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# De-Committing the Sixth Fleet

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by
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The Sixth Fleet has dominated the military scene on and over Mediterranean waters for over 30 years. In spite of dramatic political, economic, and military changes in the region, the avowed purposes of the fleet's presence have remained remarkably coustant. They include deterring aggression against Western Europe by being prepared to launch either conventional or nuclear weapons strikes under either Nato auspices or under US aegis alone.

The wartime roles and nissions of the Sixth Fleet have been the subject of debate in recent years. One view holds that the fleet must be counted as an essential component of Nato defense on land, that "its airpower offers the only hope of early reenforcement and of survival of the local (Greek and Turkish) forces in the first stages of the defensive battles."[1]

Well and good. What happens if the Warsaw Pact chooses to attack westward, through Germany, but not southward through Turkey and Greece? Surely, it can be argued that it would be to Moscow's advantage not to be diverted from the main thrust westward by actions in what could be the Soviet rear. Further, success in the west would, in due course, yield the Soviets desirable results in the Eastern Mediterranean without having to fight for them.

Moreover, for their own reasons, the possibility of Greek and Turkish neutrality cannot be ruled out, given the frequently scratchy relations between the two countries, and with the United States and Nato. After a 6-year absence, Greek armed forces were reintegrated into Nato's military structure only in 1980. Strong domestic political sentiments for disassociation from the Alliance remain.[2] In the case of Turkey, one knowledgeable observer concluded his review of Turkish security attitudes as follows: "In essence, the Turkish position seems to rely on the US-Nato association for purposes of defense only, while at the same time moving Turkey out of the sphere of superpower interaction. This position must be as much a course of security for the Soviet Union as it is for Turkey, and it follows that Turkey is unwilling to assume any strategic military roles that are not related to her own defense."[3]

Turkish or Greek nonbelligerence in the event of a Warsaw Pact attack against Western Europe would not conflict with either country's formal responsibilities under the Nato Charter. The latter prescribes that an armed attack against one shall be considered an attack against all, to be met by such action as each of them "deems necessary."[4] Moreover, a Nato hard-pressed for resources on the Western front

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might be happy not to have to share them with hard-pressed allies in the southeast. So, no war there could be good news for Nato, too.

If, for any of the reasons given, or for any other reason, the Sixth Fleet was not obligated to support Greek and Turkish defenses, what might it be called on to do? Two major roles have been mentioned. The first is air strikes against the southern part of the Soviet Union. The second is a direct support for the Nato defenders on the Central Front.

Let us first look at the first role. It comes for two reasons.

The first purpose would entail the bombardment of Soviet Navy and Air Force targets around the Black Sea. Such an aim would be consistent with the traditional naval task of assuring sea control by destroying enemy naval and air forces ashore, including their bases and logistic support.[5] The second possible purpose of hitting Soviet targets has been termed "intra-war deterrence," namely to demonstrate to the Soviets that the war will not be contained to Western Europe, that unless they halt their aggression, their homeland will be as much at risk to destruction. Retired Admiral Worth H. Bagley has suggested that conventionally armed long-range cruise missiles mighr be used in such a strategy. He writes that "Western sea power can be employed in a way that may contribute directly to Moscow's perception of the risks of aggression on land . . . , a conventionally-armed SCM attack from the sea on Soviet industrial facilities might be undertaken to encourage the Soviet Union to pause elsewhere."[6]

Yet the relationship between the two goals of bombarding military or industrial targets in the southern Soviet Union and the outcome of events in Central Europe seems tenuous. Sinking the Black Sea Fleet at its slips will not degrade the Warsaw Pact's war-making powers on the Central Front. As an intra-war deterrent its value is doubtful. A Soviet decision to invade Western Europe would presumably be made in anticipation of pain and destruction. History shows that, once at war, a determined opponent will rarely reassess his original cost-benefit calculation; indeed, as his costs go up, the attainment of the objective may become all the more important.

