What Type of Fleet can Keep the Indo-Pacific Free and Open?

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We live in a rare moment in international life where the military friction between a superpower and a rising rival will likely take place on, above, or under the ocean. China, the great power challenger has invested heavily in the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), the fastest growing maritime force over the last thirty years. While experts question the quality of the PLAN as a warfighting force against the U.S. Navy, it looks more formidable the closer it operates to supporting land-based air and missile systems. Few doubt that it poses considerable risk to American allies, such as Japan, in the Asian littoral and busy maritime commercial routes. The U.S. Navy, while powerful and operationally proficient, is struggling to recapitalize while maintaining the operational tempo necessary to fulfill the nation's far flung commitments. The response of the United States broadly and the US Navy, *in tandem with allies such as Japan*, to China's maritime rise will influence the likelihood of a regional conflict and the shape of the global political economic order for the next century.

We do not pretend to speak for the United States Navy, much less the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force. We are confident that the US Navy—in accord with the most recent U.S. National Defense Strategy (NDS)—is optimizing its fleet for great power competition and the primary great power it contemplates—again in accord with the NDS—is China.[2]

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[1] The following article represents the opinions and analysis of the authors and do not represent the views of the US Naval War College, the US Navy, Department of Defense or the US government.

[2] The United States of America Department of Defense, "Summary of the National Defense Strategy of the United States of America 2018," 2018, p. 1, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf.

As it prepares for such a competition, the US Navy will face a classic tradeoff in fleet design. Deploying missiles and aircraft as far forward as possible to sink as much as the enemy's fleet as quickly as possible is designed to increase deterrence, but this comes at the potential cost of increased crisis instability. It thus risks a large, potentially irreplaceable, portion of the United States' global military power, as well as the viability to the JSMDF and bases within Japanese territory. While debate is ongoing, we do believe that, shaped by the US Navy's makeup of its fleet as well as its traditions, too great an emphasis on warfighting, in particular sea control, may risk the very "free and open Indo-Pacific" whose maintenance justifies building the fleet in the first place. We at the Naval War College and elsewhere believe it our solemn duty to consider this dilemma.

Although we advocate that the United States pay close attention to the interests and capabilities of allies, especially Japan, it is simply a fact that Japan will have to respond to US fleet design much more than the US fleet design will respond to Japan. It is therefore crucial that our partners understand this important dilemma as it unfolds with the United States, especially its sea services. While we understand that, as one of our closest allies, many JMSDF readers will have a good understanding of the ongoing evolution of the United States fleet, we believe it is worth reviewing.

Great Power Competition at Sea

Much previous academic and policy work on great power competition, not surprisingly, rests on the foundations of the Cold War. We argue that this work emphasizes the competition over territory (most in central Europe between armies) and unilateral operations. Perhaps surprisingly, the Navy's Cold War approach, often called "The Maritime Strategy," shared this bias concentrating on a unilateral flanking maneuver in support of a primarily ground-based conflict. We argue that the geography of Sino-American competition differs in two important ways. First, ground operations will support a primarily maritime battle. Second,

the participation of allies, particularly Japan, is far more essential for success.

The world's most important great power competition takes place between two nuclear-armed, continent-sized, globally-oriented trading states that are relatively secure from territorial threats.[3] Tensions over Taiwan, an inherently maritime problem, produce a situation ripe for miscalculation. Several other island and artificial reef disputes plague Chinese relations with US allies such as Japan and the Philippines. Both the United States and China depend on seaborne commerce for a significant portion of their prosperity and thus their political stability.[4] Any Sino-American conflict will almost certainly take place in what Barry Posen calls the "global commons" between navies and air forces rather than armies.

In maritime competitions, unlike land-based ones, military forces play essential, active roles in peacetime as well as war. Submarines, aircraft, and ship-launched drones cater to theater commanders' insatiable intelligence demands. Marine-carrying amphibs can respond quickly to political and humanitarian brushfires. Surface ships continuously "show the flag," reassuring allies and patrolling global sea lanes. For better or worse, the primary response of the United States to Chinese challenges to the so-called "liberal international order" are Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) in which US warships sail in disputed waters.

