

THE EVOLUTION OF MODERN U.S. NAVAL STRATEGY

Address by Vice Admiral Frank C. Pandolfe to the Naval Strategy Symposium, Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island, 13 June 2016

Good morning, everyone. It's a pleasure to be back in Newport, the home of naval strategic thought for well over a hundred years. Thanks to this school—and to the thousands of military officers and civilian strategists who have worked here over the years—our Navy has benefited from farsighted and rigorous thinking about how best to apply maritime power to achieve our nation's goals in ever-changing security environments.

Today we sometimes hear laments about how our nation lacks effective military strategies and strategists. Yet in this room today there are nearly seventy-five naval officers representing a vibrant community of strategic thinking that is growing every year. And when we include civilian members of our strategy community and retired officers, we can appreciate a family that numbers many more.

So, my first message to you today is to take heart regarding the state of our strategic thinking. It is robust, and I predict it will remain so. Why do I say that? Because our Navy has regularly produced timely and innovative strategies over the past thirty years. Let's take a look.

Modern Naval Strategy: An Overview

Let's start with the *Maritime Strategy of 1986*. I was a junior officer when it came out. I well remember the excitement generated by publication of that unclassified version of our war plan for taking the fight to the enemy at sea and ashore. In a confrontational era, it was a confrontational document. Inside its covers were three complementary essays by the CNO [Chief of Naval Operations], CMC [Commandant of the Marine Corps], and SecNav [Secretary of the Navy]. The *Maritime Strategy* focused on how we would defeat the Soviet fleet, detailed how the Marines would take the fight ashore, and called for six hundred ships to fulfill the strategy.

Critics said the *Maritime Strategy* was nothing more than a marketing tool to justify an expanded Navy and Marine Corps. They were wrong. The *Maritime*

Strategy galvanized the fleet. It provided a strategic context for developing war-fighting instructions and executing bold and innovative tactics that were practiced from the High North to the Mediterranean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. Above all, it was a powerful signal from our leadership that maritime power would play a leading role should global war be unleashed on us.

The *Maritime Strategy*, like all strategies, had to make choices. Its horizon was relatively near term. Specifics of how the services would integrate capabilities largely were left for others to work out. And the fiscal challenges of sustaining such a large fleet were not fully addressed.

Nevertheless, the *Maritime Strategy* succeeded brilliantly in communicating the challenges we faced and our unalterable goal of victory at sea, to be achieved by the simultaneous application of decisive operations in multiple theaters. It called for action by way of an ambitious construction program that would create the instrument of supreme sea power in the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first. It was a strategy that dreamed big and, in doing so, generated strong support to build hundreds of ships, some of which still sail in the fleet today.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the naval services shifted gears and unveiled . . . *From the Sea* in 1992. Today it is easy to underestimate how much emotion went into writing that document. The world had fundamentally changed, and a new strategy was needed to address emergent challenges. To be effective, that strategy had to address hard choices, recommending that some capabilities be emphasized going forward and others downsized.

In the absence of the Soviet Union, American sea control was assumed as a fact; an open-ocean fight would not be necessary. Power projection ashore was king. Henceforth, naval forces would focus their efforts in the littorals, ensuring the flow ashore of military capabilities by way of sequential joint operations.

As a result of this shift in naval strategic thinking, a number of submarines and maritime patrol aircraft were cut from the fleet while strike assets and amphibious shipping were prioritized. Adversaries were viewed as regional in nature and with limited reach. Addressing humanitarian concerns emerged as a key mission area, rivaling war fighting in competing for institutional attention. Political theorists spoke of great-power convergence, working toward an increasingly free, prosperous, and peaceful world order. A terrible day in September 2001 ended such utopian dreams.

In October 2002, our Navy unveiled its *Sea Power 21* strategy. *Sea Power 21* described the capabilities needed to meet nation-state challenges but also to address growing transregional threats posed by substate actors employing terror to undermine established political orders.

Sea Power 21 emphasized the centrality of networked information in generating joint effects. It moved beyond the sequential prescriptions of . . . *From the*

Sea to envision a unified battle space within which the oceans would be a vast maneuver area from which to deliver offensive fires and—for the first time—defensive protection deep inland. It stated that in the future the positioning of BMD [ballistic-missile defense] ships would rival that of aircraft carriers, while computer network defenses would be as important as missiles in ensuring mission success. It directed radical change in how we managed the fleet, implemented innovation, and trained our people.

