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Maritime Mission or Strategy?

James L. George

The Navy has been very proud of its development of the Maritime Strategy, as well it should be. The *Naval War College Review* and the U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, among other professional and scholarly journals, have published numerous articles and commentaries on the subject. The *Proceedings* even published a special supplement of articles in January 1986, written by leaders in the naval services at that time, including Secretary of the Navy John F. Lehman, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral James D. Watkins, and Commandant of the Marine Corps General P.X. Kelley.¹ There also have been several conferences and seminars on the Maritime Strategy and, according to last count, at least three books on the subject are being written. Even this author has put pen to paper a few times on the subject.

Then, on 17 May 1987, reality struck. The U.S.S. *Stark*, performing one of the oldest maritime missions in the world, naval presence, was caught unprepared and 37 men died. This was not the first such tragedy in recent years. On 23 October 1983, the U.S. Marines, performing another historic maritime mission, projection ashore, were also caught unaware and 241 men died. More recently, in the Persian Gulf, for a time, the greatest navy in the world was unable to perform a third and, again, very old maritime mission, sea control, or at least adequate sea control, because of Iranian-laid mines and political-military restraints.

Thus, while the Navy has been developing and refining the Maritime Strategy, it has, by some appearances, neglected similar concentration on and development of the three traditional, real-world, everyday maritime missions: naval presence, projection ashore, and sea control.

It is worth thinking about missions as such, for they are the real building blocks of strategy. Indeed, concentrating on maritime missions rather than on strategy would provide these advantages to practical thought:

- Missions involve day-to-day operations.
- Missions frame the frequent crises.

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- Mission analysis can help establish political-military parameters.
- Missions define the importance of the Navy's role in national security.

Daily Operations: Naval Presence

The oldest naval mission in the world, "presence," is what Commander James McNulty once called "the misunderstood mission."² On a day-to-day basis, navies do not fight battles of Jutland or Midway or even take part in episodes such as that at Grenada or in dangerous escort duties such as those in the Persian Gulf. They perform the rarely exciting duty of being present. Often derogatorily called "gunboat diplomacy," presence is mainly aimed at helping keep the peace. This has been especially so since World War II. Nowadays, the particular aim of naval presence rarely is to intimidate the natives; rather, usually it is to protect one's own nationals and the freedom of the seas. As the United States learned in the Persian Gulf and at Beirut, naval presence can at times be a hazardous undertaking.

With the exception of two articles, both written well over a decade ago, there has been little detailed discussion of the naval presence mission or even of missions per se. One article on missions by Vice Admiral Stansfield Turner, then President of the Naval War College, breaks the naval presence mission down to "preventive" and "reactive" deployments, with the latter, of course, often falling into "crisis response" situations.³ Commander McNulty's article on the "misunderstood mission" is more detailed. In it he lists seven contributions of naval presence:

- Supporting acknowledged international military commitments of the Nation.
- Confirming political commitments on a routine and regular basis.
- Demonstrating to foreign governments the capability of U.S. naval forces to move and act in support of unilateral or shared interests.
- Asserting continuing unilateral U.S. interests in areas of the world geographically remote from our shores but deemed to be of sufficient importance to our national security or economic and political well-being.
- Manifesting credible war-fighting capabilities in a specific geographic area during times of rising tension.
- Providing humanitarian aid when needed.
- Addressing the most ancient and once most popular use of naval forces in the presence role; it can coerce an opponent to comply with some preferred course of action.⁴

As exhaustive as this list seems, it barely scratches the surface. The problem has become increasingly complicated since 1974. A required naval presence in the Persian Gulf today is considerably different from the old "show the flag" mission of the Middle East Force which has been there since 1948. And that would be quite different from any mission required in a

current Caribbean situation. Both are (or would be) different from the traditional Sixth and Seventh Fleet roles, which also have changed considerably over the years.

International incidents of the past pale in comparison to today's terrorist attacks and complex Third World situation. Yesterday's bumping incidents between U.S. and Soviet warships now seem like a child's game, complete with unspoken rules. Today there seem to be no rules, and because important and terrifying incidents can arise suddenly out of a seemingly placid sea, there is a need for "off the shelf" solutions or at least guidelines for those suddenly on the firing line.

Besides Commander McNulty's article, a good place to start formulating guidelines would be "An Inventory of the Functions of Navies" by Ken Booth, also written in the 1970s.⁵ Professor Booth lists three general purposes for the peacetime use of navies: "Negotiation from strength," "Manipulation," and "Prestige." He follows this with 18 subcategories ranging from "reassure and strengthen allies and associates" to "project an image of impressive naval force." He further breaks these into over 100 topics, each of which deserves an individual operational plan and public discussion.

