

The New 2020 Tri-Service Maritime Strategy—“Advantage at Sea”

THE ISSUE

On December 17, 2020, the Pentagon released a tri-service maritime strategy titled “Advantage at Sea: Prevailing with Integrated All-Domain Naval Power”—the third Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard combined strategy since 2007. The strategy provides a framework for employing the future fleet described in the December 9 Future Naval Force Study and associated 30-year ship-building plan.

The strategy focuses on day-to-day competition with China and Russia, while acknowledging that forward-deployed forces should be more assertive and accept higher risks to expose malign activities. This focus is welcome, but falls short on addressing any necessary trade-offs or institutional changes for its implementation.

NAVAL SERVICES (NAVY, COAST GUARD, MARINE CORPS) PRIORITIZE COMPETITION WITH CHINA

- In the event of conflict, China and Russia will likely attempt to seize territory before the United States and its allies can mount an effective response—leading to a *fait accompli*, making a military response seem disproportionately costly.
- Russia’s operations are designed to fragment the international order. Russia’s pursuit of an expanded sphere of influence has been defined by opportunism and a willingness to violate international agreements and laws, as well as use of military force.
- The strategy recommends using the Naval services to increase the reputational costs to aggressors by providing evidence of malign activities that refute a rival’s false narratives.

ALLIANCES AND PARTNERSHIPS: THE KEY U.S. STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE

- Enabling allies’ and partners’ ability to counter Chinese and Russian coercion and subversion can be a force multiplier for U.S. Naval forces.

ACTIVITIES SHORT OF WAR CAN ACHIEVE STRATEGIC EFFECTS

- Unchecked, China’s and Russia’s revisionist approaches in the maritime domain leave U.S. Naval services unable to protect national interests within the next decade.
- China has implemented a strategy aimed at the heart of the United States’ maritime power. China seeks to corrode international maritime governance, deny access to traditional logistical hubs, inhibit freedom of the seas, control use of key chokepoints, deter U.S. engagement in regional disputes, and displace the United States as the preferred security partner of countries in the Indo-Pacific.

FORWARD OPERATION DETERS COERCIVE BEHAVIOR AND CONVENTIONAL AGGRESSION

- Persistent forward-deployed, combat-credible forces is an imperative to strategy execution. To achieve advantage in contested seas requires fielding new platforms and technologies and adjusting service culture to compete in great-power competition and win future wars.

PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE INVESTMENT

- A more distributed Naval force complicates adversary tactics and capabilities by utilizing numerous low-signature, highly

maneuverable forces—including optionally manned or unmanned assets—to increase offensive lethality and complicating enemy targeting.

- Capabilities and concepts to expose, disrupt, and deny malign activities in day-to-day competition, such as new scalable armaments, can deliver effects short of lethal force that provide additional response options.
- Sustaining operations in contested seas requires next-generation aircraft, directed-energy weapons and rail-guns for air and missile defense, sealift and prepositioned forward capabilities, distributed logistic nodes, and development of a Next Generation Logistics Ship.
- Persistent, all-domain, long-range precision fires, supported by resilient networks, can complicate adversary targeting and access to open seas.

ASSESSMENT

- U.S. Naval services will seek to prioritize future warfighting readiness over near-term demands. The track record on this is questionable given the increasingly aggressive maritime behaviors of China and Russia.
- Day-to-day competition implies a high degree of integration across the interagency and intelligence community that has been elusive.

- The execution of the 2020 tri-service maritime strategy is questionable. The Navy's 2018 strategy called for large-scale exercises and fleet experiments to validate unmanned platforms; these have yet to occur, though the Navy says these are planned in 2021. The 2015 tri-service strategy, "A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower," called for 120 ships deployed forward by 2020; as of January 4, 2021, only 97 ships were deployed. Lastly, without structural changes, it is unlikely that the three Naval services will be able to shift budgeting, operational, or future force design to a more integrated approach called for in the 2020 strategy.

The 2020 strategy came out too late for the Trump Administration to implement and risks being discarded by the next Administration. Should this occur, it would create an unacceptable delay to urgently needed attention and investment to compete in the maritime domain with the Chinese and Russians. As such, the Biden Administration should review and endorse this document as quickly as possible.