

Tailoring a Naval Force Structure to the Emerging Future Security Environment

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The panorama of history is replete with numerous great powers rising, making their mark upon the world and then declining in the face of another rising power. The Egyptians gave way to the Assyrians, and the Assyrians to the Babylonians etc. until the present day when the British Empire gave way to the Soviet and American Cold War and ultimately to a moment of American uni-polarity unlike any other era in history with the possible exception of the Romans. These cycles are well understood by those who choose to look at them, but what is not understood is the technologies that lay behind these rise and fall cycles throughout history.

Great powers tend to rise and persist due to a set of advantages. These might be an aspect of agrarian reform, or perhaps a system of governance that allows a great accrual of wealth, but rises are almost always accompanied by a particular form of military technology that provides an advantage to the nation who wields it upon the field of battle. The spear gave way to the bow and arrow. This combination gave way to a Bowman on a horse in mounted cavalry formations. The phalanx made its debut and then was bested by the manipular formation. The longbow overcame French armor at Agincourt. Sailing ships of the line gave way to steam and steel. Technology marches inexorably on, except where it doesn't, which is often in the great power that was responsible for introducing it.

Great powers who rise on a new technology are beholden to it, often beyond its useful life. Because new innovations come with a cost, be it economic or cultural, once a great power buys into a new form of military technology, it becomes a sunk cost. Innovation would of necessity require acknowledging that previous technologies had become obsolete and a decision to move in a new direction. History suggests that such acts of agility rarely occur. What is more likely is that a Great Power, having ridden a new technology to the top, will commit to that technology, perhaps even expanding its investment in it. This has the effect of presenting a stable capabilities target for other would be rising powers, allowing them to tailor a new capability that is focused on weaknesses inherent in the current Great Power's military capability, allowing the rising power to ultimately surpass the reigning hegemon.

We see that today across all four of our DoD services. The Army and Air Force each continue to invest in weapons that are evolutionary derivatives of platforms their predecessors in World War II operated despite seven decades of technological progress. The Navy with its ten carrier strike group awaiting orders to proceed to Point Luck prepares to fight the battle of Midway over again. The Marine Corps, which gained a congressional mandate codified in law, maintains a "fleet marine force," prepared to perform an amphibious assault, with all the equipment necessary to perform that mission, despite the fact that the mission has not been executed 65

years. In each of these cases, the United States military has presented a stable target, evolving but not really changing, for rising powers to target.

The Army has increasingly packed more soldiers into tanks, armored personnel carriers, and Humvees. Their enemy adapted armor piercing technologies and asymmetric tactics to kill and disable Americans in their mobile formations. The Air Force found itself facing radars and missiles with increasing range, maneuverability and lethality and responded by building a series of fighters and bombers that were both increasingly difficult to find and increasingly expensive to buy, necessitating a decreasing force size that is unable to guarantee either air superiority or access to critical targets. The Navy and Marine Corps similarly have invested in progressively more capable platforms that come with added costs leading to a shrinking fleet and force even as the rest of the world invests in anti-access/area denial weapons designed to hold American naval power projection off beyond its effective range. With its inability to change, the American military has elected obsolescence.

“So what are we to do?” service proponents might ask. Change is the answer. Divorcement from the present reality, standing outside of the accepted paradigm and investing in change. Recognize that in peace we do not need all high end capabilities to demonstrate American interest and resolve. As the 2007 Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower said, maintaining peace is at least as important as winning the war. A large number of low capability frigates, perhaps 75-100 of them, are required to service the 19 critical maritime regions of the globe. These frigates can provide maritime security, build partnership capacity, and demonstrate the United States’ resolve. Critics might say that these vessels would serve little to no role in a region spanning maritime war, such as that which was fought in the Pacific during the 1941-45 era, and they would be correct. That is not the war we should fight.

If the United States were to go to war again it must leverage the technologies it has, a superb intelligence-reconnaissance complex as well as a precision strike capability unlike any other nation on earth, and combine these with newly emerging capabilities; unmanned and man-machine platforms, directed energy weapons, electro-magnetic and hypersonics to identify, target and destroy the critical center of gravity within the enemy camp. We should banish plans for a long campaign, attriting our way through the enemy’s military, population, infrastructure and essential systems to reach the one that really matters, its leadership. Should diplomacy and negotiations fail and circumstances warrant, then attacks on national leadership at hypersonic velocities should be the American way of war.

Such attacks should come from increased numbers of nuclear submarines, perhaps a combination of 100 fast attack and guided missile submarines, as well as hypersonic cruise missile laden long range strike bombers, and perhaps even from the decks of aircraft carriers, provided they rapidly integrate a long ranged, unmanned strike aircraft, capable of spanning the 1500 mile standoff range imposed by recent A2AD weapons.

If the United States does not break with its past and sunk infrastructure force constructs, it condemns itself to a fate as a declining power. If, however, it embraces innovation, either under the label of a Third Offset, or Air-Sea Battle or some other convenient bumper sticker, then it has a chance to revitalize its leadership in the world and once again return to a position wherein it

imposes costs upon its enemies, and not the other way around. Such innovation requires bold leadership and clear vision, characteristics our Navy once had in abundance and which I hope it still does.