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# NATIONAL POLICY AND THE POST-SYSTEMIC NAVY

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*Robert C. Rubel*

**I**n 1954, the noted political scientist Samuel P. Huntington published a seminal article entitled “National Policy and the Transoceanic Navy.” In it he sought to articulate the connection between the geopolitical conditions of the time and the need for and functions of the U.S. Navy. His concern was as follows: “If a service does not possess a well-defined strategic concept, the public and the political leaders will be confused as to the role of the service, uncertain as to the necessity of its existence, and apathetic or hostile to the claims made by the service upon the resources of society.”<sup>1</sup>

Huntington felt impelled to write because the Navy of 1954 was facing a quandary arising from its own success in World War II. The service faced similar quandaries in 1979, in the post-Vietnam national “malaise” of the late 1970s; in 1992, in the wake of the Cold War; and again in 2004–2006, as major operations in Afghanistan and Iraq devolved into extended insurgencies. In each case the Navy had to reassess its purpose and missions and articulate a “strategic concept.” In 2013 another quandary is forming, this time in an era of economic downturn, emerging peer competition, massive government debt, ballooning cost of all things needed to maintain a navy, and a world of bewildering complexity and change. The Navy’s existing strategic concept, codified in “A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower,” is barely six years old, but the issues just mentioned have arisen or intensified since that concept was crafted.<sup>2</sup> The Navy faces, as it has in the past, an era of austerity following a period of extensive use and generous budgets, and once again a fundamental reassessment of its purpose is in order, as well as the articulation of a new strategic concept. This process is made all the harder by the ambiguous vector of geopolitical conditions. This article will

attempt to establish a basis for such a reassessment and provide a vocabulary that could be useful in crafting a new strategic concept.

Huntington's notion of the Navy's strategic concept at the time he wrote reflected a new and unprecedented focus on projecting power ashore, in "that decisive strip of littoral encircling the Eurasian continent."<sup>3</sup> The reason the Navy would do this, Huntington argued, was simply that the United States—a mari-

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time power—was engaged in a global struggle with a continental power. Since American command of the seas was a given, it stood to reason that the Navy's mission would be

to project U.S. power inland. This explanation was limited; the brute fact of the threat from the Soviet Union sufficed to justify the instrumentality of power projection ashore. The fall of the Soviet Union removed this justification, and the Navy then found itself in a quandary a bit like the one after World War II that had prompted Huntington's article. However, national prosperity, the high prestige of the armed forces generated by the successful Gulf War in 1991, and a series of peripheral crises served to maintain public support for a relatively large navy.

Today, however, a financial crisis combines with political gridlock and spiraling costs to produce a situation in which the Navy will have to dig deeper to explain why the American public should invest scarce resources in it. A viable strategic concept will have to be constructed on a more profound understanding of the connection between U.S. policy and naval instrumentalities.

The Constitution of the United States directs Congress to "provide and maintain a navy," whereas its language regarding an army is "raise and support." The obvious inference is that land forces are to be created as needed to meet emergencies but a navy is to be maintained in peacetime as well as war. This logic with respect to land forces has long been eclipsed by geopolitical and technological circumstances, the structural requirements for an army dictating that a robust cadre be maintained in continuous readiness. However, its essence may reassert itself as budgets tighten. The naval logic, however, is as germane now as it was in 1789. The Constitution's wording implies that the Navy is needed to perform some essential function for the Republic in both war and peace, thus justifying its expense in peacetime.

That essential function and its underlying logic can be expressed by a simple syllogism: if what happens overseas affects what happens here in North America, then the United States needs to have a voice and influence in overseas affairs. "Voice" here means the nation's ability to make itself heard in international forums of various kinds, as well as credibility, based on the perceived legitimacy

of the country, of the pronouncements and policies of national leaders. “Influence” is the effect of power—that others must take the United States into account whether they wish to or not. A corollary to this syllogism (perhaps reflecting a realist tilt) is that voice and influence both require some form of power and instrumentality to back them up if they are to have effect. The Navy (along with the Marine Corps) is envisioned by the Constitution as the source of that power and instrumentality on a day-to-day basis.

Three major caveats to this argument must be stated up front. First, it is admitted that the fundamental nature of a navy is to fight and win, by defeating adversary navies, protecting friendly shipping, interdicting enemy shipping, directly bombarding the enemy targets ashore, delivering Marines and the Army to where they need to be used, and supporting them while they are there. This point should not require explicit expression, but there are those who need such reassurance. Even so, however, this fundamental purpose must be seen in the context of the wider strategic landscape; war winning is a lens that can block out critical factors that better peripheral vision might detect. Admiral Michael Mullen, calling (as Chief of Naval Operations) for the development of a new maritime strategy, said, “So I am here to challenge you. First, to rid yourselves of the old notion—held by so many for so long—that maritime strategy exists solely to fight and win wars at sea, and the rest will take care of itself.”<sup>4</sup> For much of its history, the Navy was not in fact built to win wars; it was built to fight and win certain engagements that might prove crucial in an overall strategy, such as in the War of 1812, or to have a chance of prevailing in certain defined circumstances, as from the 1890s through the start of World War II. Since 1944, however, American naval officers have been so conditioned by U.S. Navy dominance that it is almost impossible for them to think in any terms other than war winning.

