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In My View

John Hanley

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IN MY VIEW

“REDUX” FALLS SHORT

Sir:

Barney Rubel’s trenchant commentary is often insightful and on the mark. For instance, on 26 July 2022, his remarks to the Connections wargaming conference provided advice for wise action. Unfortunately, his article “Command of the Sea Redux,” from the Spring 2022 issue of the *Naval War College Review*, falls far short of those qualities.

Central to his argument is that command of the sea is a strategic concept in which sea control is operational and tactical; however, quite the opposite is true. Rubel argues for a dominance that requires no strategy and no priorities, since any course of action the dominant power takes makes others’ strategies irrelevant. Yet no navy ever has had control of all the world’s oceans and seas simultaneously; even the most dominant powers have had to select what sea areas they would control over what period and for what purpose—the definition of *sea control*. No national or naval leaders during the Cold War dismissed Soviet naval and maritime power as casually as Rubel does. As the 1980s U.S. *Maritime Strategy* was being created, the Soviets were extending their defensive zone from 1,500 to 2,500 kilometers at sea while conducting maritime operations throughout the world’s oceans.

Historical examples of dissuasion illustrate the failure of such approaches more than their success. The U.S. Navy did well in battling the British in the War of 1812. The George W. Bush administration, adopting a version of the Wolfowitz doctrine for preventing the emergence of military rivals, made dissuading others from building military forces a pillar of its national strategy, to the point of including countries such as Germany and Japan in the list of powers to be dissuaded. Yet Rubel is silent on the role of allies and on whether his formula of having a navy larger than the next two largest navies combined includes those of allies or alliances.

Rubel’s complaint that legislators override the Navy’s shipbuilding plans demonstrates a lack of appreciation for U.S. civilian control over the military and for the U.S. Constitution. As Ian W. Toll documents in his excellent book *Six Frigates*:

The Epic History of the Founding of the U.S. Navy (2006), the Navy built six frigates because it had six shipyards capable of building frigates, and each had to be allocated one frigate to create the political consensus for building any of them. The role of the Congress is to represent its members' constituents and to provide funds for the nation's defense. Although this process is never efficient, Navy leaders need to appreciate the system as it exists and develop strategies for influencing it, as much as they need strategies to influence allies and adversaries.

Another statutory matter that eludes Rubel is the role of the Secretary of Defense in allocating U.S. forces. Even if two combatant commanders agree to shift any military forces, they still would require the approval of the Secretary of Defense. In practice, the demarcations separating regional combatant command areas of responsibility have had little effect on the moving of forces stationed in one region when they were needed in another. Each of the Navy's numbered fleets is responsible for an area of the world, and each must be ready and able to employ alternative doctrine and tactics when transfers occur between those fleets. Does Rubel suggest eliminating the numbered fleets?

Rubel's statement that today's Navy could not produce a strategy like the 1986 *Maritime Strategy* also is misguided. Before the Goldwater-Nichols legislation, each combatant commander, each fleet commander in chief, each numbered fleet and area commander, each commander of submarine forces in the Atlantic and Pacific, and others developed war plans they intended to use; but one should not conflate strategy with war plans. The first Chief of Naval Operations Strategic Studies Group (CNO SSG), established in 1981, quickly found that these plans were misaligned and did not add up to a global strategy for fighting the Soviet Union. The 1980s *Maritime Strategy* provided a vision, and the SSG provided campaign plans for executing that vision. However, the authority to execute the strategy fell to multiple levels of command, both above and within the Navy. The CNO lost operational control over the Navy because of revisions to the National Security Act in 1958, and Goldwater-Nichols clarified that the combatant commanders had the ultimate authority. However, nothing in the legislation prevents the Navy from producing a vision of how the combatant commanders best can use the Navy—akin to the *Maritime Strategy*.

Rubel's notion of re-creating a commander in chief type of naval command, like that of Admiral Ernest J. King, to oversee all Navy operations harkens to a time long past. This arrangement worked well during World War II when King, George C. Marshall, and Henry H. "Hap" Arnold (the latter was added to parallel the British model for forming a combined chiefs of staff) worked directly for the president and focused on winning the war.

Following the war, the primary enemies of the naval establishment in Washington, DC, became the other services—competing for budget shares—not foreign

powers. Any Navy commander in chief in the Pentagon would need to deal with four other services. Relevant conceptual questions would arise. Which is a larger domain of the world: the oceans or the airspace and the space surrounding the earth? Would such a command be focused on foreign or domestic competition? Would it embody the tact that the combatant commands can demonstrate in dealing with developments in their regions? Absent regional commands, would allies (continue to) believe they have reliable relations with U.S. forces? How would isolating the Navy from other joint forces prepare the service to exert influence and fight in all-domain environments, given that the Navy actually needs *more* integration with other services and government agencies to deal with issues such as cyber attacks on Navy personnel and facilities located in U.S. territories? The fact is, in a multilayered, networked world, independence of Navy forces is a shibboleth and a recipe for failure.

Rubel also conflates naval with maritime power. Captain Alfred T. Mahan provided a set of criteria for a maritime power. Factors included long coastlines, with harbors suitable for building reliable ports; adequate natural and human resources; and a large population involved in fishing, maritime trade, and shipbuilding. Today, the United States no longer is competitive with China in shipbuilding unless we team with Japan and Korea. The portion of the U.S. population involved in maritime industries continues to diminish, along with maritime industries' political power. In contrast, for World War II, the essence of War Plan ORANGE came down to not losing the war while the United States mobilized its industrial might. That strategy would be a loser in any prolonged war with China today. The United States will not compete successfully with China using industrial-age metrics of navy ship counts.

Most disappointing is Rubel's endorsement of "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must," echoing Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi's comments at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore a few years ago. One can counter this notion with the Roman *fasces*, a bound bundle of wooden rods, often including an ax, representing collective power, law, and governance. Collective power to offset the strong is also a realist notion—one that has provided unique benefits to the United States, and is a more apt concept in an interconnected world. The building of maritime alliances among those nations that value the freedom of their people over authoritarian control does more for command of the sea than a narrow focus on U.S. shipbuilding and fleet architectures.

JOHN HANLEY

