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## STRATEGIC CULTURE AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO NAVAL STRATEGY

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*Roger W. Barnett*

**A**t the Naval War College's Current Strategy Forum in June 2006, the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Michael Mullen, called for the creation of a new maritime strategy. The key for the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard in formulating a new strategy will be in describing how, within the context of a national military strategy, maritime forces can make a strategic difference. There are three parts to this requirement. First, it should be cast as a *strategy*. Secondly, it should be closely aligned with national military strategy, for, as Samuel Huntington sagely observed over fifty years ago,

The resources which a service is able to obtain in a democratic society are a function of the *public support* of that service. The service has the responsibility to develop this necessary support, and it can only do this if it possesses a strategic concept which clearly formulates its relationship to the national security.<sup>1</sup>

And, thirdly, the strategy must be in harmony with Navy strategic culture.

When the Navy's Cold War maritime strategy was crafted in the early 1980s, it fulfilled each of these three requirements.<sup>2</sup> It was a strategy because it had strategic

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context: it addressed a specific adversary in specific geographic places along a phased transition in time. It was not doctrine, which tends to be essentially context free. It was complementary to the national, and NATO, strategy of flexible response, and it offered a way to employ naval forces (including allied naval forces) in order to take the war to the Soviets in places, against targets, and at times of our own choosing, not theirs. The question the crafters of the strategy asked themselves was:

How can naval forces employ the dimensions of warfare—time, geographic space, and intensity—to influence the course and outcome of the war?

The maritime strategy of the 1980s was successful in underwriting plans and programs, actions with U.S. allies, and peacetime deployment patterns and exercises. It was opposed by many in the Department of Defense, other military services, American civilian strategists, and, to be sure, the Soviet military. It was characterized as too risky, too dangerous, too provocative, too offensive, peripheral to the central conflict, wasteful of resources in a sideshow, mere justification for programs, too rigid, too independent, not specific enough for programming purposes, not detailed enough to use for operational planning, and contrary to—in fact, hostile to—the objectives of naval arms control. The fact that it raised such a panoply of objections was a tribute to its power. Critics had visions of mindless maritime martinets marching mechanically to Murmansk.<sup>3</sup> The strategy was, however, embraced by the naval service and, with the leadership of a very activist Secretary of the Navy and a generous defense budget, supported an expansion toward force-level goals of fifteen carrier battle groups, six hundred combatant ships, and a robust amphibious lift capacity.

In large measure, it was looked upon favorably by the naval community because it was in harmony with Navy strategic culture. Accordingly, if a new strategy is to be successful, it also must resonate with Navy strategic culture.

The major, enduring characteristics of this culture, or community of shared beliefs and attitudes, are:

- Recognizing the primacy of context
- Maintaining a systems approach
- Performing in an expeditionary manner: offensive, forward, mobile, and joint
- Ensuring adaptability
- Accounting for inherent uncertainty and risk.

These characteristics are specific, yet they are broad enough to encompass the Navy's tripartite organizational culture of surface, subsurface, and air communities. It would appear, moreover, that the Marine Corps, with some augmentation by its unique cultural factors, can fit comfortably within this framework.

## CONTEXT

The environment influences very powerfully both how naval forces can operate and how they do operate. The thought patterns of seafarers are powerfully molded by the essentially featureless, politically uncontrolled seascape. Both the

open ocean and the littoral are environments hostile to sailors. The environment must be mastered and kept under control first; then attention can be directed toward strategic objectives.<sup>4</sup>

The maritime environment is fundamentally nonlinear. That is, no natural or artificial lines exist around which to organize reconnaissance, surveillance, or battle. There are no flanks, no forward edge of the battle area, and no rear. Missions can be executed simultaneously or sequentially. The senses operate differently and have different priorities. There is no role for the senses of smell, touch, or taste. Sight and hearing, moreover, must be artificially enhanced even for survival.

In such an environment, concepts rule—that is, the context is so overwhelming and powerful that doctrine must take a back seat. Take, for example, the horizon. The horizon is a concept. You can't get there from here or anywhere else. But ad-

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versaries can place themselves just beyond the horizon, and without overhead assets an at-sea commander will not know they are there. Moreover, the environment

is truly three-dimensional, insofar as it has dimensionality in depth as well as in height.