The second caveat is that voice and influence are not precision instruments. Rare indeed is the national leadership that can craft elegant maneuvers to convey closely nuanced messages that will be correctly interpreted by their intended recipients. Military force is mostly a blunt weapon, with collateral effects almost impossible to predict. As one example, the 1996 dispatch of two American aircraft carriers to the vicinity of Taiwan in response to missile firings by the People’s Republic of China had the unintended side effect of stimulating a Chinese military buildup.<sup>5</sup> Building a navy and creating a deployment pattern for it create a context in which statesmanship can be exercised, for good or for ill. However, without a navy it is clear that strategic options are far more limited.

The third caveat involves the totality of the American military establishment. Obviously, given the global reach and presence of all the U.S. military services, the Navy and Marine Corps are collectively but one piece in a much larger pattern. However, the use of the seas and the projection of power from the seas are

strategic issues predominantly associated with those two services—especially in peacetime—and the implications for the creation and conveyance of American voice and influence overseas are sufficiently compelling to warrant an (almost) exclusive focus on them in this article.

An assertion that the Navy's fundamental purpose is to provide the basis for American voice and influence overseas, though it would be a logical foundation for thought, is not sufficiently specific to offer utility in particular geopolitical circumstances. Huntington attempts to add context via a historical analysis of the geopolitical phases of American history, based on successive geographic foci of U.S. grand strategy. Starting with what he terms the "continental phase," Huntington traces the expanding locus of U.S. security interests into the "oceanic phase" and finally, after World War II, to the "transoceanic phase." While his categorization is accurate and useful for his own purposes, for this discussion a different perspective is needed. On the basis of the syllogism above, the criterion for categorization for our purposes is how the Navy has provided for American voice and influence overseas.

### THE HAMILTONIAN ERA

Alexander Hamilton was an early proponent of a navy. Writing from the perspective of the commercial interests in New England, Hamilton laid out in one of his Federalist Papers the instrumentality the navy would afford: "A further resource for influencing the conduct of European nations toward us . . . would arise from the establishment of a navy." A navy of sufficient size and power would, if committed on the side of one external power or another in a war in the West Indies, constitute the margin of victory: "It will be readily perceived that a situation so favorable would enable us to bargain with great advantage for commercial privileges. A price would be set not only upon our friendship, but upon our neutrality. By a steady adherence to the Union we may hope, ere long, to become the arbiter of Europe in competitions in this part of the world as our interest may dictate."<sup>6</sup> Here is a clear articulation of a navy's instrumental logic. Hamilton's scenario did not actually transpire in that century, but it reflects a clear understanding that the imperial competition among European powers would affect American commercial prospects and American naval deployments even in the Western Hemisphere could generate influence in Europe.

In the event, American naval instrumentality was manifested in operations against the Barbary pirates and in commerce raiding against the British in the War of 1812. American naval power in the early part of the Hamiltonian Era was elemental, represented principally by highly capable frigates, several of whose victories against Royal Navy adversaries discomfited British public opinion.<sup>7</sup> Later on, the effectiveness—at least a creditable attempt at effectiveness—of the

Union blockade of the Confederacy was a factor in keeping Britain, and thus the other European powers, from recognizing or directly aiding the South.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Admiral David Farragut's amphibious capture of New Orleans stemmed the Confederate export of cotton, thus scuttling a Southern scheme to finance the war via cotton-secured bonds in Europe. Some regard this seizure, rather than the battle of Gettysburg or the capture of Vicksburg, as the turning point of the Civil War, as it kept the powerful Rothschild banking conglomerate on the sidelines, not financing the Confederacy as it had Great Britain in the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>9</sup> The general strategic concept, explicit or not, of the Hamiltonian Era, which extended up to the Spanish-American War, involved deployment of the nation's limited naval power, principally within the Western Hemisphere, to influence events in Europe, as well as a series of discrete naval expeditions to protect and support, in various ways, American commercial interests.

