

# ISSUE BRIEF

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BRENT SCOWCROFT CENTER ON INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

## Naval Future: International Preponderance Through Naval Partnership

In 2005 US Navy ship numbers fell lower than at any point since 1916 and little has changed since then. The Royal Navy now has fewer ships and sailors than Nelson had at Trafalgar. It is of course true that counting hulls is no longer a reliable way of assessing naval power yet numbers matter.

The oceans are big places and the freedom to use that space in defense of national and international interests will remain vital. Concentrating naval force in smaller numbers in specific localities such as the Western Pacific and Persian Gulf means that the resources necessary to maintain effective presence elsewhere, or to redeploy forces to confront new threats rapidly, has been weakened. That is one lesson the Libya operation has made all too clear.

Enhanced naval cooperation can help like-minded navies align desired ends with available means in an age when budgets have become the new strategy. Broader and deeper cooperation can be built on five pillars: shared strategic vision; coordinated maritime doctrine aligning war-fighting, presence, and security missions; increasingly closely integrated capability development and capacity building; cross-fertilization of naval education and training; all leading, ultimately, to more effective global burden-sharing.

### About the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security

The Atlantic Council's flagship International Security Program was relaunched as the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security in September 2012. The Scowcroft Center continues the Council's long-standing focus on NATO and the transatlantic partnership, while also studying 'over the horizon' regional and functional security challenges to the United States, its allies, and partners.

The Scowcroft Center works collaboratively with the Council's other regional and functional programs to produce analysis with a global perspective. The Center will honor General Brent Scowcroft's legacy of service and embody his ethos of non-partisan commitment to the cause of international security, support for US international leadership in cooperation with allies and partners, and legacy of mentorship to the next generation of leaders.

The Center's Chairman is General James L. Jones, Jr., USMC (Ret.). For more information about the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security, please contact the Center's Director Barry Pavel at [bpavel@acus.org](mailto:bpavel@acus.org).

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## The Context

Use of the maritime domain, including by navies operating to promote international stability and security, will be shaped over the next quarter century by six factors:

- The financial crisis in the West, and underlying economic disequilibria in both Europe and Asia, are feeding long-term geo-political turbulence; the fact that this is occurring in two such distant theaters raises questions about the security of international maritime trade links that only navies can protect;
- The shift in economic gravity from West to East is exemplified by the rise of China. This shift, however, may only be gradual. China's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has grown exponentially, which has enabled it to fund a more capable military, but its GDP per capita lags far behind those of the United States (US) and much of Europe, which suggests that economic inequalities could trigger internal political instability;
- The disorder originating from states with extensive coastlines that are either unable to maintain their own security and contribute constructively to the maintenance of the rules-based world order, such as Somalia, or are working actively to undermine it, such as Iran;
- The increasing exploitation of the sea and seabed for food, minerals and energy;
- That notwithstanding the rights and obligations accepted by all states under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), freedom of navigation is under pressure resulting in challenges to free passage by warships and commercial shipping in sea areas with indispensable maritime chokepoints, sea lanes and economic resources, or are held to be part of a nation's vital patrimony;
- A severely diminished public and political willingness in the West to engage in prolonged, large-scale military engagements ashore, mirroring the quarter-

century gap between the fall of Saigon and Operation Desert Storm, such that interventions in the medium-term will – barring major and unavoidable conflict - be limited and from the sea;

- The translation of financial pressure into fiscal constraint in the West and the negative impact this is having on defense capacity and capability highlighted in naval matters perhaps most clearly by the relentless decline in platform numbers; despite the fervent prayers of admirals and political leaders ships, aircraft and submarines cannot be in two places at once.

Not even the United States has the resources to patrol and police the world's oceans, provide forward presence on a global scale, and conduct the full range of operations required to maintain international peace and stability. Newly-appointed Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Jonathan W. Greenert said recently:

*'We have to have sufficient capacity through the co-operative agreements that we agree to. We need to have the sustainment whenever things happen. We need to posture ourselves to be able to react. And of course we've got to trust each other and be willing to co-operate.... We are in a time of unprecedented global interdependence and we have abundant maritime activity and a lot of constructions out there. It's a time of budget constraints, so we've got to innovate, we've got to share capabilities, share technologies, and be willing to work together.... No one can do it alone. It's a team effort. It's a team sport.'*

The United States faces some significant strategic challenges, the consequences of which also will have major implications for its partners and allies. First, the imminent ending of combat operations in Afghanistan asks questions about how much the United States will be willing to commit to major ground-based military actions over the medium-term. The second is the implication contained in President Barak Obama's new Defense Strategic Guidance, Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense, of a pivot towards the Persian Gulf and the Western Pacific with a residual focus on the Indian Ocean. This shift naturally raises questions about the role of traditional allies and the extent to which a US presence

in other areas of interest, specifically the Atlantic, Arctic, Mediterranean, and the waters around Africa, will become episodic.

