The U.S. Navy and the Future of Sea Control: An Institutional Perspective

Peter D. Haynes
Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

How the Navy adapted to the immense strategic, operational, technological, and political challenges of the Cold War and the post-Cold War shaped a distinctive way of thinking about U.S. naval strategy and sea control, which will structure how the Navy is defining and solving the problems associated with sea control, which, in turn, will shape what new technologies, operational concepts, and doctrine are researched, developed, and operationalized and which ones, however promising, are moved to the margins of institutional consideration.

For the first time since the Cold War, the U.S. Navy has to contend for control of the seas. Operationally, the challenge is how to address the anti-access/area denial systems employed by China, Russia, and Iran. Strategically, it is about how to confront the rise of a revisionist China as a maritime power, one capable of deploying a powerful and far-ranging fleet built to deny U.S. regional access, ensure China's access to its resources, and protect its global commercial empire—and, in time, project power around the globe. For the United States, sea control—the ability to use the seas while denying the adversary the same—is indispensable. It is a prerequisite if the United States wants to employ its unique ability to project power globally to protect its security and economic interests and maintain leadership of its rules- and alliance-based international system.

However, the long lee of the post-Cold War era left the Navy unprepared materially and conceptually to address the problem of ensuring sea control in an era of great power competition. In the post-Cold War era, precision strike warfare lay at the heart of the Navy's strategic approach and was fiscally supported as such. In contrast, sea control was marginalized. Skills that had been honed over the Cold War atrophied, while many of the capabilities needed for sea control withered. While the United States was engaged in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, China, Russia, and Iran, among others, caught up technologically and began fielding access-denial capabilities to offset the United States' ability to project power.

As the gap between what the fleet has and what it needs to ensure sea control widens, Navy leaders have elevated sea control's standing and some have organized plans to close that gap. However, in a period marked by fiscal constraints (compounded by the need to fund the expensive recapitalization of the SSBN and carrier fleets) and the rise of a illiberal, revisionist great power capable of contesting the seas—all of which is bringing about a reappraisal of U.S. naval strategy—finding institutional consensus on how to close that gap may prove difficult.

As it did in the 1970s, when the Navy was dealing with a remarkably similar set of issues, the attempt by Navy leaders to rebalance the fleet for a greater emphasis on sea control may ignite a debate within the Navy, particularly between the advocates of sea control and power projection. At issue during such a debate would be how much of the fleet's portfolio of capabilities should be rebalanced for sea control and what concepts the fleet would employ to ensure sea control. Much of that determination rests on how the Navy will operationally relate and therefore programmatically prioritize the capabilities and weapons systems of the essential elements of sea control—undersea warfare, strike warfare, surface warfare, electronic warfare, mine warfare, and ISR.

The determination also rests on how the Navy manages the competition for resources between its warfare communities—surface warfare, submarines, aviation, and NSW. Historically, decisions on platforms and weapons systems have not been based on a holistic long-term plan coordinated across the communities. Those decisions are presented to Navy leaders when the need arises and are made on the merits of the case at hand. In the absence of a plan, day-to-day programmatic decisions tend to be shaped more by shared institutional beliefs and assumptions that underlie decisions on how fleet should be balanced, employed, and rationalized, which is how Navy leaders understand "naval strategy."

At issue would also be how much of the funds needed to close the gap would come at the expense of the Navy's other primary missions—strategic deterrence (i.e., SSBN), forward presence, and power projection. During the Cold War, funding for strategic deterrence and forward presence were largely unassailable—and remains so. As the nation's only survivable second-strike platform, the SSBN was the United States' primary means of deterring the Soviets, and was fiscally supported by the administrations as such, and continues to be. For its part, forward deployment was and remains an institutional imperative. Its members understand "operations" as the Navy's raison d'être. Tying up the fleet in port threatens not only the institution's relevance, but also the fleet itself; forward presence requires three ships to keep one deployed overseas.

Consequently, in times of fiscal constraint and strategic reappraisal, Navy leaders had to make hard decisions between sea control and power projection capabilities, which were shaped by assumptions and beliefs on how the fleet should be employed and balanced. The Navy had emerged from the Second World War with a distinct style of warfare that shaped and was reshaped by its Cold War experiences. The style was not the sea control-oriented one used to win the Battle of the Atlantic in the Second World War, which did not require a broadly capable, and a balanced, carrier-centric fleet (balanced in the sense that it included air, surface, and subsurface forces) nor did it require Marines to seize territory.

Instead, the style that emerged from the Second World War was the offensive-minded power-projecting one that enabled victory in the institution's seminal event, the Pacific War against Japan. As the Navy learned during the Pacific War and throughout the Cold War, a balanced, carrier-based fleet demonstrated unprecedented versatility across a much broader range of missions than one based on battleships, for instance, or one designed for nuclear retaliation or sea control. It packed far more striking power and longer-ranging firepower and offered more range, mobility, and flexibility than any fleet before. While battleships, submarines, and carriers can clear the seas, only the latter can fully exploit control of the seas.

In the late 1960s, the Soviets deployed a large and powerful fleet designed for sea denial and nuclear retaliation. The Soviet naval threat and the need to recapitalize the U.S. fleet in a period of fiscal austerity brought about a reappraisal of naval strategy, which meant trading power projection capabilities for sea control capabilities, which, in turn, set off a fierce decade-long debate inside the Navy. On one side were those that advocated for a sea control-centric fleet, and saw the Navy's purpose in terms of general war. On the other were the proponents of carrier-based power projection, fresh off of their Vietnam experience, who argued to maintain a fleet comprised of flexible and adaptable—yet expensive—multi-mission platforms, a fleet optimized to be effective across the spectrum of conflict, not just general war.

Perhaps because it is so pervasive, the influence of the Navy's experiences in the Cold War and post-Cold War era on its institutional thinking on strategy, emerging technologies, and operational concepts tends to escape notice. In general, the Navy is far from having mastered its Cold War and post-Cold War experiences. If the Navy is so inclined to study history, it could apply

its lessons to more effectively address how to deal with institutional as well as operational challenges to ensure control of the seas. One can, however, be certain that how the Navy has approached sea control in the past will not escape the notice of its rivals.