International ‘Gray Zone’ Actions Challenge Blue-Water Navy

Despite the current heavy focus on great power competition, the Navy must retain and build its ability to engage in irregular maritime conflict, which historically has always been a fundamental part of maintaining maritime security, a panel of historians and naval security analysts said June 26.

Although the early Navy considered irregular actions, such as raids on coastal cities and enemy commerce and antipiracy missions, as a part of general maritime conflict, the current Navy thinks of itself as blue-water force that must be prepared for the clash of battle fleets. But some potential adversaries, including China and Iran, are engaging in “gray zone” actions below the level of war and the Navy and Marine Corps must be able to respond, the panel said at a Hudson Institute forum.

Benjamin Armstrong, a Naval Academy professor and author of a history of 18th and 19th century U.S. Navy, contrasted John Paul Jones’ raids on British ports and merchant ships with the current Navy’s devotion to the clash of battle fleets championed by Alfred Mahan, while Iran harasses U.S. warships with small boats and China build artificial islands and employs its fishing

fleet as an auxiliary force to control the South China Sea.

"Today's Navy and Marine Corps are wrestling with how to balance great power conflict with gray zone acts … the kind of maritime competition below the level of war," Armstrong said.

Martin Murphy, a fellow at the Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy Studies and author of a book on piracy and maritime terrorism in the modern world, and Joshua Tallis, from the Center for Naval Analysis and author of a similar history of irregular maritime conflict, also said the current Navy's strategy and self image does not account for the broader dimension of maritime security and the challenges from non-state actors.

Murphy said, "I do not believe the United States is prepared" for the broader dimensions of maritime security, because the importance of sea power has "lost all traction in U.S. foreign policy."

Peter Haynes, an analyst with the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments and a former deputy with the Special Operations Command, said the Navy's problem is that it "has defined the [maritime] competition very narrowly in the context of global conflict," which reflects the Navy's self-identity of "we only do blue-water operations."

Linda Robinson, the senior international/defense researcher at the RAND Corp., said that while the new

National Defense Strategy cited the return of great power competition, it also said “irregular warfare was part of what the U.S. needs to be about,” because small-state and non-state actors can employ a “broad range of powers.”

In response to a question, several of the panelists said the Navy should be buying more smaller ships to deal with the challenges from adversaries other than China and Russia, including Iran’s threat of swarming attacks of small fast craft. “When we see the Navy buying small ships, we’ll know the Navy has got it,” Murphy said.