Speaking at the Atlantic Council on January 6, 2012, UK Secretary of State for Defense Philip Hammond stated that close allies such as the UK and the US must:

*'collectively direct the drive towards a number of capacity enhancing actions: greater pooling and sharing of capabilities; mission, role and geographic specialization; greater sharing of technology; co-operation on logistics; alignment of research and development programmes; and more collaborative training. This is not an exhaustive list, but contains what are likely to be the most promising ideas.'*

## **Demands and Resources**

The strategic challenges facing the international community require the leading powers and their navies to continue to engage around the world in support of international security requirements. Recent years have shown that instability, unpredictability, and strategic surprise remain enduring features of the global geostrategic balance, and that governments must continue to employ navies in support of a range of national interests growing both in number and complexity. If, especially in the current economic circumstances, it seems unlikely that budget levels can be maintained let alone increased, this raises two key questions about the role of naval force in supporting national interest. First, while re-capitalising navies continues to require significant up-front investment, is the value of the strategic flexibility afforded by navies in the context of matching increased commitment with reducing military force levels fully understood? Secondly, with naval force levels continuing to decline as these strategic challenges increase, to what extent can the development of new options for cooperation between navies help provide improved support for policy at national and international levels?

All parts of government must be subject to the same budgetary disciplines. Except in the most extreme circumstance, military power cannot claim any special privileges. Instead it must seek ways in which it can continue to deliver improved effect with fewer resources.

Under plans announced by the Obama administration, the US defense budget is slated to contract by eight percent over the next decade. In 2013 the defense budget will drop to the level it was in 2008 and grow for the next decade only in line with inflation. In dollar terms this is a \$487 billion reduction over ten years. Sequestration might impose an additional across-the-board cut of \$500 billion in January 2013 unless Congress is able to agree cuts in domestic programs or tax rises.

The Western Pacific and Arabian Gulf are essentially maritime theaters which implies a greater role for the Navy and Air Force, and a reduced one for the Army and Marine Corps, in line with the stated opinion of previous Secretary of Defense Robert Gates that “any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should have his head examined.” Despite the fact that the US Navy remains the world’s premier naval force by a historically unprecedented margin, the numbers of its ships, aircraft and personnel have declined sharply compared even to ten years ago. There is little prospect that ship numbers will increase from the current level of 285 to the Navy’s 313 ship target. Given current budget projections, many fear that even 285 ships may prove unsustainable and that further cuts will be required.

China, in contrast, has increased its defense expenditures. Exactly how much is unclear partly because nations use different metrics to define defense expenditures, and partly because there are good grounds for believing that China spends more on defense than it admits publicly. Whatever the actual figure might be, China has been developing and enlarging its navy since 2006 when it committed to gradually extend the strategic depth of its operations outwards from its coast to the first island chain and beyond to distant-water operations. The US has no option other than to respond: the US Navy is working with the US Air Force to develop ‘Air-Sea Battle’ (ASB), a high-intensity, high-investment, high-technology joint operating concept which is designed to ensure that US access into any theater required, including East Asian littoral waters, cannot be denied.

How can the US Navy manage these strains? In an era when all its allies and partners are under similar budgetary pressure, can the US Navy turn to them for help and, if so, how?

## **Enduring Alliances, the Great American Advantage**

The US Navy made clear its desire to cooperate with navies around the world with the publication in 2007 of its Cooperative Strategy for 21st-Century Seapower. It took the view that if challenges to “common threats and mutual interests in an open, multi-polar world” are to be confronted effectively then not only must US maritime forces cooperate with other arms of government but the “capabilities of our international partners” must be integrated too. It acknowledged that the level of cooperation this implied required a long-term commitment from both the US and its partners because it necessitated a level of trust which, in its words, could not be ‘surged’. Greenert has charged the Naval War College to assess the Cooperative Strategy’s continuing relevance and, while no major changes are expected, it is hard to see that more and deeper cooperation with allies and partners overseas can remain anything other than vital to the Navy’s future thinking.

The question, however, is how? The most obvious place to start is with the allies the United States has had longest: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. This is not to suggest that other and newer allies and partners are not just as important; rather that the almost instinctive levels of understanding that exist between the US and these four navies provide a potential platform upon which similar cooperative habits can be built with others. Nor is to suggest that the relationship between the US and these four navies as it exists currently is as good as it gets. On the contrary, the combination of rising challenges and falling resources means that things cannot stay as they are. What exists now is good, but to remain relevant it must become better. The measure is no longer what these navies have done together but what they can do together more effectively and efficiently in the future.

