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*These days, cooperation begins at the waters edge and extends both seaward and inland.*

## Sea Power and the Central Front

By James D. Hessman, Editor in Chief, *Sea Power Magazine*

The US Navy was not, in the late 1970s, ardently supportive of what came to be called "the Central Front Strategy," developed under then-Secretary of Defense Harold Brown. As the Navy saw it, this strategy would result in reduced funding for Navy and Marine Corps units around the world in order to build up and modernize US air and ground units assigned to the Central Front in Europe.

The impact on the Navy's budget and therefore on morale, is perhaps best exemplified by one telling statistic: In the five-year shipbuilding plan forwarded by the Carter Administration with the Fiscal Year 1978 budget, the Navy was programmed to receive in FY '80 funding for thirty-eight ships. These included two *Trident* ballistic-missile submarines, twelve frigates, three *Aegis* fleet air-defense cruisers, and six mine-countermeasures ships (MCMs).

When FY'80 itself rolled around, however, the Navy's great expectations had been thoroughly soaked by a sudden downpour of reality – the Carter Administration requested funds for construction of only fifteen ships. In the end, Congress appropriated money for twelve, including one *Trident* and six frigates, but no *Aegis* cruisers or MCMs.

Making allowance for the fact that out-year projections tower majestically over such lower gradations of falsehood and insincere promises and "statistics," the plummet from thirty-eight ships to the twelve actually funded was a bitter pill to swallow. Navy partisans and their supporters in Congress fought the cutbacks vigorously, but with only partial success. The truth is that they pulled their punches to a certain extent, and for two eminently good reasons: (1) They remembered only too well that previous bouts of "interservice bickering," as it was called by the joyfully unsympathetic press, had always ended with several losers and no winners; and (2) there was no plausible way to refute the fact that US forces in Europe did indeed need augmentation and modernization.

The problem was not that additional funds were being allocated to the Army and the Air Force. Indeed, those services were still receiving far less than wartime needs dictated. The hitch was that the aforementioned additional funds were being made available not through a straightforward increase in the overall defense budget but through what one angry (but prudently anonymous) Navy spokesman called "a redistribution of insufficiency."

### **"A Maritime Strategy"**

It is safe to suggest that, while remaining fervently apolitical, none of the services has been overly dismayed by the larger defense budgets being sought by President Reagan. The Navy has been particularly pleased not only by the Administration's commitment to rebuild the active

fleet to a minimum of 600 ships (from the approximately 450 in the inventory at the close of the Carter Administration), but also – and perhaps more so – by its ideological embrace of what Secretary of the navy John Lemay defends enthusiastically and articulately as “a maritime strategy.” It has a nice nautical ring to it, but one with which the other services can live in reasonable comfort and sufficiency.

There is another important factor that has contributed to the Navy’s “gruntlement,” and that is the almost visible spirit of cooperation among the services, perhaps best exemplified by the united front on the MX and the memorandum of agreement (MOA) between Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Charles Gabriel and Chief of Naval Operations Adm. James D. Watkins. The MOA provides for, among other things, a much greater role for the Air Force in such areas of previous Navy monopoly as maritime surveillance, reconnaissance, and anti-submarine warfare (ASW).

It used to be said – and still is, but with lessening accuracy – that politics stops at the water’s edge. The same is true, but with a slight twist of interservice cooperation in modern warfare. The twist is that, in today’s conflict scenario, cooperation *starts* at the water’s edge, with the Air Force lending the Navy an important hand seaward and the Navy in good position to return the favor inland.

Indeed, one of the more important joint side effects of the maritime strategy *cum* Watkins/Gabriel MOA is that the Navy is now reasonably able to devote a good deal more of its own time, energy, people, and hardware resources to the NATO Central Front in Europe.

That is a departure from previous tradition more profound than is generally realized. To consider the new scheme of things in perspective, consider the following proposition: The history books are unanimous that there have been in this century two “world wars.” But there has not been even one. There have been, rather, two intense and prolonged but mostly regional conflicts, each of which, with some slight differences, each of which, with some slight differences, consisted of two phases: a sea phase and a land phase.

