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THE NEW MARITIME STRATEGY

A Lost Opportunity

William T. Pendley

America is in a New Era that began over a decade and a half ago with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Like all new eras in history, this one brings with it both new threats and new opportunities. For the United States to protect and advance its national interests and assure its survival, it must adapt to change and put in place a national strategy that will meet these new challenges. It is important that this new national strategy be supported by a comprehensive military strategy as well. One element of the military strategy should be a maritime strategy that provides for the most effective employment of maritime forces within a joint force strategy. *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower* (October 2007, available at www.navy.mil/maritime/MaritimeStrategy.pdf) is the latest in a series of attempts to do so. Unfortunately, like the national strategy publications to which it makes reference, the latest maritime strategy attempts to be all things to all people and therefore fails the test for any realistic and viable strategy. It reads more like a public affairs document developed at town meetings. Even a declaratory strategy requires several major elements if it is to be taken seriously.

AN ACCURATE ANALYSIS OF THE GLOBAL SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

First, a military strategy must provide an accurate analysis of the global security environment for which it is designed and in which it will be implemented. This new maritime strategy is at its best in this area. It recognizes the more complex world of this New Era. It avoids any references to a unipolar world or to America as the “indispensable nation.” Such arrogant misrepresentations of the international system and America’s role have contributed to the failure of U.S.

administrations to adopt a coherent and effective strategy for nearly ten and a half years. Many of the difficult situations the United States finds itself facing today result from that failure.

This new maritime strategy envisions a multipolar international system that may be on the strategic horizon. We are still, more accurately, in a nonpolar world, in which both nations and nonstate actors exercise a high degree of latitude and in which alliances have lost much of the appeal and reliability that were present in bipolar and multipolar systems of the past. The major powers today seek to maintain peaceful and mutually beneficial relationships among themselves without losing their freedom of action. None seeks the types of confrontational relationships or targeted alliances that marked the previous century. Leftover alliance structures from the Cold War have attempted to restructure and revise their roles and missions to maintain relevance in this New Era.

Recognizing the dramatic change in the global security environment has been difficult for a generation of foreign policy and national security elites who were shaped by the experience of the last half of the twentieth century. America was truly the indispensable nation of the late 1940s and the early Cold War, but 2008 is not 1948. This new maritime strategy makes a positive contribution to any strategic debate by moving toward a more realistic assessment of the new global security environment.

THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE NEW ERA

Second, a military strategy must identify and prioritize the threats and opportunities that a new era brings. It is not adequate merely to catalogue threats, which is what this new maritime strategy does. To be relevant, it must prioritize the threats in terms of both their timing and danger to American national interests.

The most dangerous and imminent threats to American security and the safety of the homeland in this New Era are posed by radical Islamic terrorist organizations and the potential proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and means of delivering them. While defeating those threats requires a comprehensive approach employing integrated political, diplomatic, economic, and communication strategies, it requires an effective military strategy as well.

Additionally, there are potential threats of being drawn into conflicts in Korea or the Taiwan Strait, where deterrent strategies have maintained the peace for over half a century. While these conflicts may seem improbable and deterrable for the foreseeable future, they cannot be dismissed. Any military strategy must therefore seek to maintain capabilities that will bolster deterrence and prevail in any conflict if political solutions fail.

At a secondary level there are the transnational threats of piracy, drugs, and human trafficking, transshipment of WMD materials, and so forth. Such issues

are highlighted in the new maritime strategy, since it labels itself a “cooperative strategy,” and it is at this level that broad maritime cooperation is most feasible. These are traditional issues of interdiction appropriate for frigates or patrol craft and coast guard–type forces. This is where the “thousand-ship navy”—or as others have labeled it, the “thousand-ship coast guard”—has the best chance of becoming a reality. It is foolhardy, however, to assume that such broad maritime cooperation will be there for military action required to deal with the higher-level and more critical threats posed by proliferation or terrorist activities, not to mention should deterrence fail in the Taiwan Strait or Korea.

