

# THE TYRANNY OF FORWARD PRESENCE

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*Daniel Gouré*

A specter is haunting U.S. Navy strategic and force planning. It is the specter of forward presence, the continual deployment of Navy and Marine Corps units in waters adjacent to foreign littorals. Although the Navy speaks of its central purpose as maritime power projection, it is forward presence, particularly in peacetime, that drives both force structure requirements and operations tempo. The demands placed on both force structure and operations tempo by the Navy's long-standing commitment to maintain forward presence in multiple regions have been exacerbated in the past few years by that institution's desire to extend its area of influence to both littoral waters and the land beyond. The ever-increasing scope of forward presence exerts a tyrannical hold on the future of the Navy, a hold that threatens—in an era of constrained defense budgets and rapidly changing threats—to break the force.

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The general argument for forward presence as a cardinal principle of Navy strategic planning is that "shaping" the international environment is a necessary and appropriate mission for the U.S. military in general, and the Navy in particular.<sup>1</sup> The military is not alone in believing in the importance of the "shaping" mission. Under various rubrics, this impetus was central to the Clinton administration's articulation of national security policy and national military strategy.<sup>2</sup> Were this only the view of one administration, it could be readily dismissed as international social work.<sup>3</sup> But a growing chorus of voices in the academic and analytic communities argues

that U.S. defense planning should emphasize “shaping” functions. Some are so bold as to speak of a new role for U.S. forces in terms of “what can only be termed ‘imperial policing.’”<sup>4</sup>

The myth that the world is in dire need of shaping or policing derives from the proposition that with the end of the Cold War the forces that had dampened disorder and disunity ceased to function. This “chaos theory” increasingly pervades all the services and the Department of Defense as well, but the Navy and Marine Corps have been among its chief proponents. Here is but one example of the Navy–Marine Corps view:

Never again will the United States exist in a bipolar world whose nuclear shadow suppressed nationalism and ethnic tensions. The international system, in some respects, reverted to the world our ancestors knew. A world of disorder. Somalia, Bosnia, Liberia, Haiti, Rwanda, Iraq, and the Taiwan Straits are examples of continuing crises we now face. Some might call this period an age of chaos.<sup>5</sup>

But is this Hobbesian vision real? Has the world reverted in the last decade to a state of nature, from some prior regime of civility, or at least restraint? The Middle East suffered four Arab-Israeli wars prior to the end of the Cold War. For decades, Iraq engaged in predatory behavior toward its neighbors—producing most notably a ten-year bloodbath with Iran—before deciding to invade Kuwait. India and Pakistan have several wars to their account, the last in 1971, as well as chronic conflict over Kashmir. The Taiwan Straits is a military problem not because of the end of the Cold War but because of China’s arms buildup and the failure of the United States to provide countervailing capabilities to Taiwan. The civil and regional wars of Africa are largely consequences of colonization and the rivalries of the Cold War itself.

Many once-fractious parts of the world have become more stable over the past decade. The collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the downfall of the Soviet Union eliminated the major supporter of international terrorism. Thereafter, the inability of Russia to provide cheap conventional weapons to client states also reduced regional arms races dramatically. Lack of arms may have reduced as well the aggressive tendency of such former client states as Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Iran. One can point even to recent events on the Korean Peninsula as a direct, albeit delayed, result of Pyongyang’s loss of its Soviet godfather.

Where problems have arisen, it is not clear that the end of the Cold War was the catalytic event. It is difficult, for instance, to establish a correlation between the end of the Cold War and the rise of militant Islam. Further, events in Indonesia have had less to do with the rise and fall of superpowers than with the consequences of the Asian economic crisis (during which, it must be noted, the

Treasury Department did more to maintain stability than all the U.S. forces deployed to the region).

Current military planning has somewhat tempered its earlier “Boschian” vision of global chaos, asserting now that it is the uncertainty of our time and the difficulty of predicting the future security environment that necessitates a

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strategy of power projection based on forward presence.<sup>6</sup> The fault, in that view, lies not in the unstable nature of the external world but in our inability to

forecast the future accurately. For planning purposes, uncertainty may be as good as chaos. In some respects it is even better, since—as the services’ planning documents note—it requires that the military maintain capabilities to address all threats.