In World War I, which was mostly a land war, fought mostly in Europe, the United States under President Woodrow Wilson joined in on the Allied side only because Germany had, on February 1, 1917, resumed unrestricted submarine warfare. Two days later, the US broke off relations with Germany, but it was not until April 6, more than two weeks after German U-boats had torpedoed three American ships, that Wilson signed the joint resolution of war that had been passed by the House earlier that day (373-50), and by the Senate (83-6) two days before. The unprecedented menace posed by the German U-boats might have completely thwarted US efforts to reinforce the Western Front in Europe had it not been for the convoy system set up to protect the troop ships. That may well have been the difference.

As Paolo E. Coletta points out in *American Secretaries of the Navy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1980), “Shipping losses to U-boats were cut from about 3000,000 tons in January 1918 to 112,000 in October.” More important, “not a man convoyed under American protection was lost because of enemy action.”

World War II was even more intense, of longer duration, and spread over a much wider geographic, not to mention oceanographic, area of the world. But it, too, lacks credibility as a “world” war; despite the formalities of their alliance, Germany and Japan waged two separate wars – simultaneously, but literally oceans and continents apart.

The US, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and a few lesser allies fought – again, mostly a land war – against Germany first in North Africa and in western Russia and then on the continent of Europe. They emerged victorious only after the Battle of the Atlantic (sea phase of the war in Europe against Nazi Germany) had been won.

### **Naval War Against Japan**

At the same time, in the Pacific and on the land areas bordering that massive ocean, the US and, to a much lesser extent, Great Britain, Australia, China, several of the smaller Pacific powers, and, in the closing days of the war, the Soviet Union fought mainly a naval war against the Japanese. The outcome of the numerous land battles of the war, except those on the continent of Asia itself, was almost always the same whether in the Philippines, at Wake Island, Iwo Jima, or Tarawa: Whoever controlled the seas eventually emerged victorious on land.

Ignoring the more complex geometry of World War II in the Pacific, it seems well established that both wars in Europe had at least one thing in common: In neither conflict could the land-war phase have been won if the Allies had not first won the sea-war phase.

In light of that grim historical truth, the following facts are relevant to any consideration of the US Navy's role in the event of a NATO/Warsaw Pact conflict in central Europe.

- Hitler started World War II with only thirty-five operational U-boats, yet almost won the Battle of the Atlantic – and, with it, the land phase of the war in Europe. As it was, the Allies lost 20,000,000 tons of shipping. The low point for the Allied side, in fact, probably occurred in early 1943 when U-boats, then equipped with radar and traveling in squadrons or “wolf packs,” sank ninety-six ships in twenty days.
- The USSR today has in its active fleet an estimated 189 nuclear attack submarines as well as 198 diesel attack submarines. The least capable of the Soviet nuclear boats is infinitely more capable, more lethal, faster, deeper-diving, and possessed of much greater range and endurance than the best of the Nazi U-boats.
- There will still be – even after all the airlift, POMCUS matériel (Pre-positioned Overseas Matériel Configured in Unit Sets) in Europe, and allied assets are factored in – an urgent need for a massive US/NATO sealift immediately after (if not before) the start of conflict.

Adm. Isaac C. Kidd, USN (Ret.), told Congress in his farewell testimony on September 20, 1978, that an estimated 3,000 to 6,000 merchant ships would be needed for re-supply and reinforcement in the early stages of fighting. Even if enough ships were available – they wouldn't be, for a variety of well-documented reasons – the losses, Admiral Kidd said, “would be staggering... would be horrendous.”

- The US itself is seriously deficient in merchant bottoms. US-flag ships, moreover, carry less than four percent of the nation's two-way tonnage (exports and imports combined). And the trend in ship numbers has been steadily downward over the past three decades – from 1,170 merchant ships in the privately owned US-flag fleet as of December 31, 1950, to 1,008 ships ten years later. A decade after that the figure stood at 793 and is now at 569 ships listed at the beginning of this year by the Transportation Department's Maritime Administration.

The US-flag fleet has increased significantly, however, in deadweight tonnage (dwt) in recent years, building from 14,100,000 dwt at the end of 1960 to 21,300,000 as of July 1, 1981 (latest

available figures). What those statistics mean in tandem is that today's US-flag merchant vessels are considerably bigger than their immediate predecessors, but that there are fewer of them. And that translates into bigger and more lucrative targets for Soviet submarines.

