Rethinking the Navy's Strategic Presumptions and Planning Procedures

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A One-Ocean Navy?

Strategic planners should challenge the whittled down presumptions and planning of today's navy, which likes to think of itself as a global navy but is headed for relevance in only one ocean. At that, if the Asia-Pacific is the model for thinking about the one-ocean Navy, relevance is not necessarily going to be the same as prevalence.

At best, with every innovative basing scheme and crew-swap program imaginable, current global Navy deployment schedules will be hard pressed to keep more than a single battle group forward deployed in any region *in peacetime*. This is more than a ship count issue, especially when it is fairly obvious that the ship repair base can't keep up even with this force structure when the schedule is disrupted. Every shred of redundancy has been wrung out of the force and the support establishment, apparently based upon presumptions of unchallenged deployments and no operational surges.

To make matters worse, it has been many decades since the U.S. Navy has been challenged as the presumptive guarantor of freedom of the seas. Even ten years ago, there was not another regional navy to challenge this rhetoric. Now, China, Russia, and soon Iran will challenge regionally at least. This rapid threat emergence is reminiscent of the post-Cuban Missile Crisis rise of the Soviet Navy. Even if that were not going to be true, there are many more key maritime straits and crossroads besides the South China Sea that need to be vouchsafed -- from the Mediterranean to the Baltic to the Gulf of Aden -- than the Navy has the force structure to cover. This warranty deficit is not lost on interested observers who have a stake in the outcome on one side or the other.

We should not be willing to accept this regressive outcome as foreordained, not if it is true that as goes the Navy, so goes the Nation. The Navy's strategic presumptions and force planning procedures no longer are adequate.

What Will War At Sea Look Like?

To make matters worse, war at sea is going to be quite different in terms of scope and scale than anything being discussed publicly, which is an imperfect but useful gauge of what is being considered in the classified process. There will be other differences that have to be sorted out, but this issue of scope and scale refers to regional warfare that is going to be much, much more difficult and destructive than anything generally being considered. Furthermore, regional naval

warfare also will be very dependent upon the ground components for support in places like China's "Three Seas", the Mediterranean, the Baltic, the North Sea, and the Persian Gulf, while naval forces will have to be able to support the ground component in turn.

Most important, the potential for escalation in maritime conflict is high because that is where our forces will come together, and equally unacceptable: because in an age of generally unconstrained nuclear, cyber, and space warfare, the civilizational risks of escalation are unthinkable. This means that the U.S. navy is going to have to maintain a force structure that is in a forward-leaning operational posture; with overbearing operational capabilities; and with dependable and robust command and control and ISR sufficient to dominate escalation continuously.

The circumstantial backdrop of real war at sea makes the case for this conclusion. As one example, in the Asia-Pacific this would be war against the Chinese Communist Party, which as the progenitor of China's emergence to challenge the status quo – in other words, the rules-based order that was established after World War II but not buttressed since the end of the Cold War – has no room for compromise. Conflict once started will be extremely difficult to control. Second, the maritime democracies are going to have to contend at a minimum with the Three Navies – China, Russia, and Iran – which may not always operate in close coordination but which will split defenses and at a minimum seriously challenge resources. Third, Navy operational presumptions regarding connectivity and reach may not hold in the face of cyber attacks; precision guided munitions and the missile-enabled loss of air control; and standoff defenses.

This is a Job for the CNO, Not for the COCOMS or the Joint Staff

These are problems with national and global implications, but it is going to have to be the Navy, in the person of the CNO and not some remote staff in the hinterlands or the wilderness of the Pentagon, that is going to have to sort out an escalation dominance strategy or something like it; derive the operational requirements; articulate the strategy to the White House, the Congress, and the public; argue for the necessary resources; and get the fleet ready.

So far, this is aspirational. Congressman Randy Forbes referred to this "deficit of strategic thinking" in a letter to CNO Greenert.

Congressman Forbes's central point in his letter was that technology, programs, and force structure were driving strategy, instead of the other way around:

> It makes eminent sense to start with the Maritime Strategy, developed by the Chief of Naval Operations, but in recent years we seem to have turned ourselves upside down by increasingly emphasizing programs and force structure rather than starting with a strategy based on what we need naval forces to do and in what scenarios.

"What's the Answer" vs. "What is the Question"

The congressman has put his finger on a central issue. We have put a tremendous amount of energy into trying to derive the answer, rather than asking, "What are the right questions?" This "answer first" approach shows clearly in the Navy's current vernacular debates over LCS and carriers, for instance, and in the contretemps over integrating unmanned aircraft into carrier air wings.

