



Fight Them Forward

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by [CDR R.B. Watts, USCG](#)

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Introduction

The "Global War on Terror" (GWOT) and the threat terrorists pose to the homeland present significant challenges to our established military principles and strategies. This is especially true in the sea services, whose very offensive nature in obtaining command of the sea defines traditional forward operating doctrine. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, critics argued that this doctrine has been made obsolete by an asymmetric enemy, and that protection of the homeland against maritime attack requires a complete revision of Navy strategy to focus on the defense.

Speculative scenarios such as using ships as weapons, smuggling of enemy terrorists, or attempted employment of WMD are often cited as rationale for keeping the fleet close to home waters. A realistic appraisal of these scenarios, a review of historical lessons learned, and analysis of coastal defense operations and doctrine illustrate that the Navy's continued plan for forward operations is sound, and ultimately the most effective means of employing sea power in GWOT.

Unique Challenge to Military Principles

The three years since the 9/11 attacks have seen an almost unprecedented use of U.S. military power in the GWOT. Although many elements of the war on terror are nothing new in the scheme of conventional military operations, there are elements of this war that are unprecedented and present a unique challenge to established military principles.

This is especially true in the sea services. Our terrorist enemies are an elusive and asymmetric land power, and as such challenge our established maritime war fighting principles—leaving the sea services struggling for an identity. Questions surrounding the Navy's role in the GWOT are numerous. Traditionally navies operate forward, offensively, to obtain command of the sea, protect our sea lanes of communication, and support operations on hostile shores. Are these missions now worth the time and dedication of national resources, or are they even relevant against an asymmetric enemy?

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In the aftermath of the Cold War there is no power today that can match the United States in open conflict on the sea; has not “command of the sea” therefore been obtained, in the classic military sense? Yet conversely, although “command of the sea” has arguably been obtained, America has seemingly never been more vulnerable.

Although the attack on 9/11 came from the air and was launched from our shores, the fact remains that we are an island-nation with vast coastlines that are open, allowing our enemy to potentially use the sea to strike at us, using unconventional and heretofore unforeseen methods. The coastlines and ports on which we depend are enormous vulnerabilities in the eyes of many; if this is true, do we need a complete revision of our traditional naval principles to focus on defense of the homeland versus far flung operations which potentially leave us open to attack?

These questions are nothing new; as a form of military power whose main role is support of strategic goals, navies have historically been forced to justify maritime principles whose immediate results were not evident. But this new war brings with it new realities; in the face of an asymmetric threat, misapplication of sea power could lead to a direct and devastating attack on the homeland. Can the Navy therefore justify its far flung, traditional “forward” doctrine? The answer requires a validation of our principles with elements of history, and a realistic appraisal of the threat posed by the “new” form of warfare, in order to promulgate a clear (and public) understanding of the vital role for sea power in the GWOT.

Arguments for the Defense

Threats from the sea are nothing new to maritime powers; arguably, motivation for the development of the first navies came from the desire to protect the homeland from attack. But as sea power evolved this role changed. Historically, even in the most dire situations, island-nations have never used their sea power effectively in the defense. The “storm tossed ships” on which Mahan based much of his classic treatise did not save Britain from Napoleonic invasion by forming wooden walls around the home islands—rather, it fought a long and tedious war of blockade, attrition, and ultimately battle forward, in pursuit of the enemy.^[1]

Several generations later, their descendants employed similar tactics in two World Wars. Even when faced with a clear offensive from the sea—such as that employed with devastating effect by Nazi submarines against the U.S. coastline during WW2—use of traditional sea power in a defensive role was almost completely ineffective.^[2] What worked—aggressive use of intelligence, a dedicated surveillance effort, and a coordinated, multi-agency effort to defeat the enemy with non-traditional methods—allowed the vast bulk of naval force to be employed effectively forward in the offensive role. This model carried over to modern times; even in the latter days of the Cold War and the Maritime Strategy, defense of the homeland relied heavily on aggressive use of sensors, intelligence, and very focused combat power to defend the shore while using the Navy offensively forward to destroy the enemy before he could deploy to threaten the coastline.^[3]

This history is well and good, one could argue, but how does it work today in the “new” environment? Previous conflicts were almost purely conventional; defense models were designed to fight ships, submarines, and the occasional special operations team—not terrorists.