Responding to peacetime daily operations is probably one of the more complex matters today, especially in this era of what Admiral Watkins called "violent peace."⁶ The Maritime Strategy has been focused on potential U.S.-Soviet conflicts, neglecting the realities of daily, naval presence-type missions.

Crisis Response

Very few naval analysts can resist quoting the now famous Brookings report, *Force Without War*, which concludes: "Throughout the postwar period the United States has turned most often to its Navy when it desired to employ components of the armed forces in support of political objectives. Naval units participated in 177 of the 215 incidents, or more than four out of every five.

"In short, the Navy clearly has been the foremost instrument for the United States' political uses of the armed forces: at all times, in all places, and regardless of the *specifics of the situation*."⁷

The problem has been that, as emphasized, those "specifics of the situation" have not been properly analyzed. If they had been, it would have been found that they involved naval presence, projection ashore, and sea control—the traditional navy missions. This might sound like a philosophical tautology, and perhaps it is to the naval officer, but not necessarily to the civilian, especially the civilian national security expert and the national decision maker.

The authors of the Brookings study were looking for underlying causes and patterns in dealing with conflicts. While there is a ring of truth to Santayana's observation that those who forget history are doomed to repeat it, the statement that history never repeats itself exactly has an even stronger ring. Perhaps one of the problems with the 1983 Lebanon intervention was the memory of the earlier, successful 1958 Lebanon landing. Though the situations were entirely different, the stated purposes of the Marines were virtually identical—in both cases the Marines were simply to restore some modicum of order between rival factions.

The lesson for us today from the two Lebanon interventions is that we need to study crises constantly because history does change. We must pay more attention to the various crises and our responses to them. It is not enough to just keep quoting the Brookings study.

Establishing Political-Military Parameters

Perhaps the most useful purpose a concentration on missions could serve us now would be to establish some political-military parameters. When the U.S. Navy responded to an Iranian attack on a U.S. flag ship by shelling an oil platform, many people, undoubtedly most in uniform, probably agreed with Colonel Harry Summers' assessment that "here we go again." As he wrote, "President Reagan called that response 'prudent yet restrained.' But what it really represents is a return to the very same military strategy that caused us so much grief in the Vietnam War. . . . Those who know nothing about war were reassured by President Reagan's comments that the U.S. response was 'prudent yet restrained.' Those who understand what war is all about shuddered at what those words may well portend."⁸ According to news reports, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger was against sending the Marines into Beirut for similar reasons.

Independently of whether one agrees with Harry Summers, the problem is that the debates really need to be carried out well before arriving at any decision to act. Once a decision to act is made, the time to debate is past. But the time for debate is not confined to the period before action. The time to debate returns after action. Unfortunately, after-action debates often turn into cynical criticisms and finger-pointing, especially by some of the so-called military reformers. But that field need not, and should not, be ceded by default to such people.

In any event, the time to debate the subjects, to set some parameters, is during peacetime. The old saying about preparing for war during peacetime should include setting political-military parameters for future action and not just providing equipment and training. There have been some very constructive debates. During the 1960s there was a terrible tendency to micromanage every crisis. Although that tendency is still alive (as perhaps

was the case when the Navy was directed in detail how to respond to the Beirut bombing), most now recognize its limits. The U.S. response to the mining of the *Samuel B. Roberts* was well executed. It was also closely controlled from Washington. Did the local commanders have the latitude they needed to perform most effectively? We have not yet heard.

Since, as the Brookings study indicates, most of the daily incidents and crises responses have involved the Navy, it seems appropriate that the Navy take the lead in thought and discussion of crisis response. Yet, our wargaming, our special studies, and most articles in our journals seem to concentrate on potential U.S.-U.S.S.R. conflicts. While decisions in war, such as whether to launch nuclear weapons, will be difficult, the routine rules of engagement (ROEs) during any major war will be fairly simple. On the other hand, as we now know, the ROEs in the Persian Gulf were anything but simple.

With that wonderful 20/20 hindsight we all have, both the Beirut and *Stark* incidents could be said to have been almost predictable. At least some Marines were bound to be killed in that almost tribal war in Beirut. During six-odd years of fighting between Iran and Iraq, it is amazing that a *Stark*-type incident had not happened earlier. Yet, both incidents surprised us.

