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STRATEGIC HOMEPORTING: A TACTICAL PERSPECTIVE

by

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A paper submitted to the faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Naval Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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TODAY, BECAUSE OF BUDGET CONSTRAINTS AND THE CORRESPONDING REDUCTION IN FORCES, THE WAR FIGHTER, THE CINC FOR THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER, HAS TO RESPOND TO CRISES IN HIS AOR WITH FEWER AND LESS FORWARD DEPLOYED ASSETS THAN WAS THE CASE JUST A FEW YEARS AGO; SO ANY INCREASE IN FLEXIBILITY GREATLY INCREASES THE CHANCE FOR SUCCESS OF HIS MISSION. THE STRATEGIC HOMEPORT PROGRAM, ALONG WITH THE ADVENT OF THE BB SAG, GIVES THE CINC AN ADDED MEASURE OF FLEXIBILITY TO RESPOND TO CRISES WITHIN HIS AOR AND GREATLY INCREASE HIS CHANCE FOR SUCCESS.

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Abstract of
STRATEGIC HOMEPORTING: A TACTICAL PERSPECTIVE

Strategic Homeporting as a concept is not new. Naval planners saw the value of having naval stations on every coast since before WW I. The concept has also not been without controversy since that time, and proponents and opponents of the program today are arguing points that were argued almost 80 years ago. The arguments, for or against, never fully concentrated on the tactical level, or the level from which the actual war fighters had to deal. The arguments were either national strategy or policy related and more often than not were influenced by money in one way or another. Today, because of budget constraints and the corresponding reduction in forces, the war fighter, the CINC for the purpose of this paper, has to respond to crises in his AOR with fewer and less forward deployed assets than was the case just a few years ago; so any increase in flexibility greatly increases the chance for success of his mission. The Strategic Homeport Program, along with the advent of the BB SAG, gives the CINC an added measure of flexibility to respond to crises within his AOR and greatly increases his chance for success.

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PREFACE

At the time of this writing, strategic homeporting of U.S. Navy ships is a highly contentious and politically sensitive subject. Because of this sensitivity, no one on staffs from the CINCLANTFLT level down to SECOND FLEET, were willing to discuss details on the program's current status or on the general utility to the Navy of the various homeports. It is quite obvious why this is so. Briefly, there are significant political ties at the congressional level and serious opposition at various levels within the Navy to the entire program. The very survival of these homeports depends on which side bolsters the most clout. However, this is not a political paper. It is an operations paper. Regardless of the outcome of the political dispute between the Navy and Congress, the purpose of this paper is to address the operational aspect of Strategic Homeporting viewed from the eyes/mind of the CINC or CINCFLT level. I have focused this paper on the Atlantic and Gulf regions, including: CINCLANT, CINCSOUTH, CINCLANTFLT to limit the scope of the research and because the strategic homeport program, (SHP), affects these areas the most. The Gulf of Mexico, which falls into CINCLANT's AOR is also unique in that it is an area that has been without a significant naval presence for a great number of years, some would even say neglected for those years, and it is an area of great and constantly increasing strategic significance to our national security.

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INTRODUCTION

Strategic Homeporting is simply making homes for groups of Navy ships in ports around the U.S. coastline. The complement of the ports range in size from just a handful of ships in places like Pascagoula, MS or Pensacola, FL to over 100 at some of the larger ports like San Diego or Norfolk. Strategic homeporting is not new, the earliest writings concerning strategic dispersal of U.S. Navy ships goes back prior to World War I. However, some of the thinking has changed over the years and the newest homeports of today have an important new element in the form of specialized surface action groups built around capital ships, (i.e., BB, CVA), that train together and are tasked as a group.