The person who approves FONOPs, and has far greater responsibilities, is a combatant commander (COCOM), the four-star general or admiral directing all military operations in a given theater (Europe, Africa, Indo-Pacific, etc.). While COCOMs must prepare for major war (and in the case of Central Command actively fight several small ones), most of their energy goes toward managing day-to-day operations in

[3] It must, however, be emphasized that, compared to China United States is relatively more secure from territorial threats, more heavily nuclear-armed, and less reliant on trade for the health of its economy.

[4] It seems clear that China is *relatively* more dependent on international trade for its economic well-being than the United States. Also, both states are less dependent on overseas commerce than Great Britain, Japan, and the Dutch in earlier eras.

support of the United States' wide-ranging approach to national security that identifies interests almost everywhere. Such operations, known as "shaping" in the Defense Department, fall under the traditional (and not particularly loved) naval mission of "presence." They inevitably entail the promiscuous deployment of ships. The Navy recently concluded that a 653-ship force would be necessary to address all COCOM demands. The Navy has 286.

Twenty-five years ago, the battle force hovered at approximately 450. Despite this decline by a third, the Navy continues to deploy the same number of ships at any given time: 85–100. The pace has led to poorly maintained equipment, under-trained crews, short-staffed ships, and incomplete squadrons. Many studies of the two tragic collisions of the United States destroyers *McCain* and *Fitzgerald* in 2017 finds that the high operational tempo in the Western Pacific played an important role.[5] We know that our colleagues in the JMSDF understand this all too well. The increased incursions of Chinese aircraft and ships--civilian, military, or in between—are placing enormous demands on the operational assets of the JMSDF, Japan Coast Guard, and JASDF. Over time the pace may not be unsustainable.

Facing the impossibility of meeting demands broadly, the Navy (besides pleading for more ships) seeks to concentrate its effort. Cued by the National Defense Strategy, it is focusing on offensive "lethality" as a means of deterring China from threatening American allies and partners in the western Pacific and thereby maintaining overarching international order.

The Navy's current strategy is classified, as are existing operational plans. But one can triangulate the Navy's ideas about the future of naval warfare, even against China, via two publicly available, and relatively stable, characteristics: its slowly- evolving fleet and its longstanding beliefs about how best to fight wars at sea. Combined, these

[5] Robert Faturechi, Megan Rose and T. Christian Miller, "Years of Warning, Then Death and Disaster," ProPubllica.com (February 7, 2019): https://features.propublica.org/navy-accidents/us-navy-crashes-japan-cause-mccain/.

characteristics—while increasing deterrence—may set the stage for inadvertent escalation into a disastrous conflict.

What will fight

One of the vital disconnects in US defense planning is that while the COCOMs determine where ships go, the service largely determines what ships get built. This is a particularly weighty decision for a navy. Ships are eye-wateringly expensive, take years to build, and last for decades. Even after the United States reaches a consensus on the parameters of a new fleet suitable for meeting this new era and the changing character of war, the implementation is necessarily slow, as new acquisitions come on line and older warships are gradually retired. Change therefore comes incrementally. Fleets are stubborn things.

While aircraft carriers' obsolescence is a venerable theme, and despite the Navy's plan to retire one early (quickly snuffed out by Congress), they will remain its key combatant. Importantly, a carrier is not just a thirteen billion dollar ship, it's a thirteen billion dollar ship carrying 80 plus aircraft that must be protected by about seven additional billion dollar warships (setting aside submarines and logistics vessels). That the number of carriers will not change much over the coming decades will shape the rest of the future fleet and how it will be deployed.

