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The Strategic Significance of Maritime Theaters

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Given its national aims, geographical position, and alliance structure, it is essential that the United States maintain its position as the world's premier maritime power. Maritime superiority underlies the Western coalition, at the core of which is a group of industrialized democratic nations linked by economic ties, shared aspirations, and sea lines of communication. The Maritime Strategy—the maritime element of U.S. national military strategy—represents a consensus of the Navy's best conceptual thinking.* The Maritime Strategy, now fully accepted by the U.S. Government and by America's allies, forms a conceptual framework for the forward defense of U.S. interests and the direct defense of many of the allies.

The primary aim of the Maritime Strategy is to deter war with the U.S.S.R. The deterrent value of the strategy is enhanced by the direction that is being taken in military thinking within the Soviet Union. Soviet writers are exploring in the open military press the possibility that the next war, should it occur, might not entail the use of nuclear weapons and could, therefore, last as long as any of the world wars preceding it. In this context, the marked inferiority of the Soviet Union in naval power would be a debilitating weakness. For starters, its maritime inferiority threatens Moscow with the destruction of all overseas Soviet forces and assets, its bases in Cuba and Vietnam, its merchant and fishing fleets, and virtually all over-water, including coastal, transportation lines. Many of the transportation lines, particularly those in the Far East, are essential for the Soviet defense system and economy. The marked inability of the Soviet maritime forces to compete with those of the United States, its allies, and

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*Admiral James D. Watkins, U.S. Navy, "The Maritime Strategy," A Supplement to the U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, January 1986; and Admiral Carlisle A. H. Trost, U.S. Navy, "Looking Beyond the Maritime Strategy," the U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, January 1987, pp. 13-16.

its potential allies is thus a powerful deterrent to any military challenge to the West by the Kremlin.

A more powerful deterrent is the decisive role that the United States and allied naval forces would play in an extended nonnuclear global war. The capability to spearhead the counterattack which would ultimately decide such a global war in the West's favor, is something the Soviets have to face in the correlation-of-force calculations upon which they base their military decisions.

Significant changes are taking place in military technology as well as in Soviet military doctrine. These changes will shape the new concepts that the Soviet Union will adopt to challenge Western interests in future conflicts. As the U.S. Navy takes these changes into account, it will be faced with the challenge of maintaining the necessary force structure, developing war-fighting techniques, and adapting the Maritime Strategy so that no conceivable military challenge by the Soviet Union and its allies could be ultimately successful.

High Technology and Strategy

For the past two decades the accelerating pace of military technology has led to a fleet of fewer, individually more capable systems—ships, aircraft, sensors, and command-and-control systems. The total fighting power of the Navy has grown much stronger, but its strength has been concentrated on a considerably smaller base of both platforms and weaponry.

The Soviet weapons development process is more conservative than that of the United States, tending toward incremental, evolutionary progress rather than continually pushing the state of the art. Furthermore, through commercial acquisition and espionage, the Soviet weapons development system feeds off Western military research, taking advantage of its successes and learning and saving resources from its failures.

The same trend towards fewer, but better, ships, aircraft, weapons, and equipment has become more and more characteristic of the Soviet Navy. For example, the Soviet inventory of submarines is declining, while the proportion of larger, quieter, more capable individual units is increasing. Regiments of the new Backfire bomber contain fewer aircraft than the older Badger regiments they replace. And, in the West, individual rounds of sophisticated, high-technology weaponry have become so expensive and difficult to build and maintain that there are too few for both practice shots and for keeping the inventory bins filled for use in conflict.

Complicating the military planning equation, neither Western nor Soviet planners can know for sure what attrition and consumption rates will be for ships, aircraft, and weapons in a future conflict. Recent combat actions—the Arab-Israeli wars, the Vietnam war, and the Falklands war—indicate

that the expenditure rates of even the smartest weapons will be higher than anticipated and that ship and aircraft losses will be surprising.

In weapons laboratories, both Western and Soviet engineers will continue searching for a "silver bullet" to give a decisive advantage in military operations, as the tank did for Germany. But there is no technology or weapon on the horizon that will enable an adversary to threaten Western maritime forces with defeat. For every system and platform currently under development by the Soviet armed forces there are counters to enable the U.S. Fleet to carry out its mission.