A brief history of the controversy surrounding the homeport concept is essential to understanding what a misused asset these ports have been throughout our maritime history. From the common sense notion that no maritime power would allow one of its sea coasts to be without a protecting navy, this country progressed so that at one time it had over 65 homeports protecting the sea coasts. Today with 34 existing ports and 4 in the works, the real significance of these ports is manifest in a relatively new concept of the warfighting CINC. With the CINC running the war with direction directly from the NSC, the more flexible and responsive his assets are, the better he can do his job. The strategic homeport with its tailored battle group gives the CINC a naval arm that both delivers a decisive blow and can respond quicker than what previous basing strategies would allow.

HISTORY

BEGINNINGS

In 1916, retired RADM John R. Edwards, a naval engineer, addressed the U.S. Senate concerning the development of naval stations in support of the growing fleet, and the adequacy of then current naval repair facilities to service the fleet. His discussion of naval facilities on the Gulf of Mexico coast was noticeably matter-of-fact. The essence of his argument was that it was natural for there to be a naval presence in the Gulf of Mexico, because of the 1200 miles of exposed U.S. coastline and close proximity of the Panama Canal, along with the realization of the potential for maritime traffic through the Canal and the Caribbean and Gulf region. His only concern was that enough large ports were built in sufficient numbers on every coast to accommodate new larger and deeper draft ships that were entering the fleet. It was determined that one of these major ports was enough for the Gulf, while five were needed on the Atlantic coast and three on the pacific.[1]

Then as now, however, RADM Edwards' thinking was not without critics. A "naval expert" of the time was quoted:

> "To consider any point so far withdrawn from the inevitable field of action, in case of a naval war in the Atlantic, as are either Pensacola or New Orleans as a base, is not only to violate every principle of reason but of common sense as well."[2]

This thinking was substantiated in that the naval facilities at Pensacola and New Orleans were the only two naval facilities on the Gulf Coast and had been shut down for over two years when

this testimony was made. It was not until events with Mexico, (surrounding U.S. involvement/support for factions in the 1910-1922 Mexican revolution), and the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914, that Congress reappropriated funds to open the naval facility at New Orleans. Likewise, not until developments in naval aviation produced the need, did the Navy see fit to reopen Pensacola as an active port.[3] Further, the major area of concern affecting national security even prior to WWI was seen as being in Europe, and when this is translated to the naval standpoint, the North Atlantic. There was just no threat in the Gulf. As will be seen later in this introduction, this same sort of reasoning permeates the latest discussion of the SHP.

Although it appears that there is no significant literature on naval basing between the early writings and the 1970's, by 1970, 65 homeports were operational. Obviously, this was largely the impact of WWII and the wars in Korea and Vietnam. It was during the 70's when ADM Zumwalt, as CNO was forced to cut, because of tighter budgets, the number of Navy ships from over 900 at the height of the Vietnam War to under 500 by 1976, which in turn forced the reduction of home ports.[4] By 1982, there were only 34 left.

CHANGE IN THE 80s

The Reagan administration was responsible for tremendous growth in all of the armed services in the 80's. A major winner was the Navy, which under SECNAV John Lehman, saw a fleet,

decimated in the previous decade, expand by 130 ships, or around 30%, to over 600. Without going into the major political and fiscal considerations that the Navy was involved in for several years convincing Congress of the need for the SHP, the Navy saw that the new 130 ships would not comfortably fit into the existing naval stations. This, coupled with the desire to accomplish some long sought after strategic enhancements to the fleet, prompted Navy planners to opt for dispersing the new ships to new and some existing but lesser utilized homeports. To create a viable plan for this dispersal, the DCNO, Logistics, VADM Tom Hughes assumed the primary task of finding satisfactory port cities that wanted the Navy as part of the community. He considered five other criteria.

1) Create Battlegroups centered around capital ships like battleships or carriers rather than just a scattering of ships.

2) Improve the integrity of the battlegroups to make them more capable of training and fighting as a unit.

3) Effect on the industrial base of the community and surrounding area.