This sense of chaos, or even mere uncertainty, masks what is really happening: a restructuring of the international environment, the creation of a new international system.<sup>7</sup> We know from history that such restructuring is long, complex, and often quite messy. Wherever we look, in each of the critical regions of the world, the character of the relations among the dominant powers has yet to be firmly set, much less put on a course toward stable, positive, and peaceful relations. Western Europe is waiting to see if a closer union, and with it an incipient common security and defense identity, can be effected. Nato expansion is confronting the question of Russia’s legitimate security interests in Eastern Europe. China’s role in East Asia is being defined by Beijing—witness the 1999 military maneuvers and missile launches against Taiwan—in ways that must make all of its neighbors nervous; how China acts will determine to a large extent the behavior of others in the region. The relationship between India and Pakistan is as tense as it has ever been; increasingly, both states see the need to reach out to other powers of the Middle East and Asia in order to strengthen their positions in their own rivalry. Finally, the future of the political and security relationships in the Persian Gulf is frozen, and it will be as long as Iraq and Iran remain pariah states and the United States is required to maintain a military presence in the area.

Historically, the creation of new international orders has been dominated by major economic and military powers. This current period of evolution appears to be no different. In prior periods of reorganization, emerging powers have sought ways to shift regional and even global power balances in their favor, provoking similar behavior by their adversaries. (It is in this light that we need to look with some concern at current Russian and Chinese efforts to forge a new strategic alliance.)

Certain regions will be most important in the development of the new international order. For future U.S. policy, three regions are of vital importance: Europe, from the Atlantic to Russia's borders; the Pacific Rim, from Korea through Southeast Asia; and South Asia and the Persian Gulf. Those regions have three things that set them apart from the rest of the world. First, they contain the overwhelming predominance of global wealth, economic activity, and technological investments. Second, they are the loci of vital U.S. allies and of economic interests that must be protected. Third, they each border on one or more of the emerging potential competitor states.

The United States is the sole global power; it has interests in every region of the world and vital interests in each of them.<sup>8</sup> Thus, while it is difficult to identify where confrontations will arise, the sheer breadth and scope of U.S. interests abroad provide more than a few reasons that this nation may find itself at basic odds with local adversaries. Indeed, at least one major study of U.S. foreign policy in the next century argues that the foremost U.S. interest in Asia and Europe is to prevent the domination of those regions by adversarial powers.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the United States could find itself in confrontations with rising powers as it seeks to preserve regional balances of power or American access. This would be particularly likely should, as has been the case in the past, a powerful regional state threaten U.S. allies. The United States is likely to be the only nation that can provide sufficient military support to enable these allies to deter or, if necessary, defeat such an adversary.

It is true that the post-Cold War world has demonstrated a degree of disorderliness. But it can hardly be said that the world has entered a period of mounting chaos. Nor can it be claimed that U.S. decision makers and planners are paralyzed by uncertainty. They continue to make decisions and set priorities on force structure, regional deployments, and future acquisitions with a great deal of self-assurance. The chaos/uncertainty argument, then, serves largely as a means of defending the military against the increasingly evident need to make hard choices with respect to current missions and future capabilities. For the Navy, the validity of the doctrine of forward presence represents one of those hard choices.

#### **SHOULD THE NAVY MAINTAIN A STRATEGY OF FORWARD PRESENCE?**

It is not clear that the U.S. military should focus its planning and force-building around forward presence, much less "imperial policing." The idea that military forces can shape the political environment in regions in which they are deployed has become fashionable as a result of the rise of an issues-based approach to national security policy.<sup>10</sup> Many of these issues are sociopolitical in nature, and

their solutions fall, broadly speaking, under the heading of “shaping.” The trend toward employing military forces for political purposes has been given additional impetus by the activism of the regional commanders in chief (such as those of Pacific Command or Central Command), which has grown as the power of the State Department and U.S. ambassadors to conduct foreign policy has declined.<sup>11</sup> (One of the potential consequences of their use of forward-deployed forces for political purposes was highlighted by the USS *Cole* incident.)