This new maritime strategy fails to differentiate clearly and prioritize present-day threats; accordingly, it lacks an essential focus. Every potential threat is listed, but a strategy to guide the investment of resources, alliance priorities and force development, basing, and deployments must provide both judgments and assessments, probabilities and priorities. This proposed maritime strategy fails in this, most conspicuously when it includes terrorism in the same breath as piracy, drugs, and human trafficking.

To be successful a strategy must also grasp opportunities that arise. The primary security threats to America being largely focused in that broad Islamic arc that reaches from Africa to Southeast Asia, there is an opportunity to reduce America’s military footprint elsewhere. Doing so would counter arguments that the United States seeks some manner of global hegemony or empire and would reduce both the political burden for friendly governments and targets for terrorist organizations. Such redeployment would also allow for more appropriate utilization and strategic positioning of U.S. forces, including maritime forces.

Given the economic and political progress of Western Europe, it is possible to transition military leadership within a reformed and expanded NATO. Europe in 2008 is not the Europe of 1948. America is an Atlantic power, not a European power. Transition of military leadership and security responsibility in Europe and redeployment of U.S. forces from Europe would be long overdue recognitions of the political, economic, and security realities on the continent.

In Northeast Asia the same type of transition from a leading military to a supporting one is required. That transition has been slow in coming in Korea, despite the significant economic and political progress there. The alliance with Japan is a useful model, with the United States clearly in a supporting role in the military defense of Japan, consolidating and reducing its forces stationed there. Both countries benefit from a broader political alliance globally while making necessary adjustments in their military alliance. North Korea is not a significant threat to the United States. The regional powers—Japan, South Korea, and China—have far more at stake in peace on the Korean Peninsula and are better positioned both to maintain that peace and to encourage the type of internal

change required in North Korea. Northeast Asia of 2008 is not the Northeast Asia of 1953, and American military presence on the Korean Peninsula that was for many years essential may now be more a hindrance to progress and peace. America is a Pacific power, not an Asian power.

The United States was faced with a global challenge twice in the last century. First America and its allies faced the combination of Nazi Germany, imperial Japan, and fascist Italy. That was a real axis. Iraq, Iran, and North Korea are not in the same ballpark. Second, the Soviet Union and the communist ideology posed a global challenge during the Cold War. Attempts today to paint the terrorist threat as a global threat exaggerate its capabilities. China is the rising state in Asia, but it too faces severe domestic challenges and resource limitations; in military terms, it remains at best a regional power for the foreseeable future. If one removes the Taiwan issue, it is difficult to construct a realistic scenario for a Sino-American conflict. America faces no global threat from any nation, nonstate actor, or ideology, today or for the foreseeable future, that measures up to those faced in the past.

An effective military strategy must be focused on current strategic realities and future probabilities. It must deal with the threats that actually exist, not those it would prefer. It must also reallocate resources, evolve alliance relationships, and reposition forces to take advantage of change and the opportunities it offers. Because this new maritime strategy fails to identify and prioritize clearly threats and opportunities, what it advances is far too general and unfocused to serve as even a relevant declaratory strategy.

ENSURING AMERICAN SECURITY

Third, given that a strategy makes an accurate analysis of the global security environment and clearly identifies and prioritizes the threats and opportunities of the era in which it will be implemented, it must also lay out at its core how it will ensure America's security. How does it propose to succeed, and how does it differ from or support the current military strategy? Here this new maritime strategy is filled with internal contradictions.

The strategy argues that U.S. maritime forces will be "globally postured" and employ "persistent presence," while only paragraphs later it admits that "we cannot be everywhere." The first argument is obviously designed to support the maintenance of a powerful and, ideally, larger fleet and other maritime forces. The later contradictory admission is a recognition of a limitation of the resources that will be available for maritime forces absent a real maritime threat.

The strategy attempts to bridge this obvious disconnect with the theme of cooperative arrangements, such as the Global Maritime Partnership. Unfortunately, evidence to date is not convincing. Few nations have provided any

maritime forces to critical maritime operations in the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, or the Indian Ocean off the Horn of Africa. These are the very maritime operations for which the strategy seeks a cooperative approach. The recent ending of Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force refueling operations in the Indian Ocean and the Japanese withdrawal from the region indicate how fragile these arrangements can be even with America's closest allies.

