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POSTURE VERSUS PRESENCE

The Relationship between Global Naval Engagement and Naval War-Fighting Posture

Robert C. Rubel

There has occurred of late a controversy of sorts regarding the vector of investment by the U.S. Navy. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter overruled certain aspects of the Navy's fiscal year 2016 budget, directing funds away from presence-related items such as the littoral combat ship (LCS) and toward high-end combat capabilities such as the F-35.¹ Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Admiral John Richardson categorized the ensuing debate about the functions of presence versus high-end military posture as a "false choice," asserting that the Navy must provide both in a balanced manner.² However, in an era of budget squeezes, marginal trade-offs meant to solve the problem, such as Carter's Navy budget alterations, could result in a Navy that will be able to provide neither to a sufficient degree. Decisions on "fleet design" should be informed by an understanding of the relationship between forward engagement, in all its forms, and combat posture.³ Regarding these two functional elements of the Navy's mission as either mutually exclusive or having a primary/collateral relationship is a recipe for strategic error.

Naval officers traditionally have viewed war-fighting readiness and dispersed presence as conflicting strategic functions. This view goes all the way back to Alfred Thayer Mahan, who wrote:

Police duty, it was called, and quite accurately, for the distribution was that of police, not that of a military organization calculated for military use. So American ships, and those of other nations, were dotted singly around the world, in separate ports; with single beats, like that of a policeman.

How changed present conditions, how entirely concentration—which is military—has taken the place of dispersion, it is needless to insist. This is the effect of Naval Strategy, adapted to changes in conditions.⁴

For most of the post–World War II history of the U.S. Navy, the issue of war-fighting readiness versus presence essentially was moot because fleet size was large enough and geopolitical conditions were such that the two functions were carried out adequately and appropriately by the array of large combatants that constituted the fleet. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, fleet size began to shrink as a result of the “peace dividend,” and after the 9/11 attacks the geopolitical character of the world changed.

These were tectonic shifts for the Navy, and the previously mooted question of presence versus war-fighting posture became relevant again. The tension was illustrated by a disagreement that arose in 2005 between the Commander, Fleet Forces, Admiral John Nathman, and the Deputy CNO for Operations and Strategy, Vice Admiral John Morgan.⁵ At the time, two Middle East wars, the requirement to secure the homeland from terrorist attack, and a progressively shrinking fleet were putting enormous pressure on the Navy. CNO Admiral Mike Mullen was searching for some new strategic recipe to reconcile and accommodate all the demands.

Admiral Morgan devised what he called the “3/1” strategy, which was really a template for fleet design. He depicted it as a sort of Venn diagram, with a large circle labeled “Major Contingency Operations” representing war-fighting readiness. On the perimeter of the circle he positioned three smaller circles, labeled “Global War on Terror,” “Shaping,” and “Homeland Defense.” These circles only partly overlaid the big circle, implying that these missions required forces that were not suitable for high-end combat—smaller, cheaper, and thus more numerous units that could generate more widespread presence, among other things.

Admiral Nathman disagreed with the depiction, and in his subsequent briefings showed a slide that moved the smaller circles completely within the large one, implying that the forces designed for combat could perform these other missions as a collateral duty. Nathman’s logic was that if the Navy’s budget is tightly constrained, such that a choice between presence and war-fighting capability is forced, then war fighting gets the priority. Secretary Carter’s modification of the Navy’s budget indicates that this outlook is still held by at least some leaders in the Department of Defense, if not by many in the Navy itself.

However, that logic is a bit too simplistic for today’s world. The United States does not face a single global competitor as it did during the Cold War, and threats to both the homeland and American strategic interests around the world are far more diverse and varied than at any time in the past. Conventional forces are neither numerous enough nor suitable for addressing all the different threats that

confront the nation. The United States needs help from other countries if it is to maintain a favorable world order—help at almost all levels of conflict. Constricting the Navy to a unilateral conventional combat design will compromise its ability to conduct the global engagement necessary to create the interoperability as well as the trust and confidence needed to obtain that help.

