

OPINION

The US Navy in Distress

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failed states, and demographic change point to an increasingly unstable future and challenging international strategic environment. The common denominator in managing these problems is maritime power: force that can be applied to the shore from the sea, used to protect against missile-borne as well as stealthier ocean-borne Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), marshaled to alleviate the causes of massive immigration, and displayed to reassure allies and dissuade enemies.

Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have sucked the oxygen out of any serious effort to understand the connection betw

The size, shape, and strategy of the US Navy are a critical element of America's position as the world's great power. Our ability to protect or rend asunder the globe's ocean-going lines of communication is inseparable from our position as the world's great power. But very few outside a small community of naval officers and selected military/foreign policy analysts appreciate the strategic results of American seapower's slow but steady diminution. The eventual impact of this weakening includes, but is not limited to, a major shift of power away from American influence in Asia; the shattering of such key maritime alliances and partnerships as those we currently maintain with Australia, India, Japan, and Singapore; the rise of China as a hegemonic power; a debilitating loss in America's ability to shape the future global strategic environment; and a powerful reinforcement of the perception that the United States is in decline.

Globally, the continued attrition of US naval force also means a serious threat to the security of the world's sea lines of communication and the choke points – such as the Straits of Hormuz – through which pass an increasing volume of global commerce, the departure of a visible and stabilizing American presence from allied ports as well as potential worldwide flashpoints, and the international perception that the United States is abandoning the critical element of military capability that undergirded the world system American policy has sought for over a century, seapower.

The consequences of a much diminished US fleet are complemented by the American public's ignorance of them, the slow yet steady pace of naval deterioration, and the increasing time and dismayingly large resources needed to recoup seapower surrendered slowly over decades.

How did this happen?

Besides a natural contraction following the virtual disappearance of the Soviet navy

projected fleet size had dwindled to 313 ships. There it has stayed . . . until May of this year when a senior Navy budget official, commenting on the proposed 2010 budget, suggested that the new Quadrennial Review now underway at the Defense Department will likely result in a smaller projected fleet size. Huge increases in current and projected national debt and the vulnerability of the military budget to help offset it increase the chance that without compelling events the nation's sea services will experience additional and perhaps drastic reductions. National indebtedness will grow from its current ratio of 40 per cent of GDP to 80 per cent of GDP in a decade. Servicing this will cripple the nation's ability to modernize and increase a powerful world-class fleet or drive us deeper into a yawning financial hole.

Possible reductions in overall numbers are complemented by cuts in programmes. Defense Secretary Gates last year announced a further delay of the next generation of cruisers which are the large vertebrae of a powerful surface fleet's spine. His decision came less than a year after the Navy determined that a new generation of destroyers was too costly – estimates of the two lead ships in the class had reached \$3.3 billion per ship – and should be largely cancelled in favor of reopening the production line for the previous generation, the DDG-51 class. Technical problems leading to cost overruns effectively ended the Navy's plan to build midget submarines for its special warfare commandos after the price tag for the lead vessel in its class was delivered at more than five times its originally projected cost of \$80 million.

The Navy has sought to call attention to its gradual decline. The Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) told the House Armed Service Committee in May 2009 that 'we are stretched in our ability to . . . modernize and procure the Navy for tomorrow.' He admitted that the Navy will have to reduce its carrier fleet from its 11 to 10 for at least three years, i.e. between when the next carrier scheduled for decommissioning is retired and when its replacement (the *USS Gerald R. Ford*) joins the fleet. This reduction increases both the interval between when a departing carrier leaves its patrolling area and its replacement arrives along with the associated risk of absence during a crisis. More important, the number of new and untested combat systems aboard the Ford class suggests that the US carrier fleet will be restricted to ten ships for significantly more than three years.

The Navy has had no more success addressing the diverse causes of decline than it has experienced in calling attention to them. Nor have others. Such experts as the Congressional Budget Office's naval analyst, Eric Labs produce data for Congress that show a doubling in the average cost of naval combatants between 1981 and 2001. Before he left the Senate this past summer Mel Martinez noted that 'the Navy settles for single-digit ship procurement each year' (*Politico* 8 June 2009).¹ Congressional Research Service naval analyst Ronald O'Rourke informs Congress that China has built or is now building four new classes of nuclear and conventional-powered attack and ballistic missile submarines and that at their current rate of construction China could field a submarine force larger than the US Navy's within the foreseeable future.² The US Naval Institute's lead publication, *Proceedings*, publishes an article that asks but does not answer the question 'why do we have a Navy?' ('Fear and Loathing in the Post-Naval Era', *Proceedings*, March 2009).³

