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Smarter Naval Power in the Indo-Pacific Region

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Bold. Innovative. Bipartisan.

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The views expressed in this report are personal and the author's alone. They are solely responsible for any errors in fact, analysis, or omission.

ABOUT THE SERIES

To build a foundation of subject matter expertise for our study, "Dynamic Balance: An Alliance Requirements Roadmap for the Asia-Pacific Region," CNAS commissioned this Alliance Requirements Roadmap essay series from experts in third offset strategic thinking, Asian-Pacific maritime security issues, and on partner countries in Asia. These essays were the focus of a December 2015 experts' workshop, where CNAS investigators and leaders in the field discussed in depth the tools the United States, Japan, and its regional partners would need to best shape the future security environment of the Asia-Pacific. These conference papers were crucial to our analysis and have done much to shape the study's findings.

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ABOUT THE ASIA-PACIFIC SECURITY PROGRAM

The Asia-Pacific Security program seeks to inform the exercise of U.S. leadership in Asia by analyzing how the United States can rebalance its priorities; shape a rules-based regional order; modernize traditional alliances; build the capacity of new partners; and strengthen multilateral institutions. From exploring rising maritime tensions in the region to crafting ways to renew key alliances and partnerships to articulating strategies to extend and enhance America's influence, the program leverages the diverse experience and background of its team, deep relationships in the region and in Washington, and CNAS' convening power to shape and elevate the conversation on U.S. policy across a changing Asia.

The United States is actively pursuing technological solutions to allow U.S. military forces to maintain their freedom of action in anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) environments, following a Chinese military overhaul. Such U.S. advances, in the form of the third offset, could take decades and require steadfast budgetary commitment to reliably develop, produce, and operationalize. These are long-term solutions, perhaps 20 to 30 years in the future, and do not meet the need to gain and maintain access in the maritime environment in the near term.

While the United States continues to invest in this type of sophisticated weaponry, the deliberate and purposeful use of naval power will be the most effective means of deterring aggression, countering competition, and assuring allies and partners in the near-term – prerequisites to gaining and maintaining political, economic, and military access. Naval power provides access to the region today and it will continue to shape the strategic environment to ensure future access in ways that are uniquely situated to meet the challenge of China's increased great power ambition, maintaining U.S. influence, and assuring continued access. The United States can continue to be effective in deterring, assuring, and influencing by sustaining a meaningful Navy presence in the Asia-Pacific region, maritime security operations, and engagement with allies, partners, and China.

Nevertheless, the United States' ability to operate with unrestricted access in the maritime domain is likely to end as China improves its A2/AD capabilities. In "A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority," released in January 2016, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral John Richardson calls for a new framework of assessing the design of naval power: "The scope and complexity of the challenges we face demand a different approach than that offered by a classic campaign plan."¹¹ A new framework must examine solutions to the A2/AD challenge based on different planning assumptions to produce an alternative strategy that does not stifle creativity, innovation, and the evolution of tactics, techniques, and procedures.

GAINING AND MAINTAINING ACCESS UNDER CURRENT CONDITIONS

Naval power helps to guarantee to the United States political, economic, and military access despite efforts by China to erode it. It serves national interests articulated in the *National Security Strategy*, including deterrence of aggression, assurance of access to shared spaces, respect for rules-based international order, and mutual cooperation to meet challenges and prevent conflict.² Naval power operationalizes these conditions with a visible representation of U.S. commitment.

Because naval power guarantees those conditions through U.S. Navy operations, U.S. influence remains relevant to decisionmaking for allies, partners, and potential adversaries, opening opportunities for political, economic, and military access. However, access requires cultivation. If the United States is driven from the decisionmaking space because it fails to exercise naval power, competitors will fill the void. Maintaining conditions favorable to access now positions the United States for continued access in the future. U.S. Navy forward presence, maritime security operations, and engagement with allies, partners, and China maintains U.S. relevance in the decisionmaking of competitors and allies to influence outcomes.

