



IDSS COMMENTARIES (79/2006)

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NAVIES OF THE WORLD UNITE! WILL THE NEW U.S. MARITIME STRATEGY WORK?

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11 August 2006

The United States Navy (USN) needs a threat and a maritime strategy. It had both during the Cold War but since then its situation has been more difficult. Without a contemporary strategy to deal with prevailing asymmetric threats, the Navy is finding it increasingly harder to compete with the other U.S. Services for scarce defence dollars in the tighter budgetary environment that currently prevails in Washington. Shipbuilding programmes are being cut and the USN faces a period of down-sizing unless it can come up with a new maritime strategy.

It is not surprising therefore that the USN's Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Michael Mullen, has recently announced a plan to develop a "maritime strategy for the 21st Century". He has foreshadowed that this will widen the Navy's concept of sea power beyond its war-fighting role to include securing international shipping against piracy and maritime terrorism and using warships to deliver humanitarian aid. While previous maritime strategies have been based on unilateral sea control, the new strategy will have a strong cooperative flavour, recognizing the impact of globalization and common interests in safety and security upon the world's oceans.

In unveiling his plan, Admiral Mullen identified three factors, which he called "enduring qualities" of sea power. First, the USN can influence global security by promoting concepts of free markets and societies. Secondly, the inherent flexibility of sea power allows a navy to undertake a vast range of tasks both on the oceans and in coastal areas. The third quality is the ability of the USN to forge partnerships with foreign navies – in effect, a naval "coalition of the willing" comprising friendly navies of the world.

The 1,000 Ship Navy

The concept of the "1,000-ship navy" announced by Admiral Mullen at the 17th International Seapower Symposium last year is an important element of his new strategic approach. This is intended to help secure the seas against transnational threats, terrorism, piracy, trafficking in arms, drugs and people; and environmental degradation. However, there must be questions about the ability of the USN to take a leading role in such an arrangement while still maintaining its war-fighting capabilities. Also, early statements about the concept do not acknowledge the fundamental framework for international maritime cooperation provided by the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), presumably because the U.S. is still not a party to the Convention.

Whereas the USN only comprises about 300 ships, the additional 700 will come from other navies and maritime security forces from around the world. In the U.S., it will be based on the “National Fleet” of the USN and the U.S. Coast Guard. Building links with the Coast Guard has figured prominently in Admiral Mullen’s recent pronouncements on maritime strategy and force posture.

Evolution of US Maritime Strategy

The U.S. Maritime Strategy of the 1980s exemplifies a successful maritime strategy. It had a clear focus on sea control and was characterized as forward, global, allied and joint. It emphasized offensive operations and horizontal escalation using command of the sea, for example, to attack the Soviet Far East if the Soviet Union had have attacked Europe. The primary naval task was sea control. Indeed throughout the Cold War, the emphasis in Western maritime strategy was on the containment of Soviet power at sea. Economic themes, including the security of shipping, played a subordinate role. It appears now with Admiral Mullen’s plans, this situation is about to change.

In the immediate post-Cold War era, the USN experienced a crisis of identity with the demise of the Soviet threat and the probability of defence budget cuts (the “peace dividend”). The first Gulf War and operations in Somalia and the Balkans saved the situation to some extent. The *From the Sea - A new direction for the Naval Service* concept of 1992 evolved into *Forward... From the Sea* in 1994. The emphasis was on projection of power and amphibious operations with a focus on naval expeditionary forces, joint operations, and operating forward in the littoral areas of the world.

Continuing the theme of “war from the sea” rather than “war at sea”, the USN launched the *Sea Power 21* concept in 2002. This demonstrated how the USN would implement defence transformation with enhanced war-fighting capabilities, new concepts, technologies, and organizational initiatives. *Sea Power 21* was based on three main operational activities:

- *Sea Strike* - offensive operations with strike aircraft and cruise missiles, as well as Marines, Special Forces, and the joint strike capabilities of the Army and Air Force, plus the strike capabilities of allies and coalition partners;
- *Sea Shield* - layered defence to protect the homeland, sustain access to contested littoral areas, and protect coalition and joint forces with sea-based ballistic missile defense, and new capabilities for littoral operations, mine countermeasures and defence against modern, quiet diesel submarines in shallow waters; and
- *Sea Basing* – capabilities to exploit inherent advantages of sea-based forces to operate over the horizon and without dependence on foreign bases.

Along with the other Services, winning the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) has become the USN’s main priority, while concurrently defending the homeland against attack. However, the USN has been losing out recently in the competition for resources between the Services, and it appears that *Sea Power 21* is no longer adequate justification for proposed new naval capabilities.

Will the New Maritime Strategy Succeed?

A successful maritime strategy for the USN must pass at least three tests. First, it must be credible to those who implement it – the men and women of the Navy, who must believe in it

as satisfying rationale for why they spend long periods away from home. Secondly, it must convince the politicians that it is an effective strategy and worth spending billions of dollars on implementing it. Thirdly, the strategy must be persuasive as far as friends and allies of the U.S. are concerned, as well as posing a credible threat to potential adversaries.

Passing the first test may not be too difficult, but the latter two will be problematic. With the second test, opposition is likely from the U.S. Army and U.S. Air Force, who may regard the new strategy as neither joint nor in their best interests. They may question its logic when competing for resources in the competitive environment that prevails when a Defence Budget is being put together. Aircraft carriers and large guided missile cruisers and destroyers may also appear as an “over-kill” for humanitarian missions!

With the third test, some friends and allies might see the new strategy as a contemporary version of Mahanian sea power theory – which advocates sea power to project national policy -- and a form of neo-imperialism. Furthermore, the concept of the 1,000 ship navy does not appreciate fundamental sensitivities that inhibit cooperation between navies.

These are amply evident in East Asia where countries are showing a clear preference for using coast guards in sensitive areas to undertake practical cooperation to maintain safety and law and order at sea rather than navies. The naval cooperation that does occur is largely for show, and achieves little in terms of suppressing piracy or other forms of illegal activity at sea, including the prevention of marine pollution. The new Maritime Strategy will be released in 2007, and whether it passes the tests of a successful maritime strategy will be observed with interest.

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