

Center for Maritime Strategy: Looking to History to Help Face the Threats Ahead



Cmdr. Robert J. Briggs and Cmdr. Richard D. Slye monitor the Chinese aircraft carrier Liaoning from the pilothouse of the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Mustin in April. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Arthur Rosen*

The Navy League's Center for Maritime Strategy set sail on a following sea of supportive calls, emails, and letters. The urgent cause of our nation's maritime power resonates from commercial districts to the cargo terminals. With our ideal location inside the capital beltway, we will gather a coalition of maritime-minded business leaders, think tanks, concerned citizens and congressional leadership to drive the sea changes our maritime future needs.

Accordingly, I spent the first week in full “startup” mode, launching the office off the blocks while interviewing CMS candidates, fielding phone calls and taking CMS’s message on the road. I had the pleasure of introducing our mission and vision on two popular podcasts hosted by [Francis Rose of Fedscoop](#) and [Walker Mills of Sea Control](#) (affiliated with the Center for International Maritime Security, or CIMSEC). Both interviews will give you an idea of where we want to take CMS in the months and years to come

Meanwhile, over the Thanksgiving break, I had some time to reflect on the past and the future as CMS endeavors to become a strong advocate of America’s maritime power. In fact, just last month, I keynoted at Deep Blue 2021, a Canadian maritime conference. In preparing for my remarks, I harkened back to an assignment I undertook in the Pentagon in 1997 – a reflection indicative of the predictive errors that led how our maritime project decayed to its current state.

As a member of the staff of Dr. Paris Genalis, director of naval warfare in the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition and Technology (USD A&T), I served as a government adviser for the Defense Science Board Task Force on Submarines. The DSB’s team of talented, bi-partisan scientists, industrialists, civilian policy makers and uniformed services representatives chartered to decide the direction the nation would take in our next generation of submarines.

The task force first needed a vision of the future resolving what capabilities our next generation submarine required. Over its first few months, the task force embarked on a mini futures study to predict the security environment in the maritime domain in 2020 and beyond. It’s worthwhile to examine some of their conclusions, assess the accuracy of their predictions and then assess how we have done as a nation in responding to future threats.

The task force began with a prediction of the type of battlefield trends the military would face in 2020 and beyond. They envisioned:

- Multiple, simultaneous and shifting geographic foci
- Greater requirements for stealth, agility and self defense
- Proliferation of technology in sensing, guidance and targeting significantly increasing weapons effectiveness for all parties
- More effective coordination of sensors and shooters over longer ranges would allow smaller forces to conduct precision strike from greater distances
- Mission diversity would increase, requiring a greater variety of warfighter skills and tradecraft
- Reduced decision cycle would decrease warning time, intensifying the need for rapid response capabilities.

Twenty three years ago, the task force's future military trend predictions were spot on. We are deterring and defending against multiple adversaries on multiple axes in complex competitions which threaten to explode into conflicts fought over extreme standoff ranges. Agile hypersonic weapons and stealthy, long-range and accurate weapons in the hypersonic family of missiles slash commanders' available warning time and necessitate the evolution from simple Aegis-like decision systems to artificial intelligence assistance to the warfighter's decision cycle.

The nature of the battlefield determined, the task force imagined the Navy's role in 2020. A quick review of the U.S. Navy's latest maritime strategy paper, "Advantage at Sea," reveals the DSB's assessment of the Navy's mission priorities in 2020 and beyond was remarkably similar. You can read them at this [link to "Advantage at Sea."](#)

Unfortunately, like many other future studies of the same era, the DSB's geopolitical analysis of the "World from DoD's

Perspective – in the next 10 to 20, then 50 years” fell lethally short – wrong by either misestimation or misplaced optimism.

In 1998, the DSB predicted America would face “no plausible strategic competitor” in 10 to 20 years, beset instead by an increasing number of diffuse regional threats. This was dead wrong, even though the signs were predicted. The DSB noted the one-sided superiority of U.S. weapons systems will be reduced, that traditional alliances will become weaker and American overseas basing would decrease with more restrictions or national caveats on their use. DSB understood and reported technology diffusion would make our deterrence more challenging, especially as regional conflicts drew focus – all devastatingly true. Despite these trends, looking to the future from the heights of American power, we couldn’t conceive of a strategic adversary emerging before 2050.

While the DBS was dead wrong in its prediction of “no plausible strategic competitor” by 2020, the DSB was far from alone in banking on continued American global hegemony for another half century. Our inability as a nation to predict these threats 20 years ago suppressed our ability to act. America singularly focused on its fight against violent extremism across the Middle East and Africa to the exclusion of all else, assuming our competitive advantage would last. As we lay entrenched, other’s stole a march on us, filling the vacuums we left and grasping at the mantles we let droop.

So where do we go from here? Our strategic competitor out-paced our predictions by 30 years; and 20 years of counter-insurgency stymied our recognition and reaction. More than our future investments, our investment now must bias toward sea, air, space and the enabling signals domains. According to the Congressional Research Service, China will increase its fleet to 425 ships by 2030, with six carriers by the mid 2030s. The U.S. Navy will globally disperse only 300-305 ships, while the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) sits en masse on the

WESTPAC doorstep. Even if estimations of the PLAN threat are overwrought, which they are not, a recapitalization of the fleet and bets on commercial maritime power still provide guaranteed economic improvement and a mobile deterrent hedge against any forward threat against American national interests.

Efforts like the \$25 billion Shipyard Infrastructure Optimization Plan must be accelerated to improve the maritime industrial base over a decade, not two. We need the capability and capacity to build, modernize and repair our ships now. Doing anything less will leave our Sailors and national security within a lethal margin for potential defeat from which there will be no second chances.

Let's act now and restore the great reserve of sea power our nation needs, sooner than later!

The DSB Report summary was [published online in 1998](#) by the Defense Technical Information Center (DTIC).