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On the Cusp of the Maritime Strategy

Captain Jerome J. Burke, Jr., U.S. Navy

The Issue

The extraordinary commitment of naval forces to the Persian Gulf since June 1987 raises a number of issues regarding the doctrine that has emerged since the end of World War II concerning peacetime and wartime employment of naval forces.[1] Generally, the body of literature describing this doctrine—various DOD and Navy posture statements, speeches, and articles—focuses the Navy's roles and missions on:

- Deterring attack.
- Executing traditional wartime missions of sea control, sea denial, and the projection of maritime power ashore.
- Responding to crises by drawing on the mobility and flexibility of naval forces in order to influence events either actively or passively.[2]
- Conducting the traditional peacetime missions of forward presence, the reassurance of allies, and the protection of U.S. interests and citizens overseas.

Over the past few years, these maritime concepts have been codified by the issuance of the Navy's Maritime Strategy,[3] which centers the Navy's thinking on employment concepts for waging a general war at sea with the Soviet Union.

The Maritime Strategy has become an integrating force in the Navy, linking overarching strategic principles and wartime objectives with the Navy's design and structure. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger noted this by saying: "the greatest value of President Reagan's maritime strategy is its focus on the crucial issue of how we can best use our maritime forces and those of our allies to achieve the basic goal of deterrence—and deny the adversary his preferred wartime strategy."[4] Additionally, the maritime concepts and their underlying assumptions have been tested and evaluated

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in war games and exercises evidently designed to scrimmage the game plan under conditions as realistic as possible.[5]

On balance, these efforts have resulted in bettering the Navy's ability to internalize the principles of the Maritime Strategy, which include:

- Taking the fight to the enemy by prompt offensive action.
- Seizing and holding the initiative.
- Influencing the global war.
- Developing and maintaining leverage to terminate the war to U.S. advantage.

In sum, having the Navy make a strategic difference.

Yet recent events in the Persian Gulf demonstrate that there exists a "cusp"—a transitional element—between the strictly peacetime employment of the Navy and the waging of general war with the Soviet Union. Our maritime literature is not bereft of analysis of this phenomenon. Admiral Stansfield Turner's 1974 assessment of U.S. Navy missions included those to be undertaken in the non-Soviet context. Navy posture statements and other analyses followed similar descriptive themes.[6] While this transitional phase has been called "violent peace" or "low intensity conflict," and reassuringly graphed on various asymptotic charts, it is not at all clear that the aforementioned principles and assumptions of the Maritime Strategy apply to the subthreshold crisis or confrontation that lasts for some period of time. It may be useful, then, to use the current situation in the Persian Gulf to develop some principles for dealing with circumstances on the cusp of the Maritime Strategy.

Where Is the Cusp?

By definition, events on the cusp do not involve general war with the Soviet Union. But clearly they are not business as usual, at least in terms of unperturbed operations and exercises of the Navy's operating forces. While the Soviets may be involved, the proximate causes of the crisis involve other nations directly. In this circumstance, U.S. interests are at stake, but not necessarily vital U.S. interests.[7] Without a threat to the survival of the Nation, which "vital interest" connotes, the degree to which U.S. interests are at stake might be measured by the Government's willingness to commit a higher and higher level of military force to support its political and diplomatic objectives. Clearly the U.S. Government might be willing to take military risks in a crisis such as this. Ships might steam into danger, thereby risking deliberate, indiscriminate, or inadvertent attack; lives might be lost; and confrontation with the adversary might be clear and direct. There might be instances of actual combat, either isolated or sustained for a period of time. In sum, the level of risk we are willing to take is based on our commitment to the protection of our interests. The result, however, is a

dilemma posed by the lack of any discernible measure of this commitment and interest, save the deployment of military force.

Such risk-taking behavior will be accompanied by the added gamble that the crisis might worsen to involve actual war with the adversary, or even directly with the Soviet Union. The latter possibility carries serious consequences, since the commitment of naval forces to one region could leave them excessively vulnerable or out of position were the crisis to eventuate into a confrontation or conflict with the U.S.S.R. Also, in such a crisis, war reserve stocks and forces essential for the successful conduct of general war might be consumed or lost. Thus, the Navy could be maldeployed and maldisposed to combat the Russians.

For these and other reasons, there will be high-level political attention to such a crisis in the United States, in allied capitals, and in the Soviet Union. In some cases, it might be argued that the United States and the Soviet Union will perceive or even use the crisis or conflict as a "surrogate war," wherein larger issues of superpower competition are signaled through the use of proxy conflict.

Congressional involvement and discomfort will likely be manifest, with special reference to the War Powers Resolution. Numerous hearings will be held, coinciding with visits to the region. The crisis may be further politicized along partisan lines. There also may be manifest a general unwillingness of the Congress to take a public stand, one way or the other, on a tough but very ambiguous issue, many members essentially wishing to be "right" in hindsight.

