

2022

## Commentary: NWP 3, Fleet Warfare, Change 1

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### Recommended Citation

Rubel, Robert C. (2022) "Commentary: NWP 3, Fleet Warfare, Change 1," *Naval War College Review*. Vol. 75: No. 4, Article 9.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol75/iss4/9>

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## COMMENTARY

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### **NWP 3, FLEET WARFARE, CHANGE 1**

*Robert C. Rubel*

The Navy recently issued change 1 to one of its key doctrine books, Navy Warfare Publication (NWP) 3, *Fleet Warfare*, March 2021. The change was issued to update the definitions of several key terms to keep them in accordance with joint doctrine. The issuing entity, the Navy Warfare Development Command, states, “Ultimately, Change 1 to NWP-3 enhances fleet-centric war-fighting effectiveness through establishing a framework for the execution of fleet warfare at the operational level of warfare.” Certainly there is an advantage to maintaining consistency across the services in the definition of terms, but “ultimately” NWP 3’s contribution to war-fighting effectiveness is less than it could be, owing to its generic approach to the subject. Granted, it is an unclassified publication, but nonetheless it could have gone into more detail on the evolving nature of the Navy’s approach to war fighting.

Beyond the definition of various terms such as *strategy*, *operations*, *tactics*, and *mission command*, NWP 3 describes the three levels of war and the command-and-control (C2) arrangements that the United States has established to direct forces within that framework. Focusing on the Navy’s piece of the action, NWP 3 defines numbered fleets as the Navy’s highest tactical-level

commands, although in certain cases, such as that of Fifth Fleet (although specific fleets are not mentioned in the text), the fleet staff also might function as a joint force maritime component commander (JFMCC), in which case it would constitute an operational-level command. The Navy components—such as Pacific Fleet; Naval Forces, Europe; and Naval Forces, Northern

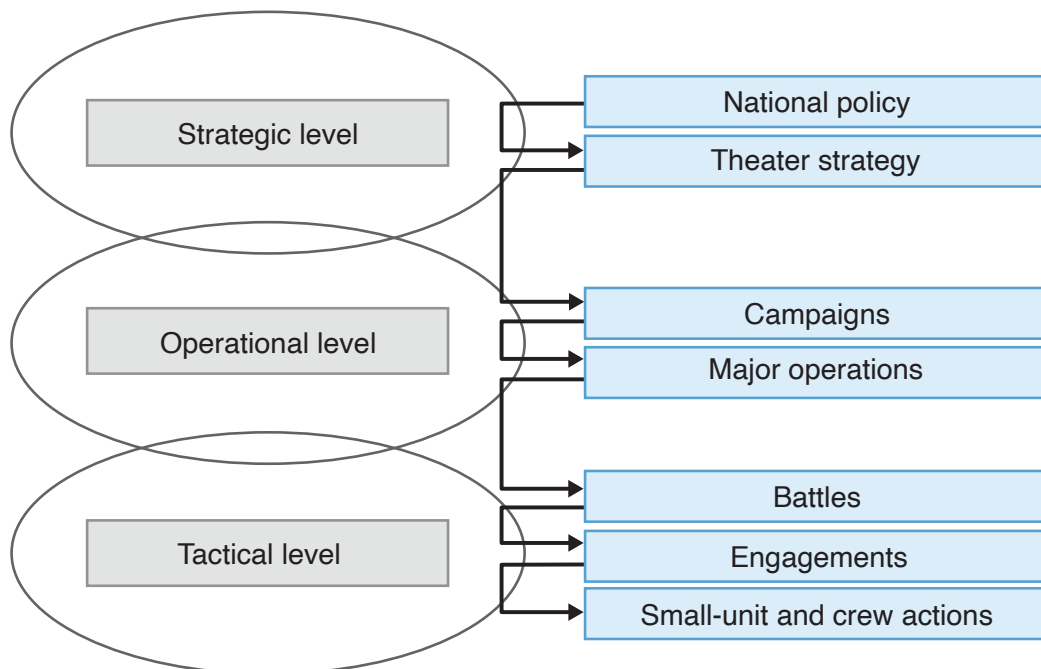
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Naval War College Review, Autumn 2022, Vol. 75, No. 4

Command—are led by the Navy’s highest operational-level-of-war commanders, and as such presumably plan and execute campaigns and major operations. This is depicted conceptually in the figure.