Additionally, the Navy seeks to pack more offensive punch into "stretched" versions of familiar hulls. The current *Virginia* class submarine's next modification will get triple the number of missile tubes. Newer versions of the venerable *Arleigh Burke* destroyers will get an improved radar and fire control system to launch their 96 missiles. The planned replacement for the littoral combat ship will be a "small," missile-armed frigate that will rival the largest vessels in most allies' fleets. Although planning documents suggest the future fleet will also include dozens, if not hundreds, of unmanned systems of all types, the history of the Navy and unmanned vehicles is rife with unfulfilled promises. For all the Navy's talk of "distributing lethality," the future fleet will be composed largely of a relatively small number of heavily armed big ships. This is

borne out by the Navy's most recent assessment of shipbuilding requirements in Table 1.

Table 1 Comparing Current US Navy Fleet and the 2016 Force Structure Assessment[6]

Type	Current	2016 FSA	% change
Total	275	355	29%
Carrier	11	12	9%
Attack subs	51	66	29%
Large surface warships	87	104	20%
Small surface warships	20	52	160%
Amphibious warfare ships	31	38	23%
Combat logistics	29	32	10%
Support ships	28	39	39%
Ballistic-missile subs	14	12	-14%
Guided-missile subs	4	0	-100%

Compared to the current fleet, the Navy has asked to add 17 large surface combatants, 15 attack submarines, and an additional carrier. The large combatants are needed to "deliver increased air defense and expeditionary [ballistic missile defense] capacity and provide escorts for the additional aircraft carrier." It appears apparent that the aircraft carrier remains the focus of the US Navy. According to reporting, that ship request was based on filling a carrier strike group with five guided-missile combatants to perform anti- submarine warfare (ASW), protect the ship from surface and air threats and protect the CSG from ballistic missiles. However, ongoing studies and wargaming conducted by the Navy's surface warfare establishment concluded the number of ships to keep carrier safe

[6] EXECUTIVE SUMMARY, 2016 Navy Force Structure Assessment (FSA), 14 DECEMBER 2016. https://news.usni.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/FSA_Executive-Summary.pdf. Assessments are subject to revision. Just recently, for example, General David Berger, the Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, has made it clear that he does not believe the Marine require 38 amphibious warfare ships.

should potentially be increased to seven or eight due to how rapidly the Chinese have increased their high-end capability.[7] The CSG-centrism is also reflected in the CNO's most recent authoritative guidance, "enable deployment of 5-6 carrier strike groups within relatively short time frames.

How it will fight

What does the Navy plan to do with this firepower? The last Navy strategy for deterring and, if necessary, fighting, a great power provides some insight. "The Maritime Strategy" of the 1980s prepared to take the fight forward directly to the Soviet navy from the fjords of northern Europe to Vladivostok in the Far East. The strategy combined an offensive fight against the Soviet navy deep in its home seas with air strikes and even amphibious assaults into Soviet-held territory.

The Maritime Strategy combined the two traditional wartime missions of the US Navy: sea control—the ability for one's ships to move unmolested in a given sea—and power projection—directly acting against the land. The two are often contrasted with each other, but are intimately related. The Navy reminds the other services that sea control is necessary for power projection, but—especially in a world of land-based anti-access weaponry—only power projection can make sea control feasible. Much like the Maritime Strategy the highly visible AirSea Battle concept of 2010 envisioned, a series of deep strikes into an enemy mainland to take out command and control nodes, long range, "carrier-killing" missiles, and any PLAN ships unwilling to engage the superior American fleet at sea.

While the Maritime Strategy may remain, in one naval thinker's assessment "the most complete statement of offensive military intent ever laid down by [the US] navy,"[8] the offensive predilection predates and outlives that particular document. One Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) wryly observed, "Over the years our Maritime Strategy has been very

[7] Eckstein, M., & LaGrone, S. (2016, December 16). Navy Wants to Grow Fleet to 355 Ships; 47 Hull Increase Adds Destroyers, Attack Subs. *USNI News*, pp. 1–30. Newport RI. Retrieved from https://news.usni.org/2016/12/16/navy-wants-grow-fleet-355-ships-47-hull-increase-previous-goal

[8] Martin N. Murphy. (2015). Kick the Door Down with AirSea Battle…Then What? *Parameters*, *45*(2), 97–107, p 98.

much like the British Constitution—unwritten but thoroughly understood by those who practice it."[9] The roots reach deep into Navy history, at least back to the aftermath of its unquestionably dominating performance during World War II.[10] In short, we see a long-standing preoccupation with *offensive sea control* and *power projection.* Moreover, while it is clear that sea control is a prerequisite for power projection, the Navy's maximalist idea of sea control also demands power projection (as exemplified by the Maritime Strategy).

