



Corbett Paper

No 16

The Home Fleet: Pivot of Maritime Strategy

Robert C. Rubel

KING'S
College
LONDON

University of London

The Home Fleet: Pivot of Maritime Strategy

Robert C. Rubel

Key Points

- The notion of a home fleet continues to be relevant for any nation that has overseas interests and a navy that has the capability to deploy in order to support them.
- The issue of a home fleet creates force allocation and fleet architecture dilemmas for a deployable navy.
- For the Twenty-first Century U.S. Navy, the functional equivalent of a home fleet is the Global Maritime Partnership.

Robert C. Rubel is a retired U.S. Navy captain and Professor Emeritus of the U.S. Naval War College. He served thirty years on active duty flying A-7 Corsairs and F-18 Hornets from the decks of eight different aircraft carriers, ultimately commanding a strike fighter squadron aboard USS Eisenhower during Desert Shield. He served ashore as a flight instructor and later, Inspector General of U.S. Southern Command. He is a graduate of the Spanish Naval War College and the U.S. Naval War College. He taught planning and decision making at the Naval War College, and served as Chairman of the Wargaming Department and most recently as Dean of the Center for Naval Warfare Studies. In that capacity he designed and led the research effort that led to the 2007 U.S. maritime strategy, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*. He is a member of the Chief of Naval Operations Advisory Board and has authored two book chapters and numerous articles pertaining to naval aviation, operational art and maritime strategy.

The analysis, opinions and conclusions expressed or implied in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the JSCSC, the UK MOD, the Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy Studies or King's College London

The Home Fleet: Pivot of Maritime Strategy

Robert C. Rubel

The most fundamental mission of any navy is to protect its homeland. For small coastal navies this constitutes their entire mission portfolio. However, larger, more capable navies have other missions as well. Those that have at least a few ships capable of crossing an ocean might engage in out-of-area, multi-lateral operations such as counter-piracy operations off Somalia or disaster relief in Haiti. For such navies, like those of Japan and Brazil, these operations do not conflict in any meaningful way with their central mission of homeland defense. However, for global navies, such as the Royal Navy in the heyday of the British Empire and the U.S. Navy since 1945, mission prioritization is not so straightforward, especially when it comes to force distribution decisions. Keeping naval forces in the domestic littoral – a home fleet – has always presented a dilemma for naval strategists. Since naval forces are always scarce assets with regard to the mission demands placed upon them, constitution of a home fleet has represented a significant opportunity cost.

The U.S. Navy is not immune to this dilemma, although, for most of its post-World War II history a combination of robust force structure and lack of a seaborne threat to the homeland has obscured or submerged the issue of a home fleet. However, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks the issue resurfaced, at least briefly, until it was resolved through the emergence of a global maritime partnership. The issue of a home fleet still exists, latent though it may be, especially as U.S. Navy force structure continues to shrink, making mission prioritization decisions increasingly difficult. In one sense, the home fleet can be thought of as a pivot of maritime strategy, the understanding of which better illuminates the other parts. This article will attempt such illumination by tracing the idea of a home fleet through the writings of two classic naval theorists and through the development of the 2007 Navy/Marine Corps/Coast Guard document “A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower,” frequently referred to as CS21.¹

The matter of a home fleet lurks in the background in the writings of the two major classic theorists of maritime strategy, the American Alfred Thayer Mahan and the Englishman Sir Julian Corbett. The differences in emphasis and focus between the two are well known by those who study naval affairs; Mahan advocating fleet concentration in order to secure command of the seas through decisive battle, Corbett focusing on limited war, the distribution of forces and joint operations. However, both writers acknowledge the need for a concentrated home fleet when a threat to the homeland arises, and that understanding influences the balance of their writings on naval strategy. However, for American naval officers and scholars, in the wake of World War II, the issue of a home fleet seemed to evaporate and its salience in the writings of Mahan and Corbett disappear like invisible ink.

The 9/11 attacks briefly confronted the U.S. Navy with the home fleet dilemma, but after some months the political pressures to tie warships to the US littoral abated as time marched on with no follow-on al Qaeda attacks and as wars in Afghanistan and Iraq absorbed the nation's attention. However, the issue of securing the homeland against terrorist attacks mounted from the sea was not resolved until 2007 when the Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard issued CS21. CS21 was not a strategy per se, but a document that catalyzed international naval cooperation on maritime security, which became the functional equivalent of a home fleet.