Concepts are more important to a naval strategist than doctrine is. This is because concepts and doctrine tend to be enemies. Concepts are undefined, not clearly bounded, changing and changeable; doctrine is defined, bounded, difficult to change, and relatively inflexible. Admiral Chester Nimitz had it just right: he considered doctrine as a reminder, sort of a checklist to ensure nothing is forgotten or overlooked.<sup>5</sup>

The at-sea environment is very different from where people live. All the familiar things—family, school, community, friends—are radically different from what they are at “home.” There are no constant reminders of home. Neither trees, houses, river banks, highways, mountains, nor malls are in evidence.

In such an environment, the most difficult problem facing a commander is *finding the adversary*. The corollary, of course, is to take actions so that the adversary cannot find you. This is a two-sided question of establishing and denying sanctuary, and it persists for twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year. When terrain is part of the environment, it influences the ability to find seaborne adversaries. This explains the operational importance of geographic choke points and ports. Darkness and weather are environmental factors to be taken into consideration as well.

The corollary to the importance of findability is also pivotal for maritime forces: that they take positive actions to prevent their being found by an adversary. If ships or submarines can be found on vast ocean tracts or under the deepest oceans, they become vulnerable. If they are vulnerable, the possibility of their being sunk looms real, and their prospective value comes into question, for they cannot be reconstituted.

The importance of the overall context of the conflict and of understanding the adversary's strategy can be understood when one considers the great debate that accompanied the inclusion of attacks on Soviet ballistic missile submarines in the 1980s maritime strategy. This was controversial enough to cause Barry Posen to write, "We now live in the worst of all possible worlds."<sup>6</sup>

What Posen and others had argued was that attacking Soviet ballistic missile submarines would cause them to "use them or lose them" and that therefore doing so was of little strategic value and could cause a catastrophic holocaust. But the critics could not answer why the Soviets would protect the submarines if they would use them or lose them, instead harping on their slogan while refusing to address the context, which was crucial to understanding the strategic interaction.<sup>7</sup>

So strongly influencing to maritime strategy is the question of context that one of Napoleon's maxims asserts: "A general commanding an army and an admiral commanding a fleet need different qualities. The qualities necessary to command an army are born in one; but those necessary to command a fleet are acquired only by experience."<sup>8</sup>

#### SYSTEMS APPROACH

Those proficient in maritime warfare think in systems terms. Land warfare experts think in terms of units. When an army officer briefs, the first thing he displays is an organizational chart. He lives and dies by organizational charts, for a commander must know where his air defenses and field kitchens are and what unit is supplying his MPs, for example. When the admiral arrives on the scene, he has no thoughts at all of where these things are or who is supplying them. He is thinking in terms of air defense systems, antisubmarine systems, of mine warfare, amphibious, logistics, and strike systems. It is not accidental that network-centric warfare originated in the Navy and that a naval officer wrote a book about a "system of systems."<sup>9</sup> Naval officers are entirely comfortable with electronic systems and networks. Indeed, the first radar-directed dogfight took place at sea in February 1942, and the Naval Tactical Data System, with its intership and aircraft links, went to sea over forty years ago.<sup>10</sup> As Wayne Hughes noted, "All navies are concerned with the movement and delivery of goods and services rather than with 'the purchase of real estate.' Thus, a navy is in the *links*, not the

*nodes* business.”<sup>11</sup> Commenting on naval operations in World War II, Fleet Admiral William F. Halsey is reported to have said, “A fleet is like a hand of cards at poker or bridge. You don’t see it as aces and kings and deuces. You see it as a hand, a unit. You see a fleet as a unit, not carriers, battleships and destroyers. You don’t play individual cards, you play the hand.”<sup>12</sup> Of course, Metcalf’s Law—to the effect that the power of a network increases as the square of the number of nodes—gives additional support to the notion that numbers really matter in sea warfare.

This mode of thought begins in elementary naval training and education, and it continues throughout a naval career. It encourages approaching questions—including strategies—from a holistic, systematic point of view.

If it is correct that naval thinking is systems based, it would seem axiomatic that navies would be great advocates of jointness—linking up with complementary and supplementary sources of information and action. Yet the Navy has traditionally been cool to jointness, viewing it essentially as a one-way street: the Navy knows full well what it can do for the other services, but it is skeptical of what they can do for it. In an era of networking, when assets—and especially information—can be accessed and put to advantage quickly and easily, the Navy must and will be more forthcoming with respect to jointness.

### EXPEDITIONARY

The third aspect of Navy strategic culture is that it is very strongly expeditionary. That means naval forces are not garrison forces but are forward deployed and ready for offensive action at all times. It means fully mobile, not static, forces.