While the discussion of international maritime cooperation and a thousand-ship navy makes for great press at an International Seapower Symposium, such a concept is not highly significant for an American military strategy. It is marginal at best and should occupy a paragraph or two focused on piracy, drugs, human trafficking, and interdiction of nuclear materials. Giving cooperative arrangements such heavy play in the strategy is counterproductive to arguments for stronger U.S. maritime forces. Critics will note that a thousand-ship navy is far larger than the six hundred ships the U.S. Navy sought during the height of the Cold War, when there was a maritime threat.

The strategy lists a host of maritime operations, extending from deterring major-power conflict to supporting civil authorities in homeland security to humanitarian operations. Nonetheless, it fails once again to provide any real prioritization or focus. This may reflect the obvious problem of constructing a single strategy that includes all three maritime branches: the Marines, the Navy, and the Coast Guard. While all operate at sea or from the sea, each has a very different focus and priorities. A maritime strategy that attempts to include all three must break down into separate individual subsections or, as is the case here, become far too general to be of significant value.

It is unfortunate that this latest attempt does such a good job of recognizing the change in the global security environment and identifying the broad spectrum of threats yet fails to provide a real military strategy. It promises to do everything, without any recognition of resource requirements or competing demands.

A CAPABILITIES-BASED STRATEGY?

The section titled "Implementing the Strategy" provides a list of core capabilities that U.S. maritime forces should possess: forward presence, deterrence, sea control, power projection, sea security, and humanitarian activity. There is a discussion of how each operational capability may be used and why it may be needed.

This section is well written and is reminiscent of discussions at the end of the Cold War, in the waning days of the G. H. W. Bush administration and the early days of the Clinton administration. With the collapse of the Soviet Union the strategic threat had disappeared, and without such a threat it was possible for the defense budget to go into freefall as the nation dreamed of a "peace dividend."

Casting about for a new enemy quickly revealed that there was no significant peer competitor or enemy state on the horizon. Some tried unsuccessfully to promote China, Japan, or a revived Soviet Union/Russia. Lacking a real conventional enemy any time soon, some proposed building a capabilities-based military strategy across a wide range of potential threats that might emerge in the future. Secretary of Defense Les Aspin, with his experience in Congress, quickly rejected such an approach. Democracies resist investment in militaries if there is not a real identified threat or strategic rationale related to the interests, safety, and security of the nation. The 1990s largely became a lost decade in strategic affairs, planning for threats that were not there while ignoring the emerging threats of the New Era.

Although the core capabilities listed in “Implementing the Strategy” are ones that any American maritime force should possess, they are, unfortunately, core capabilities in search of a strategy. The section of the proposed maritime strategy that deals with “Implementation Priorities” deals with management and administration of the force. It addresses integration of maritime forces and interoperability, as well as maritime domain awareness and the preparation of service personnel. These are all important elements in operating a maritime force but are not the real priorities for implementation of a strategy. Those priorities should be where forces would be deployed, what roles would be emphasized, and what maritime forces should be developed and deployed that would be most critical to the success of the strategy. The recent leaked memo detailing three different navies demonstrates both the absence of and the need for a real maritime strategy that contains such recommended priorities.

The new maritime strategy provides an adequate list of what capabilities a maritime force should have and states effectively the importance of interoperability, training, and integration of the force. This, however, will allow some to characterize the document as a capabilities-based, declaratory strategy despite the fact it lacks even a prioritization of capabilities. Given the fiscal realities, growing domestic demands, and the fact that the United States faces real and immediate threats, a capabilities-based strategy is not what is needed to make the tough decisions required for America’s security.

