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National Interests and Naval Forces in the 1990s

Admiral Charles R. Larson, U.S. Navy

I

During the past 45 years, the U.S.-Soviet relationship has been the dynamic focus of our foreign and defense policy. Our preoccupation with containing Soviet expansionism—and with deterring nuclear war—has limited to a degree our ability to focus on other national and international problems. Now that relationship is again on the move, but in a positive, less confrontational direction. What the final outcome will be when the maneuvers are over, and whether our country will retain its position of strength, depend a lot on our wisdom in reacting to these developments in the Soviet Union. The changes which General Secretary Gorbachev speaks of—"glasnost," "perestroika" and "reasonable sufficiency"—offer a historic opportunity to improve the security of our nation. Our obligation is to work toward that goal while being careful not to confuse wishful thinking with reality, or stated intentions with capabilities. The future security environment *is* different, and the threat of Soviet aggression against Nato has been reduced. But Soviet *capabilities*, as of this moment, have not been reduced.

The Soviet Union, however, is only one consideration, albeit a big one, as we examine our relative position in the world now and in the future. There are other major trends emerging throughout the world which will affect our security. One can no longer view international security relationships in strictly bipolar terms. The world has become multipolar, with military and economic power becoming increasingly diffused, particularly in Asia and the Third World.

Our ability to deter and defend against a wide range of diverse threats to U.S. interests must be considered in establishing the priorities for the 1990s.

Admiral Larson is the Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet. This article is adapted from a speech delivered to the Current Strategy Forum at the Naval War College on 15 June 1989, when Admiral Larson was the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Plans, Policy and Operations.

This issue is particularly critical at a time when our own people, caught up in the euphoria of U.S.-Soviet "détente" and concerned with the budget deficit, are beginning to question whether maybe we are *too* capable or that the current budget is far *too expensive*. This latter perception is perhaps best characterized by an observation once made by Admiral Arleigh Burke: he said that in all the westerns he had ever watched, he never saw a cowboy carry three guns. Two always seemed adequate for the task at hand. Well, my concern is that there are a lot of "one gun" strategists out there today who advocate large cuts in our military—similar in scope to what we saw in the 1970s—without realizing that the world is still a very dangerous place in spite of improving U.S.-Soviet relations. Proposed cuts to our force structure to achieve short-term monetary savings can have serious long-term consequences if the strategic implications and costs of such moves are not adequately understood.

What the impact of all of this will be for the U.S. Navy is very important, for whatever changes actually do take place in the world environment, one of the imperatives that will remain constant is U.S. maritime superiority, the *sine qua non* for freedom of the seas. It guarantees access in war to our Pacific and Atlantic allies, and to world markets and natural resources, all of which are so necessary to ensuring the security and economic vitality of this island—and therefore maritime—nation.

II

Looking first at the Soviet Union, I, like everyone, am encouraged by the recent initiatives of the Soviet leadership to restructure their internal economy and political framework in a way which could provide the basis for diminished potential for conflict between our two countries in the years ahead. But while I fully support General Secretary Gorbachev's stated intentions, I share the administration's cautious approach in evaluating exactly what his real motives are, *and* his probability of success. Mr. Gorbachev's program of "perestroika" is not an admission of defeat in the Soviets' military competition with the West, but rather a realization that to successfully compete in the future they must change their traditional way of doing things. In the long run, the success of "perestroika" may improve the Soviet civil economy and industry as advertised, and as a result enhance their military potential. This is one point you do not hear General Secretary Gorbachev making to Western audiences, although I believe he has made this point to his military commanders. This expectation, among other considerations, has fostered the assent of the military to the arms reductions that have been announced or proposed to date.

The Soviet navy, *our* principal focus, is stronger today and more capable than ever. In the last several years we have seen significant technological advances across all naval warfare areas. In this regard, the Soviet navy's shipbuilding program continues apace, and Soviet nuclear submarine production remains at a consistently high level of funding and delivery. Since 1981 the Soviets have built and operated six new classes of submarines. These are heavily armed, quality ships, both nuclear and conventionally powered. The Soviets have made substantial progress in quieting these new submarines during this decade, largely as a result of espionage and technology transfer from every possible avenue. The technological advantage the United States has enjoyed for years is indeed narrowing.