The crisis will certainly be a major media event, subject to manipulation by all sides to garner support. Popular support will be critical because a politically sustainable level of effort for the duration of the commitment of forces will be essential. Yet popular support will be fragile, transitory, and hard to measure, perhaps being more dependent on how well the question is phrased in the polls than on the strict merits of the case.

The catalyst for the crisis will likely be quite clear, e.g., an action taken in legitimate self-defense, an unacceptable incident, a terrorist attack, a request from a friendly government. But, without a clear specification of objectives, the criteria and time lines for ending the crisis might not be so clear-cut. Hostages may be released, clients may stop fighting, and borders may be restored to their prewar status, but it will be exceptionally difficult to establish criteria and guarantees for political and military behavior suitable for complete disengagement. Thus, "winning" by any definition, save the satisfaction of having accomplished the stated objectives, will be exceptionally difficult to establish. Conversely, the criteria for "losing" might well be much more clear-cut. Popular support may erode or evaporate following some military adversities or casualties. Political constraints and legislatively imposed time lines may so confine operations or end them

altogether that we, in effect, "blunder out" of the crisis. By allowing a military event, political pressures, or even weariness from the costs of commitment to dictate the end of the commitment—without resolving the underlying issue that prompted us to assume that commitment—the United States would send a very strong, clearly negative signal about its constancy to friends and dedication to principle.

During the employment of military force in such circumstances, the issue of "proportionality" will become very important. Any military means must be proportionate to a discrete, legitimate military end.[8] Clearly, a superpower can employ disproportionately large amounts of military force against almost any adversary. Indeed, it is this overwhelming capability that permits the superpower to deter, persuade, or coerce another state. But because the crisis is by definition limited, one result will be a complex calculus of political, diplomatic, and military objectives which in turn will constrain the employment of military force to "appropriate" levels, likely below their optimum. For this reason, military operations will be planned, coordinated, and approved at levels of the chain of command far above the engaged tactical commander. Similarly, rules of engagement for dealing with various tactical circumstances will be developed, reviewed, and approved throughout the chain of command in order to ensure the principle of proportionality and acceptable political risk as well as to assure those at the upper levels of the chain of command that the engaged tactical commander will operate under an approved regimen in a variety of hopefully foreseen circumstances.

Finally, as we know, naval forces are well-suited to participate in this kind of activity. They are mobile, flexible, not closely tethered to bases ashore, and their commitment to a crisis does not necessarily imply a long-term commitment of ground or land-based air forces. However, these naval virtues mean that naval commanders, who are accustomed to dealing with a generally unambiguous peacetime or general war tactical circumstance, will probably find themselves enmeshed in ambiguous tactical circumstances. Thus an intellectual framework for developing some additional principles of maritime strategy for dealing with these kinds of circumstances may be useful.

Dealing with the Cusp

We are told often enough how important it is to know one's enemy. Yet the problems in doing so, posed by subthreshold crises or limited conflict, are substantial. The predominant focus of the U.S. intelligence effort is, rightly, on the most dangerous and robust threat to our national security—the U.S.S.R. The commitment of analytical resources to the diversity of actual and potential threats springing up elsewhere is necessarily an

additional burden on those devoted to Soviet problems. While additional resources have been committed to so-called "Third World" intelligence matters, a vexing problem remains: to develop a thorough appreciation of a non-Soviet adversary's concepts of operation, tactics, and strategic goals and objectives that would be tactically relevant to the engaged commander and made available to him in sufficient time to support his decision making.[9]

Furthermore, while the Soviet Union remains the largest purveyor of weapon systems to the Third World,[10] weapon systems threatening the engaged commander may not be of Soviet origin. However, as demonstrated by the Falklands war and the Persian Gulf crisis, non-Soviet weapon systems are no less lethal than their Soviet analog; but the proper electronic warfare and other defensive systems to deal with the non-Soviet threat, especially one developed by our allies or even ourselves, may not be available. The operating environment itself will be rendered even more ambiguous by the difficulty in distinguishing threat platforms from those that are friendly or neutral. For example, in the Persian Gulf the ubiquitous C-130 is found in the operational inventories of many nations of the Gulf besides Iran; save for its flag, the Qatari *La Combatante* is virtually identical with its French-built counterpart of the *Kaman* class in the Iranian Navy; and military and civilian versions of the "Huey" helicopter abound.

