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In My View

Robert C. Rubel
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SECURING NATO’S WEAKEST FLANK

Sir:

I read the Winter 2016 article by Jonathan Altman, entitled “Russian A2/AD in the Eastern Mediterranean: A Growing Risk,” and I would like to highlight the urgency of securing NATO’s southern flank. NATO needs a stronger presence in the Mediterranean to monitor activities and prevent attacks on its members.

U.S. Chief of Naval Operations Admiral John Richardson has stated that there is no plan to bolster scarce U.S. naval resources in the eastern Mediterranean. This means NATO must adapt by increasing its presence on its southern flank and boosting the military power of existing members to deter aggression in the region. Greece is one member nation that could increase its involvement, thereby strengthening NATO’s capabilities.

Greece is a key geopolitical point for NATO because it forms the alliance’s southern tip, and its large eastern border is exposed to conflicts that unfold in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. Athens is a trusted and capable ally. Even though the country is facing financial difficulties, it is one of only five NATO members that meet the alliance goal of spending two percent of gross domestic product on defense, having consistently surpassed the minimum as far back as 1988.

While the United States has forward-deployed destroyers in Rota, Spain, Washington should consider permanently basing an aircraft carrier, destroyers, and amphibious ships at Souda Bay on the Greek island of Crete. These forces could counter crises, provide more stability, and reinforce allies’ perceptions of American might. Crete is closer than Rota to where threats are likely to unfold: in the Middle East and North Africa. A Congressional Budget Office report states that basing more ships and crews abroad will boost overseas operations on a smaller budget.

NATO currently has twelve of its sixteen E-3 airborne warning and control system radar planes operating primarily out of the NATO air base in Geilenkirchen,
Germany. This limits the availability of airborne surveillance and command, control, and communications functions for tactical and air-defense forces. Having Global Hawks at Souda Bay could boost NATO’s real-time intelligence in theater, and a combat search-and-rescue capability on Crete could provide for quick responses across Europe, Africa, and the Levant. Military personnel deployed at Souda Bay also would be able to further their educations and skill sets by participating in training and educational activities nearby at the NATO Missile Firing Installation, the NATO Maritime Interdiction Operational Training Center, and other facilities on the island.

When the U.S. embassy in Benghazi, Libya, was under attack in 2012, the U.S. military was unable to respond for hours. American lives could have been saved if the United States had sent aircraft from its Souda Bay naval base—it is located only 750 miles from Libya. In the aftermath of that attack, a Marine antiterrorism detachment was added at Souda Bay to provide a quick-response capability in the region.

Using Souda Bay better is a sound idea, as it is located very close to key danger areas. Athens, Washington, and NATO should identify more opportunities to work together synergistically and protect peace and commerce in the Mediterranean Sea.

CONSTANCE BAROUDOS
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Sir:

Steven Wills provided a very thought-provoking article in the Spring 2016 Naval War College Review concerning the Navy’s loss of strategy-making authority owing to the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act (G-N) and the subsequent deterioration of the Navy’s corporate ability to craft strategy, because of its inability to generate a corps of officers with repeated tours in strategy-making billets.
However, G-N was not the only factor at work. A missing piece in Wills’s article is the recognition that necessity is not only the mother of invention; it is the genesis of strategy. That is, the 1990s featured the lack of a compelling strategic problem that needed to be solved. Without such a problem, attempting to craft global strategy is akin to trying to clap with one hand. The 1980s Maritime Strategy was a solution to a strategic problem that arose in the 1970s. At the time, the Soviet Navy had significantly expanded and the U.S. Navy came to the realization (in part through war gaming at the Naval War College [NWC]) that a global war with the Soviet Union might not go nuclear automatically. Simply shepherding reinforcement shipping across the Atlantic was not enough; the Navy had to find a way to take the offensive and help alleviate pressure on the NATO central front. This created a need for a global conventional naval strategy. Although the decade of the ’90s had its share of turbulence, the Navy could fall back on its well-oiled tactical doctrine to deal with the challenges of the period.

However, it was a time of force reductions and competition among the services for a share of the shrinking defense budget. What became critical for the Navy was effective budget justification—the forte of N8. Thus, although N3/N5 was starved of experienced strategists such as Captains Swartz, Harris, and Diamond, N8 was populated by top-notch analysts such as Captain Arthur “Trip” Barber. In this environment, N8 became dominant and insulated from N3/N5.

It appeared that in 2006 there was an incipient revival of the capability under the leadership of Vice Admiral John Morgan as N3/N5 during Admiral Mike Mullen’s reign as Chief of Naval Operations (CNO). A major reason for this was that Admiral Mullen had a global strategic problem to solve. The 9/11 attacks generated a new global, maritime, strategic problem: how to prevent terrorists from using the seas to mount attacks on the U.S. homeland and those of our allies. The key to solving it was establishing a global partnership for maritime security—a challenge that was both larger than the perspectives of the regional unified combatant commanders and beyond the ken or interest of the Joint Staff.

Not having an in-place strategic apparatus to solve the problem, Admiral Mullen did two things: he turned to NWC, and he established a small, ad hoc task force inside N51 composed of sharp, relatively junior officers. As the strategy project developed, NWC faculty would conduct a program of research, gaming, and outreach to create the underlying logic of a new strategy, and the N51 team would articulate that logic by drafting a strategy document. The product of this collaboration was the 2007 “Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower” (CS21). This document was not itself the strategy, which was essentially to court foreign navies in a way that would secure their cooperation, but it was decisive in making the strategy work. It catalyzed widespread global naval cooperation that did indeed go a long way toward solving Admiral Mullen’s strategic problem.
Concurrently with attempting to solve the strategic problem at hand, Vice Admiral Morgan also tried to establish an institutionalized strategy process within the office of the CNO (OPNAV). The process involved a formalized flow of events—meetings, reviews, games, etc.—that crossed directorate boundaries and also drew in external parties such as NWC. An instruction was drafted, but it was never signed; in this writer’s view, it foundered because of opposition from N8, which stood to lose its dominance, and Vice Admiral Morgan’s retirement.

