Transformation to What and Against Whom? The United States Navy and the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review

James A. Russell*

The otherwise routine announcement in October 2005 that the Untied States Navy (hereafter Navy) will proceed with decommissioning another ten ships in the coming fiscal year means that the Navy is reaching a milestone of sorts: it will fall below 280 surface vessels for the first time in recent history.[1] Hope springs eternal, however, and the Navy intends to reverse this declining trend by adding nearly 45 ships over the next 30 years to achieve a total of 325 ships by 2035.[2] These ambitious plans notwithstanding, just 20 years ago at the height of the Reagan defence build-up, the Navy's swashbuckling Secretary, John Lehman, tried to set the Navy on a dramatic course of achieving a force structure of 600 ships. This was part of a plan to sail up into the approaches of the Kola Peninsula and bottle up the Soviet Navy in port - thereby ensuring allied control over all the seas in the coming war with President Reagan's "evil empire."[3]

The Navy never reached Secretary Lehman's cherished shipbuilding goal. It was Lehman's willingness to do battle with the Department of Defence's bureaucracy and his articulation of a marketable strategic vision, spelling out the role of sea power as an instrument of national power, that must seem like halcyon days to the current Navy leadership. In today's environment in the Pentagon, civilian planners are asking the Navy hard questions about the roles and missions of the sea service in connection with the global war on terror. There is also a parallel need for the Navy to somehow "transform" itself into something that will better enable it to meet the varied threats of the 21st century security environment. The land force (now comprised of the Army and the Marines) and Air Force remain continuously engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan., Their military engineers are building airfields throughout the so-called Arc of Crisis in Central Asia and the Middle East. This leaves the Navy remains consumed with humanitarian operations and support activities as part of the land force's operations. Perhaps reflecting the general lack of a coherent paradigm around which to structure the United States' 1.5-million person military and its $400 billion defence budget, the Navy is struggling to define a strategic vision of its role in grand strategy. This lack of a strategic vision will place the Navy at a disadvantage in the coming battles for decreasing resources that will almost certainly follow the Bush Administration's crippling federal budget deficits and the resultant pressure on the discretionary portions of the budget.

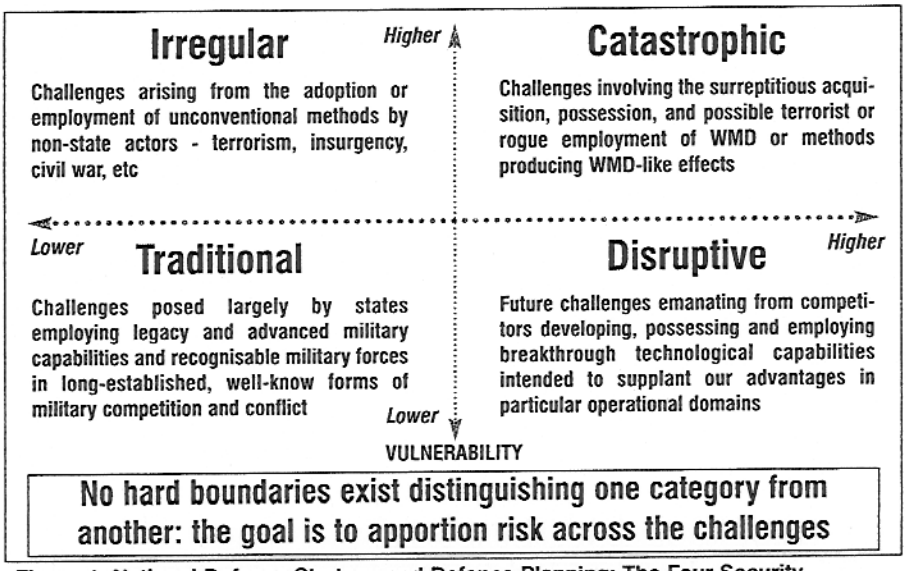

Figure 1: National Defence Strategy and Defence Planning: The Four Security Environment Challenges

QDR '06

The Defense Department is now in the throes of its second report, called the *Quadrennial Defense Defence Review* (QDR), that will attempt to attempt to relate grand strategy, the security environment and defence planning. The object of the QDR is to establish priorities for the Military Departments to plan and resource their force structures. The first QDR, released following the September 11th attacks, actually declined to identify any specific threats around which the Military Departments were supposed to plan and budget. Instead, the QDR proposed that

the services simply build capabilities across the board to counter any conceivable threat that might appear on the horizon. The genesis of "capabilities-based defense planning" and Defence Secretary Rumsfeld's directive that all the Military Departments attempt to "transform" themselves to take better advantages of advances in military technology to allow force to be applied more economically in far flung places, with fewer people boasting greater capabilities.

Dutifully complying with Secretary Rumsfeld's directives, the Navy produced the *Naval Transformation Roadmap 2003*, which provides a comprehensive listing of all the planned steps that will change the sea service in ways that are consistent with Secretary Rumsfeld's vision.[4] The 2006 Quadrennial Review will, according to reports, force the Navy to relate the transformation roadmap and the capabilities envisaged under the plan to the Defense Department's four central challenges of the 21st century security environment (shown above). Substituting "challenges" for "scenarios," the Defense Department's assumptions acknowledge what most observers would acknowledge as the blindingly obvious - that irregular warfare, such as insurgencies, terrorism and instability resulting from intra-state conflict are the most likely contingencies requiring the use of force in the contemporary security environment. The other most likely challenge posited is a catastrophic attack by terrorists using non-conventional capabilities. While it is clear that the Navy is manifestly prepared for the "traditional" challenges its role in meeting the other proposed scenarios appears to have yet to be defined. The one remaining "traditional" challenge on the horizon involving large formations in kinetic-style operations is clearly the possibility of a Chinese cross-strait attack on Taiwan. The Navy is doing all it can, for example, to prop up the Chinese submarine threat as a way to preserve its anti-submarine warfare programs. According to open sources, the Chinese now operate one 1980s-era SSBN. Working on another; operates approximately 30 1980s-era "Romeo" class attack submarines; it has had a number of accidents with the improved version of the obsolete Romeo, called the "Ming" class, now being fielded; and operates a variety of indigenously-produced diesel submarines supplemented with a few bought from the Russians.[5]