The engaged commander must therefore be prepared to deal with the orthogonal and the ambiguous. By training and doctrine, the Navy may be more used to dealing with unambiguous Soviet threats than with the non-Soviet adversary. The likely impossibility of intelligence providing a clear understanding of a non-Soviet adversary's intentions compounds the threat identification problem. Determination of a military threat posed by a "blip on a radar screen" will be difficult—flight characteristics and other cues may not be definitive and intentions even less so. Thus, the engaged tactical commander will have great difficulty answering the crucial questions "Who is he?" and "What is he going to do?" while relying on the manifest military capabilities of his force to deter hostile action or, if that deterrence fails, defensive actions under the rules of engagement.

An adversary may also be able to employ a variety of paramilitary, unconventional, subversive, or terrorist means, both at sea and ashore. Such threats would be extremely difficult to assess beforehand and deal with by conventional military means. Were the adversary's actions successful, however, they might easily serve his political goal of eroding popular support for the U.S. Navy's effort and embarrassing those who support it.

Because the crisis is, by definition, political, it will not be resolved solely by military means. Thus, military actions of any sort will signal a high political content. The military roles of adversaries, friends, and allies will be shaped by politics. For not only strictly military reasons, but also because we will desire political support for our position and actions, the cooperation

and support of our friends and allies will be very important. Yet because the crisis is by definition unforeseen and unplanned for, and likely outside the diplomatic specifications of treaties, the roles of friends and allies will not be defined clearly, and their support will be uncertain. Despite our coalition planning and expectations, we might face the possibility of "going it alone."

As Admiral Stansfield Turner wrote in 1974, naval deployments, threatened or actual, must be appropriate to the situation, must pose a credible threat to the opposition, and must suggest the capacity to engage in any of five basic actions: amphibious assault, air attack, bombardment, blockade, or exposure through reconnaissance.[11]

However, the proper employment of naval forces in these circumstances is necessarily constrained. Since the end of World War II the "doctrinal referent" of the Navy has been the aircraft carrier battle group.[12] Surface combatants have been acquired in large measure to complement the offensive and defensive capabilities of the air wing. Exceptionally detailed operating doctrine for antiair, antisubmarine, and antisurface warfare has been developed, based on the integrated combat capabilities of the aircraft, surface ships, and submarines of the battle group. The current tactical situation of the Persian Gulf, however, finds the ships of the Middle East Force engaged in missions traditional for surface combatants—certainly antiair warfare, bombardment, and escort operations—usually without the immediate availability of and integration into the aircraft carrier battle group. Indeed, unless procedures for the overflight of littoral nations' airspace have been altered, that command's ships appear to be left to their own devices to defend themselves and the ships they are escorting, at least beyond the Strait of Hormuz.

The tactical circumstance in the Persian Gulf demonstrates the need to continue the development of the doctrine, the tactics, and the operational familiarity and flexibility to deal with this kind of situation here and in other areas of the world. Although the Navy's stated goal is fifteen deployable aircraft carrier battle groups, such a number cannot possibly match the set of potential crises when the deployment of naval forces may be required. Clearly then, an aircraft carrier may either be unavailable or tactically inappropriate. For example, the constricted waters of the Caribbean may demand a nearby U.S. naval presence that could be satisfied more readily by a surface combatant task group than by a battle group centered around the aircraft carrier.

Furthermore, the demands for proportionate, measured commitment of military force might also be more readily satisfied by greater and greater increments of naval forces represented by different "mixes" of ships. In terms of "graduated responses," surface ships with a variety of offensive capabilities can add steps in a ladder of escalation—a consequential

contribution in most scenarios. Such forces are also key indicators of the level of concern held by national authorities. The visibly greater combat capabilities and the coincident increase in the set of targets held at risk may be very beneficial to limiting or resolving the crisis. If the ability to deter or coerce an adversary is based on the sum of military capabilities and the willingness to use them, it holds that the deterrent, persuasive or coercive value of naval forces will increase in proportion to those forces' increase in obvious power.

Special demands for overtness will be made to signal to the adversary our policies and procedures, as well as to influence his decision making directly. Conversely, there will be special demands for covertness to preclude conveying or revealing an operational advantage.

When weapons are employed, there will be special demands for accuracy and effectiveness that might well be of lesser concern in general war, for while in general war we necessarily allow for fog and friction, those trying to contain a crisis or limited conflict will not permit the same degree of uncertainty or tolerate undesired collateral damage.

Finally, the ambiguity of the tactical situation, the orthogonal nature of the threats an adversary can impose, and the demands for flexibility in the proportionate commitment of force will demand innovation and imaginative employment of the forces available. New ways of using existing platforms must be explored. New systems, especially those of the other services, may be used to solve tactical problems, old or new. Thus, creative thinking may well be one of the most critical elements of the Maritime Strategy for the "cusp."