¹ U.S. Navy, *A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority*, Version 1.0 (January 2016), 4.

² Office of the President of the United States, *National Security Strategy* (February 2015), 2.

Forward presence. When the United States conducts operations and engagement directly with allies and competitors in nonescalatory ways, this generates and reinforces access. Whether permanently stationed on foreign territory or rotationally deployed from the United States, the commitment to provide a continual presence is the means of operationally implementing future access and influence. In an area of friction between multiple participants, sustained forward naval presence underscores U.S. resolve to provide mutual access to the global commons, respect for the rules-based order, and mutual security cooperation.

The size and capacity of the forward force determines its deterrence and assurance capabilities, as well as ability to accomplish these ends. The capacity of the force (size, combat capability, and mobility throughout the area of operations) can assume a larger operational role. Nearly 50 percent of the U.S. Navy that is stationed in the Asia-Pacific region is based out of Japan, including an aircraft carrier strike group (CSG), its air wing, advanced surface combat warships, and an amphibious readiness group with a Marine expeditionary force in Japan, three submarines in Guam, and littoral combat ships (LCS) in Singapore. Rotational forces deployed from Pearl Harbor, San Diego, and Washington state augment the forward stationed force.³

Maritime security operations. Forward presence allows the United States to protect the sea lanes of communication and commerce and enforce freedom of navigation in international waters. Forward forces allow the United States to be in position for crisis response. These operations are particularly effective in generating sustained access because they produce public goods, including the enforcement of the rules-based international order; stability in the sea lanes; and protection against aggression. Because naval power is a flexible, adaptable, and scalable, it can be used to influence conflict resolution without changing the status quo. The ability to limit its scope means that employment does not necessarily result in an “act of war,” thus preventing escalation of every conflict by its use.⁴

Engagement with partners. When partners trust the enduring presence of the United States, they are more likely to invest in regional security solutions. Engaging partners with a sustained forward naval presence and cooperative maritime operations are concrete ways naval power supports allies and builds partner capacity. Cooperative exercises led by the U.S. Navy are the primary vehicles for this type of engagement because such activities are scalable to the size and need of the partner nation, improve joint tactical and operational level military effectiveness, and improve communication between naval forces for future operations. Because exercises can be tailored and require very little if any territorial footprint, naval forces can partner with nations with wide ranging capabilities, interests, and locations. For example, stationing ships such as the LCS and the Joint High Speed Vessel in the Pacific provide means for the fleet commander to engage with partners in scalable, adaptable ways in a wide variety of circumstances such as naval gunnery exercises; visit, board, search, and seizure operations; and participation in the large-scale Exercise Malabar. Partners clamor for these opportunities, extending U.S. influence to nations who do not possess the capacity to participate in major joint operations with the CSG or Aegis destroyers.

Engagement with China. Constructive engagement between the United States and China can also send signals of reassurance to regional partners. Because employment of naval forces can be

³ Department of the Navy, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower* (March 2015), 11.

⁴ Elbridge Colby, “Preparing for Limited War,” *National Interest*, October 21, 2015,

nonescalatory, naval power can be used to manage competition with less risk, introducing more transparency into the relationship. Just as with allies, cooperation in exercises and maritime security operations are opportunities to demonstrate transparency in U.S. naval operations, but also resolve and commitment to remain engaged in the region, discouraging unilateral action. As the U.S. Pacific Fleet commander remarked recently, “Like our broader bilateral relationship, the U.S.-China naval relationship must be able to handle elements of both harmony and friction.”⁵

