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The Maritime Strategy: One Ally's View

Jan S. Breemer

Much ink has been spilled of late on the question of whether the Maritime Strategy is the U.S. Navy's design for going it alone or whether it is a sincere invitation to the European Allies for a "rebirth" of a true *coalitional* naval strategy. One of the strategy's early critics, Robert W. Komer, warned, in 1984, that the Europeans might interpret it as a "form of U.S. global unilateralism or a form of neoisolationism." If so, he said, the effect of the Maritime Strategy on the credibility of America's alliances would be devastating.¹

Maritime Strategy proponents, on the other hand, have countered, in the words of former U.S. Secretary of the Navy, John F. Lehman, Jr., that their plan is an "'Alliance Maritime Strategy' in the defense of the Atlantic alliance and not *and* the defense of the Atlantic alliance."² (Emphasis added.) As a matter of fact, Lehman told a Washington, D.C. audience in 1986, "we have a maritime strategy in the defense of NATO that is universally accepted by the maritime forces of Europe and the United States."³

One striking aspect of this dispute over the unilateralist versus coalitional contents of the Maritime Strategy is that it has been carried on almost exclusively by American protagonists in the American professional naval literature. There has been a smattering of overseas commentary (mainly British and Norwegian), but none, so far, has reflected the official views of the West European naval staffs.

The semblance of silence on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean does not mean that the Allied navies are neither aware of, nor interested in, the Maritime Strategy or, for that matter, that a debate on its *pros* and *cons* is not taking place within their own councils. Quite the contrary is true, and these pages will confirm that a professional debate on the significance of the Maritime Strategy for national and Allied naval force planning has been going on in one of the NATO European navies—the Dutch Koninklijke Marine (K.M.), (or Royal Navy). This article is based on two main sources: first, unofficial and semiofficial commentaries that have appeared in the

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Dutch press, primarily the K.M.'s professional journal, *Marineblad* [Naval Journal] and secondly, the writer's discussions in May of last year with the K.M. strategic planning group. The latter is a small organization of uniformed personnel, a component of the Naval Staff. Its routine responsibilities include the development of strategic and operational concepts that are the foundation of the K.M.'s annual parliamentary budget presentations. A key task today is to formulate, in conjunction with other Western European navies, the K.M.'s official position on the Maritime Strategy. The group's views can be taken as official and authoritative.

Unofficial Views

"The Maritime Strategy," published by the U.S. Naval Institute in January 1986, appears to have been the catalyst that caused the K.M. officer corps to realize that the Maritime Strategy would be more than the passing slogan of a new American administration. A few months later, the *Marineblad* published a lengthy article entitled "The Maritime Strategy: A Challenge for the Allies."⁴ The author was Dr. G. Teitler, a professor of military science at the Royal Netherlands Naval College and consultant to the K.M. staff.

The new American interest in naval strategy with a capital "S," wrote Teitler, was a welcome development that the European navies, including the K.M., had better study. True, he said, the Maritime Strategy was still very much in a formative stage, and a vocal body of critics in the United States showed that the Americans themselves were still far from agreement—none knew what the Soviet response might be and what changes it might subsequently bring. And a new American President and budget cuts could well bring about a scaling-down of the Maritime Strategy's ambitious objectives. Nevertheless, cautioned Teitler, the K.M. could not afford not to carefully study the Maritime Strategy lest it become a second-class partner by default. Should it decide against hitching its fortunes to a forward "Barents Sea scenario," and prefer instead to stay with the current task of a "southerly" defense of the SLOCs, the choice should be knowledgeable and deliberate. Alternatively, a choice for forward engagement, the author argued, would send a strong signal at home and abroad that the K.M. did not intend to be relegated to the role of a standby performer.

Regardless of the course chosen, Teitler concluded, it would behoove K.M. officials to begin informing the Dutch electorate. Soon, he said, the arguments for and against the Maritime Strategy would make their way across the Atlantic, and soon the Dutch general public, already skittish with talk about "war-fighting" and "offensive" operations, would ask questions that the service had better be prepared to answer.