4) Logistics suitability, requiring no Navy underwriting of new roads or rails, and

5) Geographic considerations so that deployment needs were met.[6]

The controversy over new homeports started almost immediately after they were announced in 1982 and continues

today. The range of the controversy starts at the political level, continues through the environmental level, and touches virtually every topic, generally with fiscal overtones. The latest debate over the appropriateness of these ports considering the burgeoning austerity of the defense budget began in December 1988 when Defense Secretary Cheney proposed that a number of obsolete and unneeded bases be closed as a cost saving measure. Making the list was the entire group of Gulf Coast Homeports and a shadow of doubt was cast on the entire program, including the near completed Staten Island Homeport. The most basic case to be made against these homeports was that the Navy was no longer going to grow to 600 ships, in fact, it was likely to shrink to below the 1982 level of 470. A great deal of political maneuvering has taken place since then, and debate continues to this day. Although the substance of the debate is beyond the scope of this paper, because "politricks", not strategy is driving the fight in Congress and in the Navy over the fate of these ports, what can be construed as the strategic part of the argument is worthy of brief mention.

TODAY'S DEBATE

Proponents of the program list 5 basic factors that justify the existence of strategic homeports:

1. Dispersal of the fleet, even a reduced fleet, makes the Navy less vulnerable to attack by any adversary by any means, conventional or nuclear.

2. Dispersal of ships to areas nearer potential areas of

instability can only enhance readiness.

3. Groups of ships, called surface action groups or SAGs, built around one capital ship such as a BB or CV that are stationed together and train together have improved operational readiness over the long term.

4. Revitalizing the industrial base in the areas where the homeports go in, specifically, the ship repair industry, is essential to national defense.

5. There is a substantial benefit in the area of enhanced morale and corresponding personal readiness when considering that these ports offer a variety of new duty stations in communities that have demonstrated a strong desire to host the Navy.

Three of the main objections of opponents to SHP that go beyond the original argument against the need for additional homeports, are:

1. Our major adversary, the Soviet Union, could just as easily target with nuclear weapons 38 homeports as he could the current 34.

2. There is no threat in the Gulf of Mexico or Caribbean to justify ports in that area, and their location is not any closer than Mayport to potential hot spots in the region; the Panama Canal or Cuba. Additionally, what threat there was from Cuba is rapidly dissipating.

3. Different overhaul cycles of ships within any group of ships negates the potential benefit of training together, because at any one time some of these ships will be in overhaul and not

operating with the group.

4. Economy of scale: The Navy minimizes overhead by concentrating its forces, the savings is directly translated into more platforms rather than new facilities.

ASSUMPTIONS

It is obvious that the arguments have gone through several cycles since 1916, but the controversy remains: the benefit to be gained from strategic dispersal of navy ships is not black and white, and the debate is not likely to see a resolution in this author's lifetime. Since the verdict is still out, a few assumptions will have to be made in order to present the case properly.

1) At least 3 new strategic homeports in CINCLANT's AOR will be operational in 1995.

2) Current budget discussions have placed the number of Navy ships at 451 for 1995, down from current level of over 500, (latest budget proposal).

3) BB SAGs will be stationed in the Gulf and at Staten Island, and CVA USS Forrestal will be stationed in Pensacola, taking the place of USS Lexington.

4) <u>The most effective means of providing naval force when and where it is needed is the current process of forward deployment of our naval forces in the size and composition necessary to accomplish any task assigned.</u> This is a proven concept and should never be abandoned. With the current budget

problem, there are those in Congress that feel that in addition to the reduction in naval forces, those reduced forces will spend more time in port. It is assumed that that will be the case, and that some commitments will also be reduced to allow for it.

With these assumptions, it remains to be shown that these homeports with their Surface Action Groups give the warfighting CINC an added measure of flexibility that was not available with the previous concentration of forces.

NAVAL POWER FOR THE CINC

First, it needs to be pointed out that the CINC rarely gets directly involved with ship deployment. In fact, not even CINCLANTFLT is likely to be personally involved with the deployment of individual groups of ships. It is understood that if a naval task force is needed, that the numbered fleet will decide what the task force composition will be and from where it will come, depending on the mission.