In fact, the Navy makes little distinction between the two categories of naval action. As one CNO briefed the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1952, "The weapons which the enemy will use in his attempts to destroy our convoys and naval forces will be operated from shore bases.

Consequently, the bases and facilities which directly support those weapons must also be destroyed or neutralized."[11] This, continued the then-CNO, could only be accomplished by a fast carrier fleet. Although naval warfare and the nature of the threats to American national security have changed greatly since the early 1950s, the U.S Navy's reliance on "big deck" aircraft carriers and their associated strike groups has not. e

Extrapolating from current fleet, publicly available shipbuilding plans and warfighting concepts, and the Navy's offensively minded culture, it seems safe to assume that the Navy will seek to destroy the PLAN fleet and, if necessary, land-based facilities should a conflict erupt. Strategic maximalists argue that the Navy (along with the Air Force) should prepare for a rapid assault on the PLAN as well as air and missile strikes on the Chinese mainland to remove any Chinese capability for denying US access up to the maritime commons outside the 12 nautical miles of the territory the United States recognizes as Chinese. In short, the Navy continues to pursue sea control for power projection (and vice versa). Rowden clearly lays the sequence, "Surface forces outfitted with robust

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[9] Trost, C. A. H. (1987). Looking Beyond the Maritime Strategy. *Proceedings*, *113*(January), 13–20.

[10] Palmer, M. A. (1990). *Origins of the Maritime Strategy: The Development of American Naval Strategy, 1945-1955.* Newport, RI: U.S. Naval Institute Press.

[11] Quote in Palmer, *Origins of the Maritime Strategy,* p 83. Palmer attributes the writer to Arleigh Burke, head of the Navy's Strategic Plans Division at the time.

defensive systems and armed with credible surface launched stand-off weapons, survivable in both contested and communications degraded environments, will help to secure sea territory and enable forces to flow for follow-on power projection operations."[12]

The Dilemma

Increased deterrence, however, often comes at the cost of increased crisis instability. In his criticism of the Maritime Strategy of the 1980s, Mearsheimer notes that "some strategies also can cause forces to intermingle in a crisis in a manner that produces a tactical or strategic first-strike advantage, creating an incentive to preempt."[13] Any U.S. fleet, even if designed for a denial strategy, is unlikely to make China comfortable, just as China's A2/AD network, however "defensively" it performs at the operational level, will never reassure the United States. The Navy, and the United States military in general, tend to emphasize deterrence (often through the ability to project large amounts of fighting power at great distance).

This is especially true given the use-it-or-lose-it nature of most naval battles. As one analyst for the US Navy recently testified to Congress: "Naval weapons have gotten so long-range, so precise and so lethal that, in hundreds of studies…here at the Navy, what really comes out strongly is that it's the battle of the first salvo." He continues, "whichever side completes that targeting kill chain first and fires first almost always wins."

What are the consequences should these two forces each worried that the first strike will be the last, come to blows? Setting the real risks of nuclear escalation aside, significant damage to the United States' forward deployed, exquisite platforms would represent a massive power shift, and may thus be worth trying from China's perspective, especially if

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[12] Rowden, p. 20.

[13] Mearsheimer, J. J. (1986). A Strategic Misstep: The Maritime Strategy and Deterrence in Europe," *International Security*, *11*(2), 3–57.

it also manages to achieve other strategic objectives. Many describe Xi Jinping as both seeking to overturn the American-led international order and as a risk-taker. Its fleet may be sent to Davy Jones, but China might be willing to trade the PLAN for Taiwan or reduced US regional capability. And given the respective countries' shipbuilding capacity, China could probably rebuild a passable replacement fleet much more quickly than could the United States.

