

Reflections on US Naval Strategy before 2007

Peter Swartz

Center for Naval Analyses

In 2005, newly-installed CNO Admiral Mike Mullen charged his Deputy Chief of Naval Operations with coming up with a new “maritime strategy.” The result, after two years of intensive and multi-faceted activity, was an unclassified public document -- *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower* -- published in October 2007. In 2011, newly-installed CNO Admiral Jon Greenert called for a “refresh” of that document, and the result was a new unclassified edition subtitled “Forward, Engaged, and Ready,” published one year ago. These documents will be discussed by my colleagues on this panel, and hopefully by many of you. But where did the idea that the Navy needed such a “strategy” come from? And what issues were raised in the past that can shed light on recent and future efforts to develop naval or maritime strategy? That’s what I’m going to discuss, by giving a few examples. (For more detail, see www.cna.org/research/capstone-strategy-series)

Modern efforts to codify US naval strategic thinking started in 1970, with a classified document drawn up by CNO Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, Jr. His *Project SIXTY* posited—and prioritized—four kinds of capabilities of the Navy, later described and popularized by Vice Admiral Stansfield Turner as four “missions:” “strategic deterrence,” “sea control,” “projection of power ashore,” and “naval presence.” The Zumwalt-Turner thesis was that the Navy was coming off an era that had favored power projection (e.g., against North Vietnam) and had entered one that required more emphasis on sea control, given a rapidly building global Soviet naval challenge.

Zumwalt also introduced the discussion of presence as a major US naval capability: in part because that was what the Navy actually delivered that was useful to the nation in the absence of war, and in part because he sought the defense establishment to recognize that and provide the Navy with earmarked resources to carry it out. (In this, he and his successors would be disappointed for 20 years). Zumwalt also, given post-Vietnam War US defense budget cuts, strove to develop what he called an appropriate “hi-low mix” of platforms and weapons systems; supplementing the few, the complex and the expensive with the many, the simple, and the cheap. You will doubtless note that these same themes have pre-occupied US naval strategists and policy-makers since, and still do today.

Zumwalt’s successor, Admiral James Holloway, did not find this construct useful, however, and modified it significantly in a Naval Warfare Publication called *Strategic Concepts of the U.S. Navy*. An ardent proponent of naval power projection and super-carriers, Holloway had the disagreeable job of serving as CNO during the Carter Administration, which, apart from nuclear deterrence, viewed convoy escort as the Navy’s only useful wartime mission, and lacked

appreciation of what carriers and other Navy platforms might achieve to deter or fight in a NATO-Warsaw Pact war.

A number of Navy efforts then ensued in the late 1970s to argue and demonstrate the virtues of the Navy and its carriers in such a war, culminating in the initial formulations of *The Maritime Strategy* in 1981. That strategy was at once global, forward, offensive, allied and joint, and favored high-end platforms and weapons needed—for sea control as well as power projection—to go up against the powerful Soviets close to their own shores. *The Maritime Strategy* resonated well with many in the Fleet, and most importantly nested comfortably within the defense policies and strategy of the Reagan Administration and its strategy-minded Secretary of the Navy, John Lehman. The *Maritime Strategy* was conceptualized by the Navy staff's trained and experienced strategy specialists, using guidance from on high and their own understanding of the role of naval strategy and policy and national security. It was then drafted, vetted, promulgated, critiqued, updated and implemented – through fleet exercises, war games, conferences, articles, speeches, CNO Strategic Study Group activities, and advanced fleet training like “Top Gun” and “Strike U.” From 1982 on, it also provided the framework for the Navy's annual internal warfare assessment process for developing the service's program and budget proposals. Some editions were classified and detailed, for internal Navy use; some were more general and unclassified, for public explanation. The Soviets countered with a massive campaign to constrain the US Navy through arms control initiatives, and the later years of the 1980s saw successive CNOs develop strategies to deal with this intense diplomatic offensive.

But then the Soviets went away. And the Navy developed a plethora of successive – and sometimes simultaneous – ideas and documents to try to capture the essence of the Navy's role in the murky post-Cold War environment, and the proper mix among naval capabilities and missions, and “high” and “low” platforms and weapons. One milestone was Secretary of Defense Les Aspin's *Bottom Up Review* of 1993, which allowed the Navy for the first time to justify its budget in part by its peacetime presence activities. The Zumwalt-Turner vision was finally achieved. One result was the provision of funding for an additional carrier battle group in the next defense budget. Another was the promulgation of yet another Navy strategy document: *Forward . . . From the Sea*, by CNO ADM Mike Boorda in 1994. But dollars for presence could also mean robbing Peter – cutting-edge US Navy power projection and/or sea control capabilities – to pay Paul –combatant commander demands for increased forward naval presence, surveillance, and traditional strike operations. This issue is also salient today.

Boorda's immediate successors promulgated Navy "capstone" documents as well, all seeking to refine the balance among these issues, as well as addressing the now increasingly conspicuous views of the US Marine Corps, in the face of an evolving post-Cold War environment. That environment included rapid globalization, unconventional threats abroad, changing American public attitudes, and a federal budget climate uncongenial to significant fleet growth. Before being named CNO, while serving as NATO's Allied Joint Force Commander in Naples, Admiral Mullen realized that the Navy had to adopt – and disseminate -- a new strategic approach, not based on power projection as had been the case throughout the 1990s, but a broader approach that appreciated America's changing role in the world and the unique and vital contributions of the U.S. maritime services—Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. From that realization came the effort to create *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*.