A LOST OPPORTUNITY

The American people have tired of the role of global policeman and its inherent costs. While they expect their military to develop a strategy to defend the homeland and U.S. interests, the experiences of Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq make it highly probable that they will not support another major intervention or ground war on the Eurasian continent. The American people should expect a strategy that optimizes U.S. technological superiority and produces quick and

decisive military actions, not prolonged and seemingly indecisive conflicts. There are models in this New Era, such as the U.S. operations in the former Yugoslavia and the initial removal of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

A strategy to defeat terrorists that relies primarily on military forces is fatally flawed. If it also depends on large ground forces, interventions, occupations, and extended counterinsurgency operations conducted by other than indigenous forces, it plays to the strengths of the enemy. Such a strategy may initially benefit from the support of the American people, but as the conflict goes on that support will wane, giving the terrorists an opportunity for victory—not because of their military superiority or failure of U.S. forces but because the American military strategy is fundamentally defective.

A successful strategy for defeating terrorists must be a comprehensive one that integrates political, diplomatic, economic, and communications means. The military element of the strategy must concentrate on developing a robust intelligence system and a capability for timely strikes on targets at extended ranges with increased accuracy and lethality, from both manned and unmanned platforms. It must be an offshore strategy that avoids major basing or deployments inside Islamic nations, relying primarily on the use of special operations units, smart weapons, robust intelligence, and support for indigenous forces. While it is accurate to think of this as a long war in which terrorists will largely be contained or countered, terrorism will not be defeated in a traditional or conventional sense. It would be a serious strategic blunder to be dragged into an extensive series of military campaigns carried out by major U.S. ground forces inside the Islamic world.

Such a comprehensive strategy is also required in order to oppose proliferation. It too must have a military element. There are specific scenarios in which the threat requires military action to eliminate the development of weapons of mass destruction or their transfer to terrorists or regimes that support such organizations. The same offshore military means discussed above are applicable to halting the threat of proliferation if diplomatic, political, and economic measures are unsuccessful.

A meaningful military strategy must also defeat any area-denial strategy that China might employ to counter U.S. capability to meet its commitments to Taiwan. Deterrence in both the Taiwan Strait and in Korea depends on American ability to support their defense. An effective strategy must provide for appropriate forces to enforce sea control if necessary in surrounding areas for both power projection and direct support.

Finally, any military strategy for the United States must ensure the survival of a credible strategic nuclear deterrent. The maritime element is the most survivable strategic nuclear force and thus the most important part of the strategic deterrent.

The opportunity was there to develop a maritime strategy that would be effective against terrorist and proliferation threats while supporting deterrence in Korea and the Taiwan Strait and maintaining America's strategic nuclear deterrent. The United States and its major maritime allies, Great Britain, Japan, and Australia, are not continental powers. Such an alliance requires a maritime strategy that is based offshore, emphasizes intelligence, and provides for timely and decisive power projection from both sea-based platforms and land-based systems with intercontinental range. The absence of any significant discussion of sea basing is noticeable in this new maritime strategy.

While the purpose of a maritime strategy is to provide for the most effective use of maritime power to protect and advance U.S. interests, it can and should highlight the unique contributions that ground and air forces can make within such an offshore military strategy. It also must provide recognition that America's means and the will of the American people are not unlimited and that choices and priorities are therefore required in any realistic military strategy.

While it is easy to be critical of this new maritime strategy, the real problem that the United States faces is the lack of a coherent national strategy for this New Era. A national strategy must define the role America will play in the world and the ends that it will seek. It must also ensure that those ends are in balance with the will of the people. America's major challenge today comes not from enemies abroad but from neglect of the eroding domestic foundations of national power. Rebuilding America's domestic foundations and thus assuring America's future as a great power will require major adjustments in U.S. overseas commitments and military strategy.

It will be difficult, however, to envision a truly realistic and effective military strategy that deals with the external threats of this New Era until the United States faces up to the significant changes both in its global and domestic challenges and puts in place a national strategy. As it is, the maritime strategy provides a list of current and potential threats and a catalogue of the core capabilities for maritime forces. Beyond that, unfortunately, it marks a lost opportunity to develop a more effective and comprehensive military strategy to protect and advance America's interests in this New Era.