#### THE MAHANIAN ERA

A combination of ingredients served to change the American formula for the application of seapower to influence events overseas. The seeds were sown by the publication in 1890 of *The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1660–1783* by Alfred Thayer Mahan. Becoming an international best seller, this book provided the intellectual underpinning for the establishment of a powerful blue-water fleet. The Spanish-American War yielded possessions in Asia that would create direct vested interests for the United States overseas. Now the nation needed significant naval power to protect its possessions and to deter great-power threats to its expanding geopolitical interests. The residual concept of the Hamiltonian Era, neutrality, was eradicated by the sinking of *Lusitania*. In 1917–18 the United States directly used its naval power, sending it forward to help redress the balance of power in Europe. After World War I the nation found itself possessing a navy “second to none” and sought to take advantage of this naval power to back up its voice and influence in international forums. According to a prominent naval historian, “Still it was naval capacity, the force of the fleet, that [President Woodrow] Wilson intended to put in his service. On that strength Wilson wanted to establish an international order that would lead to the limitation of arms.” Further, “the Navy was part of Wilson’s semicoercive diplomacy, its ships stakes on the negotiating table.”<sup>10</sup>

In the Mahanian Era, command of the sea became an element of American naval instrumentality, reaching its apotheosis in World War II. Command of the sea was the precursor of America’s ability to bring its industrial might to bear against the Axis powers. The United States, via command of the sea, became the arbiter of Europe—and, to a degree, of other regions—not by constituting the potential margin of superiority for a European power but directly through its own military

might. In this context, the United States, seeking to avert another world war, brokered the Bretton Woods accords, which set the conditions for globalization. The oceans of the world were now a vast maneuver space for the U.S. Navy. As with the transition between the Hamiltonian and Mahanian Eras, naval success in one era created the conditions for an altered application of U.S. voice and influence, and with those new conditions, a new era.

### THE HUNTINGTON ERA

An extensive analysis in 1988 of the connection between command of the sea and overall national power from the dawn of the age of European empire to the last years of the Soviet Union found that such command allowed the ascendant nation to enforce the rules of an international order it found congenial to its interests.<sup>11</sup> Using naval power either directly or to move its army, the principal power could deter conflict, support allies against local threats, or keep major external powers at bay. This was the role of the United States during the Cold War. Competition and threat from the Soviet Union, a continental power, led to a new formulation of the Navy's overseas instrumentality. It was now to ring the Eurasian littoral with naval power that could extend its reach inland to prevent Soviet domination of what Nicholas Spykman had in 1944 called the "rimlands"—areas on the edges of the "World Island" marked by both political instability and strategic significance.<sup>12</sup> American naval forces were kept busy conducting naval diplomacy to suppress or limit regional conflict and supporting wars in Korea, Vietnam, and elsewhere to contain Soviet strategic probes.

American naval forces were also used to help glue together anti-Soviet and anti-Chinese alliances, as well as to enforce the new Free World order. American aircraft carriers, especially, were used as geopolitical chess pieces to deliver messages of both threat and reassurance. The motivator of this approach to overseas voice and influence was bipolarity—the maritime United States and its allies and clients were facing a hostile continental Soviet Union and its clients. The site of decision in this struggle would be the rimlands of Eurasia, so power projection, both in its threat and in its application, was the naval instrumentality. In 1954 the outcome of this struggle was not foreseeable, except perhaps to George Kennan;<sup>13</sup> nonetheless, the very success of this naval instrumentality, manifested perhaps most compellingly in the 1980s Maritime Strategy, led to its eclipse when the Soviet Union collapsed.<sup>14</sup>

### THE SYSTEMIC ERA

In the aftermath of the Cold War, American naval posture operated on momentum. Naval patrols on the Eurasian periphery continued, and there certainly were

enough residual conflicts and potential hot spots, such as Korea and Iran, to draw naval forces forward, not to mention a series of crises and minor operations, such as Somalia and Kosovo. However, the logic of the Huntington Era's naval instrumentality had evaporated and with it the justification for a "six-hundred-ship navy." The United States was even more ascendant than after World War II, and the basic logic of enforcing the rules of the international order remained. However, with the threat level so low, it was natural that the instantiation of American voice and influence would evolve.

In laying out his concept of the "culminating point of victory," the Prussian war theorist Carl von Clausewitz admonishes us that any victorious campaign, however decisive, must sooner or later go over to some kind of defense; in fact, the concept of "victory" itself must be defended.<sup>15</sup> In the post-Cold War era naval forces switched to performing what might be termed "constabulary" duties, essentially providing general security so that the victory of democracy could be defended, all the while basing their planning and programming on a set of potential contingencies with "rogue" states, principally North Korea and Iran. In this era the focus of U.S. influence shifted even more landward, to the extent that the Navy itself regarded its own function as being the support of land forces.<sup>16</sup> This orientation was manifest in the course of three land wars in the Middle East: Kuwait, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Even the orientation of the American Unified Command Plan shifted to accommodate better this continental focus;<sup>17</sup> Army-style area-of-responsibility boundaries increasingly sectioned off the oceans until they became essentially communications zones between the United States and forward, Eurasia-facing combatant commanders.