THE ENGAGEMENT LAYER CAKE

The premise of this article is that there is a positive relationship between international naval engagement and a robust war-fighting posture. That relationship is neither simple nor easy nor straightforward. However, the framework for it can be depicted with some clarity via the metaphor of a multitiered cake, each higher layer having a smaller diameter than the one below, with diameter denoting the number of nations participating. Our cake will consist of five layers, as shown in the figure, starting at the top and working down.

The first thing to note is that the prospects for wide international cooperation decrease at each higher level of conflict, with war fighting that involves major powers featuring either few or no allies. The Navy's 2007 strategy document entitled "A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower," or CS21, established the lowest layer—routine maritime security in defense of the global system of commerce and security—as a universal mission.⁶ However, it also said that in times of crisis trust and confidence cannot be surged; they must be built progressively day by day. If the United States and its Navy do this well, then the hoped-for effect is that the diameter of the upper layers will expand: the United States will have more potential coalition partners available. Of course, not every nation has the means to join in major naval operations, but this is not necessary to expand the layer. Supporting functions such as allowing overflights or providing

basing or simply political support can improve the Navy's prospects in combat significantly. These are national policy issues, but a strong naval relationship can have a positive influence.

The 9/11 attacks demonstrated that terrorists can do serious damage to the nation; the economic and political disruptions of the 2001 attacks are being felt still. Whereas in the past the threat to the homeland was from either nuclear or conventional military forces of another



nation, now terrorism constitutes the main worry. However, whatever the military outcomes achieved in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and other places, there still exists the inherent danger of some previously unknown terrorist organization mounting a 9/11-style attack. The air transportation system has been substantially secured, but the nation's coastline is extensive and the continued flow of illegal drugs into the country via the sea serves notice that maritime security requires continuing attention. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks the Navy and Coast Guard engaged in considerable planning and gaming to concoct a strategy for securing America's coastline. It quickly became clear to both services that there were not enough forces to adopt a patrolling strategy. After several years of working the issue, the only solution that presented itself was a global partnership for maritime security among as many world navies as possible. Information sharing, lubricated by trust and confidence built through routine and repeated peacetime engagement, was key to its effectiveness. However, the invasion of Iraq generated a lot of international discomfort with and resentment toward the United States, making the securing of such cooperation problematic.

The 2007 CS21, while pitched as a comprehensive new national maritime strategy, had an underlying purpose (intended or not) that was relatively narrow: to help engender a global maritime partnership that would reduce the chances that terrorists could use the seas as avenues of attack on the homeland of the United States or those of friendly nations.⁷ The document called for concentrating "combat credible" forces in the Middle East and Far East, and distributing "mission tailored" forces around the world to conduct engagement and cultivate the global maritime security partnership. A key tenet of the document was that, as mentioned above, trust and confidence among navies must be built patiently day by day and cannot be "surged" in times of crisis.

During the Cold War, U.S. membership in NATO provided the U.S. Navy a built-in alliance with European navies, supported by a formalized command structure and set doctrine and procedures. In the post-Cold War era, NATO nations have reduced their defense spending and have reduced their naval forces significantly. Moreover, the locus of potential major-power conflict has shifted to the Middle East and East Asia. Outside of defense pacts with Japan, with its growing navy, and South Korea and Australia, the United States has little in the way of formal arrangements that would underpin joint naval operations. However, nations such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and even Vietnam possess small but potentially significant navies and strategic geography that could be valuable to the United States in the event of conflict with China. Similarly, a variety of nations in the Persian Gulf region possess both navies and geography of potential utility to the United States if war with Iran breaks out. However, without an alliance structure like NATO's, the framework for and details of cooperation either

must be ad-libbed in crisis (surging trust and confidence) or, preferably, worked out deliberately in peacetime.