- Finally, the USSR's formidable submarine fleet is today augmented and supported by several fleets of Soviet surface combatants that collectively outnumber the US surface fleet by letter than a four-to-one ratio. US naval combatants are generally bigger and of higher quality. Training is also better, and the US maintains its near monopoly on sea-based naval aviation.

### **Soviet Aircraft Carriers**

The Soviet Union now has three *Kiev*-class V/STOL (vertical/short takeoff and landing) aircraft carriers operational, has launched a fourth, and is building the first of a newer, larger class of nuclear-powered carriers that will be able to launch and retrieve conventional takeoff and landing high-performance aircraft.

Add to that formidable force of land-based aircraft, including supersonic Backfires being employed in a maritime reconnaissance/surveillance role, a huge fleet of mine warfare ships (the USSR has an astonishing 395:3 edge over the US in this important area of naval warfare), close to 300 surface combatants (cruisers, destroyers, and frigates), and more than 1,000 patrol craft, logistics ships, and auxiliaries, and it is evident that the US Navy faces a daunting challenge indeed.

And even that is not all. The USSR, which unlike the US is virtually self-sufficient in raw materials, now boasts the world's third largest merchant fleet, 2,541 ships, and uses it regularly to service and re-supply the Soviet Navy all over the world. Soviet fishing vessels and oceanographic research ships also are used to develop vital intelligence for the Soviet Navy and to provide comfort and assistance in numerous other ways.

All of this does not mean the US Navy must throw in the towel. The US Navy, with its powerful CVBGs (carrier battle groups) and new SAGs (surface action groups, each headed by an *Iowa*-class battleship), is still the most powerful armada of naval power ever assembled under one flag. But it does have its work cut out for it.

Fortunately, the huge Soviet lead in numbers is in some important respects a two-edged sword. Any sudden or abnormal deployment – or withdrawal – of large numbers of Soviet Navy surface ships or even submarines would be quickly detected by US satellites, reconnaissance aircraft, and/or underwater sensor systems. The latter, incidentally, are extremely sophisticated and able not only to detect, at a considerable distance, the presence of intruders on the surface or underwater but also – thanks to the large “library” of ship signatures (screw noises and other sounds peculiar to the individual ship) already collected, analyzed, and classified – to identify them by name, rank, and serial number.

What is perhaps the US Navy's most highly classified “un-secret” today is that several arrays of the most sophisticated sensors are already in place along the so-called GIUK (Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom) Gap in the North Atlantic. The Gap is, therefore, for Soviet submarines, also a gantlet. Cross it in time of peace: immediate detection; in times of war: detection and probably destruction. (Provided, of course, that the US is able to hold on to its seabed listening posts in Iceland – and that's another tricky part of the overall strategic equation.)

Geography is no kinder to the Soviets in other areas of the world. Ships in the Soviet Baltic Fleet can egress to the North Sea and North Atlantic only by transiting first the Kattegat between Denmark and Sweden, then the Skagerrak just north of Denmark's Jutland peninsula.

The Black Sea Fleet faces a similar obstacle course. It must pass through the long and narrow Bosphorus, past Istanbul, thence through the relatively safe waters of the Sea of Marmara before plunging into the even longer (thirty-seven miles) Dardanelles Strait – the ancient Hellespont – finally in exit into the Aegean and Mediterranean.

NATO members Denmark and Turkey are, of course, in excellent position to interdict surface combatants, and it would be criminal negligence on the part of US and NATO planners if those same straits were not also well carpeted with seabed sensors.

### **Hobson's Choice**

The Soviet Pacific Fleet, home-ported in Vladivostok, faces a similar Hobson's choice – which is to say, no choice at all: a long sea-leg south through the Sea of Japan and the Korea Strait, with Korea-based US aircraft undoubtedly riding shotgun overhead, or a shorter leg north through the narrow and easily patrolled La Pérouse (or Soya) Strait between Hokkaido and Sakhalin.