As this era wore on, the Navy became increasingly concerned that it had lost its way, in terms of a strategic concept that would provide not only a utility argument but also a guide to the service's functioning. This sense became especially compelling after the 9/11 attacks as the Navy and Coast Guard struggled to conceptualize and establish a strategy for securing the homeland against future terrorist attacks that might be mounted from the sea. There were nowhere near enough ships in both services combined to establish effective patrols of the American coastline. Moreover, the Navy instinct, born of over two hundred years of focusing on influencing events overseas, did not want to tie its forces to the North American littoral. The answer to this quandary emerged in stages. First came the recognition that the United States did not have the wherewithal to secure its sea approaches unilaterally. Effective defense had to start overseas, with intelligence and cueing.<sup>18</sup> These in turn would require the cooperation of as many foreign navies, coast guards, and other agencies as possible. That consideration led to the notion of a global maritime partnership, but political conditions obviated an extension of

existing alliances or the creation of new ones. The answer was found in the crafting of a new maritime strategy document that articulated a universal maritime mission—defense of the global system of commerce and security.<sup>19</sup>

Such a codification, while new in itself, actually described a state of affairs that had existed since the fall of the Soviet Union. With no major geopolitical competition to fragment the world, the Western liberal trading system had gone global, progressively intensifying economic interdependencies. Any economic system requires security to function, and the United States became the key provider of that systemic security. The Navy became a kind of global public-safety organization, a role reflected in its recruiting advertisement slogan “A Global Force for Good.”<sup>20</sup> The strategic judgment now reached was that the nation benefited substantially from the proper operation of the global system of trade and so should act to protect that system insofar as it is able.

In this post–Cold War, globalized world, U.S. voice and influence are so pervasive and transmitted through so many channels that it is difficult to distinguish which elements are dependent on naval power or presence and which are not. Moreover, in a stable, globalized world, what does not happen is as important as what does, and, of course, it is not possible in most cases to link positive instrumentalities with potentialities that do not occur. Such imponderables made the development of the current maritime strategy in significant measure a faith-based exercise; the Navy’s being forward was judged, as an article of faith among the admirals, in the absence of any concrete evidence, to be critical to national interests, and thus the option of bringing the fleet home was rejected out of hand.<sup>21</sup>

From a purely physical standpoint, the ready availability of U.S. naval forces overseas during this era has been repeatedly useful, in episodes ranging from the initial response by two aircraft carriers to Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait to the rapidly staged relief efforts during the aftermaths of tsunamis in Indonesia and Japan. Responsiveness as an underpinning to voice and influence has a certain inherent value, not least in that it coheres nicely with the contingent nature of statesmanship. James Cable captured this notion in his concept of “catalytic force”:

However, a force is often deployed for vaguer purposes. A situation arises pregnant with a formless menace or offering obscure opportunities. Something, it is felt, is going to happen, something that somehow might have been prevented if force were available at the critical point. Advantages, their nature and the manner of their achievement still undetermined, might be reaped by those able to put immediate and appropriate power behind their sickle.<sup>22</sup>

If we regard the United States as a status quo power—that is, as satisfied with its status in the international system and as seeking to maintain the structure of

the system and day-to-day stability—then in an inherently unstable world, it is precisely for the reasons articulated by Cable that naval force is now continuously deployed forward, even though he was talking about the episodic use of limited naval force in peacetime. Influence, as defined here, is thus both continuous and contingent.

Voice, in the present sense, is, if not the flip side of influence, at least a corollary of it, with a somewhat different dynamic. Edward Luttwak, in his discussion of “suasion,” notes that suasion has a supportive side, as when U.S. naval forces are deployed to reassure allies that might be under threat by other powers.<sup>23</sup> There is, however, another facet of suasion that Luttwak, from his vantage point in the Cold War, could not clearly discern—what we today call “engagement.” Beyond disaster relief or humanitarian assistance rendered by hospital ships, routine engagement involves conducting exercises to enhance the training of other navies, building the capacity of embryonic navies by providing equipment and training, and generally getting other nations and their navies comfortable, via routine interactions, with collaborating with the United States. The theory is that such interactions improve the chances that critical information will be exchanged at critical moments and that support, both political and military, will be forthcoming in the event of a crisis. Unlike deployment for influence, which is contingent in nature, deployment for voice is a structured investment in the future. As such, it involves both costs and risks, as would any investment in the business world. Naval deployment strategy would be better conceived on that basis.

Superimposed on the Systemic Era was what some termed the “global war on terror.” The Navy’s attempt to execute its 2007 Cooperative Strategy was essentially overlaid by Navy–Marine Corps support for major land operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The nation’s apparent success in its fight against Al Qaeda and the strategic and financial overextension brought about by those two extended land wars in the Middle East have produced another quandary for the Navy. This latest quandary is exacerbated by the spiraling cost of anything required to maintain a navy. Having used up a good portion of the service lives of many of its ships and aircraft, the Navy is in need of significant recapitalization, but it is not clear what the justification should be, what direction the reconstitution should take, and what the Navy’s deployment posture ought to become. The answers to these questions depend in significant degree on whether the world is transitioning to a post-systemic era or not.