Most nations not bound into an alliance, while happy to conduct joint training with the U.S. Navy, are not anxious to commit to an a priori anti-Iran or anti-China alliance. However, as Iranian and Chinese aggressiveness build over time, the United States needs to weave together as many threads of a naval coalition as possible, both to enhance deterrence and to complicate potential opponents' military operations. This fabric must be woven, per the logic of the 2007 CS21, gradually over time. Familiarity and confidence that would lead to close cooperation in the event of war are never givens; each state will act according to its sovereign interests. However, routine and iterative engagement on peacetime missions such as maritime security helps increase the odds that effective cooperation at higher levels on the spectrum of conflict will emerge more effectively and in a more timely manner.

ENGAGEMENT AS A COMPONENT OF FLEET DESIGN

There are various reasons for a navy to want as many ships as it can get. The traditional and obvious reason is to outnumber a potential enemy in whatever class of ship is regarded as the "counting unit" of seapower. This increases the odds of victory in case of war, and thus also presumably enhances deterrence. However, if fewer ships can be had, then each one, under this logic, ought to be as powerful as possible. This approach makes perfect sense if the key to national security is the ability to win a decisive naval battle. Alfred Thayer Mahan advocated such a strategy, and in the geopolitical conditions of his day it made sense. It also makes sense if one's ships individually decisively outclass any capability any potential enemy could bring to bear. This has been the case with American aircraft carriers up until the last decade or so. They could approach virtually any shore with impunity and use their embarked airpower to deter or defeat local aggression. However, as they have become fewer in number and threats to them have become more credible, the logic of trading numbers for capability is starting to fray.

Another reason for having numerous ships is to be able to bring power and influence to bear in multiple locations at the same time. Since its founding, the United States routinely has dispersed naval forces around the globe to protect its commercial and political interests. Most often, this aspect of naval strategy has not required powerful forces, only individual ships or small squadrons. On the other hand, during the Cold War, the United States needed powerful forces for routine forward presence at multiple locations around Eurasia, and so maintained at least fifteen carrier battle groups. The collapse of the Soviet Union removed the compelling reason to have so many groups, and the number has shrunk gradually to eleven. There are still reasons to have powerful groups forward, but eleven

carriers is not enough to use them as the default presence platform in a strategically comprehensive manner.

The 9/11 attacks produced a new kind of naval dispersion requirement: global maritime security. To protect America's homeland and those of allies and friends from terrorist smuggling via the sea, the entire maritime environment has to be secured. As previously stated, the 2007 CS21 provided the basis for securing the international naval cooperation needed to attain comprehensive maritime security. Beyond the interaction of individuals in symposia such as the International Seapower Symposium (ISS) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, international war games, and personnel exchanges, the Navy found itself conducting large numbers of port visits in areas it normally had not frequented, such as the littoral of Africa, to increase the capabilities of smaller navies and reinforce commitment and resolve. Initially the Navy conducted such engagements with its combatants and amphibious ships, but experience indicated that these smaller navies felt intimidated by such ships, so the Navy took to using smaller vessels, such as the catamaran high-speed vessel (HSV). This was at least a partial validation of Vice Admiral Morgan's "3/1" strategy.

While Al Qaeda may have been crippled over the past fifteen years, it still maintains some capability. The rise of the Islamic State and the continuing viability of the Taliban indicate that maritime security is a strategic naval mission that cannot be taken for granted. While enormous gains in the development of a global maritime security partnership have been made, the structure is informal and voluntary, and so requires continuous effort to keep it going; and because it is not yet globally comprehensive, work is needed to bring more navies into the framework. While individual and organizational engagement constitutes a large part of the effort, ship visits and joint exercises are still required, and these missions demand a fleet of vessels tailored to the job, in both character and number. Given the potential strategic damage that an attack—say, a biological one—from the sea could cause, or the impact on the economy of shutting down air traffic after an airliner has been brought down by a smuggled man-portable surface-to-air missile, maritime security is an inherent and critical component of the Navy's strategic mission portfolio, and therefore a necessary component of fleet design.