As long as the strategic issue is confined to a particular theater, this graphic—and the U.S. military command structure (the Unified Command Plan, or UCP)—is an accurate depiction of how things would work. But for the Navy, there is a problem: that the seas of the world are all connected, essentially forming a single world ocean. While NWP 3 mostly confines its discussion to the framework of the UCP, it makes one excursion that acknowledges this disconnect. It quotes a Chinese white paper that declares that the People’s Liberation Army Navy will focus on the far seas—which sets up a global challenge—and then on page 10, NWP 3 states the following:

Warfare against an enemy of such resource and reach will require the Navy to operate as a globally unified force, orchestrating naval power in a manner that overcomes geographic, organizational, and administrative boundaries. It will require that commanders align, share, and synchronize assets, capabilities, operations, and understanding across the globe while balancing challenges unique to their regional theaters. Fleet warfare will require the holistic, integrated application of distributed naval power across an entire fleet, working in concert with other fleets in other operational areas to confound, dislocate, and defeat our enemies. Campaigns must account for fleet warfare on a global scale, and form an integrated, coherent unity of purpose,



Source: Author.

effort, and effect across the naval, joint, and likely coalition force. Fleet warfare in an era of GPC [great-power competition] requires integrated and distributed multifleet operations on a global level.

NWP 3 then promptly reverts to the theater-by-theater model for the following thirty-five pages until, again out of nowhere, it offers on page 45 the following solution:

Fleet warfare in this GPC era will require global coordination that crosses traditional CCDR [combatant commander] boundaries. The supported CCDR's JFMCC will integrate naval activity across CCDR lines under the authorities of a support command relationship. The SECDEF [Secretary of Defense] establishes and prioritizes support between and among CCDRs via the support command relationship. When a supporting commander cannot fulfill the needs of the supported commander, the SECDEF will be notified by either commander and will rely on the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Services to determine solutions.

While this may reflect what is permissible in the context of the UCP, it is an awkward—and probably slow—arrangement that does not seem consistent with the description of global naval-coordination requirements on page 10. If NWP 3 is trying to advocate for something different in the way of global naval C2, this is a pretty subtle—and frankly weak—approach to doing so. The discrepancy between the two paragraphs could be confusing.

This problem dates back to the early 2000s, when the Navy was attempting to achieve some degree of global coordination amid a shrinking force structure. It established Tenth Fleet to globalize cyber operations; the Global Engagement Strategy Division (N52) to rationalize engagement activity on a global level; and, according to then-Commander, U.S. Fleet Forces Command, Admiral John B. Nathman, a global network of naval-component-commander operations centers that would coordinate with one another. It still is not clear how much global coordination the Navy is able to accomplish on its own. This has relevance owing to calls by certain members of Congress for the Navy to develop a new global maritime strategy—something which, in theory, the Navy has no authority to do.

NWP 3 does not spend a lot of time discussing naval operations in a joint context. When it does, the following is what it declares:

Future fleet warfare will increasingly rely on capabilities not necessarily under direct fleet command. For example, special operations forces, embarked on fleet vessels, could be used to enhance targeting, communications, and other capabilities. Capabilities can also include those inherent within other fleets, or resident within naval forces already in theater. Joint forces, now including space and cyberspace, all have capabilities that can support fleet warfare. Additionally, national capabilities are increasingly responsive and pervasive as technological advances expand across the maritime

domain. Furthermore, integrated campaigning below the level of armed conflict provides opportunities in peace to find and refine efficiencies that are practical in war.

The yawning gap in this paragraph has to do with the U.S. Air Force. By rights, a good chunk of a fleet war-fighting manual ought to talk about how Navy forces would work with the Air Force, in both defense (integrated air and missile defense) and offense. Air Force big wings have considerable maritime-strike and -mining capabilities that could be magnified via Navy cooperation. Additionally, the Marine Corps is getting into the sea-control business, and the Army is talking about it. Why would the Navy's capstone document on fleet war fighting ignore all this? Neither distributed maritime operations (DMOs) nor the Marines' expeditionary advanced base operations (EABOs) are mentioned in the document.

