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COMMAND OF THE SEA REDUX

Robert C. Rubel

Maritime strategy—the application of a nation’s sea power to achieve its political ends—can be a complicated, multilayered affair, especially for a great power such as the United States. American maritime strategy’s complex, and frankly esoteric, nature is exacerbated by the country’s fragmented, “stovepiped” military and other governance structures. No single agency has the responsibility, authority, and perspective both to develop and to execute the country’s maritime strategy. Thus we observe the clashes between the U.S. Navy and Congress, in which legislators override both the Navy and the Secretary of Defense, taking control of naval shipbuilding plans.¹ Recently, despite the issuance by the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard of the strategy document *Advantage at Sea*, Congresswoman Elaine G. Luria (D-VA) felt compelled to write a post calling for a new maritime strategy of the sort the Navy developed in the 1980s.²

All this reflects confusion about what the nation’s sea power is for and how it should be structured and applied. In part, the problem is doctrinal and statutory; the Navy is required to focus on raising, training, and equipping forces. This leads it to define its key war-fighting concept as *sea control*, which is a tactical, and therefore inherently a local, function. A strategic, unifying doctrinal concept is needed to help reduce the confusion.

Nine years ago, the *Naval War College Review* published an article by this author asserting that the term *command of the sea* should be resurrected as an aid to planning and risk assessment.³ At the time, the Navy’s keystone doctrinal publication, *Naval Warfare*, NDP 1, made no mention of the term. The newest version of it now includes the

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term in its foreword, but defines it as “the strategic condition of free and open access and usage of the seas necessary for our nation to flourish.”⁴ In doing so, it confuses cause and effect.

Freedom of the seas is a U.S. policy that is enabled by the country’s *command of the sea*, which, rightly understood, is a strength relationship among the navies of those nations that would contend for global leadership. *Command of the sea* denotes a concentration of sea power in one nation such that others do not challenge it directly. The United States has enjoyed virtually unchallenged command of the sea since 1945, but now the combination of a shrunken USN fleet and China’s aggressive naval buildup is making that command ever more tenuous—with potentially dire geopolitical consequences. NDP 1 does state correctly that “[c]ommand of the seas is a fundamental strategic pillar of our nation, necessary for the security and prosperity of our citizens.”⁵ Given that, it is critical that the Navy take full account of the term, including its components and implications—which it has yet to do. This article will expand further on those matters.

Congresswoman Luria’s July 2021 post calls for the development of a new maritime strategy. A key reason she wrote the post was her frustration with the Navy’s budget submission. She feels—as do other members of Congress, apparently—that no valid strategy underpins the Navy’s shipbuilding plan. In a 1974 *Naval War College Review* article, then-Vice Admiral Stansfield Turner redefined the missions of the U.S. Navy as strategic deterrence, sea control, power projection, and naval presence.⁶ Turner said that an understanding of the rationale for these missions was essential for formulating strategic plans, allocating resources, and developing supporting naval tactics. However, his formulation displaced the concept of command of the sea, which had been a fundamental element of naval strategy since ancient times. By replacing *command of the sea* with *sea control*, the basis for Navy planning became operational rather than strategic—ignoring the geopolitical impact of a single world ocean.

So long as the vessels of our fleet were sufficiently numerous and lacked serious competition or threat at sea, this doctrinal shift carried with it no adverse consequences. However, that congenial set of strategic conditions now is changing, and a return to the earlier term is needed to provide for the functions Turner mentions: formulating strategic plans, allocating resources, and developing supporting naval tactics. To this array of functions we might add “providing a set of criteria by which new fleet-design options can be assessed.” If the Navy wants to develop a new and effective maritime strategy along the lines for which Congresswoman Luria calls, it will need to embrace and understand the implications of the term *command of the sea*.

Congresswoman Luria calls on the Navy to develop a new strategy of the type that focuses on achieving political ends; however, that is, by law, beyond

the authority of the service. The Navy is limited to raising, training, and equipping forces for use by the combatant commanders (COCOMs), who do have the authority to develop such strategies. The problem is that under the Unified Command Plan (UCP), which establishes the command-and-control (C2) architecture for the U.S. military, the world is divided into six regional areas of responsibility—a grid that overlays the single world ocean. The UCP does not provide for an operational-level command that has cognizance over the world's largest geographic feature.