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In addition to demonstrating its relevance to the two most likely challenges in the run up to the 2006 QDR, the Navy will also have to identify how it will apportion its programming and planning "risk" across these four central challenges. From a planning and budgeting standpoint, in the competition for resources it is clear that the Navy will have to convince its civilian masters in the Office of the Secretary of Defence that its expeditionary capabilities are in fact centrally relevant to the missions associated with the so-called "global war on terror". These capabilities, outlined in the upper left-hand quadrant of *Fig. 1* ,have been identified in the National Military Strategy as the most important military requirement currently facing the United States.[6]

The Navy's QDR-GWOT - Transformation Disconnect

The Navy's central problem as it approaches the 2006 QDR is that the priorities in the Naval Transformation Roadmap bear only a tangential relationship to the threats associated with irregular warfare and the global war on terror. These threats for the most part require land based non-kinetic capabilities. Terrorists mounting the attacks in Iraq, Jordan, Egypt and London are not sea-based. The Navy and its platforms remain eminently suited to the lower left-hand quadrant missions associated with traditional warfare. Playing to these strengths, the capabilities for "traditional" force-on-force missions are programmed for significant improvements as described in the key components of the Naval Transformation Roadmap.[7] These are:

1. Sea Shield: Extend precise and persistent naval defensive capabilities over the maritime domain as well deep overland to protect expeditionary forces operating ashore.
2. Sea Strike: Project offensive capability from the sea in support of joint objectives, to include integrating naval gunfire support and aerial and ground-based manoeuvre elements.
3. Sea Base: Turn the maritime domain into a manoeuvre area through control of the seas.
4. Forcenet: Use internet-based protocols to establish an open system architecture to support command, control, communications and intelligence (C4I) in the joint battle space.

The apparent disconnect between the Navy's transformation priorities and the QDR's posited most likely security environment challenges is exacerbated by the Navy's interest in increasingly expensive new ships and aeroplanes. These proposed new ships promise inevitably to shrink the Navy's surface fleet numbers well below the projected FY 06 level of 280 and call into question the viability of plans to grow the surface fleet significantly over the next 15 years. A review of a few of these proposed new programmes demonstrates the Navy's problems. The Navy wants to build a new

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destroyer to replace the DDG-51 "Arleigh Burke" class destroyer and FFG-7 "Oliver Hazard Perry" class frigate. The new DDX is projected to cost about $3 billion per hull, nearly 2.5 times as expensive as the DDG-51. The littoral combat ship, or LCS, is projected to cost $200 million per hull, with selected modules for each ship to cost another $200 million. The new class of aircraft carriers, CVN-21, is projected to cost nearly $14 billion after research and development costs are factored in - more than double the $6-7 billion spent on the "Nimitz" class carriers. The picture on the Navy's maritime pre-positioning ship replacement program, called MPF(F), looks similar to the other main shipbuilding programs.[8] As noted by the Congressional Budget Office: "CBO projects that investment costs involved in building those [MPF(F)] ships would average about $2.4 billion a year through 2022 - more than twice the average level between 1980 and 2000."[9] A similar story appears in a review of naval aviation, in which the Navy proposes to increase spending by $3 billion annually to fund the Joint Strike Fighter and other aviation programs. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that the Navy could need $10 billion annually to fund its aviation programs between 2005-2022, as opposed to the $6 billion it spent in 2004.

The Navy thus faces a two-part challenge in responding to the defence planning guidance that will likely flow from the 2006 QDR:

1. Presenting a coherent case that naval power will continue to be an important and useful national instrument of power in the today's security environment.
2. Convincing its civilian masters to provide ever-increasing portions of future procurement budgets that will satisfy the Navy's thirst for expensive new platforms that are manifestly suited for what is today thought to be the least likely military contingency (i.e., great power conflict) facing the United

Conclusion

The Navy's lack of clarity on its mission set will collide with budget realities as the fallout from the QDR continues through 2006. The result could be across the board reductions in aviation, shipbuilding and the transformation programmes as previously outlined. The Navy's hope for the future mainly lies in the desirability and necessity of its core capability - regardless of what labels are attached to the threat and planning scenarios of the moment: expeditionary capability that can respond on short notice to a variety of different military and non-military scenarios. The relief operations of Expeditionary Strike Group 1 in the October 2005 Pakistan earthquake provide policy makers and military leaders with a textbook example of the flexibility provided by forward deployed naval forces in distant theatres. The outcome of the upcoming battles that will shape the FY 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review promise to dramatically affect whether and/or how the Navy can preserve these core capabilities to ensure its continued relevance as a viable instrument of national power. ■

Biography

James A. Russell is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of National Security Affairs, a the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, CA, where he teaches courses on national security strategy, terrorism, and the Persian Gulf/Middle East. His latest article "Saudi Arabia in the 21st Century: A New Security Dilemma," appeared in the Fall 2005 issue of Middle East Policy. His edited volume, WMD Proliferation in the Middle East: Choices and Policy Options in the New Century, will be published by Palgrave/MacMillan in the Winter of 2006.

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