It is for these reasons, then, that the U.S. military is increasingly focused on and driven by the demands of peacetime and crisis forward presence. The problem of maintaining forward presence has been a crucial factor, for instance, in the U.S. Air Force’s creation of a new organization centered on ten aerospace expeditionary forces. The U.S. Army is undergoing its own transformation, seeking to become more responsive and deployable. Each of the services is investing in capabilities to make rapid forward presence easier to establish, whether for major conflicts or smaller contingencies.

In particular, and without question, forward presence has served the Navy well. Forward presence provides a defensible rationale for force sizing, a matter of particular importance in the absence of a threat.<sup>12</sup> In any case, the Navy functions best when it is under way, and as long as it is steaming, it might as well do so where it might be needed.

The idea of forward presence, however, is for the Navy more than a bureaucratic convenience; it is an article of faith. According to the Navy’s own *Strategic Planning Guidance*, “By remaining forward, combat-credible naval expeditionary forces guarantee that the landward reach of U.S. influence is present to favorably shape the international environment.” In the Navy’s view, forward-deployed naval forces discourage challenges to U.S. interests, deter would-be aggressors, and, should deterrence fail, provide means for a timely response. For these reasons, the Navy argues, it could play a new and unique role in U.S. national security. But for this to be true, forward presence has to be the Navy’s central mission.<sup>13</sup>

For a number of reasons, tying the future of the Navy to forward presence is problematic. The concept of “shaping” the international environment is fuzzy at best. Too often it has extended well beyond traditional notions of security to involve, inter alia, attempts to influence the internal politics of failing states, efforts to address almost intractable socioeconomic problems, and engagement in what are classic policing functions. Looked at this way, Navy combat forces seem to have little relevance.<sup>14</sup> The forces that would seem to be most useful in the social-work and policing dimensions of forward presence are those generally classed as “combat support” or “combat service support” (e.g., engineer, military police, logistical, and medical units).

The term “forward presence” too is subject to interpretation and competing definitions. In its narrow sense, the emphasis is on *forward*—it simply means the deployment of forces in proximity to locations of interest to U.S. security and foreign policy. A broader definition, focusing on the word *presence*, suggests more complex and political purposes, for which presence generally needs to be nearly continuous and highly visible—requirements that can limit both the flexibility and the combat effectiveness of the forces engaged.

Leaving aside for the moment the question of what constitutes a combat-credible force, it is fair to ask what evidence there is that naval forward presence helps to shape the international environment. One can acknowledge that military forces can perform tasks that are essentially political in nature, such as demonstrating resolve and commitment. The objective of these tasks is different from that of forward presence, as narrowly defined above.

Advocates of forward presence as an instrument of U.S. foreign policy must acknowledge that there is no empirical evidence to support their case. This is particularly true for naval forward presence. While various theories have been

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propounded as to the relationship between the pursuit of national objectives, the protection of regional interests, the suppression of sources of regional instability, and forward presence, none has any real data to support it.<sup>15</sup> It has

been possible to show in certain instances some relationship between the ebb and flow of economic indicators and the deployment of U.S. forces; however, these cases involve the deployment of forces after crises or conflicts have started.<sup>16</sup> Such analyses have not been able to demonstrate the usefulness of peacetime forward presence as a mechanism for preventing conflicts and shaping regional environments. As one analyst (in fact, an advocate of naval power) noted a few years ago, “The interesting fact is that there is virtually little or no evidence, analysis and rigorous examination on which to make a fair and objective assessment of the benefits, costs, advantages and downsides of presence. . . . [T]he record is at best ambiguous regarding the utility, benefits and disadvantages of naval presence.”<sup>17</sup>

Even the projection of maritime power may not serve to shape the environment or resolve a regional crisis. The history of the U.S. presence in the Persian Gulf in the 1980s—including Operation EARNEST WILL, the ill-fated attempt to protect oil shipments by reflagging foreign-registry tankers—does not support the thesis that naval forward presence exercises a positive influence on regional dynamics. Similarly, it is considered self-evident in Navy circles that the

deployment of two aircraft carriers to the Taiwan Straits region ended the 1996 crisis. At least one post-incident assessment suggests otherwise.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the shaping function, the Navy asserts, forward presence provides unique operational advantages. The Navy makes a strong case that such deployments are critical enablers of joint warfare, through a combination of sea control and maritime power projection; for instance, where land bases are not available, naval forces can become alternative bases. Naval power-projection capabilities, in this view, are likely to be less vulnerable to adversary attack than land bases. Even here, however, the other services have attempted to make cases that forward presence can be accomplished in other ways and with different means.<sup>19</sup>