However, from time to time strategic problems have arisen that involve the unity of the world ocean and require that perspective to solve.⁷ In the 1980s, the Navy developed the famous *Maritime Strategy* to rationalize the apportionment and allocation of naval forces globally in the event of a conventional war with the Soviet Union. Collectively, the individual war plans of the COCOMs assumed the availability of twenty-two carrier battle groups (CBGs), but the United States had only fifteen at the time. Moreover, a global strategic perspective was needed to avert the maldeployment of naval forces, specifically any denuding of the Pacific of CBGs to reinforce the European Command, which would leave American territory open to Soviet incursions. A Vice Chief of Naval Operations memo of the period stated the following: “[T]he obvious conclusion as shown here is that our current force maritime strategy for a near-simultaneous global war cannot be the sum of existing CINCs’ [COCOM] plans.”⁸

Another such strategic problem arose in the wake of the September 11 attacks: how to secure American coasts from terrorist incursion. In a series of war games held at the Naval War College in the months after the attack, it became clear that there were not enough total ships in the Navy and Coast Guard combined to protect the coasts using a patrol strategy. The ultimate answer was to secure all the seas via extensive international maritime-security cooperation. The resulting strategy document was aimed at securing the world ocean, and it was successful in doing so.⁹ In both cases it was the Navy—stepping at least partly outside its Title X constraints—that developed the needed strategies.

In both cases mentioned above, command of the sea was not an issue. In the 1980s, the Navy was large enough to exercise command adequately in all regions, and the Soviet navy exhibited no desire to sortie out and challenge that command. In 2007, there simply did not exist any navy that remotely could challenge the U.S. Navy, regardless of its parent nation's intent. However, in 2022 that condition has changed. China is building a navy that in the not-too-distant future might be able feasibly to challenge American command of the sea, especially if the U.S. Navy does not use the concept of command of the sea as a basis for strategy development. As a practical planning aid, command of the sea would create a mind-set that is strategic and global (whereas sea control is operational

and local), provide relevant criteria for both assessing risk and engaging in fleet design, help establish a more realistic assessment of the implications of Chinese and Russian naval developments, and concoct more-compelling arguments for desired resources. Moreover, it could catalyze creativity in efforts to innovate.

The DNA embedded in our definition of *command of the sea* is deterrence, involving a naval strength differential sufficient to deter other nations from mounting a direct naval challenge in wartime, and in peacetime causing them to refrain even from naval building. This definition of *command of the sea* is supported by research conducted by George Modelski and William R. Thompson, who used ship counts to track and analyze the dynamic of geopolitical competition for global leadership from the late fifteenth to the late twentieth century. They found that over the course of five “long cycles” of such competition, global war produced a nation that seized *command of the sea*, defined as possessing around 50 percent of the total naval forces available to contending nations. When “deconcentration” occurred—when the proportioning of ship counts evened out among contenders—global war eventually broke out, and the cycle repeated.¹⁰ Another way of saying this is that when it was perceived that challengers had evened the naval odds, deterrence eroded. Thus, there exists the strategic imperative to *maintain* command of the sea through maintaining a sufficient concentration of sea power. This is nothing more than the instantiation of the old Roman adage that if you want peace, prepare for war. Along this line, Britain’s Naval Defence Act of 1889 provided for a Royal Navy that was at least equal to the power of the next two strongest navies.¹¹ It is important to note that in today’s world, sea power is one element of many that contribute to the reality and perception of overall national strength. That said, in the past five centuries the deconcentration of sea power has been associated, without exception, with the breakout of global war.