This is true even in the one area where the Soviets are currently ahead of us—the military development of space. Moscow spends far more than the West on space research, development, and hardware and has made a strong national commitment to the development of space as a military battlefield. Furthermore, the U.S.S.R. has a much greater near-term capability than the United States to place military systems in orbit. However, current U.S. efforts, particularly in the Strategic Defense Initiative will, among other things, restore the space balance and give the United States the lead in knowledge and military applications of space technology.

The incorporation of relatively smaller numbers of high-technology, high-capability systems into the Navy requires a continual updating of tactical war-fighting concepts. The Navy at any one time will have in its inventory both new, scarce, and capable systems and old, numerous, and less able ones. The forces to be confronted will field a similar combination. This situation is not new in naval warfare, but the pace of technology has increased the disparity in capability between successive generations of systems. The key to victory is application of the most capable forces where they will have the greatest effect, yet not suffer attrition which limits their repeated use. By the same token, optimum employment concepts and tactics are to defeat the enemy's most capable forces without suffering disproportionate damage to one's own best weaponry and platforms. The ideal force matchup is to decimate the enemy's most capable forces with combinations of specialized, medium technology weapons, using one's most capable forces in the decisive encounters.

For example, in the area of antisubmarine warfare, the acoustic advantage of the U.S. submarines is narrowing against the small number of the very latest Soviet submarines. Western submarines can still expect very high and favorable exchange ratios in sub-on-sub encounters with the majority of the Soviet submarine inventory and could handle this mission with little support from other ASW forces. Against the small number of the most capable Soviet submarines, the expected sub-on-sub exchange ratios would still be favorable, but less so. Those Soviet submarines should therefore be

engaged by a large number of diverse ASW platforms, bringing numbers to bear against individual capabilities.

Soviet Military Doctrine and Strategy

Analysts of the Soviet military literature believe that Soviet strategists are focusing on planning options for conflict with the West which do not necessarily escalate to the nuclear level. Soviet leaders, since at least 1977, have been stating publicly that nuclear conflict is not winnable. If this concept should eventually be adopted as Soviet military doctrine, then the primary Soviet military planning scenarios for war with the West would change. Current Soviet scenarios are based on the assumption that escalation to use of nuclear weapons is likely. A revised doctrine would be based on the assumption that escalation is possible, but unlikely.

The consequences of such a change in Soviet strategy are profound. In strategies which assume the United States and the Soviet Union are at nuclear gridlock, nuclear weapons are useful only for deterring the other side from using nuclear weapons and from threatening national survival or other core interests. Total, unconditional victory becomes unattainable and initial conflict objectives relatively limited. Furthermore, when combat objectives are limited and strategic nuclear exchanges considered unlikely, geography begins to reassert its traditional importance in war planning. Where and how a war begins makes comparatively little strategic difference if it ends in an intercontinental nuclear exchange. But Soviet strategy for a conventional war with the United States, beginning with a Korean crisis, would be entirely different from strategy for war resulting from a crisis with Berlin. How protracted, conventional wars will end also matters. Soviet strategy for a nonnuclear conflict would be designed to seize territory in a quick preemptive strike, and then use that territory to bargain for the most favorable possible outcome during peace negotiations.

That nonnuclear conflict can lead to a potentially prolonged war presents Soviet planners with insuperable problems. Although the Soviets would want to achieve their comparatively limited objectives in as short a time as possible, they could not have a high assurance of success unless they neutralized the potential for Western counteroffensives over the longer term. And as long as the West maintains superior maritime forces and control of key maritime theaters, the Soviets could never be certain that they would prevail in an extended war. The Soviet General Staff knows that, as do all students of military history, wars once started assume their own momentum and it is impossible to be sure that an opponent will restrict his objectives to the defeat of original objectives, no matter how limited.

Likely Soviet Strategies

It is important to keep in mind that Soviet strategies for nonnuclear conflicts would add to, rather than replace, current nuclear options. Present war plans that incorporate nuclear conflict would be retained. Furthermore, Moscow is well aware that building a force structure for global, protracted, conventional conflict, equipped with today's and tomorrow's highly expensive nonnuclear technologies, would take an enormous amount of its national resources and severely inhibit its economic development in the civilian sector. Serious planning by the General Staff to equip Soviet forces for prolonged, high-technology warfare would almost certainly lead to demands for greater resource allocation for the military at a time when Secretary-General Gorbachev would clearly prefer to focus on improving the economic performance of Soviet society. This situation could well contain the seeds for future internal discussion within the U.S.S.R.