So the situation is this: As in tanks, aircraft, SAM sites, and virtually all other quantifiable types of equipment, weapons, and weapons platforms, the Soviet Union has a huge numerical advantage in ships. But, unlike the other hardware items mentioned, it cannot exploit the advantage.

Deployment patterns are already well established – and known to the West. Any large outpouring of surface ships and/or submarines into the North Atlantic, Mediterranean, or Pacific would put the West on worldwide alert. Not deploying them, however, means the Baltic and Black Sea Fleets, at least, would probably be bottled up in the early days of the war and unable to exert any significant influence thereafter.

The Northern and Pacific Fleets would have somewhat greater freedom of movement, but not much. And before reaching the relatively safe waters of the open ocean, they would have to get past a surly lynch mob of SAGs, CVBGs, sensors and land-based ASW aircraft. As well, there might be a few surprises that US newspapers and, therefore, Soviet planners haven't heard about yet.

Attrition would be considerable, obviously. But to the USSR it might be worth it if the SLOCs (sea lines of communication) between the US and Europe could be closed long enough or often enough to tilt the balance on the Central Front.

There's another consideration the Kremlin's decision-makers have to factor into the battle equation: Soviet fishing trawlers, oceanographic research vessels, merchant ships, and even the Soviet Navy's surface combatants scattered over the seven seas would have to be written off. Many would probably seek asylum in some neutral port. Of course, to sit out the war – as some German ships did in World War II.

The Soviet Navy's ships might be willing to fight it out and could probably give a good account of themselves for a while. But they're short on reload capability, limited in the number of overseas bases, and deficient in at-sea refueling and re-supply capabilities.

All of the preceding is relevant to the US Navy's first and probably most important assignment in the event of a Central Front conflicts re-supply and reinforcement. It would accomplish that mission in several ways: by blocking in/bottling up the several Soviet naval fleets, insofar as possible; by interdicting those surface ships and submarines already deployed or that manage a successful exit after the commencement of hostilities; by long-distance escort of the container ships, tankers, and other merchantmen ferrying rolling stock, ammunition, POL, ordnance, and other consumables across the Atlantic to the NATO re-supply ports in northern Europe; and by keeping those ports open and clear of mines.

The old convoy system that eventually turned the tide in World Wars I and II, it might be noted, is no longer feasible – bunching ships up is the best way to lose large numbers of them in a very short time. What is feasible is use of nuclear attack submarines and surface-ship ASW groups as “outriders” maintaining a mobile and forward-moving *cordon sanitaire* across the Atlantic that Soviet submarines could penetrate only at very high risk.

Major assistance also would be available through rapid deployment of one or two Marine Corps divisions, either to the Central Front or to one of the flanks, Northern Norway would be the most likely locale for a USMC deployment, but the Marines also have exercised on the Central Front itself and would provide a helpful backup capability for the US/NATO ground units already there.

More important targets for the Marines, however, might be in areas far removed from the Central Front itself – Cuba, perhaps, or Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam, or Soviet naval repair and re-supply bases almost anywhere else in the world, or perhaps even in eastern Siberia (the last-named is a most unlikely possibility, but shouldn't be completely ruled out).

Those suggestions may seem surprising, or audacious, or even outrageous, or all three, but they shouldn't. They're all part of what the Navy calls “horizontal escalation,” and the Kremlin would be well advised to take that concept seriously. Horizontal escalation wouldn't really be the Navy's second mission in the event of a Central Front war; it would be more of a parallel first mission. “Horizontal escalation” has a nice academic ring to it – somewhat the way “mega-deaths” does, and just about as innocuous. It's the Navy's way of saying a Central Front war would be confined to the Central Front war would be confined to the Central Front for only about as long as it takes the Pacific Fleet to get under way.

There should be no misunderstanding of the true meaning of horizontal escalation. It means that war in Europe, whether it starts on the Central Front or on one of the flanks, escalates at the very start into a true world war. Soviet ships in the Indian Ocean would be the immediate targets of US CVBGs and submarines in that area.

Soviets bases and facilities in eastern Siberia would be subject to attack and interdiction also – and that possibility, incidentally, is what would keep Soviet air and ground units in the Far East from reinforcing the Central Front.

