Preparing to Go and Remain in Harm's Way Again

Rear Admiral Chris Parry, CBE (Royal Navy)
University of Reading

In 1944, fast carrier task force and task group concepts and operations enabled the U.S. Third and Fifth Fleets to assert sea control at will and for extended periods not only around themselves, but also in sustaining a defensive zone within which other tasks, such as massed air attack against the land, amphibious assault and surface action, could be undertaken. U.S. carriers had previously been obliged to raid Japanese positions and then depart rapidly before being exposed to retributive attack by enemy land-based air and other sea-based assets. Conversely, in the Falklands conflict of 1982, British carriers were unable to assert continuous sea control around the islands and had to settle for episodic sea and air control, limited in time and place, that supported specific tasks, such as amphibious assault and the support of land operations.

The prospect today is that sea control and access will be threatened by states (notably, but not exclusively, China, Iran and Russia) and sub-state groups that will attempt to contest the freedom of the seas, both for geo-political and economic advantage. The navies of the United States and its allies will be confronted by state-based, hybrid and irregular opponents, acting in both conventional and asymmetric ways. On the one hand, state-based opponents will deploy progressively more sophisticated platforms and systems designed to deter entry into designated sea space **by** all but the most capable navies and to provide coercive options. Meanwhile, irregular actors, hybrid opponents and status quo rejectionists are likely to benefit from technology leakage and capable systems acquired from both failing and flailing states. The situation will be complicated by the increasing prevalence of unmanned and disruptive applications, allowing both regular and irregular opponents opportunities to conduct attacks in all environments, with the advantages afforded by anonymity and deniability. Together with the introduction of networked and distributed concepts of operation, these will blur familiar spatial boundaries and concepts.

In this environment, most operations, especially involving presence and power projection, are likely to involve 'encounter**'** actions in the margins of disputes or claims to jurisdiction and sovereignty. They are likely to take place between primarily between individual units, both in the air and at sea. This means that individual units will need to have the capability and confidence, in terms of systems and training, to stand toe-to-toe with their counterparts in the navies of potential opponents. In cases of escalation, they will also need to **have the** ability, proportionate to the threat, to choose 'fight' or 'flight' once the 'fright' reflex has been activated and to call on and coordinate reinforcement if **they are** to stand **their** ground in maintaining presence. In future, this back-up will probably take the form of direct, but more distant group support or be derived from new concepts associated with 'distributed lethality'. In the meantime, the doctrinal thrust for detached units will need to reflect the motto, 'if it floats, it fights', with the presumption that readiness levels of all combatants must be maintained at a high level. The contrasting fortunes of USS MASON and the HSV-2 SWIFT when faced by separate missile attacks by hybrid opponents off the coast of Yemen in October 2016 graphically demonstrated the validity of this approach in relation to individual units.

Three further considerations are relevant. Each 'encounter', especially in state-on-state confrontations, will be viewed, both **by** the countries concerned and the international media, as an indicator of national prestige and commitment to the objectives at stake. Secondly, sea control and presence **is** likely to impose disadvantageous cost ratios on the US and its allies in deterring and defeating the range of anti-access and area denial systems that they are likely to have to face. When scarce dollars (and pounds) and opportunity costs are involved, this aspect needs addressing with some urgency if the political will to commit naval and other forces in encounter actions is to be sustained. The opportunities presented by novel technologies, such as directed energy, offer possibilities in this regard.

To be credible, sea control capabilities will demand a range of active and passive defensive systems, capable of dealing with the diverse capabilities of likely opponents and confrontational situations that seem certain to proliferate. Gun and missile systems need to be capable of intercepting threats at sufficient range to prevent damage or catastrophic loss, but it is doubtful whether most naval systems are proof against the air, surface and sub-surface launched missiles that are already deployed by potential opponents and peer competitors, especially when fired in salvoes. Similarly, current decoys, design features (characterized as 'stealth'**)** and active counter-measures, such as electro-magnetic disruption, have only limited effect. New applications, principally involving off-board, unmanned and stealth technologies need to be explored and implemented, including the use of semi-submersible hull forms, electronic disruptors and swarming decoys. These considerations make modularization, allowing tailored mission packages of personnel and equipment, as well as **regular** technology insertion to cope with innovation and invention, increasingly attractive. Nevertheless, for a fighting service, an understanding is required among political authorities and public opinion that individual platforms must be considered 'lose-able', if they to be 'use-able' in situations involving marginal risk and brinkmanship.

Finally, there will be a pressing need to gain definitive technical intelligence about the systems and platforms of likely opponents while denying them access to the parameters and capabilities of our own technologies, with which we have been notably profligate since the end of the Cold War. We also need to understand the concepts and tactics that accompany opponents' systems, while concentrating on what potential opponents could do rather than we judge they intend to do – a key lesson from the Pacific in World War II. As the Naval War College report into the disaster at Savo Island in August 1942 assessed: 'A commander, in making his plans, should follow the method of enemy capability rather than the method of enemy intentions […] which has been discarded by the United States Armed Forces'.[1] We must also seek counters to the latent, but potent potential of electro-magnetic interference and disruption of our networks and systems alongside the familiar cyber threat, while improving our own offensive capabilities in these areas.

All in all, it is time to mine the corporate memory about how operations at sea used to be conducted during the Cold War, with its overriding commitment to containment, forward presence and defence in depth. Depending on individual situations, our future aspirations for sea control are likely to lie somewhere between that demonstrated in the Pacific in World War II and in the Falklands. Success will depend on the political will, the level of resource allocation and the degree of technological superiority that can be maintained in relation to opponents. Most importantly, the burden of maintaining access in a rules-based international system, in the face of states seeking to subvert both the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the Grotian concept of the freedom of the seas, cannot be left simply to the United States, in terms of either political commitment or capability investment. All those countries that have an interest in the sea as the primary strategic medium for access and exchange will need to step up to the plate, assist in

conducting freedom of navigation transits and deploy capabilities that will enable them to provide persistent presence where there is risk. Our politicians also need the will to send them there.

---

[1] Commodore Richard W. Bates, USN (Ret) and Commander Walter D. Innis, USN, *The Battle of Savo Island August 9th, 1942, Strategical and Tactical Analysis, Part 1* (Newport RI: Naval War College, Department of Analysis, 1950), p. 348. Spruance in a letter to E. B. Potter stressed that 'We found that there had been a tendency to decide what an enemy was *going* to do and lose sight of what he *could* do. I have seen just this happen in fleet problems at sea, and it is very dangerous'.