Preface I: Geopolitics

Geopolitics is the study of how geography, economics and demographic factors affect politics, most especially in the realm of foreign policy and grand strategy. In terms of geography, the largest feature on the globe is the ocean. The godfather of geopolitics, Halford Mackinder, said that "The unity of the ocean is the simple physical fact underlying the dominant value of sea power in the modern, globe-wide world."² Because ships can go anywhere, the nation that has dominant sea power is likely to achieve a dominant role internationally. Sir Walter Raleigh summed it up in a pithy syllogism several centuries before Mackinder: "Whosoever commands the sea commands the trade; whosoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world and consequently the world itself."³

However, nations exist on land, and where that land is located, especially in relation to other nations strongly influences its foreign policy and is a key factor in

determining whether or not that nation will become a sea power. Great Britain and the United States both became dominant sea powers in different eras, but geographically they are in very different situations. Great Britain is an island situated next to a continent that spawned a number of competing continental powers over the centuries, powers that at times threatened Britain with invasion. By building dominant sea power, Britain was able to suppress, contain or defeat her competitors and create an unmatched global empire. The United States, on the other hand, is on an insular continent, with weak neighbors to the north and south. Until the 20th Century, the US tended to focus on internal development and hemispheric security. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor finally drew it out of its hemispheric cocoon into a dominant global geopolitical role.

Geopolitics figure prominently, if not explicitly, in the writings of Mahan and Corbett, and indeed are an integral element of global naval strategy. The geopolitical admixture of globally connected seas, the proximity of hostile competitors and globally dispersed interests set up the dilemma of the home fleet. Policy and strategy, and more to the point, the logic and principles that underpin them, do not occur in some abstract world, they arise out of the necessities imposed by geography and other geopolitical factors. That is not to say that such things are pre-determined, but when theorists attempt to articulate concepts and principles, their work is inevitably influenced by the geopolitical circumstances which shaped the history that constituted the raw material for their theories. Thus, when modern day writers detect apparent differences or contradictions between Mahan and Corbett, they ought to take into account the disparate geopolitical perspective each was attempting to interpret. Perhaps both writers were trying to codify universal or immutable principles of naval strategy, but the geopolitical prisms through which they observed naval history broke up the light in different ways. Despite these differences in perspective and emphasis, one of the threads of logic that connects Mahan and Corbett is that of the home fleet.

Preface II: Command of the Sea

The world ocean is the largest geographic and geopolitical feature on the planet. Humans talk blithely about commanding or controlling the sea, but such expressions are at best metaphorical. The sea is vast and ships are small and few. We must be

careful, therefore, not to allow expressions such as “command of the sea” to lure us into self-delusion. Mahan regards command of the sea as the condition in which the enemy’s flag – that is, his warships and merchantmen – is driven from the sea except as a fugitive.⁴ Corbett regards the sea as generally uncommanded, but such command as a nation may achieve involves disrupting enemy communications – sea transport – and securing one’s own.⁵ Each of these perspectives have merit, but they both embed the illusion that command of the sea is about water space.

If we dig deeper into the logic of command of the sea, we realize that it is really about human perception and decision making. The British engineer Fredrick Lanchester developed mathematical equations that illustrated the advantage that greater numbers confer on a military force.⁶ Admirals may not be mathematicians, but they instinctively understand how the odds in a sea battle can shift dramatically to the side of an even slightly larger force. Such calculations tend to govern decisions on whether to seek or avoid battle, on what terms, and what risks to run with unarmed ships such as merchants and troop transports. Since navies cannot be rebuilt overnight, admirals are careful about what risks they accept. If an admiral feels his force would be at a disadvantage in a pitched battle, he will try to avoid it. By so doing he cedes freedom of action in greater or lesser degree to the stronger navy, which is then at liberty to do all kinds of things with its own unarmed ships.