We can expect to see the Soviet navy reducing its overall numbers of submarines in a widely publicized arms control gesture, but the ships to be stricken are obsolete diesel and nuclear-powered submarines. Many have not been underway and out of home waters in years and are destined for the scrapper's yard in any event. The methodology used to analyze arms control proposals involves more than rote "bean-counting" of platforms—the respective capabilities of the platforms involved must be considered. The recurrent theme in all Soviet naval arms control proposals is to trade Soviet capabilities which are of marginal value to them for U.S. capabilities which are fundamental to our national security. The United States opposes naval arms control measures precisely because a strong navy is crucial to protecting our vital security interests. So you can clearly see that Soviet proposals to trade as many as 5-7 U.S. aircraft carriers—the very foundation of our naval capability—for 100 obsolete Soviet submarines is not an even trade and would clearly be in their favor! Complementing this sort of proposal, the Soviets have stated that force reductions in the Soviet navy are being driven by a "new defensive orientation." They focus, in particular, on the Pacific. Closer examination reveals that while there has been a small reduction in naval combatants in the Soviet Pacific Fleet, the introduction of new units, technological upgrades and system improvements has markedly enhanced the capability of the Pacific Fleet to carry out the full range of its naval wartime missions. This is not a meaningful reduction in naval strength, but a better use of fiscal and manpower resources driven by economic necessity.

The Soviets also have not overlooked the surface navy. Current major combatant shipbuilding programs in the U.S.S.R. include the *Tbilisi*-class carrier, the *Kirov* and *Slava*-class cruisers, the *Sovremenny* and *Udaloy*-class destroyers, and the Krivak-class frigate. The trend of Soviet naval aviation has likewise been one of extensive growth in capability over the past few years. This growth is expected to continue through the 1990s and into the next century. The Soviet Union has long recognized the value of aircraft carriers and has, to a large extent, constructed its entire modern navy around countering our carrier force. Last year we witnessed the Soviets' first large-deck carrier operating at sea. This ship is about 65,000 tons (slightly smaller than our *Midway* class) and will add immeasurably to their sea control and power projection capability. A second ship of the same class is also nearing completion. And now, according to their published statements, they are constructing an even larger and more capable next-generation carrier, probably similar in size to our *Midway*-class carriers.

While the Soviets are adding this new formidable capability to their fleets, they argue that we should reduce the number of carriers in our force because they are destabilizing. They repeatedly contend that naval forces should be included in conventional arms control talks. The U.S. Government and the Nato alliance have consistently opposed their inclusion at this stage of the arms control process.

To do otherwise would ignore geography and the key role naval forces play in supporting U.S. strategy in all regions of the world. The United States, by virtue of oceans separating us from the rest of the world, has always been a maritime power. This is not true of the Soviet Union. While the Soviets claim a blue water maritime heritage dating back to the days of Peter the Great, the majority of their economic and political interests lie within their own continental land mass. The Soviet Union will always have the ability to generate forces quickly from within its borders and transport them to a front in either the East or West. For forty-five years, our European and Pacific allies have depended on U.S. maritime superiority to keep the sea lines of communication open, thus enabling us to resupply these Allies from our industrial base in the event of war. In two previous world wars, these oceanic lines of communication have proven to be the highways to victory. We have not forgotten how their contested control by enemy forces came so close to spelling defeat for the Allied powers in both the Atlantic and Pacific theaters. Negotiations or unilateral reductions which would reduce the ability of the United States to guarantee the free use of the sea, *globally*, would critically undermine our national security posture. The asymmetry between the United States and the Soviet Union was clearly highlighted by former Secretary of Defense Carlucci during his 1988 discussions with Defense Minister Yazov in the Soviet Union. He noted that only in Eurasia does power and influence travel by bridges; elsewhere it must move across oceans. His point was that if we were expected to agree to proposals which would restrict our ability to protect and use the seas, they should be expected to shut down their infrastructure of bridges, railroads and highways, all critical to their national security posture.

