A Fleet Perspective on the Maritime Strategy

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One of the key benefits of the strategy was the deliberate, more specific integration of the sea services in this document. Throughout the three years of staffing, the document had been thoroughly processed through the bureaucracy that there is not much in it to object to on its face. The exercise of staffing the strategy is team-building in itself and the promulgation of it gives that more unified perspective to the members of the sea services. It connected the high end of the conflict spectrum activities of the USN and USMC to the low end and constabulary missions of the USCG. Further, the return to a more threat-based vision reflects the worse case scenario business that we are in. Overall, the strategy was perceived as an improvement over the 2007 strategy.

CONTENT

With respect to the content of the strategy, there were changes that caught attention. First and foremost, the strategy is one of total access with the primary objective being the ability to go anywhere and do anything. This is not new necessarily, it replaced "full spectrum dominance" in the 1990s. Not only was all domain access newly identified, it was listed first among the five functions, appearing to rank over and above the standard naval functions of deterrence, sea control, power projection, and maritime security. One could even see all-domain access as a derivative of the historic functions of sea control or power projection without a need for calling it out specifically. The appearance of preeminence reflects the more threat-based thinking rather than the more systemic approach embedded in the 2007 strategy.

Second, one could ask: what happened to the systemic approach of the 2007 strategy? In this strategy the Navy played a much broader with protecting the liberal world order, guarding the global sea-based trading system, and utilizing the hard power assets to show both hard and soft power effects. In fact, the inclusion of humanitarian assistance/disaster relief in 2007 marked a strategic shift showing that military assets for soft power missions could produce strategically superior outcomes. The loss of this perspective questions whether the strategy is actually strategic enough. And while it may play better in Congress who funds the services, its threat-based approach simultaneously sends messages of reassurance and concern rippling throughout the world.

One final comment on content, this strategy focuses on state and non-state actors as threats. The potential threats to the future world include a variety of other concerns like climate change, population migration, urbanization, pandemics, transnational crime, and resource competition. One major criticism is what cannot be said in an unclassified document regarding

regional assessments and capability development. While this is managed through classified addendums, it is not broadly available information to the fleet and leaves large gaps in overall understanding of what it might mean to them operationally, tactically, or personally.
If the national strategy remains sustaining the world order, then inevitably, the military will play some role as an instrument of national power in addressing these concerns. This new strategy does little to plan for these inevitable events.

OPERATIONAL SUPPORT

I do not do the fleet justice without mentioning the connection of the "we can do it all" strategy with the operational tempo that rides on the back of the ships and Sailors. Using data from the CNO's 2016 Posture Statement to Congress, since 2013, eight carrier strike groups, four amphibious readiness groups, and twelve destroyers have deployed for eight months or longer. The escalation of optempo, complexity of missions, and unpredictability of funding wreaks havoc among readiness, morale, maintenance, and modernization. To quote the CNO: "the gap between our responsibilities and our funding levels represents risk -- risk of Sailors' lives lost, of a weakened deterrent, of a slower response to crisis or conflict, of greater financial cost, of uncertainty for our international partners -- all of which affect the security and prosperity of America." The strategy is challenging to fulfill operationally.

The Navy is struggling to balance the requirements placed upon it with the resources (platforms, personnel, funding) available to complete the mission. The Navy has made operational changes trying to accommodate requirements of the strategy and the nation, but perhaps not meet them all. One example is shifting from a combatant command (CCMD) demand driven model for assets to a supply driven availability model. This causes friction between the CCMDs and the naval service and leaves gaps in carrier strike group availability that will need to be covered by the joint services. To date, this change has been reinforced with the support of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Along with this is the revised Optimized Fleet Response Plan (OFRP). This three-year cycle ties the ships in the carrier strike groups together for scheduling, maintenance, training, and deployments. This more predictable schedule is to maximize the employability of available force capacity and keeps ships just returned from deployment in a surge capacity during a post-deployment sustainment phase. The benefits include predictable scheduling, synchronization of modernization efforts within the strike group, and strike group cohesion, but it also has its drawbacks. It creates peaks and valleys for maintenance and training facilities, which may not be supportable. Equally important, the revised ship schedule does not match up with the aviation schedule of the carrier air wings. The post-deployment sustainment phase is largely unfunded—meaning squadrons lose their flight qualifications and even if the ship is ready to surge, its ability to be fully operational degrades significantly within months of returning from deployment. For the foreseeable future the air wings and the strike groups will not be able to maintain the same schedule. While the OFRP is a significant step forward in balancing the operational needs of the CCMDs with the long term sustainability of the Naval force, the full feasibility of it remains to be seen.

Considering this information, does the new operational structure support the overall strategy? One thing in its favor is that something is finally being done to try to address the phenomenal operational tempo stressing the fleet. However, the foundation of forward presence in the strategy is about giving more options to the President in times of crisis and the operational structure of the new system may limit the options.

ENDURABILITY

The sign of a good strategy is the endurability of it. In favor of the threat-based approach, the strategy remains valid until the threats change. However, it overlooks several other factors that could potentially impact the long-term usefulness of the strategy. Internal to the force, the ways and means, operational concepts, priorities, or force structure, will all play a role in the ongoing validity. Also, listing ship counts was a controversial addition to the strategy. While it sets a benchmark, it is something that challenges the endurability of the strategy. Externally, the strategy can be upended with political turnover, differences with higher leadership within the DoD, budget cuts, programming, and acquisition. Things are changing fast in the domestic and global environment and it is very possible that the sea services will have to write another strategy sooner than later.