Historically Speaking

Naval Supremacy: How Much Is Enough?

Many of us have read with great interest the newly promulgated *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, signed by our President. As written, the document is thoughtful, forward-looking, and a worthy pediment upon which to construct further defense planning. This does not, unfortunately, mean that interpretations by pundits have been uniformly thoughtful, forward-looking or worthy. Too many tell us that we now are committed to wildly slashing ground forces in favor of refurbishing air and naval supremacy. Ground force structure will undoubtedly come down, but *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership*’s anticipated pace, envisioned floor and stated objective of “reversibility” offer important caveats to pell-mell dismantlement. We addressed air enthusiasm in the January issue of ARMY. With respect to achieving naval supremacy, how much is enough?

Historically, a number of thalassocracies were so dominant as to have been considered sovereign on the seas. These included Athens in the fifth century B.C., Rome from the end of the First Punic War well into the third century A.D., Spain in the middle of the 16th century, Britain in the 19th century, and the United States from the end of World War II until the global war on terrorism. At the height of its powers, Athens had perhaps 200 triremes. Sparta and its allies had a little more than 100. By the Punic Wars the capital ship was the quinquireme, and Rome cemented its victory in the First Punic War by deploying 220 ships. The Spanish, for a period, were thought supreme at sea because they had twice as many galleons as any potential adversary. In 1803, during the Napoleonic Wars, the British had about 120 ships of the line as compared to about 40 for France, 30 for Spain and 20 for Holland. Thus the British tripled any single potential adversary and doubled likely combinations. These odds got even better for them when they captured or sank a score of French and Spanish ships off Cape Trafalgar in 1805. Through the ages of oar and sail, a 2-to-1 advantage in capital ships seems to have been equivalent to naval supremacy.

With the Industrial Revolution, sustaining naval supremacy became more taxing. Technological advances brought on obsolescence much more rapidly. Ships and weapons had to be refurbished far more frequently. During the mid-19th century, steamships (screw) and sailing ships each had advantages and disadvantages. In 1859 the British and French ran neck-and-neck with respect to screw, but the British had more than a 2-to-1 lead with respect to sail. The British were still considered supreme at sea, in part because seamanships allowed them...
to use their overwhelming overmatch with respect to sail to best advantage. Germans, Japanese and Americans entered the lists in the late 19th century, and a race to construct modern battleships and cruisers ensued. Britain resolved to deploy at least as many battleships and cruisers as the next two powers combined. It helped Britain that the second greatest naval power continued to be France, and France switched from rival to ally in the face of a rising threat from Germany. Naval power continued to be France, and France switched from rival to ally in the face of a rising threat from Germany. Throughout the 19th century, a 2-to-1 advantage in capital ships remained an indicator of naval supremacy.

World War I and World War II respectively introduced and reinforced radically altered paradigms for assessing naval supremacy. Technology and specialization added the aircraft carrier (and aircraft), the submarine and the destroyer escort to the force mix. Battleships and cruisers were not particularly relevant to securing merchant shipping from submarines. Destroyer escorts were relevant but were hopelessly overmatched if caught proximate to enemy battleships and cruisers. Aircraft carriers were lethal at long ranges but relatively few in number and helpless in a direct-fire exchange. Rather than merely counting up capital ships, force planners had to overmatch in multiple venues in a “rock-paper-scissors” sort of way. (As German U-boats nearly proved, a naval power has to achieve overmatch in only one of multiple venues to deny an opponent reliable use of the sea.) At the height of the Cold War, the United States and its principal allies outnumbered the Soviets approximately 20-to-1 in aircraft carriers, 3-to-1 in frigates and destroyers, 3-to-1 in amphibious craft and 2-to-1 in cruisers.

With respect to nuclear submarines, however, the odds were even. Naval supremacy did not accrue from numbers of ships alone; it accrued from a confidence that a combination of air, surface and sub-surface attacks—infomed by near-perfect intelligence—could destroy the Soviet submarine fleet before it could inflict unacceptale damage. To control the sea, one had to overmatch in each of the venues wherein that control might be contested.

Happily, the Soviets have disappeared as a principal threat driving force design. The Russians do have a submarine fleet, but it is radically reduced in size and even more radically reduced in capability from Soviet precedents. The new justification for naval upgrades seems to be China. It is hoped that we are not standing China up as a boogeyman to scare us into undue expense. China is profiting immensely from the international order as it now exists, secure in its borders, aging and historically risk-averse. It has little to gain and much to lose from conflict with the United States. Despite recent improvements, China’s capability to operate at sea beyond the range of land-based aircraft remains negligible. They have one aircraft carrier and no cruisers. The United States and its allies outnumber them about 5-to-1 in destroyers and frigates, and perhaps 10-to-1 in nuclear submarines.

China has enough coastal warfare vessels and conventional submarines to make a landing on its coasts risky, but this would be a very bad idea anyway. China does have a robust inventory of amphibious warfare vessels. This makes a sudden descent on Taiwan or the Paracel or Spratly Islands feasible militarily, if unlikely diplomatically. All factors considered, China’s maritime options are limited, predictable and containable.

As Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership plays out, there will undoubtedly be analytic exercises wherein multiple scenarios are dissected for insights relevant to future force structure. We have done this before. We owe it to our soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines to ensure that the dominant scenarios are realistic and likely. Naval supremacy is vital to our global standing. Determining what it takes to achieve naval supremacy will profit from rigorous analysis and an appreciation of historical precedent. Adversaries tend to strike at weakness rather than strength. Where will we be weak in 2020?

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