So, I think the facts show clearly that the Soviet Union's military capability *is not receding* but *rather is growing*; and that their actions to date do not necessarily reflect their stated intentions. As the Chief of Naval Operations has noted, "In short, while they project an attractive new image, the old reality has yet to catch up." In effect, the Soviets are doing now what the U.S. Navy did 15-20 years ago, and we are more capable now than then because of a very solid modernization program.

III

But the Soviets are not the only threat or the sole purpose of our forward-deployed forces. We have to understand that while the world seems smaller because of communications, data transfer and travel, it is actually growing larger in terms of international commerce. Not only that, more and more of our industrial base is moving overseas—predominantly to the Pacific region. In addition, over 50 percent of our foreign trade is with the Pacific nations, and nearly all of this trade is seaborne. More than ever, then, we are a maritime nation, dependent on the sea as never before. But many of our countrymen don't realize it. We have to understand that this new global network of overseas interests leaves our country exposed to a wider range of threats than ever before. The most severe threat continues to be that of total war, with all the new factors in our relationship with the Soviet Union for us to consider. And although the threat of regional confrontations may not be as severe, the probability of their occurrence is much higher. We must be ready to counter both, all the way from global war to low intensity conflict. I would like to make one important point in this regard. Analysts can't model presence, influence and deterrence—only war. If we are going to make intelligent decisions regarding the composition and capability of our forces in the future, these unquantifiable variables—which result from a strong, forward naval posture—must be given proper consideration.

In Asia, sweeping changes are taking place as recent events in China have so graphically demonstrated. Economically, our balance of trade has shifted from a European focus to the Pacific rim, and can be expected to expand as markets are opened in China and southeast Asia. The Japanese economic miracle needs no description, but equally amazing is the growth in economic power of South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. China is expected to be a booming economic giant in the next century and is projected to surpass Japan in GNP by the year 2010 if her current political unrest is resolved (how quickly the horizon changes!). Politically, great change is also afoot as evidenced by movement toward Korean reunification talks, economic openings between socialist and non-socialist countries, and the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia. The ASEAN countries are becoming a strong grouping, increasingly conscious of their common interests, both economically and in terms of security.

But, while moderating winds of change are evident, powerful neighbors (in addition to the large Soviet Pacific Fleet) still give rise to the need for security precautions in the region. While China plans to reduce the size of the People's Liberation Army, all branches of the Chinese armed forces are making major improvements in the quality of personnel, arms, and equipment. Japan plays an increasing role in her own defense and contributes significantly to the maintenance of U.S. forces in the region. However, other countries in the region—China, South Korea and the ASEAN nations—view Japan's growing military capabilities with a certain uneasiness. There is a delicate weave of power in the Pacific, and the central threads keeping it all together are the deployed forces of the United States in harmony with the forces of our allies in the area. The Philippines, a longtime ally with which we have strong ties of friendship and shared ideals, is also a strategically important island chain. But our future there is uncertain. The freely elected democratic government of President Aquino is under attack by Marxist and other revolutionaries demanding the ouster of U.S. forces. Terrorism spawned by these forces strikes not only at Americans, but at the survival of the democratic government taking root in that beautiful country.

In the Indian Ocean area, India looms as a burgeoning regional superpower and as a growing economic and military force. A navy of over 200 ships coupled with a continuing growth in numbers and capability signals an Indian desire for naval supremacy in the region. While India has assured us that it poses no threat to U.S. interests, the ongoing improvements to its naval forces remain an outstanding example of the proliferation of technologically sophisticated regional maritime powers.

The Middle East remains a region of grave uncertainty. Looking first at the Persian Gulf, the U.N. negotiated cease-fire between Iran and Iraq is holding, but neither side has entered into substantive negotiation for a long-term settlement. They both are rebuilding their armed forces, and though it may take some years before they have recovered from the war, the potential for instability is still present. The presence and action of U.S. and European naval forces was a major factor in preventing the Eight-Year War from closing access to the world's richest petroleum supply and precipitating a greater world crisis. Today these same naval forces provide the only check against that becoming a reality in any future conflict there.

Iran, in spite of some signs of moderation, has still not renounced terrorism as a political-military instrument. I thought the world had seen the limit of uncivilized behavior when Khomeini solicited the assassination of Salman Rushdie or the Speaker of the Assembly postulated five Western deaths for every Palestinian killed in the Intifada with Israel. Remember, this is not a country armed with clubs and stones but high technology weaponry, and the apparent will to use it.