The land-versus-sea-base argument has been going on for a long time, with no resolution in sight. It is sufficient here to point out that the fact that naval forward presence may be needed if land bases are not available does not make it the preferred solution. Indeed, when the stakes are sufficiently grave or vital interests and allies are threatened, it is unlikely that U.S. political and military leaders will rely solely on naval forward presence. To put it bluntly, if land bases are necessary, they will be found or even seized. This is an often-overlooked lesson of the Gulf War and the Kosovo campaign. In this connection, the Navy itself speaks of its role as that of an enabler, suggesting that it is the responsibility of the other services—those that require land basing—to win a war. In that light, it is not clear that allies will find the simple presence of naval units offshore adequate. U.S. “boots on the ground” have reassured allies for some fifty years as indications that the United States is willing to share equally in the risks of resisting aggression.

At the very minimum, the Navy needs to rethink how it describes the forward-presence mission.<sup>20</sup> Justifying forward presence in terms of the ability to shape the international environment raises questions of how relevant the current Navy force structure is to that purpose. Moreover, it risks promising more than the Navy can deliver, at least in terms of demonstrable impact. Also, because forward presence is tied to a particular national security strategy, it may be rendered less relevant if the new administration formulates a new, more restrained strategy.

It is, then, difficult to see continuous, peacetime forward presence as anything other than a vehicle for defending the Navy’s desired force structure. The political rationale is weak at best, and holding on to it may undermine the Navy’s case for more capable forces in the future. One naval officer appears to have recognized the danger in a recent article: “If . . . naval forward presence forces have but small roles in crisis response and contingencies, such forces are luxuries that may have

some relevance in peacetime diplomacy but little usefulness in crisis and war. This is not an impression that bodes well for the future of a military service.”<sup>21</sup>

### **CAN THE NAVY MAINTAIN A STRATEGY OF FORWARD PRESENCE?**

Even if it were obvious that forward presence is an important tool of U.S. national security strategy, there are reasons to believe that it will not be possible to continue it for long. Forward presence places inordinate and, in the current budgetary environment, unsustainable physical demands on the Navy. Some fixed and substantial number of ships is necessary to maintain a fraction of them on station continually. For every ship deployed, the U.S. Navy requires between three and five more in rotation: steaming to or from the deployment area; in overhaul; in port for leave and repair; and “working up” in local training exercises. All that in turn translates into a minimum required budget. It is clear that the Navy will not have a large enough budget, and thus not enough ships. Vice Admiral Edmund Giambastiani was reported to have pegged the Navy–Marine Corps annual procurement budget at between twenty-eight and thirty-four billion dollars annually, far above the twenty-two-billion average for the past decade.<sup>22</sup> The lower procurement number translates into reduced ship construction and, inevitably, a navy of fewer than three hundred ships. Even if additional funds and an adequate number of ships were available, changes to the threat environments in regions where forward naval presence is now practiced raise questions as to its wisdom.

All naval forces are subject to the terrible tyranny of distance. It takes time for ships to sail from their home ports to deployment areas. Nowhere are the distances to be traveled greater than in the Pacific. Whereas it typically takes a U.S. warship about eleven days to travel from the East Coast to its assigned station in the Mediterranean, the same deployment can take up to twenty days from the West Coast of the United States to the littoral waters of the Asian landmass.

No other navy is so tyrannized by its strategy and geography as that of the United States. Every other naval power is concerned largely with the protection of its own coastlines and nearby waters. Only the United States is confronted with the need to project naval power eight to ten thousand miles to areas of concern. The farther away a deployment area is from home ports, the more ships are required in order that a given number can be continually present. Hence a strategy that emphasizes forward presence inevitably puts additional strain on an already-overstretched U.S. Navy.

From a force of nearly six hundred ships in the late 1980s, the Navy has been reduced to a little over three hundred ships today, of which approximately 45 percent must be under way in order to meet current peacetime responsibilities.