Maneuver, correctly understood as movement *relative to an adversary*, is not an option for naval forces but a way of life. The Navy is always maneuvering; it is maneuver that makes offense, defense, and logistical support effective. Maneuver accomplishes nothing on its own: it enables the other functions. As Muhammad Ali said, “Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.” It is not the float but the sting that matters.

From the early 1960s until the adoption of the Cold War maritime strategy of the 1980s, the Navy was relegated by the Office of the Secretary of Defense to a role of defensive sea control. The Navy chafed at this, considering it derisively as “hauling ash and trash.” When the Maritime Strategy, a sharp break from a defensive sea control posture, was presented at the Army War College in 1983, an irate member of the audience suggested that the Navy was not interested in protecting the vital sea lanes that carry the reinforcement and resupply convoys to Europe in case of war, that all the Navy was seeking was support for its expensive big-deck carrier programs while impoverishing the Army. The presenter responded, “The Army is not defending Texas. It’s in Germany.” The

point registered was that the Navy, by pinning down Soviet submarines north of the Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom Gap and by filtering out the Soviet naval aviation threat, was providing protection for the sea lanes in the same way the Army was defending Texas—that is, by operating in forward areas.

At sea, it is important to “attack effectively first,” as Wayne Hughes has also wisely counseled.<sup>13</sup> It is also vital that a navy with global reach have the capability to project power ashore with guns, missiles, or aircraft, or employ Marines in operational maneuver from the sea. All these entail offensive capability to achieve offensive objectives.

Forward deploying means interaction with allied navies, and the Navy has always worked assiduously at initiating and fostering such links. From the biennial International Seapower Symposium series first convened in 1969 to the establishment at the Naval War College of the Naval Command College in 1956 and the Naval Staff College in 1972, to the conduct of navy-to-navy staff talks with many navies for nearly thirty years, to the suggestion by the Chief of Naval Operations of a thousand-ship navy in 2005, the Navy has been in the forefront of international cooperation for the freedom of the seas and for the ability to use the seas in securing national interests. Forward presence also means that naval forces, unlike those of the other services, can be positioned and configured in a way that leaves to the adversary the decision to break the peace. That is, others must take U.S. and allied naval units on the scene into account before they act in ways contrary to American interests.

#### ADAPTABILITY

The fourth cultural aspect of interest is adaptability. Warfare has been likened to a complex adaptive system, and a major aspect of strategy is anticipation. An effective strategy must anticipate actions of a thinking adversary, and then it must be sufficiently adaptive to prevent or neutralize the adversary’s counterefforts. To the extent that anticipation is lacking or that one is surprised, the greater will be the need for adaptability. Ways (strategies) exhibit various degrees of adaptability. Means (forces), on the other hand, exhibit various degrees of flexibility. Flexibility should also be a conscious by-product of training and education.<sup>14</sup> A good strategy is supported by flexible forces and flexible frames of mind, providing it as many dimensions of adaptability as possible. Adaptability is built into the strategy and must be a prime consideration for the preparation of plans and of the commander’s intent.

Adaptability, characterized by individual initiative and freedom of action, has long been a strength of the Navy. As Victor Davis Hanson has observed, “At critical stages during the planning, fighting, and aftermath of the battle [of Midway], American military personnel at all ranks were unusually innovative,

even eccentric, and always unpredictable. Most were unafraid to take the initiative to craft policy when orders from superiors were either vague or nonexistent—in a fashion completely antithetical to the protocols of operations in the imperial fleet, which in turn mirrored much of the prevailing values and attitudes inherent in Japanese society.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, “Individualism, unlike consensual government and constitutional recognition of political freedom, is a cultural, rather than political, entity.”<sup>16</sup>

The need for adaptability in the battle space helps to explain the Navy’s coolness to the prescriptive nature of written doctrine. Doctrine, as it is understood in the joint arena, “connects the dots.” But then it goes a step farther and says: “See the lines connecting the dots? You must color inside the lines.”<sup>17</sup> This runs directly counter to the Navy’s need for adaptability at the lowest levels of command. As Colin Gray has written, “If we fail the *adaptability* test, we are begging to be caught out by the diversity and complexity of future warfare.”<sup>18</sup>

#### UNCERTAINTY AND RISK

Much has been written about uncertainty and risk. Clausewitz’s categorization of fog and friction in warfare has a long audit trail.<sup>19</sup> The sources of uncertainty stem from information deficiencies; the misalignment of ends, ways, and means; the nonlinearity of combat-related effects, resulting in unanticipated or unintended consequences; and external constraints on the application of military force.<sup>20</sup> Risks arise from, and are measured by, the magnitude of these uncertainties. Uncertainty and risk are always present and unavoidable. Still, as has been known from the time of the ancient Greeks, “He who does not expect the unexpected cannot detect it.”<sup>21</sup>

