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# American Security Interests and the U.S. Navy

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Admiral C. A. H. Trost, U.S. Navy

**D**uring the past 44 years the U.S.-Soviet relationship has been stalemated. Our preoccupation with containing Soviet expansion and with deterring nuclear war has limited our ability to focus on other national and international problems. Now that relationship is on the move. What the final positions will be when the maneuvers are over, and whether our country will assume a new position of strength, depend a lot on our wisdom in reacting to these developments in the Soviet Union; developments that few of us understand completely and even fewer would dare to predict.

Not only will we observe the Soviet Union in the Gorbachev era, but even more importantly, we will probably have to come to terms with the post-Gorbachev era. Interestingly, a recent newspaper report stated that the Soviet Union has now stripped away all honors from the memories of Chairmen Brezhnev and Chernenko. This is, of course, the familiar and facile Soviet practice of historical revisionism—anticanonization, as it were; the descent upon Soviet life of the “non-person.” The question is, will Gorbachev get the same treatment one day? Will he become a non-person? Will a more powerful, efficient Soviet Union, after *perestroika*, decide to restore Marxist imperatives, including the quest for world domination? Or will it become so imbued with Western values that the long-standing Russian paranoia about foreigners will be lifted permanently?

For the West, the question is, how do we respond to these developments? How do you live with a troubled neighbor? Do you lend him your tools? Or do you keep your fences repaired? Is the Soviet problem one of environment or one of heredity? Whatever the answers are, to those and many other questions, serving officers will have to confront them.

During the past 10 years there has been a growing consciousness of the relative decline of the position of the United States in the world. Because

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Admiral Trost is the Chief of Naval Operations. This article is adapted from an address to the student body at the Naval War College on 10 January 1989.

many people associate “decline” with “fall,” there has been, particularly in the last few years, concern, even approaching alarm, that America is entering its final era as a great power.

Real problems do exist in the United States, as they always have, and as they do—perhaps in greater magnitude—elsewhere. We cannot take them lightly.

Nevertheless, the growing vitality of other nations, particularly in Asia, should not alarm us, and we should not listen to the dire predictions of the declinists, for this is a development we have helped to bring about and of which we can rightly feel proud.

Its root cause is the industrial revolution, now spreading to other areas of the world beyond North America and Europe. What is making this happen more readily today in some countries than in others, however, is the presence of two conditions that we in the United States have long enjoyed: political stability and free democratic institutions. Through our post-World War II policies we have promoted these conditions, not as a kind of global sugar daddy but in recognition that the fundamental necessity of men and women is to be free.

The development of new great nations has not been uniform, and each is a special case. All seek economic power from which most derive, and increasingly use, political power. Some also have sought a third derivation—military power—while some, for internal reasons, have not. But together these nations help constitute a new global community among whom we in the United States will now have to adjust our thinking to an appropriate level of leadership.

As a result of these developments, there is now a requirement for the United States, its friends, and allies to review their common responsibilities for regional and global defense. This has been expressed in the pejorative sense by the term, “burden sharing,” but I prefer to look at it more positively.

Out of the current period of introspection, there should come a new impetus for effective, regional partnerships that reflect the true interests—and the threats to them—of the nations concerned, as well as the resources they can bring to bear. Each region should have its cordon of strength. By this concept, the nations whose interests are most directly affected would develop the purely defensive and counteroffensive military capabilities for protecting those interests, while the responsibility of the United States and of the larger alliances would be for strategic deterrence and for reasonable power projection.

In the future, regional stability and security can be assured only if each of the countries represented at this College is willing to assert its appropriate level of leadership. That does not mean, in most cases, a global reach. But it does mean looking beyond one's own borders to the totality of one's

interests, and it does mean effecting the closest possible cooperation with one's neighbors.

In the United States, our problem is different. First, we have to understand that while the world is growing smaller in terms of one or two types of communications—data systems and travel—it is actually growing larger in terms of another type—international commerce. More and more of our markets are moving overseas. Not only that, more and more of our industrial base is moving overseas. In our absorption with the trade deficit, we have overlooked the fact that total U.S. trade in this decade has increased dramatically. In 1980 it was \$481 billion. In 1987 it was \$678 billion. And almost all of that trade was by surface ship. More than ever, we are a maritime nation.