The situation in Lebanon remains a powder keg with the potential to escalate and involve many countries in the region. Syria, armed with frontline Soviet-trained forces, poses an increasing threat not only to Israel but to moderate Arab states as well. The very existence of Lebanon as a state in the future is in serious doubt.

Then there's Libya, a perpetual menace. When Quaddafi's new Soviet-supplied attack aircraft become operational and aerial refueling techniques are incorporated in the Libyan Air Force, Libya will be able to threaten most of the central and eastern Mediterranean Sea and adjacent countries, including

Israel, Italy, Turkey and Greece. And Quaddafi is not above arming his forces with chemical weapons manufactured in the world's best protected pharmaceutical plant. His neighbors in Chad and the Sudan are forced to devote scarce resources to protecting their borders, resources that they can hardly spare.

In our own hemisphere, democracy is beginning to take hold in Central and South America after decades of rule by military juntas. However, many of these countries are beset by inflation, debt on which they can't pay the interest, and civil disorder resulting from these economic problems. Here, too, the influences of more than forty years of Soviet export of communist revolution remain at work, intent on snuffing out democratic progress in Peru, Guatemala, Bolivia, and El Salvador, among others. The success of these destabilizing insurgencies will not necessarily depend on outside support. Many of these movements now have the ability to support their operations independently. A new dimension in the war for national survival in Central and South America is the power and corrupting influence of the drug cartels which, in several countries, rivals that of the elected government. Increasingly, both the Soviet Union and the United States will have little, if any, direct control over the outcome of "internal" events and subversion in this region.

Panama and the Canal remain strategically important to all free world commerce. And the Canal is very vulnerable; a destructive act of terrorism could close it, with dire security and economic consequences.

The solutions to Latin America's problems lie in strengthening the local economies and giving democracy time to work, without having to worry about communist insurgency or aggression or the tyranny of a superimposed drug culture. But right now these countries don't have that choice.

Last, but not least, pressures to reduce our overseas base structure and restrictions on operations from such bases will have far-reaching impact on our security posture. In the last several decades we have seen the number of countries that host U.S. forces shrink by two-thirds, and the number of installations reduced by 60 percent. The heavy domestic political criticism levied on Prime Minister Thatcher's government for allowing U.S. Air Force F-111's based in England to participate in the retaliatory strike on Libya and France's refusal to allow those same aircraft overflight rights are graphic examples of why we must maintain a capability for unilateral action unfettered by foreign constraints when our national interests are at stake.

IV

Against this background we should ask ourselves, What will be our requirements for national security in the coming years, and how, in particular, does the navy see its missions?

These trends in the future security environment suggest we may be able to make changes in the way our naval forces are used to meet national security commitments but, in general, the main focus won't change. As it is in the other services, the role of the navy will remain as timeless as the Constitution. That role consists of two major parts.

First is the transcendent mission of maintaining a strong and ready military force, a fleet ready for any contingency or tasking. In this category lie all the operations we conduct that contribute to the deterrence of war and to victory in war should deterrence fail.

Second are all the other operations that used to be called "carrying out the national interests," but which go by much more esoteric titles today: peacetime presence, crisis control, conventional force options, politically constrained intervention, and so forth. Today we have approximately 160 ships underway in home waters, with almost 110 others forward deployed. Most are normally engaged in this second category of operations, for which the navy's level of commitments continues to rise. Maritime operations have been a large part of many conflicts short of declared war, in which more than 14 million Americans have served and more than 110,000 Americans have died since 1945. So we have a moral obligation to understand as well as possible how our nation should employ its armed forces to protect its interests with the greatest effect. And we must also understand what factors reduce that effectiveness, not only in the United States but among friends and allies—things like strategic inflexibility, lack of national resolve, lack of resources, complacency or even uneasiness following success.

We must remember that *where* we place our forces is every bit as important as *what* we place there. It is not enough to have adequate capability: it must exist in the right numbers, and we must have the ability to employ it in the distant areas of the globe. For that is where the instability is, where confrontation and coercion exist: on the borders and sometimes within the borders of our friends and allies. That's where they count on us for help.