Cooperation on maritime security is based on a shared unity of purpose among nations. As former Colombian CNO Admiral Guillermo Barrera has said, "Any nation that benefits from the sea has a responsibility to help secure it."⁸ That unity of purpose is based on the notion that globalization has created a world economic system in which every nation has a stake. But the system is subject to any number of threats and disruptions, ranging from maritime piracy to major-power war. In theory, missions involving defense of the system that occur at any level of the layer cake become a responsibility of all nations, contributing as each

is able. Such an attitude is strategically important to the United States in its efforts both to secure its coasts and to deter aggression by “rogues” and near peers. This attitude was evinced to some extent during the Korean War, when twenty-two nations joined the United Nations Command in one way or another. The argument advanced by this article is that such cooperation can be made more likely and more widespread in the maritime realm by constant engagement and cooperation on maritime security, disaster relief, and a host of other peacetime missions.

The linkage between routine maritime security work and higher levels of conflict can be illustrated by a notional example. In the South China Sea there are numerous overlapping territorial claims. Currently China is building artificial islands to create military bases to back up its extensive—and illegal—claims. Southeast Asian nations mostly have small coastal navies that are unable to operate very far out at sea for very long. One method of maritime security cooperation in the capacity-building realm would be for the U.S. Navy to configure one of its *San Antonio*-class amphibious transport docks (LPDs) to function as a mother ship or sea base for Philippine, Vietnamese, Bruneian, and other navies’ patrol craft to build experience and confidence operating to the limit of their claimed exclusive economic zones. Routine operations by a number of nations inside contested waters could complicate the politics for China; China’s scope for easy expansionism would become more limited if such operations stimulated the confidence of Southeast Asian nations and resulted in their developing greater war-at-sea capabilities.

A governing concept of engagement is to avoid the perception that the United States simply is attempting to drag other nations into its own quarrels or to advance its own parochial strategic interests. This was a perception problem for the Navy in 2003–2006 as it attempted to secure international maritime security cooperation in the wake of the Iraq invasion. The United States was seen as an interventionist power pursuing its own agenda, and this interfered with the ability of international naval leaders to develop closer ties with the U.S. Navy or to buy into the notion of global maritime security cooperation. The 2007 CS21 was able to reverse that perception both by involving a range of international navies in its development and through its inclusion of (1) the key concepts of defense of the global system; (2) the statement that preventing wars is as important as winning them; and (3) the framework of globally deployed, mission-tailored forces for engagement.⁹ Efforts such as Secretary Carter’s to curtail engagement capability (through reducing the buy of LCSs) to enhance war-fighting posture run counter to that concept.

The U.S. Navy’s latest strategy document, “A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower: Forward, Engaged, Ready” (CS21R), is supposed to be a “refresh” to the 2007 CS21. However, in this writer’s view, it is a completely different

document with different purposes. Whatever the new document's virtues with respect to its intended purpose (and there are many), some of its language is at cross-purposes with the intent of its predecessor and could undermine the Navy's efforts to engender increased levels of international naval cooperation. This concern will not be readily apparent to most who read the new document, as it does contain language that calls for such cooperation.¹⁰ However, several sections of the document contain statements such as "Enhance the ability to command and control operations to project power from the sea in contested environments, including interoperability with partner nations."¹¹ There is good reason for the U.S. Navy to try to achieve interoperability with other navies for high-end combat operations, but CS21R does not distinguish clearly between cooperation for maritime security and cooperation in combat. Other navies will parse the document closely, looking for hidden agendas. Conflating all naval cooperation functions from low end to high end will spark suspicions that the United States will try to drag international navies into wars in which their nations do not want to participate. This was precisely the problem Admiral Mullen faced back in 2005–2006 as he attempted to put together the "thousand-ship navy" for maritime security purposes. It took the indirect approach of the 2007 CS21 to allay those fears.

