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IN MY VIEW

THE SSGN: SOMETHING WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE?

Sir:

The article “SSGN: A Transformation Limited by Legacy Command and Control” by Capt. Charles Sykora (Winter 2006, pp. 41–62) fails to answer many of the questions being asked by congressional staffers, Department of Defense analysts, and even fellow naval officers. These questions about the SSGN can be addressed in three categories:

(1) *Mission crossover*: What happens if an *Ohio*-class SSGN has landed people on the beach and receives a Tomahawk “fire order”? Will she launch missiles, which will reveal that a U.S. submarine is in the area? Or, perhaps to reach the launch (wave) point the SSGN will have to leave the area, essentially abandoning people on the beach. Will the SSGN be a truly dual-mission submarine?

(2) *Missile role*: What is the scenario in which a submarine (clandestine) launch of perhaps 150 missiles will be of value? (Remember, almost every SSN carries twelve vertical-launch Tomahawks, and additional missiles can be launched from their torpedo tubes.)

What is the availability of Tomahawk missiles? The fleet already has many more Tomahawk “holes” than can be filled. With the plan to keep two-plus SSGNs deployed at all times—using the Blue and Gold crew concept—will the U.S. Navy be able to purchase at least three hundred additional Tomahawk missiles?

The Tomahawk-launch role, especially employing the Tactical Tomahawk (TacTom), will undoubtedly require two-way communications. Will this compromise the SSGN’s location?

(3) *Special operations role*: How will special forces reach the beach? The Advanced Swimmer Delivery System (ASDS)—hailed for years as the principal means of SSGNs putting people on the beach—has been canceled. Thus, the only means of getting SEALs to the beach will be the few, outdated Mark VIII “wet vehicles” and rubber raiding craft. What is the relative vulnerability of these

craft to hostile detection? What is the time-versus-fatigue factor for troops being carried in a wet vehicle whose mission may require them to remain in the water at the objective?

What are the probable distances from the beach that an SSGN would operate while launching wet vehicles or rafts? An 18,750-ton, 560-foot submarine requires a significant depth of water for safe operation.

And is there “something wrong with this picture” when one considers an SSGN with a crew of 150-plus men being employed to put a half-dozen people on the beach or into an enemy harbor for a clandestine mission? Indications are that not since 1950 have more than a dozen Americans been sent onto a hostile beach or into a hostile harbor by submarine. (In 1950 the submarine *Perch* landed sixty-seven British marines behind communist lines in Korea to blow up a railroad tunnel.)

What are the scenarios in which the sixty-six troops carried by an SSGN would be landed for a clandestine operation? Or even two geographically linked operations of thirty-plus SEALs, or . . . ?

Again, effective operations with special forces will require a high degree of communications. Will such connectivity be possible from a submarine, especially without revealing the submarine’s presence in the area?

These and other questions about SSGN operations should be answered by Captain Sykora. These questions should have been satisfactorily answered before the decision to convert four Trident ballistic-missile submarines to the SSGN configuration.

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