Sea Power 21, like its predecessors, emphasized some things over others. It largely spoke to exploiting U.S. unilateral advantages, stressing the development of advanced capabilities that would widen the gap between America and its partners. If the heart of the *Maritime Strategy* was an operational war plan, *Sea Power 21* fundamentally was a vision document. Both, to be fully implemented, required significant increases in naval funding.

Sea Power 21 served us well. It set the course for our Navy's capability development. Today, nearly fourteen years later, most of the programs it recommended are present or arriving in the fleet; we are implementing increasingly responsive, transparent, and tailored training and assignment processes; and we continue our efforts to capture institutional efficiencies.

In 2007, the naval services updated our strategic guidance yet again by unveiling *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*. CS-21, as it became known, was a hopeful strategy. It emphasized the collective strength to be derived from leveraging a global coalition of like-minded nations. It foresaw the possibility of creating, in effect, a "thousand-ship navy" dedicated to patrolling the seelanes, policing up international outliers, and providing humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HA/DR).

While the *Maritime Strategy* emphasized war fighting at sea, . . . *From the Sea* stressed enabling sequential joint power projection, and *Sea Power 21* envisioned networked capabilities generating joint effects across a unified battle space, CS-21 highlighted the value to our nation of time-tested maritime core capabilities: forward presence, deterrence, sea control, power projection, maritime security, HA/DR.

CS-21 proved right for its time, as well. It demonstrated immense international appeal owing to its inclusive nature and relatively modest capability demands. It was the perfect vehicle for rallying broad efforts to combat piracy, which had emerged as a significant problem for international commerce. It came to life as an array of navies from around the globe worked together to shepherd merchant ships through dangerous waters. And it fostered navy-to-navy cooperation in other ways. For example, at various times both Russian and Chinese senior officers attended the International Seapower Symposium in Newport.

CS-21 also had its critics. It struck some as overly optimistic in implying that growing economic integration would lead to political convergence. It also was accused of de-emphasizing war fighting. But such issues did not compromise its effectiveness. In the end, CS-21 was remarkably successful in inspiring greater international naval cooperation.

More recently, as international tensions have increased from the Baltic to the South China Sea, our strategy has been revised yet again. Introduced just last year, *CS-21 Revised* (2015) has a sharper edge than its predecessor. It emphasizes five essential functions, the first of which is all-domain access to counter growing antiaccess/area-denial (A2/AD) threats, followed by deterrence, sea control, power projection, and maritime security. The previous emphasis on coalition efforts is balanced with the need to develop higher-end war-fighting capabilities. HA/DR is dropped as a major focus area. Russia and China are named as growing sources of international instability. CNO [Admiral John] Richardson underlines this evolving challenge in his *Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority*, writing that “[f]or the first time in 25 years, the United States is facing a return to great power competition.”

Lessons Learned

What lessons can we take away from this brief review of the evolution of naval strategy over the past three decades?

First, naval strategic thinking is not on holiday today and never has been. To the contrary, the naval services have compiled an impressive record of updating their strategic guidance documents on a regular basis to reflect an ever-changing world.

Also, all these documents emphasized time-tested maritime strengths, including the importance of being forward to reassure allies, deter adversaries, and respond to crises. They prescribed the application of both sea-control and power-projection capabilities, adjusting the balance between them to reflect the prevailing threat environment. And they conveyed an appreciation for the importance of allies and partners while illuminating the need to develop and, when necessary, to employ unilateral capabilities. They built on one another—they evolved—in recommending actions required to meet changing threats. And they conveyed an appreciation for the importance of teamwork within and among services, departments, agencies, and nations.

Yet each of these documents was distinct in how it emphasized the three pillars of strategy: ends, ways, and means. For example, *Sea Power 21*'s strength was its vision of a future fleet, illustrating the *ends* of strategy. The *Maritime Strategy* of 1986, on the other hand, was most effective in detailing how the United States would destroy the Soviet fleet and project power ashore, a brilliant illustration of

strategic ways. And CS-21 was unique in emphasizing the power of partnering, placing an emphasis on employing shared *means* toward common purpose.