In 2012, shortly after becoming CNO, Admiral Greenert requested a “refresh” of CS21. Such a project was certainly warranted, as global geopolitical conditions had significantly changed from 2007. However, still lacking any viable strategy-making apparatus, he turned once more to NWC for assistance. However, this time, rather than a full research and analysis project, the refresh was supposed to employ a rather short-fused drafting process, producing something within a couple of months. NWC complied and duly produced a draft.

However, with no focused strategy team in place, and with the new and politically charged concept of air-sea battle ricocheting around the Pentagon, the draft got put on the back burner. The lack of a well-defined strategy problem at the time also contributed to inhibiting the creation of a new document. China and Russia were clearly becoming threats, but the exact nature of a global naval strategic problem was not yet clear. Admiral Greenert over the next two years substituted his mantra of “warfighting first, operate forward, be ready” for a new strategy document. Within OPNAV, strategy development fell prey to endless redrafting. Finally, after several years of such activity, the Navy produced a “refresh” of CS21.

However, its relationship to the 2007 document was in name only, the new so-called CS21R being (in this writer’s view) essentially a pleading document aimed at Congress for a larger Navy. To the extent that the Navy’s strategic problem in 2014 was a shrinking fleet owing to the Budget Control Act (sequestration), the new document could be seen as supporting a strategy of influencing Congress. However, it was not produced by a cadre of experienced strategists, nor was it the product of a formal and disciplined institutional process.

The new CNO, Admiral John Richardson, has inherited a more clearly defined and compelling strategic problem of global proportions that will require of the Navy discerning strategic analysis. While the global maritime security problem the 2007 CS21 addressed is, at least for the time being, apparently under control, the growth of increasingly assertive Chinese and Russian naval power along with a dire budget crunch at home poses a global naval strategic problem of unprecedented scope and complexity. Not only must the Navy reengineer its forces and doctrine to deal with such new threats as antiship ballistic missiles; it must also find a way to maintain effective presence in three or more widely separated areas.
of the Eurasian littoral to fight terrorism, support allies, and assemble a global naval partnership against major-power expansionism.

Admiral Richardson has promulgated a guidance document entitled “A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority.” It is not a strategy in the traditional sense, but it establishes a set of criteria and lines of effort for the Navy to work toward. The key concept embedded in it is fleet design. Given the restrictions on the Navy’s authority (and ability) to craft actual strategies in the manner of the 1980s Maritime Strategy that Wills discusses, work on fleet design appears to be an appropriate avenue of strategic analysis.

In the early 2000s, the threat of terrorists supporting another 9/11-style attack on the United States via maritime smuggling created the need for a particular kind of naval strategy. Today, the combination of factors just mentioned poses another global strategic naval problem that needs to be solved. For various reasons, neither N8 nor N3/N5 is capable of solving it on its own. The CNO needs to strengthen the strategy-development capabilities of the Navy Staff. This would include establishing a mechanism whereby N3/N5 and N8 would work more synergistically, bringing the right officers into those directorates and lengthening tours there, especially for leadership. In addition, he must create an effective collaboration with a range of outside organizations, most directly NWC and the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS).

The Navy is also working to produce a new cadre of strategists. Both NWC and NPS have developed new, more-extensive programs to provide an educational foundation for officers specializing in strategy. Whether this will bear fruit in the future is uncertain, the strictures of G-N still being in place. If Wills is right (and I believe he is), without the ability to detail officers to multiple tours in a well-established strategy office, this education will go for naught. The CNO also disestablished the Strategic Studies Group, a move that has generated quite a bit of discussion among naval cognoscenti. I am not privy to his reasons, but I would guess that he is looking to put some other mechanism in place that can generate robust thinking about fleet design.

A second missing piece that Wills touches on but does not develop is the structure of the Unified Command Plan. In addition to the current strategic challenges just mentioned, any new Navy strategy will have to contend with two other effects of G-N: the many joint area of responsibility (AOR) boundaries that have been drawn in the water, and the joint process of global force distribution.

In World War II, Admiral Ernest King, as both CNO and commander in chief, had wide latitude for changing the longitude of U.S. naval forces; he could, within the general strategic guidelines of the Combined Chiefs of Staff, move Navy forces between the Atlantic and Pacific theaters, and, within the Pacific theater,
allocate forces between MacArthur and Nimitz. For King, the world ocean was a unified theater of war.

Today there is no naval officer with such authority. The Navy’s precious few ships are allocated via a joint consensus process whose inherent logic seems to be to oil the squeakiest regional wheel. This does not allow easily for the application of a global naval strategy. At best, the CNO can bring the logic of a global naval strategy—if he has one—to the meeting. Second, since the world ocean is fragmented by joint AORs, the ability of modern naval forces to synchronize fluidly across hemispheric swaths of ocean—an emerging operational necessity—is compromised. These obstacles to the efficient and strategic application of American sea power in peace and war are not likely to be removed by legislation. Therefore a new Navy strategy—a new fleet design—will have to account for them in some way.

Wills is right in everything he says, and he presents a good piece of history, of which modern-day officers of all ranks should be aware. However, as discussed here, there is more to the story, whose plot continues to unfold. It now falls to Admiral Richardson to resurrect somehow the Navy’s ability to develop and execute a new form of global naval strategy.

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