The U.S. Navy engages with increased frequency with the Chinese People's Liberation Army-Navy [PLA(N)], including officer exchange opportunities in China, ship port visits to Pearl Harbor and Mayport, Florida, and including Chinese vessels in some elements of the large U.S. naval exercise Rim of the Pacific. The most significant example of cooperation is the 2014 Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea, a protocol designed to maximize safety and reduce escalation when units meet at sea. The purpose of the agreement is to “offer a means by which navies may develop mutually rewarding international cooperation and transparency...[and] in establishing international standards in relation to the use of the sea.”⁶ This agreement has been used at least twice between the United States and China, in 2014 during an antipiracy exercise in the Gulf of Aden, and in 2015 in the South China Sea between the USS *Fort Worth* (LCS-3) and the PLA(N) Jiangkai II frigate *Hengshui* (FFG-572).⁷

CHOICES FOR THE FUTURE EMPLOYMENT OF NAVAL POWER

As previously detailed, the exercise of naval power through forward presence, maritime security operations, and engagement with allies, partners, and China generates opportunities for political, economic, and military access, and cultivates influence for continued access so long as the status quo is maintained. The versatility and adaptability of naval power keeps the U.S. relevant and influential with our partners and deters competition in areas of friction with little risk of escalation. However, with China’s growing capability to deny U.S. military access to some areas of international waters, how can the United States guarantee future access, particularly in wartime?

Chinese A2/AD challenges require the U.S. military to adopt alternative planning assumptions for force design and campaigns. Alternative planning assumptions present opportunities to produce new and innovative ways to employ naval power, which may otherwise have been eliminated as too high risk under previous design frameworks. New frameworks may involve higher risk but present more options, and involve planning to the most likely rather than most dangerous scenario. They may also involve decentralizing command and control (C2) of surface assets, scaling back global force presence, and increased integration of allies into U.S. combat operations.

⁵ Prashanth Parameswaran, “China’s Unilateral Assertiveness ‘Unacceptable’ in Asia: US Navy Commander,” *The Diplomat*, December 17, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/12/chinas-unilateral-assertiveness-unacceptable-in-asia-us-navy-commander>.

⁶ Western Pacific Naval Symposium, *Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea*, Version 1.0 (April 22, 2014), <http://news.usni.org/2014/06/17/document-conduct-unplanned-encounters-sea>.

⁷ U.S. Navy, “USS FORT WORTH Conducts CUES with Chinese Navy,” Navy.mil, February 26, 2015, www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=85767.

Planning Assumption #1: Future plans to gain and maintain access must include preparations for major combat operations against China.

Given China's status as a nuclear-weapons state, major combat operations in a large-scale conventional war against China may not be the most realistic position strategically or economically from which to design a future force, although it is the most dangerous. Elbridge Colby suggests an alternate concept of a limited war with China, akin to the U.S.–Soviet Union Cold War, where opponents are “deliberately restrained ... because both sides fear the destruction that could be caused in the absence of the establishment and mutual observation of boundaries.”⁸ Consequently, a planning scenario that takes a limited war strategic approach will likely call for different war-fighting requirements than an unrestrained scenario, with the goal to prevail in limited campaigns rather than dominate an entire military force.

Using the limited war concept, competition in the maritime domain will continue apace. Conflict may involve the protection of vital U.S. interests in the defense of allies with little indications and warnings, be localized, or consist of smaller actions globally, like a threat to Taiwan or South China Sea territorial disputes. Ultimately, such scenarios call for expanded reliance on indirect sea control rather than power projection via the CSG particularly in the early stages of conflict.⁹ Operations below the level of high-end conflict are consistent with current Chinese strategies to gain incremental changes to the status quo. These lower-level approaches may also entail aspects of intensity, including Chinese forward-deployed CSGs, imposing air-defense identification zones on South China Sea reefs, and PLA(N) vessels rotationally deployed for maritime security operations, such as those recently off the Horn of Africa.

Following this alternative planning scenario, the next 20 to 30 years of conflict with the Chinese will be maritime in nature, and will require the U.S. Navy to continue to operate forward in areas of friction. Operations will include indirect sea control missions, such as keeping open shipping lanes and strategic chokepoints and asserting freedom of navigation. Successful prosecution of these missions relies on forward presence and allied partnerships, but is limited in scope to the local area. Proceeding from this alternative planning assumption establishes a different framework to analyze operational concepts for gaining and maintaining access. This is because conducting indirect sea control missions requires employing the tools in the toolbox differently than major combat operations against the Chinese homeland.