Andrew Krepinevich's 'The Pentagon's Wasting Asset' (*Foreign Affairs*, Summer 2009), recasts the issue of military transformation against the background of a financially weakened United States.⁴ Krepinevich argues that American financial decay combined with greater allied reluctance to assist in defense will force the United States to 'pursue a more modest strategy', one which, among other essentially *technological*

fixes, requires a larger submarine force armed with conventional cruise missiles, long-range, carrier-launched unmanned aircraft, and similar advances in unmanned underwater platforms. Although it calls for strategic decisions Krepinevich's argument rests on technology as a strategic *deus ex machina* for the United States. This is no more likely to succeed in reversing the Navy's fortunes than it is in providing the broad strategic ideas needed to convince Congress and the public that a substantial increase in the size and capability of the US fleet represents a wise investment in national security.

But if arguments have failed to spark congressional and public interest, neither have events. In 2008, and for the first time since the Cold War, a major Russian naval flotilla visited Latin America and held joint naval exercises with the Venezuelans. Also for the first time since Cold War days, a detachment of Russian ships called at Havana. In the spring of 2009, Moscow sent four warships from its Pacific fleet to the Bahrain port of Manama. They followed a Russian squadron's port visit to the Omani port of Salalah. Besides extensive naval coordination between Russia and Iran another significant result of the Russians' naval visit is that Gulf ports that had previously serviced US Navy vessels added new clients. In early August of 2009, US officials confirmed that Russian nuclear-powered attack submarines had resumed patrolling off the US East Coast.

Also in the spring of 2009 China harassed two US military ocean surveillance ships in international waters off the coast of China. Weeks later Beijing increased its naval patrols in the South China Sea – through which half the world's oil tanker traffic passes – arguing that more protection for Chinese fishermen was required in the face of neighboring countries' disputed fishing claims.

The media may have lost interest, but pirates continue to operate off the Somali coast as a successful hijacking of the Spanish trawler *Alakrana*, and the large Chinese bulk carrier, *De Xin Hai* in October demonstrates. The US press barely noticed in May when the Australian defense minister, Joel Fitzgibbon declared “the beginning of the end of . . . the almost two-decade long period in which the pre-eminence of our principal ally, the United States, was without question.” Australia is doubling the size of its submarine fleet and purchasing 100 (United States) Joint Strike Fighters, three destroyers, and eight frigates. Echoing his then defense minister's strategic reflections, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd observed in May that “in a period of global instability Australia must invest in a strong, capable, and well-resourced defense force”.

The importance that the Australian Government attaches to the specific threat of China's growing naval capability in the Western Pacific is neither matched nor attended at the senior levels of the US Government – as the likelihood of continued decreases in US naval power indicates. Chinese naval modernization of submarine and surface vessels continues apace. This includes the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) effort to use over-the horizon radars, satellites, sea-bed sonar networks, and cyber-warfare in the service of anti-ship ballistic missiles equipped with maneuverable reentry vehicles meant to deny the US Navy access to large portions of the Western Pacific. It is but a question of time until all the bases that support US military power in the Western Pacific are under threat.

Strategic Analysis

A document published by the Navy, itself, deserves mention among those that have framed the policy debate. Although its arguments have failed to make a public impression they would shift public understanding of the Navy's *raison d'être* away from Theodore Roosevelt's oceanic idea of naval power, and towards Thomas Jefferson's idea of a small lightly armed force. The Navy published a new maritime strategy in October 2007 calling it "A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower. This article emphasized deterring rather than winning wars, as well as humanitarian and disaster relief missions. Although these missions are not new and have been a regular part of naval operations for decades, the emphasis on them as central to US maritime strategy *is* new.

The Navy's new recruiting ad reinforces this emphasis. It notes 'the anguish of those less fortunate' as it shows sailors helping flood victims; it speaks of the US Navy as 'a global force for good' with an image of the Navy's hospital ship, *Mercy*, in the background to provide potential recruits with a clear understanding of what the good is. This may indeed attract recruits although there are always the Peace Corps, the Red Cross, Oxfam, and a host of other international relief organizations for those who believe that protecting the United States against armed threats is best achieved through vaccinations and warm blankets. However, mirroring the maritime strategy itself, the recruiting ad also features traditional Navy combat missions, an implicit admission that the need for spirited young sailors has not disappeared. But the Navy's public face, and thus its institutional self-concept fails to make clear which set of missions most accurately describes what kind of Navy is best suited to advance the nation's maritime interests.