Modelski and Thompson also found that one of the benefits of command of the sea was the ability of its possessor to enforce a global order congenial to its interests.¹² This required the *exercise* of command: the deployment of the navy in peacetime to carry out whatever functions the nation needed to support and defend the world order it desired. “Great maritime nations demand the exercise of seapower.”¹³ The United States began deploying the Navy in response to the Soviet challenge in 1946, when it dispatched the battleship *Missouri* to support Turkey in a dispute with the Soviet Union over the Dardanelles. Eventually, it ringed the Eurasian continent with sea power to deter and respond to aggression by the Soviets and their proxies. This global deployment has been made in support of the U.S. policy of defending a global liberal trading order. The demise of the Soviet Union did not alter that policy, and the U.S. Navy has continued to deploy to “protect and sustain the peaceful global system comprised of interdependent networks of trade, finance, information, law, people and governance.”¹⁴

However, as the nation harvested a “peace dividend” after the collapse of the Soviet Union, reduced defense budgets resulted in a progressively smaller fleet, even while demand for forward-deployed forces from the regional COCOMs continued unabated, especially in the wake of the September 11 attacks and the resulting global war on terror. The Navy attempted to keep up with the demand by increasing deployment lengths, deferring maintenance, and curtailing some training, but such shortcuts may have contributed to a series of ship collisions in the Pacific Fleet.¹⁵ A report by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) concluded: “Unfortunately, the benefits provided by a robust naval presence are also threatening the long-term health of the Navy. The high OPTEMPO [operational tempo] of the last decade has resulted in deferred maintenance, reduced readiness, and demoralized crews.”¹⁶

If the *exercise* of command is contributing to the deterioration of combat readiness, and therefore possibly the *maintenance* of command, we must understand better the relationship between the two. If history is any judge, the *maintenance* of command and its *exercise* are parts of the same fabric of global leadership and cannot be separated. Thus “balancing” between them does not make any strategic sense; both are necessary if peace and a favorable world order are to be preserved. That is the first principle associated with command of the sea. The second principle also derives from the fused nature of maintenance and exercise: do not risk maintenance of command while exercising it. These two principles have powerful implications for the Navy’s fleet design, C2 arrangements, and strategy.

If these principles (which will be expanded on a bit later) are critical to understanding command of the sea and its implications, understanding what constitutes command of the sea in the modern world is even more critical. Throughout most of the last five centuries, as chronicled by Modelski and Thompson, command of the sea has been a function of numbers of hulls, both as a surrogate indicator of overall national power and will and as an actual measure of naval combat capability. However, modern technology, especially that involving cyberspace, may be changing that calculus. Former Navy admiral and two-term congressman from Pennsylvania Joseph A. Sestak Jr. argues in the Winter 2020/21 *Texas National Security Review* that equating command with ship count is a self-defeating formula. Increased ship counts incur huge manning and maintenance costs. His view is that a capability-based approach that features cyber defense and offense as a principal factor would lead to a more relevant measure of command.¹⁷ He very well may be right, but more-focused research on the matter is needed to determine the best calculus.

In this author’s view, having large numbers of missiles that can be expended liberally, along with a force structure that can be replenished, such that an

extended war of exhaustion can be supported, is also important. In any case, extensive research and gaming are needed to nail down a useful new underpinning for command. That said, the basic definition still holds: a strength superiority that deters challenge. Given that understanding, we can proceed to tease out the embedded principles and their implications.

The first principle, which asserts that the maintenance of command and its exercise are fused inextricably, derives from the reason for command in the first place: global leadership. This is the gold ring that great powers seek because of its associated security benefit: a favorable world order. As Thucydides, in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, reports the Athenians saying, “[R]ight, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.”¹⁸ Whereas weaker nations must exist in a world order imposed by the ascendant great power, the great powers engage in self-help because they can. When the global leader is successful—almost invariably as a result of victory in a global war—it must both dissuade challengers and use force or the threat thereof to impose its values, or at least to suppress as much instability as possible in the rest of the world. Throughout history, oceangoing naval power has been the mechanism whereby global leaders attained global reach, and therefore influence. Thus, any argument about combat readiness versus forward presence is specious; it ignores the inherent nature of command of the sea. If a nation does not aspire to global leadership and thus to maintaining a world order favorable to its interests and values, then command of the sea is irrelevant; if it does, overall strength and global reach and influence are inseparable components. How a navy does both is the alpha and omega of maritime strategy.

As a matter of policy—and, some might say, grand strategy—the United States brokered, and subsequently used force to defend, a global liberal trading order based on institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. The goal was to foster a rules-based international order that not only would promote globe-wide economic development on an equitable basis but also would reduce the chances of another world war. In the aftermath of World War II, the U.S. Navy possessed unchallenged command of the sea and was large enough to deploy superior forces, mostly centered on aircraft carriers, to most locations where influence of some kind was needed.