A crisis, almost by definition, means confusion. During long wars, there is time to recover from mistakes and crises; defeat can be overturned by a later victory. Crises, on the other hand, are usually short-lived, lasting a matter of weeks, days, or sometimes only hours. The lack of time to recover necessitates establishing parameters, ROEs, and the million other complex factors during peacetime, before a crisis occurs. There can never be an exact off-the-shelf operational plan, but there can certainly be more definitive, comprehensive guidelines, and a better understanding of political-military parameters of missions than we now have.

The Navy's Role in National Security

Another good reason for concentrating on missions rather than strategies was illustrated in the Persian Gulf where there were debates over who should be in command, the Navy or CentCom in Florida. Another example was seen in the report of the Senate Armed Services Committee, *Defense Organization: The Need for Change*, which laid the foundation for departmental reorganization and listed six missions for the Armed Forces, three worldwide and three regional:

Worldwide Missions

- Nuclear deterrence—essential equivalence with the strategic and theater nuclear forces of the Soviet Union.
- Maritime superiority—controlling the seas when and where needed.

- Power projection superiority—deploying superior military forces in times of crises to distant world areas which are primarily outside the traditional systems of Western alliances.

Regional Missions

- Defense of NATO Europe including both the northern and southern flanks.

- Defense of East Asia, particularly Northeast Asia.

- Defense of Southwest Asia, especially the region's oil resources.⁹

Most analysts looking at those six missions would say that the Air Force has primary responsibility for nuclear deterrence (despite the Navy's important SSBN role) and that the Army has the lead role for defense of NATO Europe. However, the Navy probably would take the lead role in the other four missions—two-thirds of the total. They obviously have the lead role in sea control and, despite some Army "light" units, would have the lead role in power projection, especially as defined "outside the tradition systems of Western alliances" where there are few bases. Although thought and action in defense of East Asia, Southwest Asia, and oil resources can be very scenario-dependent, the lead would probably always be taken by the Navy since it involves power projection and sea control, as illustrated in the Persian Gulf.

Yet, what were the institutional arrangements recommended by the Senate staff report? They recommended three new, high level under secretaries, one each for nuclear deterrence and NATO, and one for both power projection and regional issues.¹⁰ That is, two of the missions, NATO and nuclear deterrence, admittedly important ones, each "deserve" an under secretary according to the staff report, but the other four, the real world, day-to-day (naval) problems were all lumped under the third under secretary. Fortunately, that staff recommendation was not followed, but it illustrates Washington's attitude toward those day-to-day missions and problems—that is until the next crisis occurs. Clearly there needs to be a better national understanding of the complexity and costs of sea control, power projection, and defense of areas such as East Asia and Southwest Asia, missions that only the Navy can perform adequately.

Building Blocks of Strategy

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the reason for concentrating on missions is that they are the building blocks of strategy. The importance of a mission as the catalyst for determining a strategy is, ironically, illustrated in the three phases of the Maritime Strategy.¹¹

Phase I: Deterrence or Transition to War. The goals are to deter war, to cede no vital area by default, and to be prepared, should we fail, for global war.

The tasks are to position forces forward, to begin the strategic sealift, to avoid maldeployment, to increase readiness, to husband resources, and to maximize warning time.

From a mission perspective, these goals and tasks could be listed as both “preventive” and “reactive” deployments. As Commander McNulty stated, the real goal of naval presence is “deterrence.”¹² The Maritime Strategy’s goals and tasks, to “deter war” and “position forward,” for example, are nothing more than normal naval presence tasks. There have been criticisms of the Maritime Strategy, but they are nothing compared to those the Navy would get for maldeployment or failing to deter by some show of force.

Phase II: Seize the Initiative. The goals of this phase are to counter the first salvo, to attrite enemy forces, to protect SLOCs, to continue the reinforcement and resupply of forces in Europe and Asia, and to improve positioning. The tasks are to conduct antisubmarine, antiair, and anti-surface warfare, as well as strike, amphibious, and various special operations. Because much of this work would be carried out north of the GIUK gap, this has been the phase most heavily criticized.

In mission terms, this is really nothing more than “sea control” and does anyone really suggest that the U.S. Navy should not attempt to gain control of the seas? Another oft-criticized element of phase II is simply another traditional maritime mission, power projection, to help a NATO ally, Norway. Even if one disagrees with moving so far north, there must still be that threat, that uncertainty, for deterrence. As Secretary Lehman stated, “If we try to draw a ‘cordon sanitaire’ and declare that we are not going to go above the GIUK gap or we are not going to go west of such and such a parallel, then obviously, they have the capability to use their attack subs offensively against our SLOCs.”¹³ In other words, Secretary Lehman was saying that to have sea control for the SLOCs, you must have, or at least attempt to gain, sea control of the routes to the SLOCs to prevent the enemy from having a safe haven while he proceeds toward his intended victims.