So the question arises: **Does the CINC, at his level, really care about strategic homeporting?** The answer is likely, **NO**. But he is concerned with what the navy can do for him. The reason is, that there is a good chance that any crises that occurs within his AOR will be responded to by naval forces. It is almost axiomatic that in over 200 occasions when armed forces were employed to respond to crises around the globe since WWII, that naval forces were involved over 80% of the time. In the

past and even today, the CINC has been able to rely on the fact that naval forces have been forward deployed continuously - - ready to respond to any demands that he made on them. Assuming that this forward deployment posture will be changing, with a corresponding decrease in worldwide commitments, there is a question as to how the naval response to any given crises will be accomplished. This is a question that the CINC has to have the answer to, because with a reduction in U.S. Naval forces, his options for timely response to any military situation become increasingly limited. Strategic Homeporting may be the asset he needs to make up for that limitation.

In the study of naval warfare over the course of study at the Naval War College, it is taught that naval forces are employed in three basic ways: 1) in a presence or diplomacy role, 2) in a command or control of the sea role, (including protection of SLOCs and merchant shipping), and 3) in a power projection role. These three roles are interrelated, and are frequently used in combination, or are accomplished sequentially as is the case in S.W. Asia today. As is typically the case, forward deployed naval forces were performing a normal peacetime presence mission in the Persian Gulf, (if you consider the Persian Gulf as ever being at peace). This led to command and control of the sea, both in terms of an embargo and in actual warfare, where sea control and protection of the SLOCs were imperative to successful prosecution of the war. Finally, these same forces, combined with additional U.S. and allied naval

forces became engaged in the power projection role; both in terms of air strikes and naval bombardment ashore and in having three MEBs afloat for possible amphibious operations.

The Surface Action Groups, configured around the battleship or carrier offer the CINC a considerable amount of firepower with the ability to perform all three of these roles short of conducting amphibious operations. The argument here arises that an equal or even better combination of ships could be obtained from current ship concentrations and still accomplish the CINC's mission. The counter to this argument is that although it is true that a more appropriate force could be configured from Norfolk, Charleston and Mayport, FL., the extra day, possibly days, required to get them out of port and joined up into a battlegroup, followed by the time required to work out discrepancies or differences in operating practices may not be adequate for the task assigned. The bottom line is that time is critical to flexibility. The SAG, although admittedly less flexible in that its configuration is set, has the capability to perform a wide variety of missions and relatively few decisions about configuration are required to get it underway. Additionally, the SAG is a unit that continuously trains together day-in and day-out and does not require time to work out operational discrepancies. The confidence that a CINC has in the ability of a tactical naval group built around a battleship is best summed up in CINCCENT's address to the U.S. Senate in 1990, when he said about the BBBG: "although not as flexible in