The problem is that many of our countrymen do not realize it. In the 19th century, our forebears thought of themselves as continentalists. The frontier was still open, and, with notable exceptions, they felt secure in their abundance behind two vast oceans. At the turn of the century, although Americans began to look overseas, they still had the comfortable perspective of a land with unlimited possibilities. Today, we feel diminished in greatness. But the truth is, we have simply become a continental island, and the oceans of the world are our lifeline, as they have been for other great nations in the past.

This leads to a second point. Today, we have to understand that this new global network of overseas interests leaves our country exposed to a wider range of threats than ever before. At the highest levels of concern, there continues to be the threat of total war, with all these new factors in our relationship with the Soviet Union for us to anticipate. But at other levels, the concern is no less, and the probability of occurrence is much higher. Today the troublemakers of the world are armed with high-tech weapons, in quality, although not in numbers, nearly as good as our own, and over their violent deeds hangs the specter of even darker conflicts with nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons. So the world remains a dangerous place for us, and violence to our life and property can originate in locales as diverse as the coca fields of Peru or 31,000 feet over Lockerbie, Scotland.

**A**gainst that background, we should ask ourselves what will be our requirements for national security in the coming years, and how, in particular, does the Navy see its missions?

In general, the focus will not change. As in the other services, the role of the Navy will remain as timeless as the Constitution. That role contains two major parts.

First is the transcendent mission of maintaining a military potential, what is called the strategic mission. In this category lie all the operations we

conduct that contribute to the deterrence of war and to the Navy's contribution to victory in war should deterrence fail.

Second are all the other operations that used to be called carrying out the national interest, but which go by much more esoteric titles today: "crisis control," "conventional force options," "politically constrained intervention," and so forth. Today we have 158 ships underway in home waters and another 110 forward deployed. Most are engaged in this second category of operations, for which the Navy's level of commitments continues to rise.

Former Secretary of the Navy James Webb has pointed out that although daily military operations embrace what many have called low intensity conflict, more than 14 million Americans have served in them and more than 110,000 Americans have died in them since 1945. So we have a moral obligation to understand as well as possible how our nation should employ her Armed Forces to protect her interests with the greatest effect. And we must understand, too, what factors reduce that effectiveness, not only in the United States but among friends and allies—things like strategic inflexibility, lack of national resolve, lack of resources, complacency or even uneasiness following success.

So where does the Navy stand in meeting the two categories of missions?

First, a few thoughts about the strategic mission.

Regarding the Soviet threat, and the supposed doctrine of reasonable sufficiency, now apparently to be authenticated by a substantial cut in the number of Soviet troops, we must be careful not to mistake trends with realities, or stated intentions with capabilities. We do not know with precision what is going on in the Soviet Union. We can make educated guesses based on this remarkable new public openness, but that in itself should raise our skepticism. We can read as many of the Soviet papers as they care to have us read. But we do not know all the political and economic currents involved, and we certainly do not know what the future will bring. Nor, I would argue, do we need to know as long as we maintain what I consider the salutary practice of judging the Soviets strictly by their actions. In that light, let us remember that to date there have been no reductions in Soviet capability except those mandated by treaty; military spending continues to absorb a disproportionate amount of the Soviets' gross national product and continues to grow; their forces retain an offensive character; and having achieved numerical superiority over the West, they are making every effort, legal and otherwise, to acquire new technology and thus to achieve qualitative superiority as well. In short, while they project an attractive new image, the old reality has yet to catch up.

That is a fact. Another fact is that Soviet leadership is mounting a major public relations campaign aimed at enervating the U.S. Navy or restricting its freedom to operate.