Planning Assumption #2: The CSG is the foundational operational unit required for access.

Starting with an alternate scenario of limited war, the CSG may not always be required to ensure maritime superiority. Certainly, there is a role for the CSG in future naval operations. However, changing the assumption that the CSG is the foundational unit opens opportunities to decentralize the C2 of naval assets capable of producing limited access for specific purposes, employing them differently than in strike group operations. Examples of limited access scenarios are defined as sea control operations in U.S. joint military publication: “The employment of forces to destroy enemy naval forces, suppress enemy sea commerce, protect vital sea lanes, and establish local military

⁸ Colby, “Preparing for Limited War,” 10.

⁹ Seth Cropsey, Bryan G. McGrath, and Timothy Walton, “Sharpening the Spear” (The Hudson Institute, October 2015), 31–33.

superiority in vital sea areas.”¹⁰ Furthermore, Joint Publication 1-02 defines superiority as the “degree of dominance...that permits the conduct of maritime operations ... at a given time and place without prohibitive interference by the opposing force [*italics added*].”¹¹

These definitions describe sea control and maritime superiority as relative objectives, not absolute environments. This is due in some part to the recognition that U.S. access is likely to be restricted. From these definitions, operationally employing surface ships differently can address the need to conduct sea control operations with a matching force rather than overwhelming force all the time, husbanding resources and readiness in case the conflict escalates. One such evolving operational concept is “distributed lethality,” designed to provide the operational commander options to employ naval combat power in an A2/AD environment with geographic dispersal of surface assets already in the inventory. This concept was created by the leaders of the Naval Surface Force and has been the subject of gaming and writing by experts at the Naval War College and elsewhere for the last two years.

Distributed lethality provides more versatility for the employment of naval forces, complicates enemy firing, and emphasizes a strong offensive posture by employing surface assets in “hunter-killer” small action groups that seize and maintain sea control, providing freedom of maneuver for follow-on forces. One hypothetical example used in Proceedings employs an Arleigh Burke-class destroyer and an LCS to secure the use of a small abandoned island with an airfield, which an opponent is expected to defend with a similarly capable surface action group. Importantly, shifting the employment of high-end naval surface forces to an offensive role, away from protection of the aircraft carrier as part of the group, allows the Navy to make “the most efficient and effective use of significant investments made in surface-force lethality over the past two decades.”¹²

A corollary planning assumption is that these billion dollar warships should not operate geographically dispersed from the aircraft carrier because their perceived survivability is too low to justify the risk of sending such scarce and valuable assets into heavily fortified, well-defended, well-trained, and high-end combat scenarios. The success of distributed lethality, or offensive sea control, must be enabled by accepting greater risk to forces than has been customary. This employment concept challenges the Navy to assume more risk in the decentralization of C2 and the dispersal of surface assets over greater distances, increasing their vulnerability. While advanced technology to improve survivability of combat forces is always warranted, naval surface forces cannot always stay beyond the reach of enemy weapons and remain competitive in the battle space. In the alternate framework posited, the types of missions the Navy will prosecute require it to operate with greater risk to force to gain and assure limited access for specific objectives during a finite window of time.

Planning Assumption #3: Forward presence must be global in scope.