Operating on the Cusp

The foregoing analysis suggests a few brief conclusions. First, the Persian Gulf represents one of the clearest manifestations of the reality that America's interests may be challenged worldwide by political, economic, and military crises that are outside the formal boundaries of alliance commitments but which, by their nature, demand a U.S. response. In the years and decades to come there will likely emerge more crises, like the one we confront today in the Gulf, which will be additive to normal commitments to alliances, exercises, and the routine employment of U.S. military force. Naval forces will continue to be the most favored and useful instrument for the influential use of U.S. military power, especially in a geostrategic environment where the U.S. overseas base structure, which we have relied upon since World War II, is subject to serious reconsideration by many host nations worldwide.

While these crises will arise quickly, they will not be without their history and a certain uniqueness of geography, tactical operating environment, and

political-military context that has taken years, if not decades or centuries, to develop. In order to deal with these emerging situations, the Navy will be required to invest in the development of detailed knowledge of, and operational experience in, the region, similar to that afforded the Navy by COMIDEASTFOR in the Gulf region since the end of World War II.

Because the Soviet Union will remain our most dangerous adversary, any crisis of import will carry with it a risk of direct or indirect Soviet involvement and competition. This involvement will likely be more opaque than the traditional Soviet political and military behavior observed toward the United States, Europe, and Asia since the end of World War II. Understanding how the Soviets may attempt to manipulate a crisis for their own ends, and the variety of overt and covert means they may use to do so, will be important. In any crisis, we cannot lose sight of the *schwerpunkt*—the German term for the critical point of contact. We cannot allow ourselves to become so embroiled in the immediacy of the event that the larger dimensions and dangers of Soviet competition, either in the region or worldwide, are overlooked.

In sum, knowing that crises like the Persian Gulf are certain to occur in the future, and lacking only the specificity of "where" and "when" and "how," will allow the Navy to continue to develop and train for naval operations on the "cusp" of the Maritime Strategy. In the tradition of Admiral Mahan, the progenitor of our current naval thinking, such is the grist of a robust, dynamic maritime strategy that is fully responsive to the needs of the Nation.

Notes

1. For a thorough compendium of the literature of the employment of naval forces to respond to political crises see Captain Peter M. Swartz, USN, "Contemporary U.S. Naval Strategy: A Bibliography," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, "The Maritime Strategy Supplement," January 1986, and his addendum thereto, published in April 1987.

2. Perhaps more perjoratively called "gunboat diplomacy," the frequency with which a President did choose to employ his naval forces was the subject of detailed record-keeping and analytical efforts to measure how often and when a President was likely to use the Navy for these purposes. Notable among these analyses is Barry M. Blechman and Stephen S. Kaplan, *Force Without War* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1978).

3. Admiral James D. Watkins, USN, "The Maritime Strategy"; General P. X. Kelley, USMC, and Major Hugh O'Donnell, Jr., USMC, "Amphibious Warfare Strategy"; and John F. Lehman, Jr., "The 600 Ship Navy," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, "The Maritime Strategy Supplement," January 1986. Addendum thereto, published in April 1987.

4. Caspar W. Weinberger, "The Meaning and Spirit of the USS *Theodore Roosevelt*" *Defense Issues*, v. 1, no. 76, Washington, Department of Defense, 1986.

5. The many recent references to the Navy's newly focused attention to realism in naval exercises include: Dean Fosdick, "Soviets Shadow Navy Drill in Aleutians," *Washington Times*, 18 November 1987, p. 3.

6. Admiral Stansfield Turner, USN, "Missions of the U.S. Navy," *Naval War College Review*, March-April 1974, p. 14. The reader may also wish to refer to Michael Vlahos, "The Third World in U.S. Naval Planning," *Orbis*, Spring 1986.

7. A very concise definition of "vital interest" is contained in Harold J. Clem, *The Environment of National Security* (Washington, D.C.: The National Defense University, 1983), p. 28. Also see *National*

Security Strategy of the United States, issued by the White House in January 1987, for a definitive statement of U.S. interests.

8. William V. O'Brien, *The Conduct of Just and Limited War* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1981), pp. 38-42.

9. "Current Naval Intelligence Issues" Office of Naval Intelligence, (Washington: March 1987).

10. Pranay Gupte, "Russia: Arms Merchant to the World," *Forbes*, 2 November 1987, p. 168; and *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers 1986*, (Washington: U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, 1986).

11. Turner, p. 14.

12. It may be argued, quite rightly, that the nuclear-powered submarine holds at least equal, if not unsurpassed right to the term "doctrinal referent" for the U.S. Navy. However, as concerns the ability of the Navy to commit forces to peacetime and crisis presence and force projection missions, the aircraft carrier, to borrow from the Navy's *CVN-74/75 Acquisition Program Handbook*, "has remained the focus of the U.S. Navy's conventional force operations. The aircraft carrier is the most 'flexible' warship ever built, capable of operating across the entire spectrum of armed force and delivering an almost infinite mix of weapons and aircraft." It is in this context that the term "doctrinal referent" is used.