This article contends that expanded engagement at lower levels of the engagement layer cake will enhance, over time, the prospects for wider participation in higher-tiered missions. However, the process requires patience, commitment, and continuity over time to generate trust and confidence. Establishing a sense of unity of purpose is critical, and focus on the lower tiers is the most promising way to get that process started. As it evolves, work on training and equipping for higher-tiered missions can be undertaken as other countries and their navies become politically ready for such moves. Of course, the U.S. Navy already conducts extensive engagement activities around the world; the issue is how future fleet design will affect the process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is, of course, simply not the case that the Navy's high-end power should be designed on the basis of a bottom-up application of the global naval layer cake concept. However, as the Navy gets smaller even as its global commitments remain constant or even increase, and as the cost of high-end combat units escalates, the Navy has to find relief somewhere. Forward-basing schemes and blue/gold crewing concepts require various regional nations to agree to allow the U.S. Navy to establish at least temporary facilities in their territories. At the very least, application of the naval engagement layer cake theory could facilitate the statesmanship needed to obtain such permission. Success along this line of effort would result

in more forward combat power at key locations. But this is more in the way of expressing a desired outcome than a recipe for implementation.

An obvious first step is for the Navy, via some new strategy document, to acknowledge the importance of engagement work and to counteract any suspicions raised by CS21R. This would be not so much a sop to foreign navies as a course change to the internal culture of the Navy. Here again, quite obviously, the foundation of the Navy ethos is war fighting and the warrior. However, given the long, glorious history of the Navy executing both strategic functions, the ethos of the naval warrior and that of the naval diplomat can exist side by side, with neither diluting the other. A new document must be developed with a clear understanding of its purpose and its intended audience. It should distinguish clearly among the levels of naval cooperation and avoid language that could be interpreted as default U.S. presumptions of other nations' policies in particular sets of circumstances. Despite its many strengths, CS21R contains such language.

As a midshipman and junior officer, I was taught that a naval officer is capable of performing literally any task that might come along—sort of a glorious amateur, in the Royal Navy tradition. And in fact, I have witnessed naval officers of all designators performing brilliantly in positions and situations way outside their backgrounds and training. That said, if the Navy is to take the engagement function seriously, it should have a cadre of personnel who can build progressive professional experience over time, allowing them to perform in a more sophisticated manner than would be possible on a one-tour basis. It does not seem necessary to establish a new designator when the Navy has at its disposal the existing foreign area officer (FAO) program. This program could be modified to include enlisted personnel and involve progressive assignments that would include mission command of partnership stations and perhaps command of HSVs or other ships that are most appropriate for engagement missions. A full definition of the engagement function could include designated flag billets, providing a viable promotion path for FAOs.

The big question in the minds of many is whether the Navy ought to divert shipbuilding and other programmatic resources to the engagement mission. The fear of those who regard such work as collateral is that any such diversion of resources will reduce unwisely the number of combatants the Navy has—a legitimate fear in a highly constrained budget environment. There are two ways of addressing this concern. First, as it happens, the Navy already has made a program decision to procure a number of HSVs for logistic work, and already they have proved useful as platforms for various partnership station initiatives in Latin America and Africa. They are relatively cheap and the Navy is getting double use from them, as both a useful logistic platform and a useful engagement platform.

In the future, the Navy might get an additional use from them if a variety of anti-ship and other missiles are containerized. The HSVs could become lethal combatants for specific purposes in specific areas under the emerging “distributed lethality” concept.¹²

There is also the matter of day-to-day execution of the layer cake theory. All the sea services must work together to make the process yield results. Wide dispersion of forces is necessary to conduct the engagement that widens the lower layers, but even with full Navy buy-in of the engagement function, ships and other resources still will be relatively scarce. A strategy must be developed for focusing resources where they will do the most good on a global basis. Not long after the issuance of the 2007 CS21, the Navy established the Global Engagement Strategy Division (N52), which was supposed to do that very thing. However, despite a good start, it was populated subsequently with desk officers whose purpose was to prepare the CNO for foreign engagements, thus changing the division’s focus from planning to execution. The Navy’s current force-distribution strategy is to “satisfice” combatant commander (COCOM) demands as best it can, but there is no global vision behind this, since each COCOM is interested almost exclusively in conditions in his theater. Most recently, the Navy’s “supply side” deployment scheme is based on availability of forces rather than strategy, and is receiving pushback from the COCOMs.¹³ The Navy must rehabilitate the strategy-development function of N52 so it can arm the CNO with arguments for force distribution that may not accord with COCOM requests for forces.