A successful strategy should discuss uncertainty and risk and describe how the strategy has been designed to cope with these, so that it does not result in the worst of all possible outcomes for a strategy—catastrophic failure. If a strategy fails, it should be designed to fail gracefully and then recover. Analysis and detailing of uncertainty and risk inherent in the strategy and in the context in which it will be applied are key. Long ago, Louis Pasteur pointed out that “chance favors the prepared mind.”<sup>22</sup>

Uncertainties are those things for which assumptions must be made in the crafting of a strategy. Typically they encompass, for example, warning and decision times; the expected length of an engagement, campaign, or conflict; whether certain classes or types of weapons will be employed; the relevance and effectiveness of training; the sturdiness of the morale of the force; whether systems will perform up to operational expectations; and the effects of operational or technological surprise. All these and more must be considered and accounted for in the preparation and adoption of a strategy.



### SALTWATER IN THEIR VEINS

When crafting a strategy, one must proceed with due appreciation for the central cultural tenets of those who will plan and execute. At the top of the list, affecting all other considerations, is the matter of context. The maritime strategy of the 1980s, prepared in the context of a global war with the Soviet Union, is now obsolete. There is no single driving context against which to write a maritime strategy for the future.

Indeed, the current context of conflict will require U.S. military forces to:

- Deploy somewhere they perhaps have never been
- Fight an adversary they have never fought
- Use weapons and equipment that might have never been used in combat, often in ways that were never intended
- Execute their orders regardless of weather or visibility
- Continue to perform in the horrific presence of death or wounding of friendly fighters as well as adversaries
- Operate on the basis of incomplete, untimely, and perhaps incorrect information
- Pursue sometimes vague, conflicting, or incomprehensible objectives
- Conduct combat operations under the unblinking eye of the television camera and the constant scrutiny of the press
- Tolerate long separations from family and loved ones
- Endure lukewarm public support, sometimes open hostility, from the home front
- Absorb minimum casualties from an adversary that might fight in unconventional, unanticipated, or illegitimate ways; that might be under the influence of performance-enhancing drugs; or that may employ nuclear, chemical, biological, or radiological weapons
- Achieve their objectives (i.e., win) quickly
- Inflict minimum casualties on the adversary
- Cause minimal destruction to property and the environment and minimal casualties to noncombatants, provide assistance to injured combatants and noncombatants, and be prepared to restore that which has been damaged
- Trigger no (or only benign) unintended consequences

—and all the while hobbled by rules (doctrine, international law, principles of war, rules of engagement) formulated in and for a radically different context.

This will mean that one might have to prepare several strategies to meet different requirements, or a multitiered strategy. How this will be approached is a function of how the crafters of the strategy view the relationship between naval strategy and the national military strategy. If the national military strategy is holistic enough to deal with a variety of contexts, it is possible that a single maritime strategy could support it. To the extent that the national military strategy and national guidance is ambiguous or insufficient to make a clear delineation as to how to proceed, the maritime strategy will itself necessarily contain areas that are more abstract than would otherwise be desirable.

The preparers of the strategy, mindful of both the force and value of the cultural factors set forth above—the primacy of context in a systems-based, expeditionary, adaptable approach, with a clear focus on uncertainties and

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risks—must also concern themselves with the forces that would be necessary to execute the strategy. This concern, however, should be

set aside during the preparation of the strategy, which should not be subject to explicit force size or fiscal constraints. That is, one should prepare an ideal maritime strategy that is fully complementary to the national military strategy, that describes how naval forces can make a strategic difference. Only after that has been accomplished should one try to determine if forces are or will be available that can fulfill the requirements with acceptable levels of risk. If the judgment is that they will not, one must either seek more capable forces, modify the strategy, or be prepared to accept greater levels of risk. This is a never-ending process, but it must be undertaken if naval forces are to be empowered to exert maximum strategic leverage.

The preparers of the strategy should be practitioners—Navy and Marine Corps officers with saltwater in their veins and relevant education. This is important, for as Edward Luttwak has written, “To evoke the intense loyalty without which combat is impossible, armed forces must be the proud keepers of exclusive traditions and reassuring continuities.”<sup>23</sup> To this end, those naval authors should be provided a set of precepts against which to prepare the strategy. These precepts would include the relevant context, framework, and cultural signposts for what is to be included. It is to the generation of a set of precepts, as comprehensive as possible, that the New Maritime Strategy Process launched by the Chief of Naval Operations should be dedicated.