The service’s strength consisted of two parts: deployed forces and those in home waters undergoing maintenance and working up for deployment. Together, these meant that the U.S. Navy had both initial-response forces and surge forces available when needed. This was illustrated in 1990 when Iraq invaded Kuwait. The initial naval response was in the form of two CBGs: the *Eisenhower* group that transited the Suez Canal into the Red Sea and the *Independence* group then operating in the Gulf of Oman. By the time Operation DESERT STORM was

initiated, the Navy had deployed six other CBGs to the region (*Eisenhower* and *Independence* having been relieved), which took six months. This essential posture—the capability for both initial response and surge—has been maintained throughout the post–World War II era, and in fact a version of it was advanced in a CSBA report that Congresswoman Luria cited favorably.¹⁹ The problem with this architecture is that ships still can go no faster than thirty knots. In a context of global influence in modern conditions, speed of response may be critical, so the long-standing response/surge posture no longer may have the deterrent value on which command is based.²⁰

Admiral Sestak advocates for a more robust forward posture, not only in the Pacific but elsewhere, such as in the Mediterranean.²¹ Historically, when the threat to command was near, as in the case of Great Britain and Germany prior to the First World War, the maintenance of command was vested in a concentrated “Home Fleet” of battleships, while the global exercise of command was carried out by cruisers. To maintain that posture in the face of constrained budgets, First Sea Lord Admiral John A. “Jacky” Fisher, RN, conceived of a new ship type: the battle cruiser.²² For the United States, a strong home fleet of the type that American naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan advocated made sense when the United States did not aspire to global leadership and the nation’s policy scope extended only as far as the Monroe Doctrine.²³ Once American strategic interests expanded beyond the Western Hemisphere after World War II, the breadth of the oceans separating the United States from the rest of the world governed the U.S. Navy’s architecture. Fleet size was determined on the basis of the number of ships needed to support rotational deployments.²⁴ In a kind of inversion of the British formula—in which the requirements of maintenance of command of the sea drove the number of capital ships, and the forces for its exercise were primarily cruisers and smaller—the needs of exercise of command drove American fleet size, and its strongest units, the aircraft carriers, were the principal units on which exercise was based.

But speed of response may drive the United States to a new architecture that is driven by threat, not by exercise (presence) requirements. If Admiral Sestak is right, the whole concept of a surge of naval forces across the Pacific in response to a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, the closure of the South China Sea, or some other form of aggression via the sea may constitute a deterrent no longer, and whenever that happens command of the sea is lost. Forward basing of a CBG in Guam, as he suggests, might help.²⁵ However, if, as Sestak claims, cyber capability is the new coin of the realm (so to speak) in terms of naval power, if offensive missile quantity matters, and if a distributed flotilla of numerous smaller ships represents a more robust deterrent than a few aircraft carriers, then a more extensive approach to forward basing will be needed. All this suggests a very different fleet

architecture from the Navy's current one, but one that could be obtained rather more quickly than the Navy could be enlarged by building more of the service's current ship types.²⁶ In other words, maintenance of command and its exercise would become more integrated, and units would be stationed forward rather than based in the United States.

The second principle offers a strategic criterion for assessing risk. Modelski and Thompson showed that a *deconcentration* of sea power—its more even distribution among those nations vying for global leadership—has been associated with the eventual outbreak of global war. In other words, deterrence erodes. Although deconcentration of sea power can be a function of naval arms races, there are other ways for it to occur.

The first way is through losses incurred when exercising command of the sea. If, for instance, U.S. naval losses in a conflict over Taiwan were great enough and China's were sufficiently low, China might be emboldened to undertake additional aggression via the sea, such as seizing Japanese islands or physically enforcing its South China Sea territorial claims. Such actions plausibly could lead to a global war. Even if China did not undertake such aggression, the loss of a U.S. carrier or two would compromise USN ability to exercise command in other areas, such as the Middle East, which might embolden Iran or Russia to engage in aggression. This illustrates that both maintenance and exercise of command of the sea are intimately connected and inherently global.

