

SURFACE WARFARE: The Nucleus of American Naval Power



190711-N-PJ626-5159 CORAL SEA (July 11, 2019) U.S. Navy, U.S. Coast Guard, Australian Navy, Canadian Navy and Japan Maritime Self Defense Force ships sail together in formation during Talisman Sabre 2019 . Talisman Sabre 2019 illustrates the closeness of the Australian and U.S. alliance and the strength of the military-to-military relationship. This is the eighth iteration of this exercise. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Kaila V. Peters)

By Bryan McGrath

The U.S. Navy is too small for what is asked of it, and what is asked of it is insufficient to meet the nation's needs. We have too few ships, submarines, aircraft, aircraft carriers, people, sensors, weapons and networks. China's People's Liberation Army Navy(PLAN) is growing faster than any navy has since the U.S. buildup to the Second World War, while the U.S. remains committed to efficient peacetime production levels

that ignore the reality of this competition. Relative to the threats it faces, American naval power is weaker than at any time since the start of World War II. While the U.S. Navy remains the world's most powerful seaborne combat force, not even the Soviet navy posed as dangerous a threat as China's PLAN does today. The nature of that threat presents the prospect of a PLAN so powerful it could dominate the Western Pacific, destroying the legitimacy and effectiveness of America's network of friends and allies by raising questions about America's will and capability to support that network. The ability to dominate a region of the world responsible for 65% of global GDP represents a profound threat to U.S. national security and prosperity, and that of like-minded nations globally. A broad-based naval building program is required to meet China's challenge and all elements of the modern, balanced fleet should expand. This essay focuses on the surface force, comprised of large surface combatants, small surface combatants and amphibious ships. For the purposes of this essay, critical surface platforms are excluded, but they are no less critical as a result. These include logistics ships, special mission ships, ocean-going tugs, sealift ships, tenders and the like. The surface force cannot operate without these other ships, and their importance to a coherent fleet design should not be discerned by their exclusion in this essay.

Navy Mission

The Navy shall be organized, trained and equipped for the peacetime promotion of the national security interests and prosperity of the United States and for prompt and sustained combat incident to operations at sea. It is responsible for the preparation of naval forces necessary for the duties described in the preceding sentence except as otherwise assigned and, in accordance with integrated joint mobilization plans, for the expansion of the peacetime components of the Navy to meet the needs of war. (10 USC Sec. 8062).

Members of the Navy League and readers of Seapower can be forgiven if this mission statement looks unfamiliar, as it has appeared in this form only since the passage of the 2023 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) in December 2022. Prior to this, Title 10 did not mention peacetime security interests or the promotion of American prosperity, functions the Navy has conducted since the earliest days of the republic. This disconnect between the Navy's legal mission and what was routinely demanded of it was stark, and the sole focus on "... prompt and sustained combat incident to operations at sea" led to bureaucratic maneuvering inside the Pentagon by other services and the Office of the Secretary of Defense when Navy officials sought a fleet large enough to carry out both its wartime and peacetime roles. The answer to the additional capacity necessary for operations other than war often was reduced to "that is not your mission." No more.

Congress is constitutionally obligated to "provide and maintain a Navy" (Art I Sec. 8) and the Navy is legally obligated to protect and promote the nation's security and prosperity in peace and be prepared to fight and win in war. No element of the modern fleet is as central to these missions as the surface force, and that force must be properly resourced for the things that are asked of it.

Tasks of the Surface Force

The tasks of the surface force are the tasks of the Navy, and while the following list is not doctrine, it represents a solid foundation for discussion.

Conventional deterrence.

To deter aggression against American interests, the U.S. Navy must be able to control the seas and skies where it operates and project power from there. It must also be capable of denying control of the sea to others. A controlled sea is an unnatural condition; the seas are, and ought to be, free. Imposing and maintaining sea control is a function of

conflict, and the ability to control the sea in order to project power is the Navy's primary contribution to conventional deterrence. Lethal, networked, sustainable and forward-deployed surface ships are the linchpin of the nation's forward-based efforts to promote security and prosperity, and they represent the vanguard of seapower that would turn immediately to Joint wartime operations should deterrence fail. One benefit of a strong deterrence posture is the assurance provided to allies and like-minded friends that the United States is a trusted local partner. Strategic (or nuclear) deterrence is a foundational task of the Navy, but it is the domain of the submarine force.

Crisis response

Crises occur where our interests lie, and those crises are both man-made and natural. Capable, flexible, available surface forces represent the humanity of the American people when disaster strikes or aggression flares. The forces we design and build for the delivery of violence are also forces of charity and relief, and they move from one role to the other without modification.

Naval diplomacy. This historic and critical task includes building partner capacity, assuring allies and friends, asserting U.S. rights and interests (including freedom of navigation), and exercising U.S. authority.

Warfighting. The Navy acts as the predominant maritime portion of the joint force in the waging and winning of war. It exercises sea control and sea denial to project power or to confound adversary power projection.

War termination. The Navy must prevent war, wage war and end war. The termination of war is a pursuit – especially at sea – that differs sufficiently from war-waging as to merit its own task, and it levies different demands upon the fleet architecture. Platforms and capabilities with less value in

detering or waging war can be of significant value in the termination of war. How war is brought to conclusion cannot be an afterthought.