This places enormous strain not only on the ships but on the men and women who serve aboard them. At the same time, because of reduced funds for shipbuilding, the average age of the Navy's vessels is increasing; accordingly, break-

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downs become more frequent, maintenance costs rise, and availability rates decline. However valuable forward presence may be in the Pentagon's internecine budget battles, it can impose in-

tolerable stress on a service that is asked to perform missions for which it is underequipped. When forward presence becomes a burden to the very service that is its chief proponent, it is time to rethink the whole proposition.

The Navy understands the problem. In testimony before the House of Representatives in 2000, Vice Admiral Conrad Lautenbacher, Deputy Chief of Naval Operations, declared that "it is no secret that our current resources of 316 ships are fully deployed and in many cases stretched thin to meet the growing national security demands."<sup>23</sup> This is not merely the view from headquarters. Admiral Dennis McGinn, commander of the Third Fleet, stated before Congress in February 2000 that "force structure throughout the Navy is such that an increased commitment anywhere necessitates reduction of operations somewhere else, or a quality of life impact due to increased operating tempo."<sup>24</sup> The commander of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, operating in the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf, said it best:

Although I am receiving the necessary forces to meet Fifth Fleet obligations, the fleet is stretched and I am uncertain how much longer the Navy can continue to juggle forces to meet the varied regional requirements, including Fifth Fleet's. I am uncertain that we have the surge capability to meet a major theater contingency, or theater war. Eventually, the increased operational tempo on our fewer and fewer ships will take its toll on their availability and readiness.<sup>25</sup>

The reality is that numbers matter. The U.S. Navy is critically short of ships; it does not have enough to maintain a full-time, combat-credible naval presence in regions of interest to the U.S. and provide the necessary surge capability for crisis or war. As a result of recent events like Kosovo, for which the western Pacific was stripped of its aircraft carrier, public and congressional attention has been focused on the inadequacy of the Navy's inventory of carriers. Further, the Joint Chiefs of Staff have published a study concluding that the nation requires sixty-eight attack submarines instead of the fifty that have been allowed. A recent surface combatant study concludes that the Navy requires up to 139 multimission warships in order to satisfy the full range of requirements and carry out day-to-day operations; instead, the Navy has been allowed only 116.

At least a quarter of its surface combatants are aging frigates and older destroyers that lack offensive and defensive capabilities essential to a twenty-first-century navy. Speaking of the lack of surface combatants, one senior naval officer has been quoted as saying, “We know we are broken. We are running our ships into the ground, our missions are expanding and our force structure is being driven down to 116 surface ships. We have to address it before we hit the precipice.”<sup>26</sup>

Unfortunately, without significantly higher defense budgets, there is no possibility that the Navy will be able to acquire the ships and submarines it needs to maintain its current forward presence posture. It is already evident that U.S. defense spending is well short of what will be required to maintain the existing

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force structure. The United States must be willing to spend on average 4 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) to support fully the force recommended by the

Quadrennial Defense Review over the next twenty years, fiscal years (FY) 2001–20. In fact, however, based on the current FY 2002 budget submission to Congress, defense spending will fall from 2.9 percent of GDP in FY 2000 to 2.4 percent in FY 2010, and to 2 percent in 2020.<sup>27</sup>

The Congressional Budget Office reports that the Defense Department is faced with annual budget shortfalls of fifty-two to seventy-seven billion dollars. General Henry Shelton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, testified before Congress in October 2000 that the military services had estimated that they will need at least \$48.5 billion more each year. The Secretary of the Air Force, F. Whitten Peters, asserted in a recent interview that the U.S. military needed some \$100 billion over current spending levels in order to replace aging equipment and maintain or improve operational readiness.<sup>28</sup> Unless real annual defense spending is increased well above the current \$310 billion at some time during this decade, the president and Congress will be left with little choice but to make additional personnel cuts, force structure reductions, and base closures.

The Navy will suffer severely if such projections, and others, of budgetary shortfalls are even approximately accurate. A recent Navy study warned that procurement was short some eight-five billion dollars for the period 2008–20, with the shipbuilding budget likely to be underfunded by some four billion annually, and naval aviation by \$3.3 billion.<sup>29</sup> These shortfalls could result in a Navy one-third to one-half its present size by the year 2010.