The Teitler piece prompted extensive commentary and in its September 1986 issue the *Marineblad* printed eight pages of readers' correspondence.⁵ The general reaction was supportive of the idea that the K.M. become an active Maritime Strategy planning participant. Opinions were divided, however, on the sincerity of the American desire for a participatory strategy. One respondent, a retired K.M. captain, wondered if there was perhaps an analogy between America's delayed entry onto the European Continent in two world wars and the apparent intent of the Maritime Strategy not to extend hostilities to Soviet soil proper until the final phase of a conflict. Was the Maritime Strategy perhaps the American way of making a superpower war "safe"? The Soviet General Staff, thought Captain Jules J. Vaessen, K.M. (Retired), would probably prefer nothing better than a conventional war limited to central Europe. The Maritime Strategy's declared intent to expand hostilities to places other than those of Soviet choosing would, no doubt, discourage Moscow from its favorite scenario, but would it discourage the Soviets enough? For Western Europe the answer literally meant life or death.

Because of the weighty issues involved in the Maritime Strategy, concluded Vaessen, the K.M. had no choice but to become an active planning partner. By pretending ignorance, the K.M. would probably find itself sweeping mines or, at best, as an "assistant" to the British Navy.

A second commentator, Captain J.J. van Waning, disagreed that the Maritime Strategy contained an undercurrent of U.S. unilateralism. He also disagreed that only an active European say in the matter would ensure a true coalition strategy. While listing numerous quotations from the U.S. Naval Institute "white paper," van Waning urged Europeans to embrace the Maritime Strategy as a long overdue and sincere American recognition of the importance of *coalitional* seapower. In the past, he said, the U.S. Navy had been wont to treat the European fleets as "alsos"—useful for secondary "regional" tasks, but to be kept at arm's length while the carrier battle groups went about fighting the "big" war. The Maritime Strategy, on the other hand, was a legitimate invitation to equal partnership that should not be wronged by suspicions of American unilateralism or isolationism.

The Evolving Official View

In September 1986 the K.M. submitted its annual defense estimates. In a formal clarifying memorandum, the Dutch Parliament was informed that, come war, one of the two main K.M. tasks would be "forward defense" of the Norwegian Sea. The pertinent passage of the memorandum is translated below:

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Guidance (for the development of K.M. forces) comes from the NATO maritime strategic concept. This concept has been established by the three NATO commanders. It proceeds from the fact that the defense of heavily populated and industrialized Western Europe is very closely connected with the safety of the Northern and Southern regions. The principle of "forward defense" is one of the foundations of this maritime strategic concept. In the event therefore of crisis and conflict situations, maritime operations in the Atlantic Ocean by the NATO commanders will especially be focussed on the Northern flank and the North Atlantic Ocean. Notably the Norwegian Sea is of very great importance, for here lies the key to the defense of northern Norway, Iceland, the Faroe Islands and the transatlantic supply routes. In the event of aggression, the [Dutch] Royal Navy participates in tasks that must be carried out in the Norwegian Sea in order to prevent the opponent from reaching open waters. It will furthermore participate in the direct safeguarding of the supply lines in the North Atlantic, the English Channel and the North Sea.⁶

Charged with developing the operational concepts that will support a K.M. "forward defense" role is the Naval Staff's strategic planning group. Recommendations will be contained in a joint tripartite concept paper to be readied in the spring of 1988. The other two NATO participants are the British Navy (which has the lead) and the West German Navy. The paper will be submitted to the Euro-group ministers for endorsement and hence to NATO.

Obviously, it is premature to speculate on the paper's final conclusions. Yet, discussions with K.M. planners have given a fair indication of the kinds of themes and concerns that will most likely be highlighted.

K.M. planners have expressed concern regarding what they perceive as the ambiguous tone of American calls for "partnership." Their complaint is that when pressed on the issue, the Americans seem reluctant to go further than a vague invitation to "sweep mines." Some Dutch observers hear a faint echo of earlier U.S. proposals to divide Allied naval responsibilities between (American) "blue water" and (European) "shallow water" specializations. K.M. planners concede that part of the problem may be their own failure to adequately and specifically communicate their views and expectations. The tripartite concept paper is intended to fill this "communication gap." K.M. planners have also told this writer of plans to summarize their views in the near future in an American professional naval journal.