### **The So-Called China Card**

The much-vaunted “China card” is a deuce and not a wild one. The men who rule in Peking may not be on speaking terms with Moscow, but they don't really like the US, either. China's most likely course of action during a superpower war would be inaction. Wait until it's over, then help the winner pick up the pieces. That could be Japan's policy as well. US planners should at least be alert to that possibility.

Why would Cuba and/or Cam Ranh Bay be possible targets of the horizontal escalation policy? Because both are major overseas bases for the Soviet Navy. Cam Ranh Bay, where the Soviet fleet has access to some of the finest ship repair and maintenance facilities ever paid for by US taxpayers, possibly could be ignored. But it probably would be mined, with no apologies to Hanoi.

Cuba is another matter. Much of the re-supply shipping to northern Europe would necessarily have to exit Gulf ports and traverse the Caribbean before starting the Great Circle leg to Amsterdam, Antwerp, or Bremerhaven. It would be suicidal for the US to permit Soviet submarines in Caribbean waters to claim sanctuary in Cuban ports.

In addition to the missions already enumerated, the US Navy would have another key mission that in time of conflict – and depending on the timing, state of USN readiness, and other factors – might well be decisive for the West: direct combat support.

Again, however, one must consider geography. The US Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean would undoubtedly be deployed in support of Italy, Greece, and Turkey in the event of a diversionary Soviet attack on the southern flank. Bulgaria would be within its reach, as would Yugoslavia and part of Anatolian Turkey. Both of these, in some scenarios, are possible targets for Soviet ground forces. The Alps and the distances involved would keep the Sixth Fleet from playing any direct role on the Central Front, however.

The situation is different in the North Sea, on the other side of the continent. US sea-based aircraft and cruise missile ships and submarines would have ample sea room to maneuver, yet would still be able to launch some direct strikes against Soviet/Warsaw Pact airfields, troop concentrations, tank columns, and – the most likely targets of all – command posts and communications centers.

With terrain guidance and every inch of the Central Front already in the computer, the high-speed, low-flying Tomahawk missiles would find it very hard to miss their assigned targets.

There are several large caveats, however. One is that the North Sea is within easy reach of the Backfires and other land-based Soviet naval aircraft based in the USSR itself, so US surface ships would clearly be going into Harm's Way. Another is that Tomahawks are likely to be in very short supply for at least the next several years, and even battleship magazine capacities are limited. The later problem could be partially remedied by including in the SAG an ammunition re-supply ship, itself an inviting target.

The third and most important caveat, however, goes back to the matter of numbers: The US Navy still does not have enough ships to be able, from the beginning of conflict, to carry out simultaneously all of the many important missions assigned to it. Until the numbers increase, those missions will, therefore, have to be carried out sequentially.

After all the preceding is taken into account, there is an "X" factor that also might be thrown into the equation, presented here in the form of a question: What would happen if USN aircraft or cruise missiles – or even land-based US/NATO aircraft and non-nuclear missiles – were to follow an intra-theater horizontal escalation policy by, say, carrying out strikes against Soviet bases and troop facilities in Poland – while, of course, very carefully and overtly avoiding any "Polish targets" per se?

The joke in Moscow is that the Soviet Union's massive military buildup was mandatory because the USSR is "the only country in the world completely surrounded by hostile Communist states." Strikes against Soviet facilities in the less-docile satellite countries could bring home the truth of that rueful jest.

This possibility is another potential problem that should give the Kremlin pause. A multitude of such problems – and the others caused by horizontal escalation, interdiction of Soviet naval and maritime assets worldwide, and the re-supply of US air and ground units on the Central Front – might even collectively be enough to enable the US Navy and its sister services to carry out the most important Central Front mission of all.

It's called deterrence. – End

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*James D. Hessman is Editor in Chief of Sea Power Magazine, the official publication of the Navy League of the United States. A 1954 graduate of Holy Cross College, he served on active duty in the Navy for eleven years, and was at Armed Forces Journal for six years before moving to Sea Power in 1972. His by-line appeared most recently in Air Force Magazine in the September '81 issue with the article "Dangerous Dependence on Foreign Minerals."*