

**The Evolving U.S. Role in Maritime Security:
Towards a New Strategic Paradigm post 9/11?**

By

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1. Introduction

There is a new strategic paradigm since September 11 that is likely to have some lasting consequences for U.S. maritime capabilities and priorities, regardless of how the final stages of the first phase of combat in Afghanistan turns out. This suggests that many critical assumptions about the evolution of U.S. military power – including maritime forces – will be overhauled or reexamined given a new set of security challenges (that coexist with a long list of enduring responsibilities). September 11 provided the real blinding insight and blueprint for the U.S. about an emerging set of security dynamics, not the much anticipated but ultimately disappointing Quadrennial Defense Review released a few days after the attacks. How will U.S. maritime forces, focus, and priorities fare in the wake of September 11? Where will we see fundamental continuity in operations and thinking? Are there new capabilities that need to be procured or policies implemented? How will changes in the U.S. approach to maritime matters ultimately affect U.S. allies and friends, as well as potential adversaries?

Maritime forces will continue to focus on traditional missions such as security of SLOCs and provide rapid crisis response in humanitarian situations as well as instances of gunboat diplomacy. The early military campaign against terrorism in Afghanistan has drawn heavily on maritime capabilities with several major capital ships and battle groups deployed to the Arabian Sea. Some of these include aircraft carriers like the USS Carl Vinson and USS Roosevelt from which strike aircraft are launching round the clock missions. There are also two other amphibious assault ships (USS Kitty Hawk and USS Pelileo) each carrying 2200 Marine combat forces from the 15th and 26th Marine Expeditionary Units respectively. The USS Kitty Hawk is also being used as a floating base for Special Operations helicopters and missions. Maritime forces will likely retain their significance as the campaign continues and take on new missions over time as well.

2. A New Strategic Context for U.S. Military Thinking, Planning, and Operations

The Conventional Wisdom on September 10, 2001

- “Rising States” over the horizon represent the greatest threats to U.S. national security (strategic analysts most often put China in this category)
- Relations with Russia and China are likely to become more contentious and there are emerging new strains in the Atlantic alliance
- “Failed States” are increasingly irrelevant at a strategic level and pose only humanitarian concerns which the U.S. and the rest of the international community increasingly ignore, leading some to talk of a “humanitarian malaise” among industrialized democracies
- U.S. global attention is in the midst of shifting inexorably but discernibly from Europe to Asia (the dawning geopolitical realities of the “Pacific Century”)
- Every major challenge to peace and stability at the outset of the new Century is found in Asia, rather than Europe (Korean peninsula, Taiwan Straits, India-Pakistan nuclear rivalry)
- The U.S. will utilize its formal alliance relationships to project power and operate where necessary, but will also be prepared to act alone if necessary. Toothless multilateral agreements and treaties can limit American flexibility and should be avoided, leading some observers overseas to speculate about a “unilateralist” streak in U.S. foreign policy
- The U.S. faces no immediate security threats, but will face a more hostile international environment two decades from now
- The U.S. can afford to “skip a generation” of weaponry and prepare for future battlefields that require greater integration of space assets and information technologies
- Asymmetrical threats are of increasing concern but they are likely to be employed by states or by state sanctioned forces

- There are rising concerns about a capabilities gap between the U.S. military and its closest allies that some fear will hinder battlefield cooperation in the event of a major crisis, raising the prospect of U.S. acting alone in some phases of combat (carrying with it the risks of diplomatic alienation for acting alone)
- There is a growing gap in military capabilities between the U.S. and most of its key allies and expectations are low about the ability for Japan to assist fundamentally in major global security crisis given constitutional restrictions and political inhibitions
- There were fears in a variety of quarters in the Navy corridors of the Pentagon and elsewhere that the QDR would call for a fundamental reorientation of naval forces and capabilities
- The U.S. will seek to promote greater hemispheric integration among the Americas and seek to promote greater cooperation on trade, energy extraction and distribution, and immigration policies
- Although the global economy is slowing in the latter half of 2001, the process of globalization will continue as the most dominant force in the international arena
- While U.S. diplomatic facilities and military assets have long been targeted overseas, there exists a fundamental – almost existential – assumption about the security and sanctity of the American homeland
- U.S. foreign and defense policy is increasingly made in a vacuum as large segments of the American public are disinterested in world affairs

A New International (and domestic) Logic emerging in the wake of September 11, 2001

- The U.S. faces both an urgent and enduring security challenge posed by al Qaeda and perhaps other fundamentalist Islamic groups; this new challenge has become the organizing principle, at least in the short to medium term, of the U.S. government
- The U.S. homeland is much more vulnerable than widely understood; September 11 represents a fundamental failure of American intelligence, imagination, and institutions
- Failing states such as Afghanistan, Somalia, and Sudan pose very real strategic challenges to the U.S. not simply humanitarian problems
- New regional and foreign policy priorities are the Middle East and South Asia, Europe, and the United States (homeland defense); Asia does not receive the same high level attention and could suffer from inattention if trends continue
- The U.S. has acted largely through informal security clusters of “willing” states; these coalitions include formal security partners and others energized by events and new global realities
- There is a greater recognition of the importance of international cooperation for the U.S. to achieve its goals against global terrorism; at the same time there is enduring skepticism about entering into international coalitions that may limit U.S. flexibility and options now or in the future
- Hemispheric integration has lagged somewhat and trade in the Americas has been disrupted by September 11 and its aftermath
- There is now a major prospect for strategic reorientation in the international arena around the issue of the struggle against global terrorism suggested by improved US-Russian relations, better US-China ties, much closer Atlantic community dialogue and coordination, and a robust Japanese package of economic, humanitarian, and military steps
- Asymmetrical capabilities can be effectively and horribly wielded by shadowy non-state actors against the U.S. and its allies
- The military gap in capabilities between the U.S. and its closest allies is growing even more rapidly than previously believed
- The QDR made no real recommendations in terms of future platforms or programs, and Navy issues received less attention than anticipated
- The process of globalization was hit hard by the terrorist assaults and by subsequent steps to prevent further attacks; the very steps that led to increased economic efficiencies such as “just in time manufacturing”, ease of travel, streamlined immigration procedures, rapid communications, have all been slowed considerably in the aftermath of 9/11