A more appropriate starting point might be to determine the Navy's strategic purpose going forward, and in what context; and then derive the force structure, force levels, and capabilities necessary to get the job done. This approach, however, challenges the entire Pentagon planning structure based upon program continuity and programmatic defense of resources, "no matter what".

To the contrary, however, the commanders who win will be those who held decisive control decades before the war starts, and who anticipated strategy, tactics, and technological trends.[1] Otherwise, without the right presumptions, whatever resources are available will be squandered.

The Second Offset Strategy as an example

The Second Offset Strategy process is one good example of how to approach such a vital problem. It grew out of the mid-1970s ARPA/DNA Long Range Research & Development Planning Program (LR^2DP^2), which convened three key panels consisting of government and industry experts. The program had the benefit of experienced analytical contractors and panel members with the background in sophisticated military equipment development critical to identifying solutions capable of providing practical operational capability. The three panels were: the Alternatives Panel; the Advanced Technology Panel; and the Munitions Panel.[2]

> The programs and capabilities that originated in the [second] offset strategy, many of which were not fielded until the late 1980s and early 1990s, revolutionized conventional warfare, assured American dominance in large-scale ground combat, and eventually drove potential adversaries to "design around" American conventional superiority by employing asymmetric advantages. The offset strategy evolved concurrently with doctrine – which came to favor rapid, decisive operations to quickly defeat adversaries – but also largely ignored urban operations and counterinsurgency missions.
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> The offset strategy led to major improvements in stealth, precision strike, battlefield information and communications systems, intelligence systems, positioning and

[1] Stefan T. Possony and J.E. Pournelle, *The Strategy of Technology: Winning the Decisive War*, University Press of Cambridge, Mass., 1970 (1st edition)

[2], Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, "ARPA/DNA Long Range Research & Development Planning Program (LR^2DP^2), Final Report of the Advanced Technology Panel", U.S. Department of Defense, 30 April 1975, p. iv.

> navigation capabilities, and training. Innovation in each of these areas was focused on a single strategic objective: offsetting the Warsaw Pact's conventional superiority in Europe, and lowering NATO's reliance on nuclear weapons to deter – or in time of war defend against – a Soviet attack.[3]

A key aspect of this successful approach was that DoD brought together into the same room a select group of operators, analysts, engineers, and industrialists. Furthermore, they had the advantage of having a clear strategy to which they could refer.

> The purpose of the overall LR^2DP^2 effort was to assess, in as systematic a manner as practicable, what possible shifts or emphasis in the U.S. Defense R&D program were implied by the strategy of Flexible Response that has been set forth by former President Nixon and secretary of Defense Schlesinger. The overall approach was to investigate representative conflict scenarios that come under the general heading of "Limited Soviet Aggression."[4]

Net Assessment as an Example

A similar procedural approach is the Net Assessment process of carefully correlated data-driven comparisons in areas of military competition that identify overlaps where comparative advantage can be leveraged or banked; and underlaps, wherein risks can be redressed or accepted and factored into strategies and plans. In this contemporary process, Net Assessment Director Andrew Marshall raised to a high art getting the right people in the room and asking them the right questions.

The Relationship Between Strategy and Technology/Force Structure

This right-minded capabilities derivation process is an example of what Possony and Pournelle refer to as "technology war". There is no argument regarding the power of American technology, only that *strategy should come first*. If strategy were to come first – and Congressman Forbes has flagged for us that it does not – then strategic presumptions and planning procedures would be quite different, and so would our conversations about force development and technology. As Possony and Pournelle point out,

> As we have repeatedly stated, the Technological War must be fought as are other wars; that is, it must be fought according to a strategy. A military general who simply muddles through, overcoming each obstacle as it comes to him, fighting battles at the dictation of the enemy, and preparing only for battles already fought, would soon lose the war. Yet, too often it is thought that the technological War, which may be the moist decisive

[3] Robert Tomes, "The Cold War Offset Strategy: Origins and Relevance", *War On The Rocks*, November 6, 2014, http://warontherocks.com/2014/11/the-cold-war-offset-strategy-origins-and-relevance/#_

[4] "ARPA/DNA Long Range Research & Development Planning Program (LR^2DP^2), Final Report of the Advanced Technology Panel", p. 1

engagement in the history of mankind, can be fought with precisely this technique. Technology is made the driving force, dictating to strategy; and strategy is conceived of as the employment of systems already created by the technologists, that is, strategy is confined to operational decisions. This is akin to allowing the munitions manufacturer to decide the conduct of the war.[5]

[5] Possony and Pournelle, p. 57.