As times changed, so did our strategic guidance. Yet when looking across these documents, are there lessons to be learned? I believe there are. In drafting future strategies, I recommend employing the following principles:

1. *Address the main challenge.* A successful strategy must focus on the most pressing challenge facing our Navy at the time. Defeat the Soviets, enable joint operations ashore, envision the future, leverage cooperative action—each naval strategy in its own way addressed the most immediate need before us.
2. *Call for action.* An effective strategy must inspire change. The *Maritime Strategy* galvanized support to build a six-hundred-ship Navy. . . . *From the Sea* led to tough choices that had far-reaching impact. *Sea Power 21* called for leveraging networked information to improve everything from war fighting to personnel processes. And CS-21 recommended building innovative coalitions to generate presence beyond the capacity of any one navy.
3. *Feasibility first.* To be effective, a strategy must be achievable. When debating strategic options, the first question to be asked should be “Can we do this?” rather than “Should we do this?” Clausewitz wrote that if the ends of a strategy are beyond its means before the start of conflict, they likely will remain so. Shaping ends to match ways and means is central to developing a solid strategy. Only after the strategy is properly scoped may decision makers answer the policy question: Should we do this?
4. *Keep it short.* American strategy during World War II remains the gold standard for succinctness: Germany first. Two words. That’s it. Those two words conveyed the end state we were pursuing, the sequence of major operations, the priority of resourcing and logistics, and the order by which we would begin to rebuild the badly fractured structure of world order. When writing a strategy, plain English is best, keep it unclassified if possible, and be ready to answer concisely the first question always asked: What’s new here?
5. *Communicate, communicate, communicate.* For any strategy to be effective, it must be driven home by way of a robust communication plan: many voices singing one song. Never underestimate how difficult it will be to penetrate target audiences with a clear message. Today that is harder than ever before because there is so much competition in the information

space. Everyone is wired, attention spans are short, and there is endless hype out there to steer attention away from your message.

6. *Be generous.* No strategy is “all new.” Each of the strategies reviewed here built on its predecessors while introducing fresh thoughts. In writing your contribution, I urge you to consult with those who came before you. At the end of the day, you will want your fellow strategists supporting your efforts.

What does all that amount to in practice? It means this: the most *impactful* strategies drive change—they cast the line far out in the water, seeking big fish; the *best* strategies are feasible and tightly written; the most *effective* strategies are hammered home relentlessly; and the best *supported* strategies leverage the collective wisdom of our strategy family.

All Ahead Flank!

So, where do we go from here? For naval strategists today, there are many rich areas to explore. In writing the next strategy, here are some questions to consider:

- What is the *key challenge* facing our Navy today? Where do we most need fresh guidance?
- Should we more strongly emphasize *sea control*, given the rise of A2/AD threats? Should we go even further and invest more fully in *sea-denial* capabilities?
- Should *nonkinetic* effects become our primary area of focus? Given the number of incoming threats we are likely to face, is it time to rely more heavily on nonkinetic effects?
- Should we concentrate the fleet in *one region*? Is that even possible, given today’s transregional threats?
- Should we focus on *restoring readiness* by reducing forward presence, or would doing so invite aggression and drive up demand?
- Should we *shift funding* among communities? We did so effectively to address the challenges of the post–Cold War era. Is it time to do so again, to counter the threats of a globalized era?
- Should we emphasize the *value of partners* to the degree that we have in recent strategy documents? Or is it time, once again, to focus primarily on advancing American capabilities?

Those are just a few of the many vital questions to ponder as you begin writing the next chapter in our strategic story. I urge you to explore them fully. I hope

you will fire up impassioned debates about the future of our Navy, ultimately positioning it to keep our nation safe and to shape the world to be a better place. That is your challenge, and I wish you every success on your journey!

Thank you.

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Vice Admiral Pandolfe serves as assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, representing the chairman in interagency matters, focusing on international relations and political-military concerns and acting as military representative to the Secretary of State. He graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1980 (with distinction) and was awarded a doctorate in international relations from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University in 1987. At sea, he has served in USS David R. Ray (DD 971), USS John Hancock (DD 981), USS Hué City (CG 66), and USS Forrestal (CV 59) and commanded USS Mitscher (DDG 57). He commanded Destroyer Squadron 18 from 2003 to 2004, operating as sea combat commander for the Enterprise carrier strike group in support of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. From 2008 to 2009, he led the Theodore Roosevelt carrier strike group on a combat deployment in support of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM in Afghanistan. Ashore, he was assigned to the Navy Staff as executive assistant to the Chief of Naval Operations, the Joint Staff as deputy director for strategy and policy, and the White House staff as military aide and adviser to the vice president of the United States. He also was Director, Surface Warfare Division, OPNAV N86, and Commander, Sixth Fleet / Striking and Support Forces NATO. Most recently, he served as director for strategic plans and policy (J5) on the Joint Staff.