Sixth Fleet air operations against targers north of the Black Sea must overcome serious geographic, political, and military handicaps. Taking off from a carrier steaming (say) near Cyprus, the aircraft must fly a straight-line distance of some 600 nautical miles to reach Sevastopol on the southern tip of the Crimean Peninsula. The notional combat radius of the A-6 is 500 naurical miles. If Turkey were not a belligerent, about one-half of this distance would involve the overflight of a neutral country. Aside from the likely adverse Turkish diplomatic (and conceivably military) reaction to that, such a US action might readily compromise Turkey's neutral status. Statements by Soviet military leaders have clearly implied that Turkey is considered to he within the Soviet Union's forward defense zone.[7] If the Soviets believed that Turkey was either unwilling or unable to stop the United States from using Turkish airspace to attack them, they might be handed a pretext for extending their military "protection," thus widening the war to everyone's disadvantage.

Considering the length of the flight, Crimean defenses would not likely be caught unprepared. If the Soviets did not receive early warning from local agents in Turkey, chances are that the approaching strike aircraft would be detected by picket ships in

the Black Sea. Soviet air defenses are the most massive and extensive in the world, particularly around important places such as air and naval bases. The losses inflicted on attacking aircraft by surface-to-air missiles and manned interceptors could be quite high.

It would be possible to use long-range, ship-launched cruise missiles to first suppress enemy defenses; however, the success of this tactic would be in doubt until the manned aircraft actually arrive over their targets.[8] Unless the force was authorized to use nuclear weapons—which would open up a whole new range of uncertainties—repeated raids would probably be needed to inflict the desired level of damage. Between raids, the Soviets would be able to bring in reinforcements more quickly than the Sixth Fleet could replace its own aircraft losses.

One final risk that is inherent in this strategy is that of a Soviet counterstrike while the launching carriers were on their stations in the Eastern Mediterranean. Its danger could be heightened by Turkish refusal to give early warning in retaliation for the US overflights.

The other proposal, that Sixth Fleet carriers provide direct theater support to the Nato defenders in the Central Region, has been advanced by, among others, John Lehman, now Secretary of the Navy, who wrote in 1978: "After the battle for control of the Mediterranean Sea is won, remaining and augmenting carrier aircraft can increase land-based aircraft in support of the land battle on both flanks and the Central Region. The unique all-weather capability of the carrier-based A-6 Intruder will be of particular value in this respect because of the generally poor weather of Central Europe."[9]

Others have echoed this suggestion, and proposed that such operations might be launched from "sanctuaries" in the Adriatic and Tyrrhenian seas.[10]

Using the Mediterranean waters as a staging area for carrier air support of the Central land battle suffers from some of the same difficulties that are presented by the first alternative. Again, flight distances are at the extreme limit of present-day carrier attack aircraft capabilities. Assuming that theater targets are situated on the principal assumed Warsaw Pact invasion routes, the Hof Corridor, Fulda Gap, and the North German Plain, one-way distances from hypothetical carrier stations in the Ligurian Gulf or northern Adriatic Sea average from 320 to 550 nautical miles. The long flight times involved, from one to one and one-half hours, mean that time-urgent targets are essentially excluded from the Sixth Fleet's "hit list."

Before their return flight to the carriers, the aircraft could theoretically be received at West German air bases for refueling and servicing. Practically, this may not be a realistic option. This is so in light of the anticipated shortage of Nato base facilities to handle the planned overseas air reinforcements, as well as the lack of standardization between US Navy and US/Nato Air Force support infrastructures. This means that Sixth Fleet strike aircraft may have to fly a minimum of some 640, and a maximum of 1,100 nautical miles on each mission.

Aircraft and flight crews cannot sustain a high tempo of operations if the average mission distance is 870 nautical miles. As the number of operational flying hours goes up, so does the number of hours for maintenance and repair. One, possibly one and one-half sorties per day is probably the maximum achievable. If Seymour Deitchman's assumed loss rate of 0.03 aircraft per sortie/day is applied, and initial Sixth Fleet contribution of 100 aircraft would be reduced by 26 to 36 percent after 10 days.[11]

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As is the case with a Sixth Fleet strike offensive against the Soviet Union, so again carrier operations from the Adriatic or Tyrrhenian Sea would require the infringement of nentral airspace. The countries involved are Yugoslavia and Austria in the first instance, and Switzerland in the second. Even if US concern with neutral sensitivities were ar a low ebb, it would be a complicating factor. Losses of aircraft and crews to the defenses of outraged neutrals, a tilting of the neutrals in favor of the foe, and last, but nor least, the possibility of Pact "defensive intervention," are possibilities. In addition, the deployment of carriers in the narrow Adriatic Sea would place them where they could easily be found, and could not easily maneuver. They would not only be vulnerable to Soviet heavy bombers, but also to Pact tactical aircraft launched from Hungarian bases, for instance. Naturally, if Austria and Yugoslavia were neutral, such Soviet attacks would also be across neutral territory, and subject to some of the same risks.

