to 3 percent of the GDP and maintain it at this appropriate level. Eventually China should introduce its version of the Monroe Doctrine into Chinese foreign policy—to push the US sphere of control or sphere of influence farther away from China's periphery.

Conclusion

Both the United States and Australia are crystal clear in their understanding that AirSea Battle itself is not a winning strategy. Defeating China through war largely depends upon an economic and psychological breakdown within China. Just as the United States believes that shutting down China's sea lines of communications will slow down its economy, which in turn will create internal disorder, so does China believe that it must reduce its dependence on foreign trade while boosting domestic demand and supply. Fundamentally, internal economic and political stability will prove crucial in defeating any perceived or planned blockade or military intervention. ✪

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Liao

The Australian Factor in the United States' Western Pacific Strategy**Liao Kai**

Mr. Liao (BA, Malmo University, Sweden; MSc, Lund University, Sweden) is a research fellow at the Knowfar Institute for Strategic and Defence Studies, China. He is involved in the AirSea Battle project, focusing on Australia's foreign and defense policies and its military cooperation with the United States in the Western Pacific. He has previously worked as the editor of the *PLA and China* newsletter and as a project associate at the Institute for Security and Development Policy, Sweden.

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