The word 'China' is absent from the strategy. The logic behind this ear-splitting silence is that naming names will defeat the strategy's objective of deterring war. Chinese military planners have yet to be persuaded. They continue to build a force that can keep the US Navy out of the Western Pacific. To its credit the maritime strategy does insist that freedom of maneuver and access to the world's oceans will be maintained as will international sea lines of communication. But the Navy's unwillingness so far to connect the new strategy with the ships or naval capability required to execute it raises questions about the document's practical value. The more perplexing issue is whether a maritime strategy based in large measure on multi-lateral naval cooperation in the service of nation-building/humanitarian assistance/disaster relief operations as well as traditional war-fighting missions while highlighting the former can achieve the public interest and acceptance to support either.

from the small number of districts where shipbuilding and naval defense contracting remains an important source of jobs – understand the Navy’s decline and the issues noted above.

Aside from a few members of Congress, naval and military analysts, the defense press, and the military itself there exists little knowledge of, and less concern about, the large consequences for US foreign policy of continued American naval decline, the role that maritime forces and strategy should take in defending against current and anticipated strategic challenges, the likelihood that the fleet will continue to shrink, and the daunting task of recovering lost ground. There is an equal lack of appreciation for the need to air these questions and subject them to national scrutiny.

So what?

The United States faces several alternative naval futures. Failure to build a fleet that answers the nation’s enduring need for flexible maritime forces or reverse the effects of serious and sustained naval decline will produce a navy-lite, one that looks more and more like a coast guard. Forgetting the bond between effective maritime strategy and discouraging likely future challenges is certain to embolden and generate increasingly formidable naval competition: With continued effort China can shed its ‘near peer competitor’ status and become the real thing. The inability to re-consider fundamental assumptions about the shape of naval forces erodes one of the United States’ traditional strengths, a flexible concept of maritime strategy as an essential element of national defense strategy. Failure to discipline the costs of building and maintaining naval forces, or to reduce a multiplying and largely unaccountable defense bureaucracy sentences the US combat fleet to either reduced size or capability – or both. The incapacity to identify affordable technologies foreshadows the end of the innovation and ingenuity that has characterized the American fleet since the post-Revolutionary War Navy built its first six over-size frigates that served effectively as capital ships from the western Atlantic to the central Mediterranean.

All these pathologies result in a much diminished US Navy. All are grave. None is as debilitating as the Navy’s self-induced drift towards conceiving of itself as a coalition-organizing and land-oriented deterrent to local conflict. This essentially continentalist idea possesses strong attraction for the Defense Department’s flavour *du jour*: multi-lateralist approaches to land-based asymmetrical challenges. But it is a death knell for a globe-spanning, trans-oceanic, strategic maritime force as well as the *idea* of such a force upon which both supreme naval competence and public support depends.

The late Samuel P. Huntington wrote in his famous article for the May 1954 issue of *Proceedings*, ‘If a service does not possess a well defined strategic concept, the public and the political leaders will be confused as to the role of the

goals threatens irreparable damage to our alliances, prestige, and the international system that American policy has labored to create for the past century.

The notion of using the Navy as a ‘global force for good’ – as the recruiting ad promises – isn’t bad and isn’t new. It could also be relatively inexpensive since building, renting, or buying small vessels linked to a mother ship and configured to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief is cheap compared to the cost of combatants. But the humanitarian mission is subordinate to the United States’ greater strategic objectives. The global-force-for-good idea turns on its head the influence that maritime force – in the absence of traditional navy-to-navy struggles for sea control – was supposed to exert over a strategic littoral area and transforms it into a kind of public diplomacy that seeks to shape public attitudes in potentially hostile regions by demonstrating American good will.

In failing to marshal the domestic political support necessary to maintain a large, capable, robust maritime force, this approach will reduce the Navy to an instrument of coastal or perhaps hemispheric defense. This puts at risk the nation’s capacity to meet with confidence an increasingly fragmented strategic future. It shatters the perception of the United States as a great power. It calls into question our future ability to clear the seas of a potential enemy’s naval and merchant shipping at precisely the moment when a would-be great power, China, is constructing maritime forces that could resurrect a naval contest of wills such as the one that withered when an essentially continental power, the Soviet Union opposed an essentially maritime power, the United States. Identifying China as a potential naval competitor threatens neither the truth nor peace. There is no better assurance of continued peaceful competition with China than a maritime strategy that retains a powerful US combat fleet in the western Pacific.

Rebirth

More important than any other single obstacle to naval recovery is the absence of a national debate over maritime strategy. Other subjects that should be aired publicly are the Navy’s current fortunes

Strategic Analysis