Regarding Norway, Secretary Lehman continued, “This is one issue that people keep raising, the GIUK gap versus the North Cape. It should be clear to everyone that if the NATO treaty means anything, it means that we are to protect and to hold Norway. The minimum reinforcement plans require both the Marines and the ACE mobile force to move by sea. They all have to go by ship, to Norway, after the conflict breaks out. If we allow the Norwegian Sea to be controlled by the Soviet Union, Norway is untenable.”¹⁴ Once again, in mission terms, he was talking about “projection ashore” and all that goes with it, namely, at least limited sea control.

Phase III: Carry the Fight to the Enemy. The goals of the third and final phase are to press home the initiative, to destroy Soviet forces, to retain

or regain territory, to keep the SLOCs open, and to support land and air operations. The goals would be accomplished by accelerated strike and amphibious operations and continuation of the other activities. In other words, increasingly aggressive sea control with perhaps more aggressive projections ashore, including on the Kola Peninsula.

In this author's opinion, the controversy over the Maritime Strategy by critics such as Robert Komer, Admiral Turner (yes the same Admiral Turner who wrote the excellent article on missions), and others has been based on two misconceptions. First, some of the early pronouncements made the Maritime Strategy sound like a "charge to the Kola," i.e., a "Charge of the Light Brigade." Unfortunately, some of these early misconceptions haunt the strategy today.

The other problem is more complex. It involves change, which always meets resistance; misconceptions, which have flourished; and misunderstanding. Had the Maritime Strategy been presented in the traditional terms of naval presence to deter conflict; sea control, with the real goal of protecting SLOCs; and in power projection terms, particularly for Norway, which requires limited sea control in dangerous waters, the criticisms might have been muted. Who can argue that the West does not need control of the seas? In short, if the Maritime Strategy had been presented as it really is, simply as a series of mission building blocks, it might have been less controversial than it has proven to be.

New recognition should be given missions and their importance to strategy. Missions address the real world, both the day-to-day operations and the crisis situations. Missions analysis can help establish important military and political-military parameters for the Navy and for the national decision makers. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, missions are really the building blocks of strategy.

Notes

1. "The Maritime Strategy," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, January 1986.
2. Commander James F. McNulty, USN, "Naval Presence—The Misunderstood Mission," *Naval War College Review*, September-October 1974, pp. 21-31.
3. Vice Admiral Stansfield Turner, USN, "Missions of the U.S. Navy," *Naval War College Review*, March-April 1974, pp. 2-17.
4. McNulty, pp. 26-27.
5. Ken Booth, "Roles, Objectives and Tasks: An Inventory of the Functions of Navies," *Naval War College Review*, Summer 1977, pp. 83-97.
6. Admiral James D. Watkins, USN, "Report to the Congress on the Fiscal Year 1986 Military Posture and Budget of the U.S. Navy," (Alexandria, Va: Naval Internal Relations Activity, 1985), p. 23.
7. Barry M. Blechman and Stephen S. Kaplan, *Force Without War: U.S. Armed Forces as a Political Instrument*, (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institute, 1978), pp. 38-39.
8. Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., USA, "'Restrained' Response to Iran Is Lawyer's Strategy," *Navy Times*, 2 November 1987, p. 27.
9. U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, *Defense Organization: The Need For Change*, Staff Report (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1985), p. 77.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

11. "The 600-Ship Navy and the Maritime Strategy," Hearings before the Sea Power and Strategic and Critical Materials Subcommittee, Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives. (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1986), pp. 38-52.

12. McNulty, p. 30.

13. U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Sea Power and Force Projection, *Department of Defense Authorization for Appropriations for Fiscal Year 1985*, (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1985), p. 3870.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 3870-3871.



"The Silent Service" was not mute because it was absorbed in thought and study, but because it was weighted down by its daily routine and by its ever complicating and diversifying technique. We had competent administrators, brilliant experts of every description, unequalled navigators, good disciplinarians, fine sea-officers, brave and devoted hearts: but at the outset of the conflict we had more captains of ships than captains of war. In this will be found the explanation of many untoward events. At least fifteen years of consistent policy were required to give the Royal Navy that widely extended outlook upon war problems and of war situations without which seamanship, gunnery, instrumentalisms of every kind, devotion of the highest order, could not achieve their due reward.

Fifteen years! And we were only to have thirty months!

Winston S. Churchill. *The World Crisis*.
New York: Scribner's, 1923. pp. 93-94.