Maritime Strategy and Grand Strategy

Paul Bracken[*]

26 September 2006

THE distinctive feature of the US Navy's new maritime strategy is that it did not start with the answer. In this, it is quite different from much strategic thinking in the United States in recent years. Instead of jumping to the right answer -- "the global war on terror," "strategic balancer," -- it calls for a productive conversation over the next year to identify the concepts and issues that go in to a maritime strategy. This marks a turning point in the style of American strategic thinking of giving instant answers with little attention to their risks or consequences.

While the maritime strategy does not advance a single answer, it does offer promising avenues to explore. These involve technology and global alliances in a calculated relationship of large ends and means, the definition of grand strategy. With its deliberative character and its focus on innovative ways of packaging technology and alliances, it could be a good tip-off to what actual US grand strategy will look like.

American Styles of Strategic Thinking

Launched by the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Michael Mullen in a talk at the Naval War College in Newport RI in June 2006, the maritime strategy starts off with a scan of the environment. Globalization, terrorism, disaster and humanitarian relief, and the importance of allies are all parts of the picture. There is little to argue with here. It is the next step in the Navy's maritime strategy that is surprising and noteworthy. It does not use these trends to leap to some overarching strategic concept connecting them. Instead, it calls for hard-headed evaluation over the next year of what they mean for the Navy, and implicitly for the country. By not immediately jumping to the answer, it opens up a wide range of factors that other strategies overlook.

The deliberative character of the maritime strategy is worth emphasizing. The strategy process over the last decade has tended to jump to a definitive strategy in the first step of the exercise. Often this happens with a tagline meant to articulate an overarching principle, like 'containment' did during the Cold War. Recent examples are 'the global war on terror' and 'strategic balancer.' Arguments are pulled together as to why the strategy that is advanced solves a large challenge. Finally, there is the step which describes what is wrong with other alternatives. There are many reasons behind this style of thinking. With the end of the Cold War it was easy to get away with being sloppy. The worst risks were small compared to those of the Cold War. The lopsided advantage of military power held by the US was believed to solve almost any problem.

There were other cultural shifts going on in the US behind the decline of deliberative strategies. For all practical purposes, the US turned into a business culture in the 1990s. This led to a widespread aping of business leaders by senior government officials. One feature of this culture has been the guru CEO. This was the take-charge leader with the wit to make quick strategic decisions based on a gut feeling that cuts through the complexities of new technologies and markets. That the guru CEO was more myth than reality, and that it led to spectacular business failures at Enron, WorldCom, and AT&T, went overlooked.

The Maritime Strategy

The danger of terrorists, the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and missiles, and the possibility that these two trends might combine, are ratcheting up the danger levels. So is the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Asia shifts in economic and military balances could have far-reaching, if as yet unforeseen, consequences. It was in response to these developments that the US Navy began its maritime strategy exercise. Two avenues of exploration are especially noteworthy here, because they not only will shape the outcome of the exercise, but because they relate to larger issues of American grand strategy.

The first is technology and systems. The second is the interesting new form of military alliances advanced. An emphasis on technology and systems as a key feature of any maritime strategy builds on the aerospace-maritime nature of American power in contrast to continental traditions. The problem today is how to back fit technology onto a fleet and air force to provide what can be called "organizational stretch". The centre of the world is no longer in Europe. It is in an enlarged operational space which includes the Middle East and Asia, and the rest of the world. But this vast increase in space comes with no increase in US force structure.

The maritime strategy debate has thus advanced the concept of a global fleet station (GFS). This is a sea base organized around a mother ship. It is a way to establish rapid basing where there is none, either because of political or other restrictions. What is significant here is the focus of the GFS: its attempt to use technology and systems to cover a larger area, over a wider range of operations, from humanitarian relief to anti-terror to other military actions.

Strategic thinking in the US in recent years has tended to devalue technology, or to see it in narrow ways. But it is technology which allows the US military to operate on a global scale, spending only 3.5 percent of GDP on defence, and with the lowest personnel levels since before World War II. While technology and systems can be overemphasized -- anything can -- many strategists overlook how central technology is to *any* American grand strategy.

The second interesting avenue in the maritime strategy is the way it envisions alliances as much looser coalitions than those of Cold War blocs. The '1,000-ship' navy concept, wherein cooperation with other maritime forces can lead to very large and potentially capable fleets, is loaded with technological and strategic significance. It could mean, for example, back fitting other navies with the over-the-horizon and intelligence capacities of the US Navy. It is like taking the world's analog telephone system and back fitting it to make it digital, wireless, and more efficient, through retrofit rather than full scale replacement.

The '1,000-ship' navy has strategic significance because it does not specify who might join the US. Coalitions could shift, depending on mission and circumstances. Together with the emphasis on technology it suggests an important notion of *extended competition*. This is a

competition centered on preserving structures of power and influence, rather than just winning in a particular crisis. It involves factors like perceptions and technology advantage, and is measured in years rather than days. My bet is that in the Asia-Pacific region just these factors will prove to be more important than the details of, say, the China-Taiwan dispute, however it works out.

Implications

Many observers have failed to grasp the possible implications or the importance of the new maritime strategy. While it has many immediate implications for combating terrorism and working with allies to deliver humanitarian and disaster relief, it has less-noticed consequences for US grand strategy. By reason of not starting out with an answer or tagline, this in itself marks it as a welcome change to American strategic thinking of recent years.

Paul Bracken is professor of management and political science at Yale University. He contributes this article specially for IDSS Commentaries. He is the author of <u>Fire in the East, the Rise of Asian Military Power and the Second Nuclear Age</u> (HarperCollins, 1999).