Here is a sea story. Last July, when Marshal Akhromeyev, then the senior military officer in the Soviet Union, visited our country with senior leaders from each of their services, I had an opportunity with the other Joint Chiefs to sit down with him for discussions. At one point he jabbed a finger at me and said, "You! You're the problem! You and your Navy are the problem! You're too strong. You've got to get rid of your cruise missiles. You've got to get rid of some of those carriers."

In the words of a famous American, he made my day. And when I see the typical Soviet chart of their country, with a host of symbols showing that they are surrounded by forward U.S. naval power, I feel good. Anything that creates doubt and uncertainty in a potential adversary, that injects an unacceptable element of risk into his strategic calculations, has to be good for deterrence.

Given that the Soviet Union retains a large, offensive capability, and given that the Warsaw Pact countries will still mount about a two and one-half to one advantage over the Nato countries, even if Mr. Gorbachev's proposals to reduce Soviet troops and tanks are carried out scrupulously, then any weapon that we have, such as the sea-launched cruise missile that could help interrupt a rapid movement of Soviet Forces across Europe, is beneficial for stability.

But that is not how the Soviets see it. "You are the problem" they say. And so, in recent years they have mounted a highly visible public campaign, under the guise of proposals for peace and confidence-building, to reduce the strategic disadvantages that our Navy poses to them. President Gorbachev has fashioned a long chain of proposals—at Vladivostok in July 1986, in an interview with the Indonesian newspaper *Merdeka* in July 1987, at Murmansk in October 1987, in Belgrade in March 1988, and in Krasnoyarsk last September—proposals to exclude certain types of naval operations or naval capabilities that, if you look at it realistically, you know apply only to the United States and Nato.

In public he has now stated that the Soviet Union will cut 5,000 tanks. His statement left little doubt that he meant what he said. However, even if the cuts are carried out unilaterally, it is clear that the Soviets will expect major concessions from the West in return, and already defense analysts and media representatives tell us that there will be heavy pressure on President Bush, for both budgetary and emotional reasons, to meet the Soviets halfway. In the past, other Soviet officials have said, "We'll cut our tanks, you cut your ships." So we can assume that in both the Soviet Union and various quarters of this country, our Navy's offensive capability will be eyed as a bargaining chip.

My response to this is, Why should we? We do not owe the Soviets anything. When you find yourself in an adversarial relationship with

someone, and particularly when your adversary comes to you with an apparent change of heart, it is awfully easy to convince yourself that everything is relative, and there must be some give in your position. But let us not forget that Nato has never threatened the Soviet Union, as apparently Soviet leadership is now beginning to acknowledge, and that the causes of the cold war lay exclusively with Soviet capabilities and Soviet actions. Whose confidence is it that needs to be built, anyway? If the Soviets are sincere, let them reduce their forces and modify their policies so that they may rejoin the community of responsible nations. Until that happens, let us not forget that today the West enjoys a highly successful policy based on adequate strength, demonstrated resolve, and constant watchfulness. And we should keep that policy intact.

At the same time, as our Navy operates to maintain this strategic potential about which President Gorbachev is so concerned, we have a myriad of other commitments in every ocean of the world. Volatile regions, even when they are away from the public spotlight, simmer and seethe just below flash point. While our ships and aircraft maintain high readiness for sustained combat, they must be flexible and adaptable enough to meet threats under other contingencies.

Last year it became fashionable for defense critics and others with an axe to grind to say that we had built the wrong Navy, that big ships and high-tech systems could not cope with the lower threats. As it became clear that our operations in the Persian Gulf were succeeding, we heard fewer and fewer such assertions. And certainly anyone who visited the Gulf came away impressed by how well our people, in truly a joint environment, were containing a threat under exceptionally difficult circumstances, both physical and political. Real-world operations entail risk and loss. In our zero-defects society we do not always appreciate that. Nor do we appreciate that an aggressor always has the advantage of the initiative *at first*. He may select where and when to strike, and afterwards, the challenges for the opposing side are to contain the strike and regain the initiative. We have done that, and what our superb people in the Gulf have shown is that flexible, capable, general purpose forces are in fact the right forces for dealing with both high-level and low-level threats. When the threat is a boat, you do not want to meet it with a boat; you want a ship, a helicopter, and an airplane; and perhaps that will deter the next threat.

