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The 2022 National Defense Strategy: Takeaways for the US Navy and Marines

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SYNOPSIS

*The United States has just issued its long-awaited National Defense Strategy. Its proposals are potentially quite radical and likely to have significant effects on US maritime engagement in the Western Pacific, says **GEOFFREY TILL**. US allies and partners in the region will think about the need to respond. As will China.*

COMMENTARY

An unclassified version of the [US National Defense Strategy](#) (NDS) was issued on 27 October. It follows the release of the [US National Security Strategy](#) (NSS), which appeared two weeks earlier. Although not significantly modified since March, when the classified version was transmitted to the US Congress, the NDS takes in some of the emerging lessons of the Ukraine war. Its aim is to show how the military will approach the task of meeting the interlinked security demands identified in the NSS. There were three of these:

- Protect the security of the American people,
- Expand economic prosperity and opportunity,
- Realise and defend the values at the heart of the American way of life.

The NDS focusses on the first of the three, but implicitly acknowledges the importance of the other two. It identifies China as “the most comprehensive and serious challenge to US national security”. In his introduction to the NDS, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin quotes the NSS: China is “... the only country with both the intent to reshape the

international order, and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do so.”

It is, accordingly, the “pacing challenge” for the Pentagon. Russia, on the other hand, is the more immediate “acute” threat, particularly in regard to its “unprovoked war against Ukraine”. Cooperation between China and Russia while possibly limited by “diverging interests and historical mistrust” continues to grow. North Korea, Iran, the residual terrorist threat and climate change are also of major concern.

The NDS is more a statement of broad intent on how the Defense Department (DOD) intends generally to approach its task than a “strategy” focusing on the specific ways and means by which it will achieve its objectives. There is not a single number in the whole document and no references to force size or composition. However, these do briefly appear in the two quite lengthy documents that accompany the NDS, which review the US nuclear and missile defence postures.

What NDS Says ...

Instead, the NDS explores the qualities of the “Joint Force” and the “defense ecosystem” required to deter Chinese and Russian attacks of all sorts. Three main requirements stand out as they are constantly repeated.

The first is an emphasis on the holistic integration of the deterrent effort across a spectrum ranging from nuclear to cyber attack. Conventional and nuclear capabilities have to be synchronised with each other and work alongside the cyber and information domains in “close collaboration with US Government departments and agencies and with our Allies and partners”. The constant emphasis on the need to work with allies and partners, indeed, is the second of the main themes of the NDS. The third is that “[i]n these times, business as usual at the Department is not acceptable.” New approaches are needed.

Therefore, the US military needs to think through the requirements of deterrence in today’s demanding circumstances and through effective “campaigning” deliver the necessary capabilities. Because of the stress in the NDS on deterrence by denial rather than by punishment, there is a very noticeable emphasis on the importance of “resilience” in all aspects of the US military.

To operate effectively in an increasingly dangerous world, the United States needs to be confident of its capacity to deal with all manner of threats. “[I]mproving conventional forces’ ability to operate in the face of limited nuclear, chemical and biological attacks”, for example, will “deny adversaries benefit from possessing and employing such weapons”.

Implications for the US Navy and Marines

Identifying China as the pacing threat, even as the Ukrainian war reaches its potentially most dangerous phase, underlines the overriding importance in American security thinking of the Indo-Pacific in general and the Western Pacific in particular. The references to “complementing” the military efforts of NATO allies reinforces the

point in an age when European capabilities are clearly set to grow relative to those of Russia. Deployments elsewhere will be on a “monitor-and-respond” basis.



PLA(N) Jingkai II-class guided missile frigate Suzhou. Chinese military power, and especially naval power, will form the "pacing threat". *The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.*

This, plus emphasis on the importance of working with allies and partners, suggests that from now on the main US naval and amphibious effort will be on deployments and a force posture that will enable the maritime services to develop a sustainable forward presence in the Indo-Pacific region. Such a presence must allow for extensive engagement with allies and partners and the development of those capabilities required to withstand and deter Chinese attack; winning conflicts that the United States and its allies cannot deter is the final requirement.

The maintenance of resilience — the capacity to withstand attack and carry on, if necessary without escalation — also comes out in the accompanying *Nuclear Posture Review*, where emphasis is given to the survivability of a secure strategic strike force in the shape of the Columbia class of ballistic-missile firing submarines that are due to appear in 2030.

Defence against all forms of missile attack is given high priority. The abandonment, as unnecessary, of the sea-based nuclear cruise missile programme inaugurated by the Trump administration has been interpreted by some analysts as reduced interest in the deterrent effect of the sub-strategic use of low yield nuclear weapons. President Biden’s measured response to Russian president Putin’s ambiguous nuclear threats may point that way too. Perhaps the aim is that resilience will extend to a capacity to absorb and so deter low-level nuclear threats without necessary recourse to their reciprocal use?

The rising capabilities of China, and in some respects Russia, also mandate extra effort on reducing vulnerabilities both in theatre and in the wider “defence ecosystem”. Thus the need for secure supply chains and ensuring that cyber resilience “will be enhanced by ... modern encryption and a zero-trust architecture”. In part this reflects acceptance that in order to cope with the demands of “all domain operations” the “Joint Force” will need to be much more closely integrated than it has been in the past. Defending that capacity to integrate is critical.

In the Western Pacific, the operational resilience of the US Navy will be sustained by the supportive efforts of the other services and of its allies and partners as well as through a determined effort to fix its own vulnerabilities. Naval forces will be hardened against all forms of attack and current gaps filled.

Hence the current emphasis on catching up and overmatching the Chinese and Russian lead in hypersonics. Large conventional platforms will be less central to the conduct of operations in a seriously contested environment; instead, in line with the arguments in the NDS, there will be greater reliance on smaller forces, in some cases unmanned, for lethal distributed and networked operations. If this indeed proves to be the case, the future debate about the composition of the fleet will be much less obsessed with its numbers (as compared to the Chinese or any other potentially hostile fleet) than with its capabilities.

This intent fits in with the new and quite controversial intent of General David Berger to drastically remodel the US Marine Corps, which he commands, into smaller and more agile but powerful formations (Marine Littoral Regiments) and to scrap large amphibious warfare vessels seen as non-survivable in high intensity situations. General Berger has also emphasised the extent to which the current situation requires new and radical thinking.

All the military services need to challenge traditional assumptions that are now invalid. When considering resilient logistics, for example, large supply ships and ammunition dumps ashore are no longer sustainable (as the Russians have been discovering in Ukraine); for challenges like this, novel thinking that is bottom-up rather than top-down is required. The Navy and Marines will need to become even more “learning organisations” than they are now. Significantly, the current Research and Development budget of US\$130 billion is the highest it has been in DOD history.

The final challenge will be how to incorporate the allies and partners that are so important as this radical new future unfolds. Moreover, since many of these advances will not materialise until the 2030s, how will US deterrence work in the meantime?

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