Normally, engagement is regarded as what forward-deployed forces do on a day-to-day peacetime basis. However, there is more to it. Foreign naval officers attend U.S. Navy education and training courses, and any number of naval training and education activities are undertaken in foreign countries. These are relatively inexpensive measures compared with ship visits and exercises. The Navy ought to take more advantage of its shore establishment, especially by including such activities in its global engagement strategy. Clearly, such activities must be coordinated with COCOM theater security cooperation plans and policies, but—unlike the distribution of forces afloat—the Navy has near-definitive authority for planning and executing them. Part of this branch of global naval engagement is the biennial ISS held at the Naval War College. Increasing attendance since the issuance of the 2007 CS21 has been an indicator of the health of the global maritime security partnership. In 2009–11, then-CNO Gary Roughead linked international war gaming conducted by the Naval War College to the ISS, with significant benefit. This linkage ought to be renewed, and a strategy for using the ISS to advance maritime security cooperation developed.

Finally, even if the Navy leverages the FAO corps for leadership in the engagement function, the operant element of Navy culture is that diplomacy and

engagement are everybody's business, from seaman to admiral. In the day-to-day process of honing the Navy's combat prowess, care should be taken to avoid presumptions that foreign navies might construe as arrogance. This is part and parcel of Theodore Roosevelt's admonition that the United States should speak softly but carry a big stick. The Navy is precisely the big stick Roosevelt had in mind, but without deft international statesmanship on the part of all naval officers and sailors, that stick becomes increasingly brittle. To secure maximum international cooperation in times of crisis and war, patient, steady attention to the engagement function in peacetime will pay dividends. This is the connection between maritime security and naval war fighting.

NOTES

1. Secretary of Defense, "Navy Program Balance," memorandum for the Secretary of the Navy, 14 December 2015, available at news.usni.org/.
2. Adm. John Richardson, "A Navy in Balance? A Conversation with Chief of Naval Operations Admiral John Richardson," *American Enterprise Institute*, 12 February 2016, www.aei.org/.
3. For fleet design, see Adm. John Richardson, "A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority," January 2016, available at www.navy.mil/.
4. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Naval Strategy Compared and Contrasted with the Principles and Practice of Military Operations on Land: Lectures Delivered at U.S. Naval War College, Newport, R.I., between the Years 1887 and 1911* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1911), p. 5.
5. The description of this disagreement is based on personal observation by the author, who was then chairman of the War Gaming Department and later dean of the Center for Naval Warfare Studies at the Naval War College.
6. J. T. Conway, G. Roughead, and T. W. Allen, "A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower," October 2007, available at www.navy.mil/; repr. *Naval War College Review* 61, no. 1 (Winter 2008), pp. 7–19.
7. For a more extensive account of the development of CS21 and a strategic analysis of its logic, see Robert C. Rubel, *The Home Fleet: Pivot of Maritime Strategy*, Corbett Centre Paper 16 (London: King's College London, May 2015), available at www.kcl.ac.uk/.
8. Adm. Guillermo Barrera, discussion with the author, Bogotá, Colombia, ca. 2009.
9. The author directed the Naval War College research and gaming effort that underpinned development of the 2007 CS21. At subsequent International Seapower Symposia, a number of foreign heads of navies told the author that the document provided top cover with their respective governments, allowing them more easily and fully to cooperate with the U.S. Navy.
10. J. F. Dunford, J. W. Greenert, and P. F. Zukunft, "A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower: Forward, Engaged, Ready," March 2015, pp. 13–18, available at www.navy.mil/.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 34. See also statements on pp. 8, 9, 33.
12. See Vice Adm. Thomas Rowden, Rear Adm. Peter Gumataotao, and Rear Adm. Peter Fanta, "Distributed Lethality," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 141/1/1,343 (January 2015), available at www.usni.org/.
13. Megan Eckstein, "Navy Stands Firm on Supply-Based Carrier Presence Model, Joint Forces Will Cover Gaps," *USNI News*, 10 September 2015, news.usni.org/.



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