Not that relations between the US and even its closest allies have always been smooth. The issue of free-riding

has been a particularly thorny issue between the US and all its partners since the beginning of the Cold War, although these four allies might have made a more significant operational contribution than most. The US has traditionally out-spent and out-built its competitors and in line with that approach has compensated for the defense expenditure shortfalls of others by throwing resources into the gap. The relative dynamic between the US and its partners, however, has now changed. This is no longer an option. Instead the US Navy is now facing perhaps the most prolonged challenge to the sustainability of its force level requirements since the 1940s. What this means in concrete terms was revealed by the Libyan operation which was conducted without a strike carrier for the first time in recent operational history. US involvement was limited but without it the operation would have been impossible. While the US may be unwilling to acknowledge it, the Libyan and East Timor models may be better pointers for future operations outside the key Arabian Sea and Western Pacific theaters. Making this support for allies effective and winning reciprocal effectiveness in return must be a key objective.

The US Navy’s most closely integrated partners have experienced painful cuts already. Indeed, the US may have drawn some pertinent lessons from the UK’s Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) that affected the Royal Navy (RN) particularly badly. Despite this, the UK continues to deploy a range of high-end capabilities to meet enduring global commitments. Operations in Libya have brought home to the current Coalition government the political and military importance of the maritime component and the need for close cooperation with naval allies.

The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) plays a central role in the Asia-Pacific power balance alongside its role in out-of-area regions such as the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. Despite emerging budgetary challenges of its own it will, under current plans, undergo a significant capability expansion. The closeness of US-Australian ties was highlighted by the recent agreement to base a US Marine Corps force on a rotational basis in the northern city of Darwin, and suggestions that the US may make use of base facilities in Perth and on the Cocos Islands.

Canada, like the US, is the only NATO member with a Pacific coastline. The Royal Canadian Navy (RCN), in addition to operating regularly in the Pacific, the Atlantic and the Arctic, has played a central role in maritime security matters in the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean. Its relationship with the US and its stated intention to invest in significant naval capability runs alongside a continuing domestic debate about the how Canada should contribute to international security.

While the Royal New Zealand Navy (RNZN) is the smallest and most regionally-focused – and its relationship to the US Navy continues to be affected by New Zealand’s refusal to allow nuclear-powered warships access to its waters – it has operated in the Persian Gulf and off East Timor, and conducted regional humanitarian and disaster relief operations. It retains a direct interest in the maritime security across the vast spaces of the South Pacific and Antarctic regions.

### **Naval Cooperation: The Way Forward**

In sum the RN, RAN and RCN remain formidable forces, while the RNZN is preeminent in its region and makes valuable contributions internationally when it can. Consequently, discussions designed to achieve new levels of naval cooperation with the USN can provide real, tangible benefit if they are concentrated in areas that have the potential to deliver the greatest strategic value. Five areas suggest themselves.

**First, shared strategic vision:** identifying the key objectives that would, by raising the cooperative game across all five navies, make their combined and individual effectiveness that much greater; the benefit would be a shared understanding of their purpose expressed through a common narrative that defines, explains and communicates how the maritime component contributes to shared defense and security objectives aligning strategic perspectives region-by-region;

**Secondly, maritime missions:** the distillation of the shared strategic vision into coordinated (but not shared) future maritime doctrine for each service which respects

their individual traditions and outlooks while at the same time aligning future war-fighting and maritime security missions including conflict prevention, suppression of non-state threats, security and stabilization, and the delivery of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR).

**Thirdly, what this means for future maritime capability:** coordination and alignment will result in changes in tasks and roles which, if they are to be achieved more efficiently and effectively, will almost certainly demand a move away from a platform-centric approach towards one which emphasizes how new technologies can be harnessed to optimal effect;

**Fourthly, force generation:** improved cooperation will not be about equipment alone; the human element will be just as critical, and arguably more so; the drive must be to share best practice experience for platform and personnel utilization including the integration of regulars, reserves and contractors into a whole force concept; more integrated training and shared educational programs and staff courses; and a renewed dedication of the officer exchange programs that historically have delivered such substantial cooperative benefits;

**Fifthly, operations:** sharing operational and tactical level lessons learned, including their wider inter-service and inter-governmental implications, to improve interoperability and global burden-sharing.

There are obvious differences of geographical location and size that would need to be worked around to achieve the deeper and more focused coordination that the new austerity pressures demand if US naval preponderance globally is not to slip away. The demand is for each of the five navies to think innovatively about what they can achieve together in order to forge a global cooperative naval force that is greater than the sum of its five constituent parts.

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