In any case, it is safe to assume that the Soviets are now at work on a varied set of war plans and options to adapt their present force structure to the needs of a potentially prolonged, nonnuclear conflict. To understand how the Soviet planners formulate their strategies, consider the Soviet armed forces' organization for war. Chart 1 shows the five primary Soviet theaters of military operations (TMOs). From the Soviet point of view, these theaters

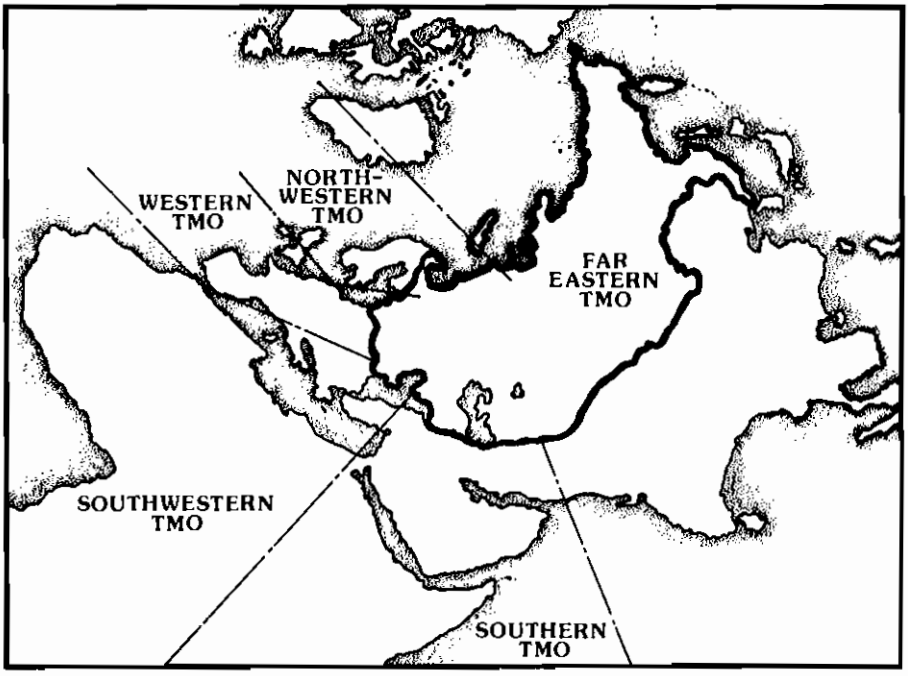

Chart 1

Naval War College Review, Vol. 41 [1988], No. 3, Art. 4

are continental. They are commanded by Soviet Army generals who control all subordinate forces in the theater—ground, air, and naval. The exceptions are selected strategic forces, which report directly to the Soviet High Command, the VGK. Sharply contrasting are the Western forces opposing the Soviets—four of the five are maritime theaters commanded by admirals or Marine Corps generals, with naval forces comprising the bulk of combat power that can be brought to bear.

In building a strategy under the assumption that the conflict will be fought with high-technology conventional weapons, with escalation to nuclear weapons unlikely, Soviet planners probably would use the concept of the combined arms strategic offensive operation to reach their objectives in the primary theater of their overall strategy. The choice of a primary theater would be determined by the aims which impelled Moscow to go to war in the first place. The start of conflict could be the theater containing a crisis point, such as the Persian Gulf or Korea, or it could be the western TMO in Europe where the bulk of the Soviet ground and air forces are deployed.

But once a war had started under these conditions, Soviet planners would have little confidence in ending it favorably until Soviet forces had established a strong defense perimeter which the United States and its allies would have little chance of counterattacking successfully. Soviet strategies under these assumptions would have to be global strategies that aim to reach defensible positions which preclude or limit Western potential counteroffensives. Only then could successful negotiations to terminate the war be expected.

Even if Warsaw Pact planners assumed a successful initial offensive in central Europe, so long as the West held the flanking maritime theaters the Soviet leadership could have no certainty that a conflict would end on favorable terms. Any Warsaw Pact strategy for conventional conflict with the West in Europe would have to include the conquest of the northern and southern maritime theaters surrounding the Warsaw Pact, as well as interdiction of the lines of communication between North America and western Europe. So long as the West maintained control of these maritime theaters, the Soviet Union could not be certain of a favorable peace to end the conflict.

The same set of considerations would apply in Soviet strategic planning for conflict with the West centered in the Middle East, Persian Gulf, or especially the Far East. The Soviets could not have confidence in their ability to restrict a conflict to one theater of operations. Breaking the Western hold on maritime theaters and the sea lines of communication among those theaters, therefore, would have to be an essential element of such strategies.