If the force cannot be recapitalized, perhaps it can be modernized or transformed, thereby avoiding the problem of finding the necessary additional funds. A number of analytic and political writers have advocated “skipping generations” in procurement in order to focus attention and resources on revolutionary

capabilities. Unhappily, the idea of skipping a generation is a fantasy. There is an illusion among its advocates that the current force will last the additional twenty-odd years while the transformation takes place. In fact, however, the funds necessary to support a transformation can be freed up only if current forces and near-term acquisitions are sharply reduced. Reducing forces and acquisitions now will only make the conduct of current operations, including forward presence, more difficult. Moreover, reducing the acquisitions will seriously damage the defense industrial base, on which the services will have to rely for the production of next-generation equipment.

Budgetary strictures also constrain the fielding of the advanced capabilities forward-deployed forces will need if they are to be combat credible and survivable. The Navy acknowledges that the threat to its forward-deployed forces is serious and likely to grow substantially worse over the next few decades.<sup>30</sup> This means that combatants built for the Cold War are increasingly vulnerable, particularly in littoral waters. The Navy will need to invest in a host of new technologies enhancing both the offensive and defensive power of the fleet; otherwise, forward presence will be not merely an expensive conceit but a truly dangerous fetish. Yet it is not clear that either the technology or the resources will be available. The demand that the Navy operate forward in peacetime, then, exerts a perverse effect, forcing on the Navy an expensive modernization/transformation effort that may in the end prove unsuccessful, if only due to a lack of funds.

It must also be recognized that even if transformation is possible, it will take decades to complete. As a result, today's Navy will be required to execute the forward-presence strategy ten and even twenty years into the future. If, as is argued by advocates of transformation, today's Navy will be the wrong force with which to maintain forward presence or contest littoral waters, it seems obvious that the problem is not with the force but with the demand that the Navy continue to base its strategy on forward presence. The Navy must seek ways other than slavish obedience to the tyranny of forward presence to pursue its strategic objectives and support national security.

There remains a final question. Facing a growing littoral threat, depending on large "Cold War era" ships and submarines, and recognizing the effort by some potential adversaries to acquire "green" and even "blue-water" capabilities, why does the Navy continue to emphasize forward presence? It would seem reckless, to say the least, to continue to pursue a demanding strategy with declining resources of the wrong type. Moreover, it would seem to be a waste of the single advantage that the U.S. Navy possesses and that will remain uncontested for decades to come: its ability to dominate the open oceans.

Operating in close-in waters would appear to provide littoral adversaries with an unacceptable advantage. The desire of potential adversaries to contest

the U.S. Navy for control of these waters suggests that it would be foolhardy for the Navy to sail into that trap.

### THE FUTURE OF FORWARD PRESENCE

The future of forward presence, then, appears uncertain at best. The American people's patience with the idea that the United States can shape an international environment to suit its sensibilities appears to be wearing thin. A more judicious approach to the application of military power in the service of foreign policy will inevitably lead to a reduced requirement for forward presence. Where peacetime forward presence is required, naval forces may not be able to provide it more effectively than other kinds of forces. It is possible that policy makers and the public alike will look for more "bang for their presence buck."

The Navy acknowledges that if forward-deployed forces are to play useful roles in peacetime or crisis, they must possess credible combat power. It is not clear how this can be accomplished in the face of the emerging threat. The proliferation of asymmetric and anti-access capabilities may threaten the survivability of forward-deployed naval forces. This problem is particularly acute for traditional surface platforms. Efforts to address the emerging vulnerability of forward-deployed naval forces by changing the character of naval systems and developing new concepts of operations may compromise the combat capability of such forces. To the extent that enhanced survivability must be acquired at the expense of offensive capabilities, it would seem to undercut the basic rationale for forward presence.

Finally, if forward-deployed capabilities can be maintained only at the expense of the ability to control the broad oceans, it will have proven to be a bad decision. At present there are no threats to the U.S. Navy in the open oceans, and this will be the case for the next several decades. However, a force built over the next ten or twenty years for forward presence and littoral combat will have to meet whatever threats emerge in the "shallow seas" for many decades beyond. Increased competition between the United States and rising regional powers could result in a challenge to the U.S. Navy's mastery of the open oceans, or at least one ocean. Such a challenge could come soon enough to necessitate reconsideration of the present policy of optimizing naval forces for the forward-presence mission.

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