Conclusion

Rather than the Navy's traditional approach of offensive sea control in pursuit of more "deterrence," we recommend an even more traditional approach to great power competition and warfighting. This has the virtue of managing the global commons while shaping China's ongoing naval expansion in constructive ways, coercively if necessary. And yet, such an approach would threaten losses to China in a long, drawn out conflict typical of most hegemonic wars.

This is not merely a presence fleet, although it would be better suited for such day-to-day tasks. Instead it plays to American wartime strengths. The concept of "horizontal escalation "was largely dismissed by the Navy during the Cold War. China, like the United States and unlike the Soviet Union, has far flung interests, and thus vulnerabilities. The further from its shores China seeks to project influence the exponentially harder (and pricier) it becomes. Such operations are the US Navy's bread and butter, and the PLAN has a steep learning curve to approach such proficiency. Imperial Germany eventually decided against competing with the Great Britain on the high seas, not for lack of ambition, but because it was not worth spending the money given more pressing strategic objectives. China may not give up this competition but will pay a lot to continue.

Because fleets change slowly, rather than new platforms we recommend emphasizing current successes. The Navy and the strategic community concur that the United States does not have enough submarines and should build as many as the industrial base can produce. The combination of stealth and survivability allows them to contribute to

multiple core Navy missions, while resisting the tendency to shoot first. Experts have criticized the Navy's conservative approach to unmanned systems, but persistent surveillance, communications capabilities, and refueling have tremendous peacetime (as well as wartime) roles. Exquisite and expensive warfighting drones will not help as much.

The other major investments we suggest is based on the fact that great power wars are rarely decided quickly. The ability to produce munitions and transport them to the theater have both been given short shrift. To prepare for, and thus hopefully deter, a long war, we recommend buying more logistics ships, building infrastructure including storage and loading facilities, and ensuring that arsenals and magazines are well-stocked munitions, even at the expense of more high-end combatant vessels.

Finally, the US Navy needs to remain open to allies, especially Japan. But our allies must understand the constraints the United States Navy faces. When Japan provides its feedback on the debate between presence and warfighting, it cannot simply be asking for more of each from the United States. Optimizing both fleets for a fight against PLAN, and forward deploying them to maximize deterrence will increase the risk of a conflict that will affect the Japanese mainland as surely as it will affect the US fleet. And finally, if the United States takes a more global approach to great power competition with China, Japan will need to invest more in anti-access/area denial capability to counter PLAN power projection, ensure its bases and seaports are resilient to repeated assault, and contribute to maintaining open sealines of communication at greater distances from the Japanese home islands.

The eternal navy trade-off between sea control in wartime and presence in peacetime cannot be solved, only managed. But how the United States plans and prepares to fight a primarily naval war in the western Pacific offers important and pressing choices. We argue against approaches that refuse to cede an maritime commons right up to China's territorial waters. This would put the American fleet at risk in war where the adversary has inherent geographic advantages and can pick and choose the time and place of the conflict. Instead we favor global approach

that preserves options, husbands the fleet and allows flexibility to pursue a wider range of national interests.

Which is why our most important recommendation is for more transparency in the Navy's strategic process for the US government, the US public, and indeed for our allies like Japan. The 1980's Maritime Strategy was widely and publicly debated, and ultimately the Navy learned valuable lessons from the process. Even more so than during the Cold War, it is vital to bring out allies' interests and thoughts into consideration. The Navy might build and fight the fleet, but it is the US public and indeed the world that will reap the consequences. Helping the Navy recognize the dangers of an unthinking traditional approach to great power war, is in everyone's interest frames."[14]

[14] Richardson, J. (2017). *The Future Navy*. Washington, DC. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559- 3584.1990.tb02669.x