Distributed Lethality relies on the forward presence of ships in contested areas. To be in the places that matter most, the United States may need to take risks in other areas of the world by cutting a

¹⁰ Department of Defense, *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Joint Publication 1-02 (February 2016), 210, www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹² Thomas Rowden, Peter Gumataotao, and Peter Fanta, “Distributed Lethality,” U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, January 2015, www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2015-01/distributed-lethality.

global presence posture in favor of a targeted presence posture with its most capable assets. As a 2010 Center for Naval Analyses study finds that meaningful global forward presence is not sustainable given the financial resources required to ensure such a presence is sufficient in quantity, possesses credible combat power, is materially ready, and is manned by highly trained and skilled personnel.¹³ The current Navy strategy recognizes the need to target presence tailored to national objectives: “Our force employment aligns capability, capacity, and platforms to regional mission demands, ensuring that our most modern and technologically advanced forces are located where their combat power is needed most.”¹⁴ Consistent with the U.S. strategic “pivot to Asia,” announced in 2011, the Navy reevaluated the status of its forward presence as a key component of deterrence of aggression and assuring access.

The Navy’s Rebalance to Asia represents a strategic effort to station more and more advanced forces in the Pacific for peacetime conditioning, maritime security operations, flexible deterrent options, and crisis response. By 2020, approximately 60 percent (up from 50 percent) of Navy ships and aircraft will be based in the Pacific, as well as its most advanced warfighting platforms such as ballistic missile defense–capable ships, submarines and the F-35C Lightning II, and the MQ-4C Triton unmanned aerial vehicle.¹⁵ With the increase in the footprint of U.S. forces, the United States will be able to expand theater security cooperation through participation in military exercises and port visits.¹⁶

The Pentagon’s rebalance to the Pacific is an incremental change to policy and employment. The Rebalance, begun in 2012, modestly changed the allocation of forces between the Atlantic and Pacific, including assets based in San Diego and Everett, Washington.¹⁷ There was no change to the number of CSGs, airwings, and amphibious ready groups. In the end, the additional assets will include two destroyers in Japan, one submarine in Guam, four LCSs in Singapore (when construction is complete), and the Zumwalt-class destroyer on rotational deployment from San Diego.¹⁸

Because of hard limitations and complicated requirements for ship maintenance and crew training, increasing rotational Navy deployments to the Pacific is not sustainable. The number of carriers in the inventory is not likely to increase, nor are the durations of deployments over the Navy’s stated goal of 7–8 months maximum in the Optimized Fleet Response Plan. Finally, the number and location of CSGs home ported in foreign ports are also not likely to change due to limitations of host nations in maintaining a larger U.S. military footprint.¹⁹

¹³ Daniel Whiteneck, Michael Price, Neil Jenkins, Peter Swartz, “The Navy at a Tipping Point: Maritime Dominance at Stake?” (Center for Naval Analysis, March 2010), 6.

¹⁴ Department of the Navy, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁶ Gopal Ratnam and Daniel Ten Kate, “U.S. Navy’s Pacific Presence to Expand, Panetta Says,” *Bloomberg*, June 2, 2012, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2012-06-02/u-s-navy-s-pacific-presence-to-expand-panetta-says.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Kris Osborn, “Navy’s New Maritime Strategy Includes More Destroyers to Pacific,” *Military.com*, February 26, 2015, www.military.com/daily-news/2015/02/26/navys-new-maritime-strategy-includes-more-destroyers-to-pacific.html.

¹⁹ Bryan Clarke and Jesse Sloman, “Deploying Beyond Their Means,” (Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2015), 6–15.

When considering the additional strict limitations of the Budget Control Act of 2011, the United States faces hard choices in determining the shape of the future Navy. The application of naval power must be selected to maximize influence of competition in U.S. favor and viewed as a scarce commodity. Forward presence must be allocated based on the most important strategic goals, rather than based on competition between combatant commanders for agendas in their areas of responsibility.²⁰ The Asia-Pacific region is the area in which the United States will be contested most strongly by a peer competitor for power, influence, and military might, so U.S. focus must secure access to the region with naval power, even if that means drawing back from commitments in other areas.