Above all, the key to success in any mission is the good professional people who have to carry it out. Today, we have such people. I never tire of saying that our personnel readiness is the highest I have known it to be in more than 39 years of service. But to retain such a quality force, the proportion of commitments to resources has to be reasonable. And that is where I am most concerned today. Our global commitments have not been reduced at all—if anything the Navy continues to take on a larger and larger share

of the burden of daily defense operations. But against that requirement, and even with all the success we have enjoyed, the budget has been reduced, in real terms, four of the past five years; the numbers of ships and aircraft squadrons are no longer growing to match commitments; and I am concerned that as a nation, we are building in problems for ourselves in the inevitable future.

**N**ow let us look at what that future holds in terms of naval forces. I will begin with the assumption that the United States will continue to need a strong Navy with broad capability, whose size will at least be adequate for the missions it is asked to perform.

With that in mind, the first point I would like to make is that *where* is every bit as important as *what*. It is not enough to have adequate capability: it must exist in the right numbers and you must have the resolve to employ it in the forward areas of the globe. That is where the instability is, where confrontation and coercion exist on the borders and sometimes within the borders of our friends and allies, and that is where they count on us for help. It may be an oversimplification to say that the handy fire extinguisher at the scene of the fire is of greater value than the fire company 15 minutes away, but it is not much of an oversimplification. Operating forward provides us with advantages that cannot be approximated by forces in continental American waters, no matter how ready. It allows us to back up our word, in a strategic context, immediately. Take a look at how far it is from the United States to the places where we routinely deploy: to northern Europe, or the Mediterranean, ten days to two weeks; to Asia, three weeks; to the Persian Gulf, 25 or 45 days, depending on the coast from which the ship leaves. If you do not have a permanent presence in-country—and increasingly even our closest allies are showing reluctance to have U.S. military units based on their soil—then the only practical way of applying adequate force to a crisis, and the only way of promoting regional stability beyond our own borders, is to have that force on station, just over the horizon, in international waters and airspace.

Another way to look at the problem is to remember that a military vacuum invites aggression. For years, the Soviet Union has made a practice out of exploiting weaknesses and shying away from strength. They are not alone in this. Reading the lessons of history, we can only conclude that in the future, forward naval operations will be even more important to global security than they are today.

What will those forces look like? You can guess a few of the adjectives already: flexible, mobile, capable, multidimensional, and—increasingly—stealthy. To those I would now add the term, “sapient.”



Sapient means that human beings must be in the operational loop as close to the point of application of power as the situation will permit. In recent years we have heard much about the vast new possibilities offered by microtechnology, including artificial intelligence. In our inventory today we have cruise missiles and other so-called “smart” systems that offer quantum improvements in our ability to deliver ordnance precisely on target. These are particularly useful when the political risk of having people captured or causing collateral damage to civilian property must be minimized. In the future we will rely on such systems to an increasing extent. But nothing in our inventory today, and nothing that I understand is in the laboratory or on the drawing board, is capable of substituting for the imagination, judgment, total comprehension, will to resist, and ethical standards of a human warrior. That human being must be well-trained, operationally oriented, and present in the loop somewhere between platform and target. And because there is no reality like the reality at the scene, it is therefore desirable that he be as close to the point of application as the situation will permit. “Fire and forget” is simply wishful thinking. Systems must be sapient.

I am certain that a keystone of U.S. naval warfare in the coming century will continue to be wide-ranging, highly capable, three-dimensional battle forces, comprising both defense-in-depth and offense-in-depth, and centered on our large-deck aircraft carriers. At a time when the battle sphere has expanded from the radar horizon to more than a thousand miles, and when widely separated elements are electromagnetically knit together by overhead systems, getting human beings into the loop, in a timely way and with adequate capability, becomes ever more difficult. For this, we require increasingly capable high-performance aircraft. Getting these into the air and recovering them safely—and in numbers large enough to be effective—require large decks with catapults and arresting gear. With large decks come magazines and aviation fuel tanks for sustained operations. For endurance in mobility, nuclear propulsion is required. Protecting that investment requires sufficient passive and active defensive systems, both offboard, as in the Aegis system, and onboard, including heavy armor plating and so forth and so on. Before too long, a train of logic leads inescapably to the design of a carrier like the *Nimitz* class, the most powerful, survivable, and flexible surface ship in the world.

