A Deep Legacy: Smaller-Scale Contingencies and the Forces That Shape the Navy

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Summary

The basic method used in this paper is simple: we look at the past—and not just the recent past—to help us understand the decisions the Navy must make about the future.

The results are also simple: there is no one fundamental principle of Naval force other then *flexibility*. Naval forces adapt to their technological, political, and international environments. When the environment changes, so does the Navy.

The U.S. Navy today often sees itself almost exclusively as an extension of the Navy of the Cold War. This is understandable: the Cold War lasted for over four decades. That long period saw the formative experience of the current generation of naval officers and their civilian colleagues. Not only that, it also was the predominant experience of the generation that served *before* them, and that educated and trained today's Navy.

The Cold War, however, was a *unique period*, with a set of special characteristics that may or may not apply to current and future environments. Also, the Cold War is not the only legacy the current and future U.S. Navy has. The Navy had been to many places and done many things before *1945*—indeed, before *1845*. To the extent the Navy looks to past experience as one input to guide future decisions, it may well be able to draw on its earlier history—what we call its "Deep Legacy"—as much as if not more than its more recent Cold War experience.

This paper demonstrates that the Navy has almost always been involved in smaller-scale contingencies (SSC) and operations other than war (OOTW). For long stretches these operations were *all* that the Navy did. More commonly, however, they shared the Navy's list of missions with various forms of high-intensity and mid-intensity war-fighting and the preparation for same.

Already the environment the Navy must operate in, the technology available to it, and the culture and attitudes that drive its decisions are

beginning to differ from what they were in the Cold War. It is reasonable to assume that they will continue to evolve.

Environment

Throughout its history the United States Navy has had to adapt to its *environment*. The Navy has reacted to its environment in many different ways. After looking at the Navy's history, we had identified *patterns* in how the Navy reacted in the past that can be used to shape and direct future debates about how naval forces could operate. Specifically, we see that the Navy has adapted to its environment by changing its:

- Procurement, or what types of ships made up the fleet. For procurement we found.

    — The only times when ships designed *exclusively* for warfighting were procured have been during times of war or impending war.

    — Ships designed for SSC and OOTW were driven by two factors: *sustainment* and *cost.*

- Organization, or how the fleets were organized to accomplish the Navy's missions and how the Navy related to external organizations. In examining the Navy's organization we found:

    — The Navy's organization mirrors its fleet; if there is a warfighting and SSC fleet, then the Navy's organization is also split.

    — The Navy's external relationships have been varied and largely *ad-hoc.*

- Deployment, or how naval forces were stationed and the missions they were assigned. For deployment we found:

    — The Navy has usually preferred to station its forces *forward.* This is always true for *contingency* forces.

    — Before World War II, the Navy kept the main fleet near the United States.

— Only with the Cold War did the Navy develop "general purpose" fleets that combined both contingency and warfighting capabilities into single, forward-deployed units.

- Employment, or what the Navy was used for.

    — Employment patterns reinforce our observation about the Navy's *flexibility*.

    — At one time or another, naval forces have done almost every imaginable mission.

From examining the history of U.S. Naval Forces we conclude that *there is no one unifying vector driving the progress of their development.* At one time or another, the U.S. Navy has tried almost every possible way of procuring, organizing, deploying, and employing ships and aircraft.

For nearly 100 years during the 19th century naval forces were deployed and used primarily in support of SSC operations and OOTW missions. Forces were normally procured and organized to specifically support these missions. Likewise, during the Civil War and World War II, naval forces were organized and equipped exclusively for warfighting, doing little or no contingency operations.

Today, the Navy retains essentially the same procurement, organization, deployment, and employment structure that it has had for most of the Cold War. Looking from a historical perspective, it becomes clear that this is because the Navy *chooses* to retain those patterns in response to its *environment* and the availability of *technology.* It is not because of some underlying attribute of naval forces that they *must* be employed that way. While the environment and technology have certainly changed since the Cold War, they apparently have not changed so much as to drive the Navy to begin thinking about significant changes in the way that it operates...yet.