- The U.S public is fundamentally engaged in the public coverage and debate of the global campaign against terrorism; most American have not paid this close attention since the fall of the Berlin Wall or the onset of the Gulf War

3. How Have Maritime Operations and Capabilities Contributed to the Current Campaign in South Asia?

- U.S. naval assets have come from Central Command, European theater of operations and the Pacific to support military operations in Afghanistan
- Approaching 50% of all combat missions flown against Afghanistan have been launched from sea based operations aboard aircraft carriers
- Naval assets assisted with the introduction of Seal Team and other special forces units into Afghanistan and surrounding region
- The first permanent ground force in Afghanistan is a Marine Expeditionary Unit deployed from ship to shore, further making the case for the Marine Corps ability to deploy rapidly to the scene even in land locked situations
- Maritime cooperation and coordination among allied states in Indian Ocean have improved sustainment of operations and the overall operational capabilities of forces on station; Britain, France, Australia, Japan, Canada, and New Zealand all have or will shortly be contributing naval forces to allied deployments in the Arabian Sea just east of Oman and south of Pakistan
- Naval command and control offshore have provided the most secure facilities in the region given the unpredictable security situation of bases and facilities utilized in counties bordering Afghanistan
- Major search and rescue capabilities for Afghanistan operations located offshore

4. What are the Implications for future Maritime Operations and Priorities should the Global Campaign Against Terrorism Endure?

- A new, sharper focus for U.S. Navy and Coast Guard on missions more closely associated with Homeland Defense (security of U.S. harbors and ports, searches for possible weapons of mass destruction possibly being smuggled into the country)
- Possible enhanced role for Maritime Forces in inspecting cargo and other shipments coming in to ports in the continental U.S.
- Clear cut role of Maritime Forces in conducting possible rapid strikes against suspected weapons of mass destruction
- Clear validation of Marine Corps strategic thinking and operational innovation in terms of rapid, flexible, and global response
- Possible reorientation of longer term maritime deployments more towards South Asia and the Middle East (these new priorities could create even greater operational strains in terms of op-tempo and duration for U.S. naval deployments)

If these are true, what are the further implications in terms of policies, procurement, and international cooperation?

- U.S. Navy has made a major investment in the realm of precision guided munitions since the Gulf War but still much more has to be done in the realm of stealth capabilities for existing air platforms and a greater exploration in the potential uses for sea-based aerial drones and other unmanned vehicles
- The U.S. will need to explore options for greater “burden sharing” and allied cooperation in the realm of open ocean patrols for safety and security of sea lines of communication (possible role for allied countries in the Persian Gulf as well as Southeast Asia; is there a possible increased role for Japan in this respect in the future?)
- 9/11 has settled for now arguments in the Pentagon about phasing out aircraft carriers because of there potential vulnerability to precision strike missiles and cruise weapons

- The Navy role in policing drug smugglers in Latin America may be de-emphasized given the more urgent perceived priorities of Homeland Defense
- Risks of strain on U.S. force deployments in Asia and elsewhere as a consequence of enduring military activities and presence in the Middle East and South Asia
- There will be resurgent questions about the safety and viability of U.S. navy port calls and liberty stops in a variety of countries and regions and new procedures in the wake of the attack against the USS Cole are likely to be further strengthened
- Will there be a need to reorient other military capabilities to Asia in order to maintain a robust presence and capability?
- What will this new prism of activities, maritime and otherwise, mean for dealing with a rising China with clear and growing maritime goals of its own in the Western Pacific?

5. Concluding Observations

The centrality of Maritime forces and capabilities were once again reaffirmed by the initial phase of conflict against international terrorism in Afghanistan. While U.S. naval deployments and operational rotations were strained during the 1990s, the new demands of a global campaign against global terrorism are likely to put even further strains on op-tempo and deployments. There will be more opportunities for maritime cooperation among U.S. allies as U.S. forces are more urgently focused on the anti-terrorist campaign. Questions will remain about whether there will be regional concerns about American preoccupation elsewhere and what that might mean for local problems of peace and stability.

If there is bumpy road ahead in the international campaign against terrorism – either problems overseas or further attacks at home – it is not inconceivable that there may be public concerns about the extent of U.S. international engagement in the military sphere. As Maritime engagement and activities are the most obvious aspects of U.S. military engagement, extra care must be taken to publicly explain and defend a forward deployed national strategy, particularly in the realm of naval forces.