It is an undeniable fact that the fall of the Soviet Union dramatically altered our threat from a well-established, traditional and centralized symmetric military force to an enemy that is decentralized, hidden, unconventional, and asymmetric.^[4] Pundits argue—with some merit—that everything has changed. This “new” enemy with his unconventional and potentially devastating methods of attack completely negates the “old” way of thinking.

Are they correct? To answer this charge, we must begin with a realistic—and dispassionate—assessment of the maritime threat. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, realistic assessment of

threat gave way to a form of popular hysteria that caused a large misdirection of military effort. Crop dusters were spraying anthrax and biological agents into water supplies. Ships lurked off the coastline loaded with nuclear weapons waiting but for clearance to enter port from an overworked Coast Guard to detonate their cargo at the pier. Homemade cruise missiles loaded on rogue merchant ships were closing in on the coastline to fire. And everyone had missiles to shoot down airliners—except those planes orbiting, waiting to fly into more buildings.[5]

Perhaps this characterization is a bit harsh—given the horrific events of 9/11 and the subsequent national outrage in the wake of the attacks, many of these threats seemed valid at the time. But an unfortunate trend is that many of these ideas still have some credibility, not only in the media but also among the burgeoning homeland security industry. This “Tom Clancy” syndrome of seeing exotic threats everywhere has led to many defensive efforts that are simply not credible.[6] Television adventure dramas aside, how credible is the maritime threat to the homeland? To answer this question we must categorize the more popular maritime threat perceptions and assess them realistically:

1. Ships as Explosive Weapons

Despite their size, commercial ships make very poor weapons. Many of the scenarios which envision merchant ships being as rams or bombs against maritime targets either lack credibility or exaggerate the effect a vessel can have on an intended target. While a ship could—in theory—be used to ram an important target (bridge, tunnel, etc.), most planners in the wake of 9/11 were quick to ensure an anxious public that potential maritime targets were designed to withstand collision.[7] This is assuming a terrorist crew could gain control of a merchant vessel—a tactic whose success is minimized by the Coast Guard’s adoption of the “sea marshal” and escort program which was designed specifically to target this threat.

As for ships being used as bombs, in this scenario, a potentially explosive ship such as a Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) carrier is either seized or attacked with the intent of detonation. This is a serious threat given that an exploding LNG tanker has tremendous destructive power. But even before 9/11, response to this scenario was well established. LNG tankers transiting in home waters have always been subject to intense regulation to ensure safety; in the aftermath of 9/11, this was enhanced considerably by multiple agency coordination among local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies specifically designed to prevent attack from shore, air, and sea. Reaching an LNG tanker in these circumstances would be problematic at best for a potential enemy—blowing one up extremely unlikely.[8]

2. Ships as Weapons Launch Platforms

Given the seemingly unregulated nature of the maritime world outside our borders (itself a bit of a fallacy), the idea of ships teeming with strike teams—or worse, offensive weapons such as cruise missiles—have become a very popular image. Both of these tactics are more difficult for an enemy to employ than would first appear. Crew manifests of potentially suspect vessels are now routinely checked (and cross-checked) by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) 96 hours prior to merchantmen entering U.S. waters, and then boarded by the Coast Guard—which conducts roster checks and vessel inspection prior to the vessel entering port.

This significantly reduces the possibility of getting a strike team through the maritime net. Firing cruise missiles (in this case, land rockets fired from ships) is extremely problematic in reality. The scenario assumes that terrorists could somehow acquire these weapons, adapt them for firing from an unstable platform, and outfit the ship in complete secrecy. While exotic, we must acknowledge that this would be almost physically impossible for most nation-states, let alone a terrorist organization.

3. Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)

Potential WMD attack dominates homeland defense planning, and for good reason. Such an attack would devastate not only the homeland but potentially bring the world to the brink of nuclear annihilation. It's a serious threat that must be taken seriously. But how realistic is it?

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, a major national concern was that a WMD (in this case, a tactical nuclear weapon) could be smuggled into a commercial port.^[9] Given that containers are now regarded by the shipping industry as a self-contained shipping method requiring minimum inspection and are used *en masse* by the industry, this threat seemed very real. And again, due to the catastrophic nature of this threat, it was—and still is—taken very seriously. But how realistic is it?

In the mid 1990s, the fall of the Soviet Union gave the impression that there were “plenty of spare nukes lying around” that could potentially be acquired by rogue states or terrorist organizations. This has never been credibly verified. But even if it were true that weapons were available, we must acknowledge that for a terrorist organization to actually acquire one of these weapons, gain the considerable technological expertise required to adapt it to land-use, and then actually get it to detonate, all while remaining undetected by the intelligence organizations of the world—all of whom, regardless of their feelings toward the United States, have a vested interest in preventing such an occurrence—would represent such a colossal failure of intelligence as to be almost unthinkable. Even constructing the popular “dirty bomb” (arguably simpler to build and employ than a tactical nuclear weapon) is a massive technological and covert challenge.^[10]

Yes, it “could” happen. But is the most effective way to defend against this scenario at sea through interception, or rather through the massive international intelligence effort specifically directed against this threat? Should we defend against a possible WMD attack by surrounding our shores with a wall of ships and attempting to board everything in sight, trying to find a weapon in potentially thousands of containers bound for our shores—a tactic that is notoriously difficult and of limited viability?^[11] Or is the anti-proliferation effort best targeted at the source, where it can be effectively—and safely—neutralized?

Perhaps the threat is less than we imagine. But in terms of overall strategy, is the lack of a well defined or realistic threat even relevant in terms of public perception when defining the Navy's role in the defense of the homeland? An historical anecdote illustrates the point.

Years after the London Blitz, a survivor described how he spent night after night underground listening to the hammering of anti-aircraft guns trying to bring down attacking German bombers. In the aftermath of the battle the gunner admitted to him that during night raids the common tactic for the gunners was simply to point the gun skyward and shoot, knowing that there was absolutely no chance of hitting the enemy. When the survivor expressed astonishment, the gunner simply said, “Yes—but by God, it gave you courage.”^[12] To some extent the military—and especially the sea services—face the same situation in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

While one could argue that the attacks of 9/11 changed little in the fundamental principles of sea power, the perception of the use of military force changed dramatically. America's vulnerability in the wake of 9/11 was—and to some extent still is—largely a matter of public perception. Tactically, the presence of large warships in New York harbor would have done nothing to stop the 9/11 attacks. But in the grand scheme of public perception, does this really matter? We must ask ourselves a painful question: does the overt presence of naval force in the homeland, while operationally not the best use of an asset, add that element of credibility to our defense effort that the public seeks? More to the political point, if the United States is attacked again, can the Navy face the question “where were you?” and still justify its forward operating doctrine?

Homeland Defense: The Forward Vision

While every sailor knows the value of a forward, offensive strategy, it is an unfortunate reality that the Navy would have a difficult time answering the “where were you?” question if another attack occurs, given the current misperceptions on the use of sea power in the defense. While the “sounds of the guns” may be comforting to an anxious public, how do we make it apparent that the use of sea power is best reserved for the offensive? The Navy must publicly and aggressively portray the war on terror as a forward war.

Citizens of the British Empire took confidence in the fact that their fleet was forward in harm's way, never questioning the need for a “close in” defense of the homeland. Fleets did not surround our coasts during the First or Second World Wars. The Navy must stress this element of sea power, making plain the fact that the role of naval power in the new global war on terrorism is exactly that—*global*. While the doctrine of “preventative war” may be new to the American psyche, the idea of “homeland defense” through offensive action has always been a fundamental, and above all effective, principle of sea power.