Operating in overseas areas provides us with strategic advantages that cannot be approximated by forces in CONUS, no matter how ready. It allows us to back our word visibly, in a strategic context, immediately. If you don't have a permanent presence in-country—and increasingly even our closest allies are showing reluctance to have U.S. military units based on their soil—then the only practical way of keeping forces in proximity to potential crisis locations, the only way of promoting regional stability and influence beyond our borders, is to have forces on station just over the horizon in international waters and airspace, forces that can be hastened to the scene of any crisis and just as quickly and quietly withdrawn when the crisis has been resolved.

Another way to look at the problem is to remember that a military vacuum invites aggression. Reading the lessons of history, we can only conclude that in the future, forward naval operations will be even more important to global security than they are today. The role of naval forces has always involved more than just containment of the Soviet Union. If the Soviet threat diminishes significantly through a combination of arms control and improved relations between our two coalitions, the global role of our naval forces will not decrease. The CNO has found in his regional travels, and I have found in my navy-to-navy talks, that the leaders of countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Pakistan, and Malaysia welcome our forward naval presence and consider it a significant contributor to regional stability due to the delicate balance of power in that region. Because of this stability, economic prosperity has followed. In the future, as regional power centers emerge, our naval forces may be called upon to serve as a "stabilizer" to prevent the domination of a region by a particular country whose sense of what its interests are may not be consistent with those of its neighbors.

What will these forces look like? A few things immediately come to mind: flexible, mobile, capable, multidimensional, and—increasingly—stealthy. In the coming century I am certain the keystone of U.S. naval warfare will continue to be wide-ranging, three-dimensional battle forces, comprising both defense-in-depth and offense-in-depth, and centered on our large-deck carriers and amphibious forces. These capabilities will be required to protect U.S. interests in peacetime and respond effectively and efficiently to crises and low-intensity conflicts worldwide when called upon to do so.

Along these lines, we must preserve the distribution of firepower throughout the fleet, thereby enabling our forces to respond discriminately across the spectrum of conflict. An essential element of this power is the sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM). SLCMs are vital to U.S. national security because of their diverse capabilities, flexible employment, and inherent stability resulting from dispersal on board a total of 200 surface combatants and submarines. The deterrent value of widely dispersed, dual-capable SLCMs complicates an enemy's planning and raises the risk and uncertainty in making a decision to start a war. The expanded strike capability and accuracy of SLCM, augmenting and in concert with carrier based air power, is an unmatchable force multiplier that contributes significantly to that deterrent power. The global utility of conventional SLCM for low-intensity conflicts should not be sacrificed for the sake of arms control agreements with the Soviets. This capability is becoming increasingly important as other countries (not all friendly to the United States) develop the potential to exploit this advanced technology and as access to foreign bases and overflight rights shrink, creating ever-greater requirements of power projection capability from the sea to safeguard our national interests and those of our allies and friends.

Despite improving U.S.-Soviet relations our multipolar, dynamically changing world remains a dangerous place, and the need for a strong, self-supporting navy with the ability to operate around the world has never been more clear. The requirement for strong naval forces is paramount in an era when our continued free access to overseas bases is frequently called into question, when proliferation of high-technology weapons increases the threat to U.S. interests, and when the immediate availability of land and air forces may be constrained as a result of factors beyond our control.

Three principles must guide both our intellectual insight and future decisions on defense:

- First, we are and will remain a maritime nation, and the oceans of the world are our lifeline.
- Second, our basic mission is to deter aggression. Weak forces encourage aggression; strong ones do not.
- And third, when you have something that works, as we do today in our naval forces, be glad of it, and protect it.

The peace we all hope for is possible, but only if the United States remains committed to the principle of peace through strength and a cautious, reasoned approach to events and political forces that are dramatically changing the world we live in. Naval forces factor *heavily* in that equation.

Ψ

"Reflecting the fact that the United States is a maritime nation dependent on the sea for security and commerce, the Constitution granted Congress the right to provide for and to maintain navies, but to raise armies when needed."

General Colin L. Powell
Chairman, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff
Vienna, 17 January 1990