## NOTES

- An abbreviated version of this article was presented to a Center for Naval Analyses conference, "The Future of Maritime Strategy," on 25 October 2006.
1. Samuel Huntington, "National Policy and The Transoceanic Navy," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 80, no. 5 (May 1954), p. 483.
  2. For analysis of and materials on the development of that document, see John B. Hattendorf, *The Evolution of the U.S. Navy's Maritime Strategy, 1977–1986*, Newport Paper 19 (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College Press, 2004), available at [www.nwc.navy.mil/press/npapers/np19/np19.pdf](http://www.nwc.navy.mil/press/npapers/np19/np19.pdf).
  3. See Roger W. Barnett, "U.S. Maritime Strategy: Sound and Safe," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (September 1987).
  4. "The Navy is always at war, because it is always fighting winds and waves and fog. The Navy is ready for an instant blow. . . . The ocean is limitless and unobstructed; and the fleet, each ship manned, gunned, and provisioned and fuelled, ready to fight within five minutes." Sir John Fisher, 1919, quoted in Robert Debs Heinl, Jr., *Dictionary of Military and Naval Quotations* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1966), p. 210.
  5. E. B. Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1976), p. 222.
  6. Barry R. Posen, "Inadvertent Nuclear War? Escalation and NATO's Northern Flank," *International Security* (Fall 1982), pp. 28–82.
  7. For an extended discussion, see Roger W. Barnett, "Soviet Strategic Reserves and the Soviet Navy," in *The Soviet Union: What Lies Ahead?* ed. Kenneth M. Currie and Gregory Varhall, *Studies in Communist Affairs*, vol. 6 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1985).
  8. Available at [www.pattonhq.com/militaryworks/napoleonmaxims.html](http://www.pattonhq.com/militaryworks/napoleonmaxims.html).
  9. Bill Owens, *Lifting the Fog of War* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2000).
  10. See David L. Boslaugh, *When Computers Went to Sea* (Los Alamitos, Calif.: IEEE Computer Society, 1999).
  11. Wayne P. Hughes, Jr., "Naval Maneuver Warfare," *Naval War College Review* 50, no. 3 (Summer 1997), p. 28 [emphasis original].
  12. Available at [tinyurl.com/ydoxcm](http://tinyurl.com/ydoxcm).
  13. Wayne P. Hughes, *Fleet Tactics: Theory and Practice* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1986).
  14. "Mahan's historically based policy analysis was a matter not so much of identifying trends and extending them, or of simple reasoning by analogy, but of applying judgment that had been well schooled in the study of complex historical phenomena, with due appreciation for the bounded but still significant and possibly even decisive role that contingency could play." Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: The Classic Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan Reconsidered* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center, and Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1997), p. 106.
  15. Victor Davis Hanson, *Carnage and Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), p. 355.
  16. *Ibid.*, p. 386.
  17. Mahan limned this clearly: "The French word *doctrinaire*, fully adopted into English gives warning of the danger that attends doctrine; a danger to which all useful conceptions are liable. The danger is that of exaggerating the letter above the spirit, of becoming mechanical instead of discriminating. This danger inheres especially in—indeed, is inseparable from—the attempt to multiply definition and to exaggerate precision; the attempt to make a subordinate a machine working on fixed lines, instead of an intelligent agent, imbued with principles of action, understanding the general character not only of his own movement, but of the whole operation of which he forms part; capable, therefore, of modifying action correctly to suit circumstances." Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Mahan on Naval Strategy: Selections from the Writings of Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1991), p. 349.
  18. Colin S. Gray, *Recognizing and Understanding Revolutionary Change in Warfare: The Sovereignty of Context* (Carlisle, Pa.: U.S. Army

War College Strategic Studies Institute, February 2006), p. vii, available at [www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil/](http://www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil/).

19. See especially Barry Watts, *Clausewitzian Friction and Future War*, McNair Paper 52 (Washington, D.C.: Institute for National Strategic Studies, 1999).
20. For significant detail see Roger W. Barnett, *Asymmetrical Warfare* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2002).
21. Heraclitus, available at [www.pshrink.com/wisdom/](http://www.pshrink.com/wisdom/).
22. Quoted at [en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Louis\\_Pasteur](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Louis_Pasteur).
23. Edward N. Luttwak, review of *Lifting the Fog of War*, by Bill Owens, *New York Times Book Review*, 21 January 2001, p. 21.