

Rebalanced Navy Can Push Back on Chinese Assertiveness, Analyst Says



U.S. Navy Airman Christopher Rodriguez signals to an MH-60S Sea Hawk to launch from the USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN 71), on a deployment to the U.S. 7th Fleet area of operations. The 7th Fleet routinely operates and interacts with 35 maritime nations while conducting missions to preserve and protect a free and open Indo-Pacific Region. One naval analyst says the Navy can more effectively counter Chinese rivalry in the area by designing its fleet more for competition than combat. U.S. Navy / Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Erik Melgar ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Navy can more effectively counter the growing Chinese capabilities by rebalancing its fleet to one designed more for competition than for intense combat, a naval analyst said.

“China and Russia are obviously pursuing an approach to achieving their objectives that is different than what we envisioned from the Soviet Union, which was more of an

existential threat, that they were going to pursue armed aggression of a conventional kind against their neighbor," said Bryan Clark, a former U.S. Navy submarine officer and a naval analyst at the Hudson Institute, speaking in a Feb. 24 webinar sponsored by the Center for Security Policy. "China and Russia are pretty much content to use this gray-zone approach to achieve their objectives over a longer period of time.

"That creates a challenge for the U.S. because we've tended to build militaries for World War III and not to fight this protracted series of low-intensity engagements that might ebb and flow in terms of how severe they become because we've built a set of high-end platforms and capabilities that are really designed for intense combat but are expensive to operate in peacetime during a competition phase," Clark said.

Clark said he sees "the need to rebalance the military, in particular the Navy, to deal with competition more than conflict ... because that seems to be where China and Russia are really hanging their hats."

The analyst pointed out that "even as the Chinese navy has grown, you can see that the way it has grown it is one that is designed more for competition. The Chinese navy is predominantly smaller platforms with smaller numbers of missiles. They're designed to keep the pressure on their neighbors than maintain a presence in the region or around the world. They have a lot lower percentage of larger combatants than the U.S. does. So, I think we need to fundamentally rethink how we organize the military to deal with competition."

Clark said that "for the [U.S.] Navy that gets us to this idea of rebalancing. How do we increase the number of ships so we can sustain presence overseas, keep up the pressure on our adversaries, not offer them opportunities to take advantage of their neighbors, and also to present them a set of options at

various escalations?”

The U.S. Indo-Pacific Command and the U.S 7th Fleet have said they need this adaptability and optionality and want to build a strategy around that idea, Clark said. “If they have more optionality, they’ve got more choices at more rungs of the escalation ladder, they can push back on Chinese assertiveness and aggression.”

“The drives us toward a Navy that’s different from the one we have had, and in our Hudson study we show that you can even build that kind of Navy within the fiscal constraints of PB21 [President’s Budget 2021] plus inflation over the next 30 years. You can rebalance the Navy and build one that’s going to be effective in that competition phase even if it accepts a little risk in its ability to fight the high-end conflict.”

Clark said the Chinese fleet is “still oriented toward the near-seas defense mission, focused on missions like sea control with a relatively small number of missiles. “It’s not designed to go and project power overseas yet. That is something that is still an aspiration, even with the [Chinese] navy having improved in size and quality over the last decade or so.”

He said the U.S. Navy could try to improve its ability to push back on the perception of the Chinese that their near seas are secure by continuing to field capable small surface combatants – and large surface combatants to a lesser degree.

Clark asserts that such a pushback would distract the Chinese attention from developing power-projection platforms “like large aircraft carriers and amphibious assault ships that the Chinese have just begun to field.”

The U.S. Navy’s shift to a larger fleet with more combatants that are smaller than their predecessors of smaller ships reflects this, he said.