Note that "naval presence" or "forward presence" is not included in this list. This is because forward presence is not a mission, it is a posture, a habit of operating. It unfortunately entered the pantheon of Navy missions in the mid-1970s in a famous essay by then Naval War College President Vice Adm. Stansfield Turner, and Navy leaders have tied themselves in knots ever since attempting to explain why "being there" is a mission, as if being there were an end unto itself. If the Navy could perform its Title 10 mission and associated tasks by surging from home ports when the nation's interests were threatened, it should be made to do so. If the Navy could perform its Title 10 mission and associated tasks as a coastal and territorial waters defense force (or coast guard) when the nation's interests were threatened, it should be made to do so. If the Navy could perform its Title 10 mission and associated tasks by occasionally sending forth cruising squadrons to "show the flag" when the nation's interests were threatened, it should be made to do so. All of these operating postures offer the possibility of a smaller and more economical Navy due to vastly different (from today's) fleet architectures. None of these alternative postures offer the prospect of mission accomplishment, and that is why forward presence is the preferred posture for the U.S. Navy.



Director, Surface Warfare Division (N96) Office of the Chief of Naval Operations Rear Adm. Fred Pyle speaks on the significance of the new Next Generation Guided-Missile Destroyer (DD Test Site (LBTS) during a ribbon cutting ceremony in Philadelphia on March 21, 2023.

Vulnerability of the Surface Force

Surface ships are vulnerable to a variety of enemy threats, including missiles, mines, and torpedoes. Adversary targeting methods and competence have improved, and it grows increasingly harder to “hide” surface ships – especially large surface ships – at sea. It is true that China’s vast buildup increases the vulnerability of the surface force in the Western Pacific, but this is an incomplete understanding of the dynamic.

First, everything on the modern battlefield has become more vulnerable. This does not mean those things are no longer valued. The war in Ukraine has demonstrated both the vulnerability and the value of heavy armor, and the same would

be expected to apply to the surface force in the event of its wartime employment. How the fleet is operated influences its vulnerability, and the sea remains a difficult environment for precision targeting, especially against a competent Navy.

Second, vulnerability is a feature of conflict, after the shooting starts. Yet the Navy spends the overwhelming portion of its time not being shot at while it pursues the other functions and tasks derived from its Title 10 mission. The fleet must be capable enough to win in combat and large enough to conduct its global peacetime tasks. There is a tradeoff between the exquisite capabilities needed for the former and the mass/capacity of necessary for the former and the latter. Both must be resourced.

Next, for the United States to conduct its mission of conventional deterrence, it must have powerful, lethal, networked surface forces forward – again, not for the sake of being forward, but to demonstrate both the will and capability to deter. What in wartime contributes to vulnerability is, in peacetime, a vital contributor to deterrence: known, visible power on the horizon. There is no substitute for the certainty of response this force provides to the conventional deterrence posture. A serious threat to the surface force comes not from the Chinese navy but from American political leadership. Insufficient demand for ships caused the shipbuilding industry to shrink to the point where it is challenged to provide the peacetime needs of the Navy when the country needs to produce at a war footing. There is an “if you build it, they will come” aspect to growing the shipbuilding industrial base, and the first step is for political leadership to agree to a substantial naval buildup, one that workers with options can depend on, and that attracts new workers to critical trades. Pointing at the industrial base as the reason we cannot expand our Navy confuses cause and effect.

Needs of the Surface Force

It must grow. As indicated in the previous paragraph, the

surface force must grow. The Navy's 30-year shipbuilding plan should commit to three large surface combatants a year, four small surface combatants a year, and a building rate sufficient to meet and maintain a fleet of 38 amphibious ships. The Navy and Marine Corps should continue to develop the landing ship medium class, but not at the expense of 38 large, capable amphibious ships.

It must be more lethal. There is no excuse for any ship of the surface force to be without offensive missiles capable of targeting other ships, targets ashore, or both. Whether through bolt-on expeditionary launchers or installed and integrated systems, amphibious ships and all littoral combat ships retained in service must become more lethal. By creating additional operational dilemmas for the adversary, each individual ship becomes less vulnerable. Those launchers (and the launchers already fielded) must be filled with increasingly more capable missiles, and more of those missiles must be acquired. Expeditionary reloading of any launching system we field cannot no longer be delayed. It must be more capable. The operational dilemmas posed by a more lethal surface force are increased when that surface force can employ its weapons at their maximum range. To do so, the surface force must have a capable organic intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platform to replace its aging helicopter fleet, one that can find and fix targets hundreds of miles from the ship from which it launched. Finally, we must build on the legacy of excellence in the Aegis Weapon System by moving to the Navy's Integrated Combat System, or ICS, an approach to command and control that ties individual ships together in a fighting network that provides in-stream battle management, weapons pairing and allocation and response options across the ensemble. It must evolve. We cannot build Arleigh Burke-class destroyers forever and continuing to avoid moving to the next-generation destroyer (DDG(X)) will preclude fielding of advanced weapons the fleet needs today. The Navy must propose, and the Congress ratify, a plan to move from

building three Flight III DDG's a year to three DDG(X)'s a year in the next decade. We must move faster in supplementing the current fleet with unmanned platforms that extend sensor coverage and magazine depth. And we must field a class of single-mission patrol boats built in numbers to employ surface-to-surface missiles in archipelagic seas. We can no longer aim for efficient peacetime production as the standard for acquisition; we must prepare for conflict and accept that there may be inefficiency involved.

Conclusion

This essay is timed for publication coincident to the January 2024 gathering of the Surface Navy Association in Arlington, Virginia, and is designed to encourage conversation and debate there and elsewhere. To this point, there is no evidence the alteration to the Title 10 mission of the Navy has had any impact on Department of Defense resource allocation, at least as can be discerned from the fiscal year 2024 DoD budget submission. It is for those interested in seapower – readers of this journal and members of the Navy League – to demand that our elected officials hold DoD and Navy officials accountable for fully implementing the Navy mission and resourcing accordingly. A strong, capable surface force is central to that mission, and there is considerable work to be done in achieving it.

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