The current Soviet force structure is not adequate for simultaneous maximum offensive operations in all theaters in a protracted, nonnuclear

conflict. In order to conduct successful strategic offensive operations in a small number of primary theaters, the Soviet High Command must reinforce the primary ones and draw down on the others, implementing defensive, economy-of-force options in those theaters. It must prioritize, plan sequential operations, and allocate scarce logistical resources carefully.

Thus, for a military option to be considered seriously, the Soviet High Command must be ready to present to the Politburo a strategy with a high probability of success for breaking Western maritime power. Otherwise, war with the West would be a high-risk, low-confidence roll of the dice, based on the hope that quick victories would crumble the political will of their opponents. Military history, including that of the Russian people themselves, argues against such a gamble.

Maritime Theaters

In prolonged, conventional war, control of selected "maritime theaters" is a prerequisite for victory. A maritime theater is an area of potential wartime operations in which the lines of communication are primarily across water and the potential battlefields are in littoral zones within reach of naval power.

Four of the five principal Soviet continental TMOs are, for the West, maritime theaters. The fundamental Western capability to thwart and defeat Soviet global, nonnuclear strategies, and therefore deter conflict, is based on maritime flexibility. To support in-place, ground-based forces, to reinforce them, or to mount a counteroffensive in maritime theaters requires concentrated, massive naval forces working in tandem with mobile, ground-based forces.

Chart 2 shows in generic form the military network of forces for holding and exploiting a maritime theater. It is an enormously complex land-based and sea-based operation. The major maritime theaters—the Northwest Pacific, the Persian Gulf/Arabian Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Norwegian Sea—are bordered on one or both littorals by friends or allies. Combat and support forces on land are essential for the successful conclusion of a campaign to hold or seize a maritime theater. These include ground forces which protect the territory; the logistics supply lines; the support bases which move beans, bullets, fuel, and supplies to both the Army and Air Force units ashore, and to the sea-based battle groups; ground-based air forces, some of which operate directly with the fleet, such as maritime patrol aircraft and electronic warfare aircraft, and some of which support the fleet indirectly, such as fighters which engage enemy bombers and thereby reduce the threat to the naval battle groups; and command, control, and communications nodes ashore for both ground and sea-based forces.

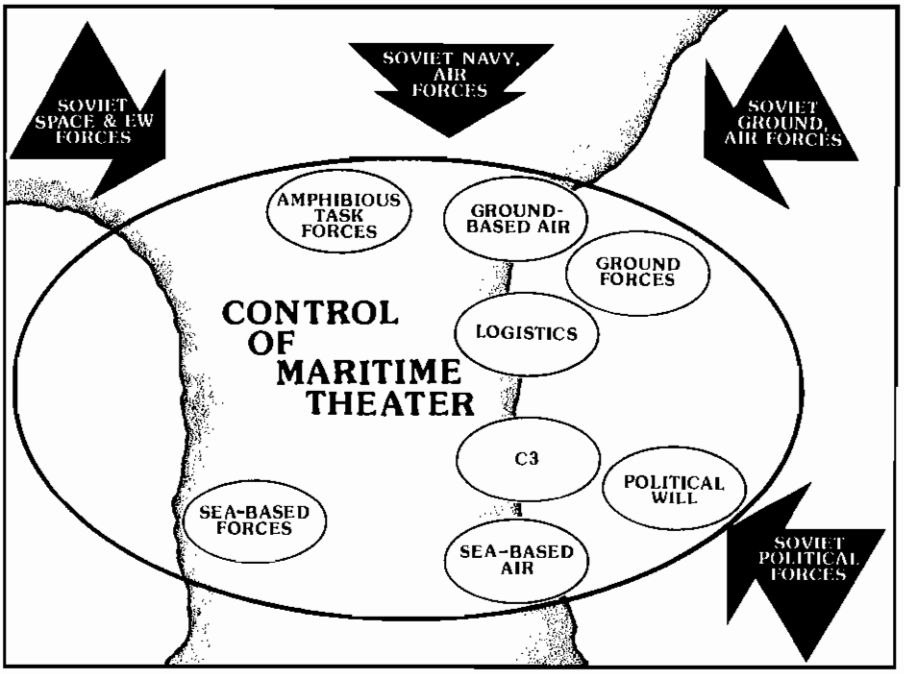

Chart 2

Support runs in the other direction from sea to land, as well. Amphibious task forces provide landing forces with their aviation combat elements, which strengthen land and land-based air defenses; sea-based air power spreads its air superiority bubble over land, and provides attack aircraft to support land combat; sea control forces protect the logistic support for the Army and Air Force formations, coming both from within the theater and from other theaters. Not only does this force structure involve different types of forces, but it involves combat personnel from the different nations in the Western alliance. Each link in the network provides an essential element of the necessary structure for carrying out both defensive and offensive campaigns.

