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I. SSN: The Queen of the Seas?

Graham Rhys-Jones

We have it on good authority that the dropping of a canvas bag over U-boat periscopes was among the desperate remedies considered by the British during the early days of World War I. There is no evidence that the measure was successful or even that it was tried.

But in "SSN: The Queen of the Seas," someone does seem to have slipped a canvas bag over Rear Admiral Holland's periscope as he looks at the question of sea control from his position beneath the waves.

If Admiral Holland's purpose were simply to remind us of the formidable capability of the nuclear attack submarine, or to warn us that contemporary preoccupations with the navy's power-projection mission should not result in too radical a change to the current naval pecking order, one could scarcely take issue with him. But his description of the SSN as the "*sine qua non* of maritime power," his uncritical use of terms such as "the predominant weapon" and "the ultimate capital ship," are more than rhetorical flourishes. They suggest a vision of maritime warfare that is centered largely, if not exclusively, around the submarine.

What seems to be missing from Admiral Holland's article is one single concession to the idea that control of the sea (the military condition that enables us to use the sea for our own purposes and to deny such use to the enemy) is achieved only through the combined action of a spectrum of diverse though complementary weapon systems—surface, subsurface, and air. The SSN is an important part of the mix, but a part nonetheless.

This was never shown more clearly than in the Falklands, an episode that Admiral Holland cites in support of his case. The "total dominance" of the SSN, he claims, "foreclosed any realistic alternative to the Argentines except surrender." Many, not least those soldiers and marines who "yomped" to Port Stanley, might dispute this simplistic view of cause and effect. But confining ourselves to the naval aspects of the campaign, it is important to remember that the dominance of the SSN

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was anything but “total.” The presence of nuclear submarines may have confined the major units of the Argentine fleet to harbour; but it did not prevent the resupply of the islands by sea, nor did it relieve British commanders of anxiety about subsurface and air threats. The threat to British objectives was broadly based, and a balanced mix of maritime capability was needed to deal with it. It is this *mix*, and not the SSN, which is the “*sine qua non* of maritime power.”

The SSN is a capable weapon, not least in the hands of our enemies. Let us agree that the West must keep its technical edge, and continue to think deeply about how best to employ the nuclear submarine—and combat it. We would do well, however, to avoid what Captain Roskill called the heresy of the dominant weapon. This has served too often to distort naval war planning and material development from the days of the *Dreadnought* onward.



In the open field of the sea the most direct route is the most natural, and, other things being equal, the best; but many circumstances may influence the decision. Paramount among these is the strength of the navy as compared with that of the enemy—a strength dependent not only upon aggregate tonnage or weight of metal, but also upon the manner in which those aggregates have been distributed among the various classes of vessels and upon the characteristics of each class in point of armament, armor, speed, and coal endurance. All these qualities are elements in strategic efficiency, sometimes mutually contradictory; and the adjustments of them among themselves may seriously affect strategic calculations. This illustrates that the composition of a national fleet is really a strategic question.

Alfred Thayer Mahan
Naval Strategy
(Boston: Little, Brown & Co.,
1918)