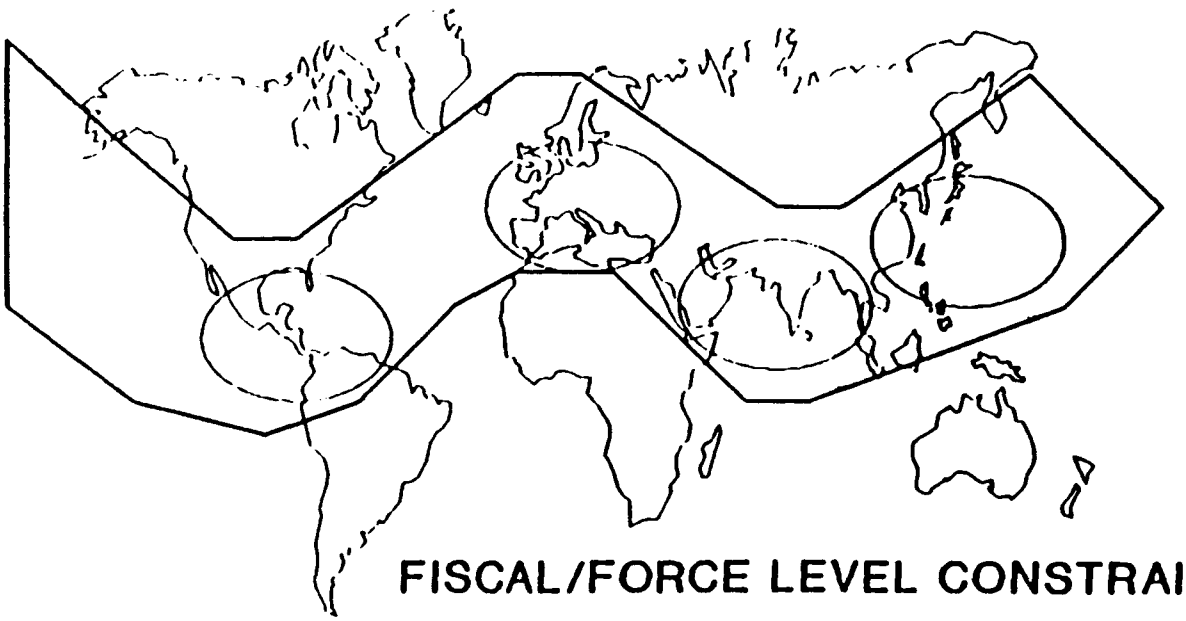
power projection as a CVBG, they [BBBG] do provide a significant presence...its mobility and firepower, coupled with state of the art defensive capability, permit operations throughout the [Persian Gulf] region.[6]

As has been pointed out, the benefit of the strategic homeporting program is not perfectly clear to either Navy or Congressional decision makers. Some very strong points have been made on both sides, and even the experts have varying opinions. But a relatively new concept has arisen over the past few years that is likely to gain acceptance among military leaders as the Services continue to economize the surviving forces and on which strategic homeports may have some impact. The concept, "Flexible Presence," divides the globe into four areas that reflect current national priorities and are potentially and predictably the major hubs of instability.[7] It just so happens that two of those areas fall into CINCLANT's AOR and can be influenced by the location of the previously mentioned homeports. The strategic and even tactical benefit to be gained by these ports is different for each homeport, so each will be addressed separately. The overall gain for the CINC is the same, increased flexibility. As can be seen in Figure 1, the two areas that fall within CINCLANT's AOR are the European and Caribbean/Gulf of Mexico regions.

FIGURE 1

MARITIME POLICY, FLEXIBLE PRESENCE CONCEPT

FLEXIBLE PRESENCE



FISCAL/FORCE LEVEL CONSTRAINTS

PREDICTABLE HUBS OF INSTABILITY

SHIFTING REGIONAL PRIORITIES

THE ANSWER: TAILORED EMPLOYMENTS

EUROPEAN THEATER

The Staten Island Homeport, is the future home of a BB SAG, a group of ships with no specific mission, but capable of several strategic functions as has been explained. The value of the SAG is in its ability to respond quickly. This case is made even stronger in the Staten Island Homeport, where actual steaming time to the European theater is less than from Norfolk for two reasons. First, New York is closer to Europe than Norfolk, and second, it takes ships at Norfolk several more hours to reach open ocean than it does from Staten Island. Whether this SAG would be responding to a presence mission or in support of an amphibious landing in Norway, the CINC is able to get a credible fighting force on station in a significantly shorter time than if he was relying on current ship distributions.

CARIBBEAN THEATER

The Gulf Homeport SAG, also configured around a battleship, is advantageous to two CINCs in a number of ways.

1) Reduces response time over comparable forces from Mayport, Norfolk and Charleston because of the savings in configuration time for a wide range of contingencies in the Gulf or Caribbean. (Actual distance to locations in the Caribbean are roughly the same from Corpus Christi, TX as they are from Charleston, S.C., therefore, steaming time is roughly the same.)