#### A POST-SYSTEMIC NAVY?

Globalization—the increasing economic interdependency of nations and regions—has been both a boon and a curse, depending on whom one asks. Over

the course of the Systemic Era the global gross domestic product has risen, and millions of people have been lifted out of poverty. On the other hand, shifting economic geography has taken jobs away from many, disrupted traditional cultures, and created new vulnerabilities. Either way, globalization has been regarded as an “objective tendency” that nations cannot avoid.<sup>24</sup> In that context, U.S. voice and influence, based on the nation’s status as the world’s leading economy and a key proponent of the Bretton Woods–based world order and aided and abetted by its seapower, would seek to be inclusive. Thus it is no accident that

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the current national maritime strategy document focuses on cooperation. However, indications are emerging that globalization may have run its course and that a backlash is

forming.<sup>25</sup> If the world steps back from globalization, how does the requirement for American voice and influence overseas change, and how would that affect the size, structure, and deployment patterns of the U.S. Navy?

Before considering how the United States would adapt to a post-globalized world, we should recognize that since the country has generally benefited from the global system that is in place, it will no doubt do what it can to maintain that international political and economic order. Fully recognizing the “rise of the rest” in terms of economic and political power, the United States is attempting to socialize rising powers and convince them that their interests are served by playing by the rules. How does the maritime element of national power serve this purpose? The answer currently on the books is to engage as extensively and intensively and with as many nations as possible, not only to enlarge and perpetuate a global maritime partnership aimed at securing the seas against terrorists and criminals but also to form a political consensus based on habitual cooperation. Under the rubric of what is termed “forward partnering,” the purpose of forward deployment would be to “enable” partners to help the United States maintain global stability.<sup>26</sup>

Such a strategy suggests frequent and repeated interactions with as many navies as possible. This approach would appear to be a very stressing one for the Navy, but relief is to be found in several ways.<sup>27</sup> First, this kind of interaction can be effectively carried out in most cases with small vessels or even via direct personnel interchanges, such as workshops, war games, instruction, command-post exercises, and the like. Second, like-minded navies might be recruited for the purpose, lessening the burden on the U.S. Navy.

On the forcible side, it would not be in the U.S. interest to give certain nations the impression that they can rewrite the rules, either globally or regionally.

Deterrence is always a problematic concept, but there is a term in the current maritime strategy that might offer some assistance—“credible combat power.”<sup>28</sup> The term itself is vague, but some parsing can help. Credibility consists of two parts. The first is the “usability” of the power—that is, whether the political costs and risks of actually using it are sufficiently low to make an American president likely, in a given set of circumstances, to say go. The second aspect of credibility is effectiveness: If used, would the combat power actually disrupt the plans and objectives of the aggressor? The first element of credibility is certainly on the side of naval and airpower; the United States has a strong track record of applying liberal doses of each, even in rather minor crises. Perhaps the apotheosis of usability is the drone aircraft, whose presence in the skies above suspected terrorist hangouts is now almost taken for granted. Precision weapons that reduce collateral damage also factor into the usability equation. In addition, barring some future mission failure, the use of special forces seems to be on the rise. At the high end of deterrence, nuclear weapons, by virtue of their very unusability, contribute to the overall environment of deterrence; at the low end, the opposite is the case.

If air- and seapower are highly usable, what about their effectiveness? Effectiveness breaks down again into two sub-elements: ability to penetrate defenses and the ability, having penetrated them, to do something strategically useful. To be clear—we are talking about bombardment, but not just striking targets ashore via aircraft and missiles. We must also consider the destruction of naval forces and naval infrastructure. The requirement in the first instance is to prevent an aggressor from attaining some military fait accompli that would be hard to reverse. This, of course, is the basic military task that U.S. forces have used as a basis for major contingency planning since the 1950s. The difference in this new age of austere budgets is that the task must be accomplished without the use of major overseas infrastructure or even massive industrial backup at home. Precision (along with its vital handmaiden, targeting) can make up some of this deficit, but the rest must be derived from the ability to reduce losses to enemy defenses. With a limited stockpile of weapons, what is fired must get through and must have effect. Given the increasing sophistication of defenses and the growing expensiveness (and thus smaller numbers) of traditional strike platforms, such as tactical aircraft, the answer to this problem will increasingly involve new kinds of missiles and other unmanned systems. If the Navy, along with the other services, can evolve to a predominantly missile-based, aggression-disruption posture, U.S. influence may be manifested in the inability or unwillingness of dissatisfied powers to try to overturn the international order, either regionally or globally, via military means.