Individually, the Sixth Fleet's tactical aircraft would count among the most capable on both sides of the front. At the same time, there is a growing body of evidence to indicate that quantity, rather than quality of aircraft may be the overriding factor in a congested tactical air environment as the Central Region is likely to be.[12]

Numerically, the Sixth Fleet's contribution to the defense of the Central Region would be marginal. An assumed maximum commitment of 100 aircraft would compare with almost 3,000 Nato aircraft in peacetime, and after US Air Force reinforcements, 4,500 to 4,800 in wartime.[13] Even if the daily availability of Nato's land-based tactical air forces is assumed to be only 70 percent, the Sixth Fleet's 100 aircraft would amount to only 3 percent of the Allied land-based total. The fleet's contribution in deliverable ordnance would be even less if comparative sortie rates are considered. Conservatively estimated, each land-based aircraft could fly 2.5 daily sorties. With an availability of 70 percent, this amounts to between 7,875 and 8,400 sorties per day. By comparison, 100 Sixth Fleet aircraft may be capable of staging from 100 to 150 sorties, or between 1 and 2 percent of the land-based effort.

Under circumstances that cannot now be foreseen, it could be entirely appropriate to use the US Navy's Mediterranean strength in a fashion as described, to use aircraft carriers in a way that takes less than full advantage of their unique characteristics—the integration of ship and airplane. Pending the arrival of those circumstances, we should not foreclose consideration of those uses. Neither should we be pre-committed to this alternative.

The aircraft carrier and her earmarked air wing are a single weapon system; the carrier without her aircraft is useless; they, without the carrier, have lost their strategic, if not their tactical mobility. Bernard Brodie wrote in 1942 that, "By means of aircraft carriers, navies have incorporated within themselves the only truly mobile air forces—in which the air bases as well as aircraft can be not only moved but also concentrated."[14] Using the Sixth Fleet as described in the preceding paragraphs, denies carrier aviation of its principal advantage: the ability to strike at the enemy at times and places of one's choosing. While it is true thar navies and aircraft carriers are built to go in harm's way, it is also true that the intelligent attacker seeks to engage the enemy where he is weakest and least expects to be struck. The Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Thomas B. Hayward, put it this way: " . . . U.S. naval

commanders must be governed by the concept of calculated risk. That is, in war they must select engagement opportunities which promise attrition ratios clearly favorable to the U.S. side . . . . Given the nature of the U.S.-Soviet naval balance and our essential inability to reconstitute battle losses, achievement of distinctly favorable attrition ratios offers the only prospect of progressively defeating the Soviet Navy in a worldwide war at sea. Even a one-to-one exchange ratio is a strategy for defeat."[15]

Granted that circumstances may indeed arise when using the Sixth Fleet in the two roles discussed may be most "cost-effective," the fleet should not be committed *a priori* to either course of action. While it may be true that the presence of the Sixth Fleet remains an important symbol of the US guarantee to its Mediterranean allies, the question must be asked if the fleet's regional commitment in peacetime signifies its automatic commitment to the area in war. Prepositioning and "forward defense" may or may not be the appropriate strategy for a land theater that lacks geographic depth; it is not for naval forces. Observed Admiral Bagley: "NATO strategy calls for sea power to give support to the southern flank, but the innate strategic flexibility of ships in the Mediterranean is exchanged for the immobility of land-based forces In whose stead they serve. Other Western naval forces—in the English Channel, the Baltic, and the North Atlantic—assume the fixed, front-oriented posture of foot soldiers on the ground in Central Europe."[16]

When war breaks out, peacetime deterrents and local symbols of the US commitment become irrelevant. What counts instead is to decide on the most effective way to respond to the immediate (and usually unforeseeable) points of crisis, while at the same time, to prepare for actions that can lead to a satisfactory end to the war.