Planning Assumption #4: U.S. integration with allies and partners must be limited for operational security reasons. In this alternative planning framework, risk is taken in assessing the type of threat posed by China, decentralizing C2, and reducing global force presence. The increased integration of allies and partners into operational concepts, technology development, and forward presence plans is imperative to mitigate risk in these other areas. Partnership with allies can move beyond engagement (i.e., port visits and fleet exercises) and capacity building (i.e., military-military training and foreign military sales) to integration (i.e., shared C2 networks and operational planning). The United States must have trusted allies providing logistics and repairs for naval forces to operate forward in peace and conflict. However, there are new opportunities to integrate with partners to increase forward presence capacity on a more advanced scale than in decades past, and as U.S. Navy relationships with Great Britain and Japan indicate, the security risk in technology transfers and sharing classified operational plans and doctrine can be mitigated with proper oversight and controls in place.

More Pacific nations, including Vietnam, Malaysia, and Singapore, are candidates for increased naval integration in ways that could not have been imagined a decade ago. Their rapid economic growth and increases in military spending as a percentage of gross domestic product has meant that they are investing in high-tech systems, and they are increasingly willing to demonstrate their interest in sustained U.S. leadership in the region. These nations have highly capable forces, officers that have trained with American partners, and a growing sense of urgency over regional military trends.²¹

The United States also has opportunities to further integrate with navies with whom it is already close, including Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan. The U.S. Navy's relationship with the Japanese Self-Defense Force (JSDF) is an example of new opportunities for greater integration with other nations. Corresponding to legislative changes in Japan's defense posture, Tokyo has agreed to purchase four E-2D Advanced Hawkeye aircraft and upgrade the Aegis combat system on two of its Arago-class destroyers, in addition to purchases of the Joint Strike Fighter in 2011. These highly advanced systems are key elements in the U.S. Navy's next-generation combat system. Incorporating these elements allows the JSDF to "to fight as a part of the U.S. Navy's new networked CSG concept – which would expand the lethal power and range of both forces."²²

²⁰ Robert C. Rubel, "The Emperor's New Clothes: The Self-Delusions of American Naval Power," War on the Rocks, October 1, 2015, <http://warontherocks.com/2015/10/the-emperors-new-clothes-the-self-delusions-of-american-naval-power>.

²¹ Robert D. Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron* (New York: Random House, 2014).

²² Sam LaGrone, "Planned Japanese Self Defense Force Aircraft Buys, Destroyer Upgrades Could Tie Into U.S. Navy's Networked Battle Force," USNI News, June 10, 2015, <http://news.usni.org/2015/06/10/planned-japanese-self-defense-force-aircraft-buys-destroyer-upgrades-could-tie-into-u-s-navys-networked-battle-force>.

While the revised terms of the Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation agreement are designed to provide mutual protection and defense, Japan now has greater legal opportunity to participate in future missions – such as providing forward presence in maritime security operations in conjunction with U.S. ships in freedom of navigation operations and protection of sea lanes. These high-tech military equipment purchases will also allow Japan to fully integrate into a U.S. CSG (i.e., sharing tactical data and fire-control solutions), meaning that in a combat scenario, Japanese Aegis destroyers and E-2D aircraft could transform the battle space by fully participating in combat alongside U.S. assets of equal capability.

In the next several decades, the United States can open opportunities for access by using naval power to influence conflict resolution in the maritime environment. To do so requires the United States to use the Navy for strategic missions, maximizing its forward presence in flexible and adaptable ways in sustained maritime security operations, engagement with allies, and partnering with China. These operations provide to allies and China alike transparency and predictability when it comes to U.S. intentions, and allow the United States to use naval power to influence the region in a nonescalatory way.

Countering China's A2/AD strategies in the future, however, not only requires advanced technology, but calls for finding new ways to employ forces and capabilities already in the Navy's inventory. Designing a future force necessitates a new framework of analysis, one that allows more risk to be taken in the planning process, risk in strategy, decentralization of C2, to forces, and in partnerships. The alternative framework offered here draws upon tools that can be employed today toward more innovative planning and posture options. Solutions like Distributed Lethality or true combat system integration with allies may accompany more traditional plans that entail lower risk. They should not, however, be discounted simply because traditional frameworks restrict our strategies for access.