The alternative to bombardment is represented by boots on the ground. The Marine Corps is currently attempting to “get back to its amphibious roots” by

reembarking more units on amphibious ships. In past eras the Marines have been eminently usable and effective when committed, but certain events, such as the 1983 Beirut Marine barracks bombing, have heralded a new, more constricted operating environment for amphibious operations. The ability to hide powerful, precision weapons will make it ever more difficult to declare given littoral areas safe for amphibious operations. Opponents will adopt a “sniping” approach, attempting, as in 1983, to inflict sufficient casualties to unhinge U.S. policy. It is not at all clear at this point what role the Marine Corps will play in providing credible combat power to underpin U.S. voice and influence, but there are strong national incentives to have an alternative to bombardment in order to back up policy. An ability to insert, support, and extract Marines from greater distances and an operational doctrine that emphasizes raiding constitute two potentially useful directions.

Of course, the current system may deteriorate, and power shifts may occur without military action. The most recent National Intelligence Council report on global trends suggests four illustrative future scenarios, three of which illustrate such shifts in one way or another. If China, for example, were somehow able to persuade its maritime neighbors to become tributary clients, or the Shanghai Cooperative Organization were to become more effective, Beijing might be able to establish a mercantilist economic regime in Eurasia.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the Arab Spring will translate into a pan-nationalist Islamic “caliphate” that is able to adopt some kind of exclusive trade zone, and an increasingly xenophobic Europe might follow. The United States, for its part, might attempt to establish its own exclusionary trade consortium among nations excluded from other blocs. The “BRICS”—the emerging national economies of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—may establish some kind of noncontiguous, alternative system.<sup>30</sup> In a world where any such development had occurred, power would talk. Major conventional warfare in Eurasia might be off the table (nuclear proliferation would likely be a feature of such a world), but trade-bloc competition in resource zones could lead to peripheral or surrogate wars.

The security of shipping and maritime infrastructure would become an issue. American voice and influence would be critical in providing assurances for the nation’s constituents and for limiting the depredations of hostile or competitive trade blocs, the objective being to limit systemic deterioration by keeping as many nations as possible within the U.S. sphere of influence. The ability to secure or disrupt oceanic movements becomes critical in such a world, and the Navy would have to “follow the trade,” much as it did in the early nineteenth century. The fleet would have to disperse widely to secure friendly shipping and protect maritime infrastructure, such as oil platforms, undersea cables, fisheries, etc.

Moreover, power-projection missions would likely be in places where, like Africa, trade-bloc influence could produce surrogate conflict.

The system could also deteriorate in a more atomistic manner, with formerly democratic governments yielding to more authoritarian regimes, be they religious or secular. Corruption in and among such regimes could produce more in the way of transnational crime. Here again, the “system,” as the United States conceives it, might contract to a group of countries that are able to maintain the democratic form and are willing to play by the established rule set. In this world, U.S. voice and influence would be a necessary “glue” to hold the residual system together. The Navy’s role would be more similar (in comparison to the bloc-competition world) to the one it currently plays in the Systemic Era—that of a global public-safety force that limits the damage transnational crime and terrorism can do, performs deterrence at certain key points, and conducts wide engagement with friendly nations, providing some form of security umbrella if they have disruptive, authoritarian neighbors. Unlike in the Huntington Era, the locus of naval deployment would not be necessarily on the rim of Eurasia. One can easily imagine the need in such a world for at least episodic naval force in the Caribbean, the coasts of Africa, and perhaps the Mediterranean.

#### VOICE, INFLUENCE, CONCENTRATION, AND DISPERSAL

A nation’s seapower can be thought of as the net vector of its policies, its overall economic and military strength relative to other nations, its geographic position and conformation, and the character of its naval forces.<sup>31</sup> The size, composition, deployment pattern, and reputation of a nation’s navy constitute collectively a geopolitical terrain feature that other nations must take into account as they develop their policies. This is one way in which the nation’s voice and influence can be made manifest, one reflected in the reasoning of Alexander Hamilton—a form of strategic body language. In addition, voice and influence are made more explicit in patterns of deployment and responses to specific situations.

The vernacular of this latter mode of strategic communication is contained in the modality of fleet concentration and dispersal. In all naval eras we have examined except for the Mahanian Era, wide strategic dispersal of the American navy has been the norm.<sup>32</sup> This consistent pattern reflects America’s sense of itself as a nation with a mission and thus a duty to fight tyranny and to promote freedom and free trade, in the contexts of the various geopolitical circumstances that have emerged over the past two and a quarter centuries. Dispersal—presence in many places at once—carries with it several implicit messages. First, it reinforces the notion that the U.S. Navy fears no opponent. Dispersal implies command of the sea, which, rightly considered, is a strength relationship among navies.

Command allows the dominant navy to disperse to exercise control in specific situations and to conduct naval diplomacy as it sees fit.<sup>33</sup> In addition, wide and persistent forward presence conditions the world to American involvement in regional affairs and confers a degree of legitimacy on claims of leadership. These messages are only reinforced and intensified when U.S. naval forces are called on to render disaster relief or other peacetime assistance.