If air support in the Central Region is called for, some of the problems that are associated with the use of carriers in the Tyrrhenian or Adriatic Sea can be avoided by deploying to different bodies of water. From a geographic and political perspective, the English Channel, for example, offers important advantages. There, the one-way mission distance to a hypothetical Nato-Pact frontline, though long, averaging 450 nautical miles, crosses none other than Allied territory. It should be possible for the Allied Channel Command to provide the carriers with effective antisubmarine protection on both ends of the Channel. Because of the much longer distances involved, as well as the interposition of Allied air defenses, the threat of bomber attack on the carriers should be less than in the Adriatic Sea. An added advantage of deploying the Sixth Fleet off the Western European continent, rather than to keep it in the Mediterranean Sea, is that ships would be able to join forces with other Atlantic Fleet components more quickly, and would be within reach of more areas of potential need, be it on land, or on the high seas.

For the US Navy, one area of "need" may well be taking shape today. As the Soviet Navy continues to evolve into a "blue-water" battle fleet of nuclear battle cruisers and possibly large carriers, the initial struggle for "sea control" is likely to become an increasingly difficult and time-consuming task, that may call for a major and lengthy commitment of US Navy carrier forces worldwide.

Circumstances, not choice, have dictated the periodic redeployment of one-half of the Sixth Fleet's carrier strength to the Indian Ocean. As such, it may have provided an unexpected opportunity for a fresh commitment to fleet flexibility.

## NOTES

1. Horacio Rivero, "Why a U.S. Fleet in the Mediterranean?" U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, May 1977, p. 86.

2. See, for example, Andriana Lerodiaconou, "Greece, U.S. Break-Off Talks on Bases Pact as Elections Approach," *The Washington Post*, 19 June 1981, p. A25.

3. Duygu Bazoglu Sezer, "Turkey's Security Policies," *Adelphi Paper*, no. 164 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, Spring 1981), pp. 34-35.

4. The North Atlantic Treaty, Article 5, Washington, D.C., 4 April 1949. Nato Information Service, *The Atlantic Alliance* (Brussels: 1969), p. 239.

5. Congressional Budget Office, *Planning U.S. General Purpose Forces: The Navy* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., December 1976), pp. 11-12. In his critique of the CBO paper, Admiral James L. Holloway III took issue with the suggestion that strikes against the Soviet Union proper might be the Sixth Fleet's only power projection mission—not that it might have such a role per se. See *U.S. Navy Analysis of Congressional Budget Office Budget Issue Paper "General Purpose Forces: Navy,"* p. 10.

6. Worth H. Bagley, "Sea Power and Western Security: The Next Decade," *Adelphi Paper*, no. 139 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, Winter 1977), p. 22.

7. Sezer, p. 15.

8. Using the Tomahawk Land Attack Missile (TLAM) in a "first wave" attack has been suggested, among others, by the retired Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt. See his "Total Force," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, May 1979, p. 105.

9. John Lehman, *Aircraft Carriers: The Real Choices*. The Washington Papers, no. 52 (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1978), p. 33.

10. See, for example, Hugh D. Connell II, "NATO TacAir Has a Tough Nut to Crack," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, February 1981, p. 38.

11. Seymour J. Deitchman, "The Future of Tactical Air Power in Land Warfare," *Astronautics and Aeronautics*, July-August 1980, p. 40.

12. The pages of *Aviation Week & Space Technology* have carried a drawn-out debate on the relative merits of "few versus many" highly capable or moderately capable fighter aircraft. See, for example, A. Lee Harrell's letter in the 18 May 1981 issue, p. 13.

13. The peacetime tactical air order of battle is provided by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 1980-1981* (London: 1980), p. 113. Wartime figures are based On US reinforcements of 1,500-1,800 aircraft. See *Department of Defense Annual Report Fiscal Year 1982* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1981), p. 72.

14. Bernard Brodie, *A Guide to Naval Strategy*, 5th ed. (New York: Praeger, 1965), p. 210.

15. Thomas B. Hayward, "The Future of U.S. Sea Power," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, May 1979, p. 69.

16. Bagley, p. 5.

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