As a nit, NWP 3 asserts that Vice Admiral Horatio, Lord Nelson's victory at Trafalgar in 1805 saved Britain from the threat of a French invasion. In fact, Napoléon already had abandoned such plans before the battle took place. The reality is more nuanced; the collective "mission command" decision-making of a number of Royal Navy admirals, along with inspired strategic directives by the First Lord of the Admiralty, Admiral Charles Middleton, confounded Napoléon's attempted combinations during the months preceding Trafalgar to lure Royal Navy forces away from the Channel so he could mount an invasion. Trafalgar was a kind of coup de grâce that freed Britain up to take the strategic offensive. A Navy doctrinal publication should exhibit more historical sophistication.

The publication appears to attempt too much erudition in the theoretical realm, leading to a rather confusing conclusion: "Recent history suggests that fleet warfare will be a protracted affair of episodic decisive engagement as each side seeks degrees of sea control suitable for supporting operational objectives." There is no point in going into here the logical disconnect in that statement, but it illustrates the overall problem with the publication: it constitutes more of a Naval War College reading than it does substantive guidance for the fleet.

The establishment of the JFMCC headquarters and its embedded maritime operations center (MOC) spelled a new approach to fleet-level C2. This should be the focus of NWP 3. How do all the elements of a fleet—surface, air, subsurface, logistic, and others—work together? For that matter, how do they all work in conjunction with joint, and perhaps international, forces? Operational-art theory is a good thing for officers to learn, but right now there is a gap between that and the teaching of unit and community tactics that needs to be filled. There must be some unclassified way of discussing fleet-level operations that bridges the operational and tactical levels and is specific enough to provide situational awareness for MOC watchstanders, JFMCC planners, and individual unit commanders. The fact that change 1 to NWP 3 merely deals with term definitions is an indicator that

the Navy has yet to think through properly how it intends to fight in the future. NWP 3 should constitute a bridge between the operational and tactical levels, yet it makes no mention of Admiral Bradley A. Fiske's injunction that no strategy is valid unless it takes account of the tactics required to make it work. The idea at the fleet level is to set units up for tactical success rather than counting on them to exhibit tactical genius to make up for deficiencies in operational design.

NWP 3 is an indicator that the Navy is having trouble shifting gears from being a service that has engaged almost exclusively in projecting power over the shore from unchallenged sanctuaries at sea to being a force that will have to fight for command of the sea and conduct sea-control operations in hostile environments. Moreover, it also indicates that the Navy has not "gotten joint in its heart" despite the years of bureaucratic requirements set up by the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act. The latest Navy capstone document, *Advantage at Sea*, together with its wingman navigation plan, offers a somewhat better vision of fleet war fighting than does NWP 3.

Despite all the theorizing about DMO and EABO right now, the fleet would fight a conventional war at sea primarily using carrier battle groups, perhaps with submarines contributing. P-8s would conduct antisubmarine warfare, and such MQ-4s as are available would provide reconnaissance and surveillance, and perhaps targeting. Naturally, how exactly the various elements would do this is classified, but the fact that the main sources of antiship capability still reside in the carrier air wings is something that should be talked about, as well as how the other elements of the Navy support that capability. At a minimum, such a description would provide a baseline for thinking through other ways of doing business at the fleet level.

One approach NWP 3 could take is to explain why current fleet design is the way it is, and if it is not specifically designed for war-at-sea operations, how will it adapt in the short term? Doctrine is supposed to be news that fleet operators can use, not theoretical background information. Moreover, NWP 3 should not be used as a substitute for the Naval War College's Joint Maritime Operations curriculum, which is itself too generic. For instance, of what use is NWP 3 to battle group commanders, or even unit commanders, who find themselves cut off from the network? Knowing the plan and commander's intent is one thing, but from a JFMCC's perspective there should be some common understanding among subordinate commanders of how the fleet is supposed to fight, such that they can make decisions that support rather than hinder the overall fleet effort. Knowledge and understanding of well-thought-out fleet doctrine constitute all the things that do not have to be communicated during operations.

One gets the uncomfortable impression that NWP 3 contains what it does because the Navy does not know what else to put in it.