Against this interlocking, mutually reinforcing maritime theater structure, the Warsaw Pact can bring four types of threats to bear: political pressure, air/land offensives, air/sea offensives, and space/electronic warfare offensives. Any one of these threats can deal a decisive blow to Western ability to control and exploit a maritime theater. For example, if through political pressure the Soviet Union can convince a littoral Western country in a maritime theater to choose neutrality or drop out of a conflict, then it will be extremely difficult for the West to continue to hold or exploit that maritime theater by sea-based forces alone. If the Warsaw Pact, through a ground/air offensive, can capture the friendly or allied coastline of a

maritime theater, then it can drive Western surface battle groups out of the theater, cut sea communications within the theater, and turn that region to its own strategic purposes; if the Soviet Union can defeat Western battle groups and task forces in a maritime theater, then the littoral countries can be isolated, and the theater seized; if the Soviet Union can destroy or interfere with Western space-based reconnaissance and communications satellites, and conduct successful radioelectronic combat against Western sensors, weapons, and communications systems, then it can decisively weaken the effectiveness and mutual support of the military forces in the theater.

The foundation of Western strategies against Soviet and Warsaw Pact nonnuclear plans continues to be the ability to control the seas during a conflict. To bring the full force of the Western coalition to bear against a particular Soviet or Warsaw Pact strategy, in every case, requires access over and across the seas. There is wide recognition of the importance of the North Atlantic sea lines of communications, and the capability to move across the Atlantic is essential. However, this is far from the only sea control capability the West requires. Against a varied set of Soviet strategies, the West must also be able to move its forces—as well as military and economic support shipping and air transportation—to and from the maritime theaters in northern and southern Europe, the Middle East and Persian Gulf regions, and the Northwest Pacific—all areas in which the Warsaw Pact can bring strong land-based and sea-based interdiction forces to bear. In addition, the West needs to move its fighting forces and its support forces freely within maritime theaters, for example, between the United Kingdom and Norway, between Italy and Turkey, between Japan and Korea.

Reinforcement and Counterattack

In a conflict, once the outlines of Warsaw Pact and Soviet strategy are clear, once it is known where forces have been reinforced and where they have been thinned, where the Soviet swing forces have been committed, in which theaters the Soviets are preparing offensives, and in which they are preparing defensive positions, then decisions can be made on the allocation of Western forces. The first choice for the West, the only acceptable political choice, is to hold a maritime theater by defeating the attack. Mobile ground-based army and air forces can be moved quickly to the threatened theater if peacetime preparations have been made to receive such forces. Sea-based power projection forces—amphibious groups and carrier battle forces—can also reinforce a maritime theater.

A reinforcement operation with sea-based forces is a powerful component of Western strategy and has the decisive capability to change the outcome of a maritime theater campaign. Compared to ground-based forces, sea-

based power projection forces have a greater range of reinforcement flexibility and a quicker reaction time. For example, with relatively small ground-based reception and logistic support preparations, a four-carrier battle force and a marine amphibious force can start from the vicinity of the United Kingdom and can, in a few days, fully engage roughly 900 tactical aircraft and 50,000 combat troops in a dozen locations from Turkey to Norway's North Cape, covering both European maritime theaters. In order to deal with a force of this power and mobility, Soviet planners have to allocate disproportionate forces to cover all these potential deployments.

There are two different types of reinforcement of a maritime theater: reinforcement before hostilities begin and reinforcement while fighting is in progress. Reinforcement before hostilities begin is the simpler and swifter of the two, and is highly desirable militarily. It occurs during a time of crisis or when the potential adversary is reinforcing or raising the readiness of forces which threaten a maritime theater. Power projection forces—aircraft carrier battle forces and amphibious groups—can be moved directly within range of potential battlefields in the theater. These pre-hostility reinforcement movements, if based on accurate intelligence of the Warsaw Pact's deployments, have the potential to deter the breakout of conflict in that theater by swinging the military advantage decisively to the Western side.