In all three of the future scenarios we have examined—a continued systemic world, a trade-bloc world, and a world of creeping authoritarianism and chaos—U.S. voice and influence are transmitted in key ways by the forward and dispersed operations of its sea services. The specifics of deployment patterns may change, but the American navy must be forward at numerous places to provide the voice and influence the nation requires to carry out policies that are consistent with the nature of its society and economy. Dispersed operations at the strategic level involve increasing risk as potential competitors develop their own navies; an adversary might be able to achieve relative concentration at a particular point and defeat our force. This situation was encountered in the eastern Mediterranean during the Yom Kippur War of 1973. The Soviet 5th Eskadra swelled to ninety-six ships and, armed with antiship missiles, outgunned in a significant way the sixty-three ships of the U.S. Sixth Fleet.<sup>34</sup> The episode occurring as it did in the context of a larger nuclear standoff, actual combat did not take place, so the potential results can only be guessed at. But it is conceivable that the U.S. Navy would have suffered significant losses if not outright defeat, with incalculable strategic effects, not the least of which would have been loss of American voice and influence.

The lesson is that strategic naval dispersal in a post-systemic era requires that individual forces have the ability to fight successfully for local sea control in modern technological conditions and that widely dispersed groups be able to aggregate quickly enough to create local superiority. The perceived ability to prevail in local fights for sea control will be a keystone of the U.S. Navy's ability to transmit American voice and influence overseas in both a systemic and post-systemic world, and it may constitute a significant factor in avoiding a global slide from the former to the latter.

### CAPITAL SHIPS AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

From the galleasses that turned the tide at the battle of Lepanto to the modern-day *Nimitz*-class aircraft carrier, capital ships have possessed characteristics that have imbued them with potent geopolitical meaning: they pack a lot of power into one hull; they are big and expensive, and thus nations can afford relatively few of them. They thus represent both commitment and risk. When a nation commits its capital ships to battle it is rolling the strategic dice—risking all to

win all. When capital ships are dispatched on missions of gunboat diplomacy, the nation is signaling intense interest.<sup>35</sup> The American aircraft carrier as a type has been referred to as iconic, signifying its size and power and its history of victory in battle. Presidents have moved carrier strike groups around the oceans like queens on a chessboard, seeking to checkmate potential aggressors before they have a chance to make their moves. How much of the effect of carriers is based on a rational calculation of their actual combat power and how much on their reputation is largely imponderable, but it stands to reason that if one were put out of action by a mine, torpedo, or missile, not only would its actual combat power be neutralized in the specific situation, but the reputation of the class would be diminished. People who were supposed to fear them would be less afraid.

Navies of the world have faced a David-and-Goliath dilemma at least since the invention of the self-propelled torpedo in the late nineteenth century. The torpedo, an undersea cruise missile capable of being launched today from either submarines or small surface craft, can bring down the most powerful capital ship. In fact, in World War II a number of U.S. aircraft carriers were put out of action by Japanese torpedoes. In the current era, nuclear-powered submarines and advanced torpedoes exacerbate the problem significantly. The antiship cruise missile, as an airborne analogue to the torpedo, has the same operational implications—it makes small ships capable of challenging and even defeating large ones. Evolving technologies permit these weapons to be stowed in shipping containers or otherwise hidden, creating the problem that any vessel could be an existential threat to a capital ship. The danger is that if the U.S. Navy ties up its credible strategic-communication capability in a small number of nuclear aircraft carriers, that capability will catastrophically evaporate if one is defeated by a salvo of cruise missiles or torpedoes. In a similar vein, newly developed land-launched, long-range antiship ballistic missiles and their cousins, coastal-defense cruise missiles, could create wide oceanic zones where capital ships cannot be operated at an acceptable degree of risk.<sup>36</sup> The stakes would be, if anything, higher in a post-systemic world.

The key question is thus whether American voice and influence can be transmitted in ways other than through the movements of its capital ships, the large aircraft carriers. On the face of it, there is no available answer, not only because of the many imponderables associated with deterrence and coercion but also because historical evidence is scant. While it is true that over the ages relatively small naval units have been effective at conducting gunboat diplomacy, in most cases they were the most powerful military forces on the scene. Nevertheless, as symbols of national interest, smaller units can deliver meaning if the recipients of the message are convinced that more military power will emerge over the horizon, sent by ironclad national will.

This brings us back to the discussion of credible combat power. Assuming the dispatch of a missile-armed surface ship (or a force of several) instead of an aircraft carrier, its offensive punch must be seen as roughly equivalent to what a carrier might deliver. This equivalence is problematic on a number of counts. The “warheads” of a carrier are bombs, smart though they may be, with the tactical aircraft constituting a reusable first stage. The carrier is thought—correctly—to carry many of these. Thus it can persist in dropping bombs over time, perhaps indefinitely. Missiles, on the other hand, are always in limited supply, so once any are fired, a certain useful indeterminacy of threat is lost: “If we can survive the first salvo, perhaps they will run out of ammo.” However, balancing that shortcoming is the advantage missiles have in overall usability—defenses are less likely to stop them or to score a lucky hit that yields an American prisoner of war.