2) Serves as a stabilizing force in an area that has historically been without a naval presence, considered by some to be the soft underbelly of the U.S. and consequently the target of

Soviet and Cuban adventurism and destabilizing efforts.

3) A readily available naval force to respond to CINCSOUTH's naval requirements. This advantage is mostly psychological in that naval forces permanently stationed on the East Coast are in the mindset of most Navy personnel Atlantic assets responding to European conflicts. A permanent naval force in the Gulf may refocus to a Southern mindset responding to Caribbean and Latin American conflicts. Those assets would still belong to SECOND FLEET, and would therefore respond to crises in the Atlantic as directed, but CINCLANT has said that he would want a naval force in the Gulf at least in the early stages of a war in Europe.[8]

4) A potent symbol to developing nations of the U.S. resolve for stability within the region. A good number of countries in Central America and the Caribbean could certainly be influenced or reassured by this sizeable naval force. This use of naval force in diplomacy, as was pointed out earlier, is one of the recognized uses of naval power.

The above listed advantages are good arguments for having a SAG permanently stationed in the Gulf during peacetime, but the value to the warfighting CINC goes beyond that. It is <u>not</u> a well known fact that the Gulf of Mexico was a major source of the German Navy's success in the area of destroyed merchant shipping during WWII. For example, 78 ships accounting for over 380,000 tons of shipping was destroyed by German U-boats in just three months in 1942.[9] The Gulf has become even more important to the

nation's security since WWII. Today, a massive petrochemical industry has blossomed all along the Gulf Coast and just offshore one of the largest natural gas fields in the world has been developed. The point is that even with the increase in strategic importance, there has been no increase in defense in the area, and this is within CINCLANT's AOR. It is not difficult to imagine that the industry and energy assets of the Gulf region could be likely targets in any major conflict with a major power. It is important also to note here that Cuba was our ally in WWII. war. While it is obvious that a SAG in the Gulf gives both CINCs an increased measure of flexibility during peacetime, during wartime it may be his only defense of this critical resource area.

CONCLUSION

The latest Strategic Homeporting Program started as a vision of some farsighted people in the early 80s. While the extent of the political motivation on the part of the Navy and the political pork barreling can be hotly debated, the fact of the matter is: we have these new homeports, and it is not for the warfighting CINC or even the Navy to debate whether or not we should have them. It is our duty to make the most of them. The arguments on both sides make a lot of sense when viewed independently and on the strategic level, but when you come down to the level at which U.S. fighting forces get employed to do the job, it is abundantly clear that these visions that have become

realities are a lot more than just a pork barrel project that pumps Navy dollars into downtrodden communities. These homeports with their made to order SAGs give a measure of flexibility to the warfighting CINC that was previously unavailable. While the homeported SAG is not an adequate substitute for a forward deployed CVBG, in times of reduced operating budgets, a well-trained unit with a multi-mission capability that can be deployed independently, or in support of any other naval/joint operations, and that can be on station at least a day ahead of any comparable force is an ace-in-the-hole for CINCLANT and probably long overdue.

NOTES

1.Rear Admiral John R. Edwards, USN(Ret), "Article," United States Senate, Strategic Importance Of Our Naval Stations, Washington:Govt. Printing Off., 1916. p.13.

2.Ibid. p.22.

3.Ibid. p.24.

4.Frederick H. Hartman, Naval renaissance: the U.S. Navy in the 1980s. Annapolis, MD., Naval Institute Press, 1990., p. 16-45.

5.Ibid. p.145.

6.U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Armed Services. Threat Assessment: Military Strategy: and Operational Requirements. Hearings. Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1990.

7.U.S. Department of the Navy, Maritime Policy Briefing, OP 063, Washington: 1990.

8. U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Armed Services. Threat Assessment: Military Strategy: and Operational Requirements. Hearings. Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1990.

9.Lt. William J. Cox, USNR, The Gulf of Mexico: A Forgotten Frontier in the 1980s, U.S. Naval War College Review?

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