The second way command could be lost is through maldeployment of naval forces. We already have discussed the problem of surge from the United States, but given that the current U.S. naval posture is based on global strategic dispersion of its forces, the risk arises that when a true naval threat emerges the U.S. fleet could be defeated in detail. This would suggest that the U.S. Navy should achieve continuous concentration, at least at key threatened points. Mahan advocated such concentration in the Caribbean to cover the Panama Canal and enforce the Monroe Doctrine.²⁷ British naval theorist Sir Julian Corbett took a more flexible view of concentration, one based on the mobility of naval forces; he asserted that dispersal could form a useful element of concentration if the various parts could cohere in some way.²⁸ The range of modern missile systems, and perhaps the global reach of the Internet, might offer some wiggle room on physical concentration. Nonetheless, forces starting from the Middle East would require many days of transit to reinforce those in either Europe or the western Pacific, so effective concentration would have to be regional. This is another reason for fleet architecture to be adjusted to feature forward-based missile flotillas.

Strategic risk associated with the second principle carries with it implications for the C2 of naval forces. As previously mentioned, the UCP divides the world into regions in which area-of-responsibility boundaries are drawn in the ocean.

This inhibits the global maneuverability of naval forces, by requiring an agreement between at least two of the COCOMs that naval forces should be transferred from the control of one to another and by necessitating the establishment of procedures for communications and doctrinal shifts and the like when ships cross boundaries. More importantly, the UCP structure does not provide for an operational maritime staff that has a global perspective, accompanied by the authority to distribute naval forces strategically. When the fleet was sufficiently numerous and the threat to American command of the sea low or nonexistent, this strategic gap in C2 was not relevant, but in an era in which the fleet is much smaller and China presents a mounting threat to command, it poses a significant strategic risk. This author and others have proposed elsewhere adjustments to the UCP to mitigate this risk.²⁹ The logic of centralizing command is in keeping with U.S. Air Force doctrine, which regards airpower as a scarce resource that must be managed centrally (via a joint force air component commander) if it is to be used efficiently. Applying this logic to sea power and scaling it to the global level are necessary under current geopolitical conditions and current fleet design. However, if the maintenance and exercise of command of the sea were fused and invested in strong regional flotillas, the current UCP structure would not constitute such a strategic weakness.

The deterrent effect of American command of the sea still seems to hold, although it may be perilously close to failing.³⁰ In any case, the dissuasion element has not affected China, whose naval building program has proceeded rapidly and now includes the construction of an aircraft carrier roughly equivalent to those of the *Nimitz* and *Ford* classes.³¹ China now makes no secret of its desire to alter and lead the global order, and to do so it will need a globally capable navy. Given the American policy of a free and open ocean, it remains to be seen how the interaction of two world-class navies on a day-to-day basis will unfold—assuming that war does not break out first. The Soviet navy actually outnumbered the U.S. Navy in certain classes of ships, including submarines, but Soviet naval doctrine was inherently defensive, so global American command never was challenged seriously. China's doctrine, as evidenced by the claim to almost the whole South China Sea as Chinese territory and the building and militarization of artificial islands therein, appears to be more expansive. Admiral Sestak claims that American command of the sea, at least in the western Pacific inside the first island chain, already is lost, since U.S. ships now can sail there only at Chinese sufferance.³² As China continues to vie for global leadership and Russia plays spoiler, the situation at sea will become more volatile.

Decisions about the structure of the U.S. fleet going forward must be informed by an understanding of how command of the sea might be maintained in the face of all this. This challenge is far larger than is appreciated currently, and half

measures that appear adequate when the organizing concept is sea control might lead to a catastrophic failure of deterrence. The first step is to determine, through research and gaming, what elements and factors constitute the modern basis for command of the sea. Then additional research and gaming will be needed to develop a strategy for maintaining and exercising it under current and future conditions. Finally, a compelling case will have to be made, on the basis of that strategy, to Congress and the American people for making the needed investments. Americans have become accustomed to a globe-girdling liberal trading order in which goods, services, and finances flow freely and in a generally equitable manner. This order is made possible by American command of the sea; if it is lost, that order will deteriorate, with incalculable consequences.

NOTES

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