However, accurate intelligence, timely political decisions, and adequate forces are not always available in times of crisis. Therefore, reinforcement operations in maritime theaters must also be made with fighting in progress. Preparatory intensive sea control operations ensure the safe arrival of the naval forces and their endurance within range of the battlefield. Sea control operations under those conditions are difficult antisubmarine and antiair warfare problems.

In overcoming the air threat, the battle forces take advantage of Western land-based air defenses along the coasts of the maritime theaters. At the same time, the carriers' early-warning, electronic warfare aircraft and fighters, and the cruiser's antiair missile batteries would be strengthening such defenses. In neutralizing the submarine threat, the battle forces are integrated into the theater's own force of antisubmarine aircraft, wide-area sensors, submarines, and surface ships. In addition, the mobile battle forces and amphibious task forces must take advantage of geography—narrow straits, deep bays, shallow banks—along with oil rigs and oceanfronts to frustrate the enemy's ability to locate and launch attacks on them. Once in their fighting locations, the naval projection forces add their considerable power to that of the ground-based forces.

A counteroffensive in a maritime theater can be either direct or indirect. Direct counteroffensives go straight back at the enemy to regain lost territory. Naval forces by themselves can retake islands, peninsulas, or other

objectives that can be isolated. They can form the leading edge of assaults to retake larger littoral areas, assaults to be exploited with additional ground-based forces. Counteroffensives can also be indirect, capturing regions held by the enemy coalition at the beginning of the conflict. Counteroffensives need not be geographical—they may be aimed at destroying a particular military capability of the enemy, such as his long-range strike aircraft, his submarine force, his surveillance system, or his logistic support.

Finally, as noted earlier, in a conflict between the Warsaw Pact and the West, certain types of counteroffensives would be virtually automatic, and must be considered by the Warsaw Pact to be the basic cost of going to war with the West. They include the destruction of all overseas Soviet bases, forces, and possessions, as well as their merchant and fishing fleets.

The choice or prioritization of various counteroffensive options cannot be prejudged, either in objective or in timing. It will depend on how the conflict starts, the enemy's war objectives, the objectives of the West, and the postwar balance of power that the West is seeking. However, all the conceivable counteroffensive options available to the West are based first of all on exploiting the four maritime theaters bordering the Warsaw Pact.

The Major Challenges Ahead

In order to deal effectively with Soviet technological developments and potential new nonnuclear Soviet strategies, the Western navies must continue to refine and develop concepts for integrated campaigns to control and exploit maritime theaters. A particular challenge will be the further development of amphibious assault doctrine to integrate the new and longer range delivery vehicles—air-cushioned vehicles, tilt-rotor aircraft—with current platforms. Another area requiring concentrated attention is the refinement of doctrine for airspace management and command-and-control procedures for sea-based and land-based air operating in mutual support in maritime theaters. Cutting across the individual types of maritime campaigns is the importance of developing concepts for employing high-technology, limited-inventory platforms and weapons in sustained campaigns, and of conducting reconnaissance, surveillance, and command-and-control functions, many of them space-based, for such sustained campaigns.

As they absorb the implications of the potential changes in the future of warfare, naval planners will be thinking through the following key balances: between fleet capabilities for sea control and for power projection within maritime campaigns; between current readiness for combat and the force modernization and exploitation of technology which is the basis for future readiness; and between various degrees of logistics support for potentially

Naval War College Review, Vol. 41 [1988], No. 3, Art. 4

prolonged, high-technology conflict. Those balances have been struck in the fleet of today for the missions and potential adversary of today. They must be continually reexamined as the environment changes.

The U.S.S.R. and the West have competed without direct military conflict for the past forty years because the potential dangers of war, especially nuclear war, have reinforced an already existing geopolitical stability in Europe that emerged from World War II. Whatever their objectives or intentions, neither side calculated it could gain by employing its own military force to further its interests at the expense of the other. It is the Navy's job to keep things that way. Continued deterrence is based on understanding the warfare implications of technological developments which will affect Soviet calculations of the risks of war in the future. Under what appear to be emerging Soviet planning factors in these areas, the importance for the West of maritime theaters is increasing markedly. A robust Western capability to hold and exploit these theaters with a combination of U.S. and allied land-based and sea-based forces is crucial in keeping the risks of undertaking a war high enough to deter the Warsaw Pact and preserve the peace.

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". . . it is never safe to assume that the calibre of thought can transcend the quality of its expression."

James Cable, *Britain's Naval Future*, p. xvi, 1983