The issue boils down to risk: Are the potential consequences of being put out of action balanced by the importance of the mission and the presumed effect of the capital ship? In the Systemic Era the answer to that question would be easy; there is no appreciable threat. In a postulated post-systemic era, however, serious consideration must be given to the trade-off. Beyond the immediate operational circumstances, American voice and influence, as transmitted via the Navy, will be at stake.

The image of an eleven-hundred-foot-long, hundred-thousand-ton aircraft carrier is laden with meaning for potential adversaries, allies, and the American public. In this huge, impressive package, the reputation of the U.S. Navy and the political will and economic power of the United States are embodied and communicated to the world. But in an age of austerity, the issue of whether these ships are appropriate investments becomes increasingly compelling.<sup>37</sup> There are a number of reasons for the U.S. Navy to shift away from these capital ships to a more dispersed, resilient, and affordable array of missile-carrying vessels. However, no such move can be made on the basis of tactical efficacy alone; there must be a viable logic that illustrates how the movements and positioning of such forces adequately convey American voice and influence overseas. It must be noted, however, that a positive logic of influence by missile might be less compelling in motivating institutional change than a negative logic of carrier vulnerability.

### BEING ALMOST EVERYWHERE

Despite its continental extent, the United States is functionally an island and has quite naturally adopted a maritime-oriented grand strategy throughout most of its history. That is, the Republic has never been truly isolated in the manner of Eurasian continental powers. Even from the beginning, it was inextricably connected to the goings-on in Europe and Asia. As a relatively weak trading power, it sought such leverage as it could through deployments of its navy in the Western

Hemisphere and in small, episodic expeditions to secure its trade. As its power and interests grew, it used the instrumentality of an increasingly strong navy to gain a voice in the international forums of the day. In Huntington's "transoceanic" era, the U.S. Navy helped glue together the various alliances that kept the Soviet Union at bay. In the post-Cold War Systemic Era the United States consolidated its legitimacy and defended the victory of democracy by making its navy available to do various kinds of good works, ranging from helping stop ethnic cleansing in Kosovo to assisting victims of tsunamis in Indonesia and Japan, not to mention supporting two ground wars in the Middle East.

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*2013 . . . an era of economic downturn, emerging peer competition, massive government debt, ballooning cost of all things needed to maintain a navy, and . . . bewildering complexity and change.*

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The United States is also unique among nations in that it feels a sense of mission in the world, and that mission requires broadly recognized legitimacy as a role model and as a leader. Such legitimacy

must be underpinned by the capability to take action when and where needed to confront tyranny and aggression and to assist those in need. The sea services deliver that capability on a global scale. Over its history, the United States has utilized naval forces to create legitimacy in a number of ways: in the Hamiltonian Era, via leverage exercised by relatively weak naval forces; in the Mahanian Era, via the power to vie for command of the sea; in the Huntington Era, via power-projection capability; and in the Systemic Era, by the ability to be almost everywhere, helping. Assuming the national sense of mission endures, the sea services' strategic concepts, as well as their patterns of deployment, will be so conditioned.

However, in a postulated post-systemic era of austerity and potential retrenchment coincident with the rise of new powers, the role of the Navy in helping maintain American influence could change significantly. In a sense, and depending on the vector of global affairs, its role may revert to one described by Huntington—that of a force operating forward to hold together alliances oriented toward counteracting threats from authoritarian competitors. The locus of deployment might change, and the relative importance of positive actions to maintain overall command of the sea and the ability to exercise local sea control will likely be higher than in the Cold War. In any case, there seems to be no suitable strategic deployment option that involves keeping the nation's sea services in home waters; the nation's character and its role in the world require that its naval forces be forward to the extent feasible, though their exact disposition and composition will be a function of technology, threat, and cost. A post-systemic navy will have to be ready to fight its way into strategically significant waters and then fight to stay there. It will have to go where a shifting array of threats dictate,

and unlike the deployment structure of the current maritime strategy, there may be no stable set of areas that serve as focal points.

Huntington wrote his article several years into the transoceanic phase he codified, so the parameters of that era's naval mission set were more or less clear. At this writing, while there are indicators of a slide toward a post-systemic world, no such clarity is available in terms of where the Navy should deploy, for what purpose, and with what capabilities. However, simply defining the problem in terms of bringing American voice and influence to bear overseas helps establish a set of criteria and a vocabulary for evaluating events as they unfold, thereby helping planners and decision makers anticipate, and even influence, the turn of events.

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