Responsible K.M. officers express reservations with the "war-fighting" emphasis of the Maritime Strategy. It is not that they object to the idea of fighting *per se*, as they are fully aware that a deterrent is only as credible as the war-fighting readiness that is backing it. Their sense is rather that the Maritime Strategy is more concerned with how to fight a war after deterrence has failed than with ways and means to ensure that deterrence will not fail. In a related observation, K.M. spokesmen who have participated in war games at the Naval War College in Newport, R.I.

thought that the "scenarios" tended to take off at an overly steep rung on the escalation ladder.

This reservation is closely tied in with a much broader concern. Namely, the Dutch—and, one suspects, the other European Allies as well—do not care for a strategy that promises success *after* their country has been devastated by a protracted, if "only" conventional, war. Their interest lies with a strategy that promises, before all, the *prevention* of war. And if it fails nevertheless, its key purpose ought to be to ensure the safe arrival of transatlantic supplies.

This point of view is very likely to be translated into a concept paper that will stress ways and means that the Allies might best contribute to the Maritime Strategy's so-called Phase I: deterrence and transition to war. Dutch naval planners are doubtful that the U.S. Navy alone has the ability to deploy expediently its forces to the Norwegian Sea in the event of a crisis. Given the Soviet advantage of the initiative and much shorter lines of communications, they fear that the Americans will find critical Norwegian bases in enemy hands and a crisis turned into war.

The Dutch believe that their navy, in conjunction with the British and West Germans, can play a crucial Phase I role. One option that is being considered in conjunction with European Allied navies, especially the British, is the idea of allied "battle groups" built around British *Invincible*-class carriers, European surface escorts, and forward-operating Allied Tornado fighter-bombers. Such a force would attempt to "hold the line" at sea and in the air pending the arrival of U.S. reinforcements. One important shortfall at this time, report the Dutch, is the lack of an Allied concept of operations. The Dutch also recognize that an *Invincible*-type battle group will be unable to provide the same level of air defense as an American carrier force. But they are hopeful that, operating from coastlines and islands, the 400-nautical-mile combat radius of the Tornado will provide coverage of most of the Norwegian Sea.

In the eyes of the Dutch, a prerequisite to early and safe forward movement of the *Invincible* groups, and indeed for the success of the "crisis control" period, is the quick dispatch of a combined British-Dutch marine force. The K.M. maintains that if an Allied task force is to operate at northern latitudes, it is a "must" that marine forces quickly help secure Norwegian air bases against a Soviet occupation attempt. Again, these forces would help hold the line while awaiting the arrival of U.S. Marine Corps contingents.

The Dutch Marine Corps today is closely integrated with its British counterpart, and its overseas movement depends on the dwindling British amphibious lift capacity. The K.M. has long established an operational requirement for its own dedicated 8,000-ton amphibious lift vessel. The ship can fill a need that has existed much longer than the Maritime Strategy,

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indeed is quite independent of the Maritime Strategy. It is this writer's opinion, nevertheless, that the K.M.'s planning has given added reason for its realization.

The "great debate" over the Maritime Strategy is taking on transatlantic proportions. The strategy's general premise that the Atlantic alliance can no longer afford to rely on a "static" naval barrier thrown across the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) gap has received the broad endorsement of America's European Allies. Yet, there are unsettled political and operational questions on how and toward what specific purposes the Maritime Strategy is to be carried out. Thanks to the outpouring of official and unofficial pronouncements on the American side of the Atlantic Ocean, the Europeans are far more familiar with U.S. thinking than vice versa. It is imperative that the educational process become a two-way street. The unhappy alternative is criticism of the Europeans for lack of interest, and of the Americans for foisting their strategic preferences.

Notes

1. Robert W. Komcr, *Maritime Strategy or Coalition Defense?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Abt Books, 1984), p. 69.
2. John F. Lehman, Jr., "Maritime Strategy in the Defense of NATO," David M. Abshire Endowed Lecture, Georgetown University, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C.: 25 September 1986, p. 1.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
4. G. Teitler, "The Maritime Strategy": Uitdaging ook aan de Bondgenoten," *Marineblad* (The Hague: June 1986), pp. 332-338.
5. "Ingezonden Mededelingen," *Marineblad* (The Hague: September 1986), pp. 471-478.
6. Dutch Parliament, *Memoire van Toelichting*, 1986-1987 session, 19700 Chapter X, no. 2, p. 23.



"We would rather be ruined by praise than saved by criticism."

Admiral Harry Train, U.S. Navy
Newport, R.I., March 1987