Once we accept that premise—and there are bookshelves full of Navy studies dating back about 20 years, all of which confirm it—the question is, how many carriers do we need? This has been an issue for as long as I have been on active duty, and I have no doubt it will continue to be an issue for a long time. Carriers are expensive, and people talking about carriers can be emotional.

At the end of this year, when we accept delivery of the U.S.S. *Abraham Lincoln*, the Navy will have achieved an inventory of 15 deployable aircraft carriers, thereby meeting a long-standing goal. This is a vital part of the core capability of the 600-ship Navy. At the budget summit in November 1987, the Administration and the Congress reaffirmed their support for this capability—including the 15 deployable carriers, 4 battleships, at least 100 attack submarines, and adequate amphibious and combat logistics ships. And the Congress protected it last year. But even so, there were proposals to cut our carrier force levels, and I have every reason to believe that another offensive will be mounted during the 101st Congress.

In that light, I will do everything in my power to persuade both the Administration and the Congress that any action to reduce the number of carriers, or to restrict their availability to the forward areas of the world, would be a terrible mistake.

Why? Here are several reasons.

First, there is the strategic mission. As senior military leaders, past and present, have frequently testified, 15 active, deployable carriers constitute the minimum number to meet, with an acceptable level of risk, our basic requirement to keep the sea lanes open and project power in support of national military strategy. If we could have more, we would reduce the risk, and I would recommend it. But if we have only 15, we can still do the job.

Second, in a national emergency, 15 carriers would be needed as soon as possible, and even during peacetime 15 are required to meet our commitments with an adequate rotation to permit minimum essential time in home port and to account for ships in overhaul. It takes seven years to build a carrier and months afterwards to train and integrate the ship/air wing team. If we do not have that capability in hand when we need it, it will be too late to start looking for it after the trouble arrives. In the 1920s and 1930s, the United Kingdom based its defense policies on an assumption that there would be no war for 10 years. By the time the threat from Nazi aggression was perceived and the policy revoked, war was only six years away. Today we could not expect even that much warning. While it took Nazi Germany six years to rearm, today the Soviet Union is armed and ready. Although a new era in relations does seem to lie ahead of us, and tensions have abated, if we throw away our hard-built capability, well within the seven-year construction cycle, the situation could change, and we could find ourselves facing new Soviet leadership with a new agenda. In this way our carriers are part of the free world's insurance policy. I will repeat: anything that makes our potential adversary so uneasy must be counted as a plus on our side. In the same way, any action to reduce this

force would be the wrong signal to send to the Soviet Union at a time when our policy of strength has worked so well.

Finally, we need 15 carriers strictly from the standpoint of efficiency and effectiveness. If one accepts none of the other arguments, one should still recoil from the prospect of the monumental waste that would result either from retiring two still capable ships, on which so much money was spent in service life extension, or else from cancelling, with tremendous penalties, the contracts for other ships under construction that are needed now. That just does not make sense. It will not save the money that its proponents claim. And most important of all, it is dangerous!

I will conclude with three principles to guide both our intellectual insight and our professional development:

First, spirited words and good intentions sometimes fall short; strength never does.

Second, when we have something that works, as we do today in our national defense, let us be glad of it, and protect it.

And third, let us remember the reality of the deckplates. Let us not neglect our skills in the fleet and in the field.



“It was borne in upon me that the worst use you could put a navy to was fighting, and the best, keeping the peace, yet we were about to be driven to the former because our naval force was and had been too small for the latter.”

Rear Admiral Robley D. Evans, U.S. Navy  
*A Sailor's Log: Recollections of Forty Years of Naval Life.*  
New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1901, p. 407