Forward operations do not mean leaving the homeland defenseless. In the strategic deterrent role, deployment of forward operating forces is an overwhelming expression of national force which can keep threats at bay. The presence of a strike group close to hostile shores is a classic deterrent against enemy action, either through direct presence or active interception. While the power of America may seem nebulous to our enemies, it cannot be doubted while ships are operating with impunity within sight of the hostile forces, ships that can—and do—respond instantly to strike against identified terrorist targets. Command of the sea gives us this ability. But ships operating forward are more than a simple deterrent. The fact remains that potential threats from the sea are easier to detect, track, and intercept closer to their point of origin. The Navy must remain aggressively engaged in this mission, and stress that this is far from an esoteric mission left over from the Cold War, but rather an integral part of homeland defense.

But what of home waters? A deterrent forward is well and good, but what if something manages to “slip through” the forces operating forward? Today, the Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Coast Guard have instituted a “layered” defense of the homeland designed to detect and intercept potential maritime threats to the homeland.^[13] Effective defense of these layers relies on non-traditional means.

As we learned during the Second World War, sea power is more than ships; in the modern era, command of the sea is as much about surveillance and detection as it is physical presence. Today, the Navy has partnered with the Coast Guard and nineteen other agencies in the Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) effort—which is specifically examining methods to leverage technology to provide for advanced surveillance, intelligence, and detection.^[14] This effort is designed to link DHS, the Coast Guard, and CONUS military forces for rapid response to a potential maritime threat. Surveillance, tracking, and intelligence are all-important. To make this work we don't need a line of ships or carrier battlegroup cruising our waters, but rather an effective system that can detect and direct established homeland defense forces into action. The design of that system has been learned from history; how we win the war on our shores is through technology, intelligence, and inter-agency coordination—not through establishing a wall of steel ships.

Conclusion

History shows that the key to success in maritime homeland defense is not possessing overwhelming combat power in home waters, but rather effectively utilizing sensors and intelligence to properly detect, track, and defeat potential threats. A realistic assessment of the maritime threat posed by our terrorist enemy demonstrates that this form of maritime homeland

defense can be equally effective in GWOT. Traditional forward operating strategy fits perfectly with this model by significantly reducing the threat at the source, employing naval force to deter or defeat the enemy before they can become a threat to the homeland. While there are many new elements in GWOT that will require innovative tactics to defeat, the Navy's time tested strategic principles to fight this war are sound.

For now, the days of the Mahanian decisive battle are past. Today we fight a war in the shadows whose results are, at best, murky. We are a nation that is in many respects is on the defensive. In such an environment, it is very tempting to categorize the present war—and all wars in the future—as one that could be conducted without the use of traditional sea power or, at best, employing sea power in direct defense of the homeland along our shores.

Such arguments fly in the face of historical principles, the established threat, and the effectiveness of forward operations. While it is tempting to cry for the “new” in light of 9/11, we should not be so quick to abandon a strategy whose effectiveness has stood the test of time. Yes, the enemy is new, and yes, his methods are unconventional. But even critics must realize that such an enemy is best defeated on his home ground, before he can become a threat to our shores. Our principles have stood the test of time because they are effective, our fundamental strategy sound. Time will show that victory in the GWOT, and ultimately securing the homeland, is best accomplished through sustained, aggressive action—forward.

About the Author

A 1985 graduate of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, CDR Bob Watts has served six tours at sea, most recently commanding USCGC STEADFAST (WMEC 623) on homeland security duty. A qualified Surface Warfare Officer, he holds post graduate degrees from the Naval War College (CCE), Old Dominion University (History), and American Military University (International Naval Studies). He has been published numerous times in USNI PROCEEDINGS on Coast Guard-Navy strategic issues, including winning the 1998 USNI Colin Powell Joint Essay Contest. He is currently assigned as Coast Guard Liaison Officer to office of the CNO (Joint Warfare), and is a student in the Naval Post Graduate School's HLS/HLD program.

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