

The Prism of Classical Naval Strategy: Another Perspective on JAM-GC and 21st Century Operational Concepts

CDR Benjamin “BJ” Armstrong, USN
PhD Candidate, King’s College, London

In March 2015 the Chief of Naval Operations, in cooperation with the Commandants of the Marine Corps and Coast Guard, released the sea services’ new strategic document *The Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*. The document encourages sailors, marines, guardsmen, and navalists to understand strategy and to think strategically. However, despite that direction, the dialogue that has loomed largest in the naval sphere over the past several years has not been strategy at all, but instead debate about an operational concept. First as Air-Sea Battle, and now as the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons or JAM-GC, this operational thinking has been the center of naval discourse, with a multitude of writings, panels, and lectures from its developers, supporters, and opponents. In the back and forth we have been introduced to Offshore Control and Joint Operational Access as well.¹

How the United States military and allied navies counter attempts at Anti-Access and Area-Denial has very important tactical and operational ramifications for the future of the force. However, it is also important to place the dialogue on operational concepts and operational thinking within strategic context. Strategy is about making choices and designing efforts to achieve national objectives. Debate that attempts to derive a consensus on a single operational concept removes choices, and removes the ability to participate in the art of naval strategy. Therefore, it is important that we make an effort to place analysis of counter-A2AD operating concepts within a larger discussion of strategy, one rooted in the classical concepts of naval warfare.

The Framework of Naval Strategy

The underlying ideas behind concepts like JAM-GC, Offshore Control, and Joint Operational Access, when examined through lens of strategy, can help us avoid the funhouse mirror of budget policy and administrative maneuvering in the Pentagon. Yet, even with the volume of writing on naval operations in the last decade, articles have tended to lack a genuine engagement with the concepts and structures in the classical naval theory. A careful reading of many of the articles on this subject, and a detailed consideration of their footnotes, frequently offers readers the conclusion that this dialogue has been divorced from the actual thinking, writing, and theory of naval strategy.²

As Bernard Brodie once wrote, “contrary to popular belief, there is nothing especially esoteric about the basic principles of warfare.”³ From the works of Mahan, Corbett, and Castex, and elucidation of others like Brodie and Rosinski, we have the foundational idea that naval warfare begins with the question of command of the sea. But command of the sea is generally insufficient except in the most theoretical form of naval war. The classical strategists all agreed that while it may be possible, and was the best case scenario, it was unlikely that establishing command would be enough to force the political objective desired. The enemy gets a vote, and rarely gives up easily. As a result, there had to be a next step in a naval strategy, a step where the control that command of sea offered was exercised. To put it as simply as possible, the exercise of this control is achieved by using the "3 B's" or blockade, bombardment, or putting boots on the ground. This is what led Corbett to his famous but often misrepresented dictum that “in no case can we exercise control by battleships alone.”⁴

Today's discussions tend to ignore these foundations entirely. However, when the lens of classical naval strategy is used to view the challenge of obtaining a strategic outcome in an A2AD environment, the operational concepts highlighted over the past two or three years begin to fall into place. When reduced to the basics, is not JAM-GC a discussion of establishing command of the sea in a modern A2AD environment? By extension, Offshore Control is our 21st century concept of an East Asian blockade, the CSBA vision of AirSea Battle has a certain focus on bombardment, and Expeditionary Force 21 and Joint Operational Access Concept are about putting boots on the ground. By placing these operational concepts within a framework that starts with strategy, instead of tactics and technology, we gain a different view.⁵

Strategic Practice v. Operational Planning

Establishing command of the sea and exercising the control allowed by that command through blockade, bombardment, or putting boots on the ground, is a simplified way of looking at the basics of naval strategy. Admittedly, from this brief discussion these principles appear sequential but that is not actually the case. They are simply building blocks of naval warfare and can be put together in an almost infinite number of ways. Mahan described the conduct of war as an art, writing: “art, out of materials which it finds about it, [it] creates new forms in endless variety...according to the genius of the artist and the temper of materials with which he is dealing.”⁶

Understanding how to combine these elements of naval warfare is the central task of naval strategy. Each has its own temporal and geographic elements in play as well as a moving scale of totality. Despite what recent writing on naval affairs tells us, the individual operational parts should not be considered strategies by themselves or in isolation. Instead, if a navy's fleet and resources are its means these should be the ways in which a strategist employs them in order to achieve the political ends desired by the conflict. Thus, localized command of the sea may be all that a naval force can accomplish, but it also may be sufficient to achieve the operational objectives desired, or needed, for the political result. Command might also only be established for a very specific period of time. As John Hattendorf has written, “there are gradations that

range from an abstract ideal to that which is practical, possible, or merely desirable...control is to be general or limited, absolute or merely governing, widespread or local, permanent or temporary.”⁷

What tends to be lost when we focus on the individual operational concepts, or the specific tactical challenges of an A2AD network, is a larger strategic view. We must remember that the scaling of the principles of naval warfare, and their combination into a method by which the naval strategist hopes to achieve his nation’s goals, is the heart of the task, not just the tactical employment of technology for kinetic effect. These are some of the fundamentals we should be discussing when considering the doctrinal and operational writing of maritime affairs in the 21st century.⁸

Using Another Lens

As Captain Haynes ably demonstrated in his recent book *Toward a New Maritime Strategy*, we navalists tend to be very comfortable engaging in the discussion of how new technologies and new tactics fit into new operational concepts but that doesn't mean we extend that comfort to strategy.⁹ We recognize how multiple tactics and multiple technologies can be combined for synergy into an effective operational ideal. But taking the next step, viewing strategy in a similar way and exercising the art of combining different operational concepts to achieve the nation's objectives, we tend to falter. We must always include this element of the discussion. Just as we always look "downward" to the development of new weapons and technology, our discussions must also look "upward" to how they contribute to strategy. Use of and understanding of the established frameworks of naval strategy will help us take the bearings we need to better chart our course.

¹ Joseph Dunford, Jonathan Greenert, Paul Zukunft, “A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower,” (Washington D.C.: Department of the Navy, 2015).

² Fontenot Greg and Benson Kevin, “Way of War or the Latest ‘Fad’? A critique of AirSea Battle”, *Infinity Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 4, Fall 2012, pp. 22-25. Nathan K. Finney, “Air-Sea Battle as a Military Contribution to Strategy Development”, *Infinity Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 4, Fall 2012, pp. 8-11. Terry S. Morris, Martha Van Driel, Bill Dries, Jason Perdew, Richard Schulz, and Kristin Jacobson, “Securing Operational Access: Evolving the Air-Sea Battle Concept,” *The National Interest Online*, 11 February 2015.

³ Bernard Brodie, *A Layman’s Guide to Naval Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1943), p. 13.

⁴ Julian S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (1911, Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1988), p. 114.

⁵ T.X. Hammes, “Offshore Control: A Proposed Strategy,” *Infinity Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Spring 2012, pp. 10-14. Jan Van Tol, et al, “Air Sea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept,” (Washington D.C.: The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010). U.S. Marine

Corps, "Expeditionary Force 21: Forward and Ready, Now and in the Future," (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Navy, 2014).

⁶ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Naval Strategy: Compared and Contrasted with the Principles and Practice of Military Operations on Land* (1911, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), p. 299.

⁷ John B. Hattendorf, *Naval History and Maritime Strategy: Collected Essays* (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing, 2000), p. 236.

⁸ Brodie, p. 14.

⁹ Peter Haynes, *Toward a New Maritime Strategy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2015).