What if command is in dispute? What if, in other words, each contending navy thinks it has a shot at victory? It is one thing for a top admiral to roll the dice on a decisive sea battle, as Admiral Yamamoto did at Midway, but that is not the only potential avenue to victory. What if the fleet was strong enough to cover a seaborne invasion force? This might be effective if a nation had particularly good ground forces as Napoleon did in his *Grande Armee* and Hitler had with his Wehrmacht. Achieving temporary naval superiority at the site of the amphibious operation might be enough if the actions of the expeditionary force could prove decisive.⁷ Spain in 1588, France in 1803 and Germany in 1940 all had this notion as they prepared to invade Britain, forcing the Royal Navy to keep strong forces in home waters.

Even though a weaker navy may cede command to a stronger one, it may still have the ability to resist at sea. In the War of 1812 American frigates harassed British shipping and won several high-profile, one-on-one engagements with their Royal

Navy counterparts. In both world wars German U-boats took a terrible toll on Allied shipping. The key to such operations was stealth; the ability to hide out in the vastness of the ocean or escape detection by submerging. All of those campaigns created force distribution dilemmas for the stronger navy. A first cousin to commerce raiding, perhaps its reciprocal, is smuggling. Employing various forms of stealth, weak parties, be they criminals or terrorists, attempt to use the sea as an avenue of commerce or attack, especially into the stronger navy's homeland. Smuggling – or the threat thereof – can also produce force distribution dilemmas for the navy that enjoys command of the sea.

Command of the sea is therefore a specific and delimited geopolitical condition that confers enormous advantages to the nation that possesses it, but it does not relieve the stronger navy of real or potential force allocation dilemmas.

Mahan

Alfred Thayer Mahan's world was multi-polar. Great Britain was the foremost great power, with the Royal Navy having effective command relative to almost all other powers. However, there were rising competitors who were building powerful navies, including Germany and Japan. The age of colonialism was not yet over, and there were reasons for American statesmen and naval officers to worry about great power adventurism in the Western Hemisphere. Although the short war with Spain had conferred overseas possessions, notably the Philippines and Guam, the focus of US naval thought in the early years of the 20th Century was the incipient completion of the Panama Canal. The United States was still in the process of internal consolidation and so its foreign policy was founded on the Monroe Doctrine.

This was the geopolitical lens through which Mahan viewed naval strategy. Defense of the hemisphere against rising colonial powers was the preoccupation of the day. In a lecture to the Naval War College he said:

When Germany shall have finished the ships contemplated in the naval programme [sic] which she has formally adopted, she will have a navy much superior to that of the United States, unless we change our present rate of building and also provide more extensive plants. Upon what then will rest the Monroe Doctrine? Upon what the security of the maintenance of the Panama Canal?⁸

Japan's defeat of the Russians at Tsushima served notice to the world that it possessed a world-class navy, which raised concerns about the security of the U.S. West Coast, not to mention the west coast of South America and of course the Panama Canal. Despite tacit British acquiescence to U.S. demands in the Venezuelan Crisis of 1895, threats from the Royal Navy could not be totally ruled out. Thus Mahan's arguments for the development of a strong US battle fleet were predicated on the enforcement of the Monroe Doctrine. What he had in mind was essentially a home fleet.

The Western Hemisphere is a big place and the United States itself possesses two extensive coastlines separated by Mexico. One approach to naval strategy would have been to create individual fleets or squadrons distributed about the hemisphere to render security and protection in the various regions. Mahan objected to this approach:

It is known that the decision of the General Board, that it was inexpedient to divide the battle fleet between the two oceans, was largely influenced by the experience of the wargames played here...it is well to remember continually that the Senate of the United States, in the year 1909, adopted a recommendation to the President for the division of the present battle-fleet between the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. So distributed, the division in each ocean would have been decisively inferior to a foreign battle-fleet there present; to which fleet the two would have been equal or superior if united.⁹

This passage reveals the crux of Mahan's logic. His basic concept is that of a home fleet; one that ought to be concentrated, regardless of the extent of American coastline or the array of potential targets of colonial adventurism in the hemisphere. In a world of multiple, powerful, and potentially hostile navies, the US was not likely to build to a "two power standard," so the fleet it did have must be concentrated so as to be equal or superior to any single competitor, counting on the mobility of warships to respond at any place in a timely manner.

While believing that commercial sea trade was the key well-spring of sea power, Mahan did not feel it was proper to disperse first-class warships to protect trade, especially in the multi-polar naval world that formed his environment:

Police duty, it was called, and quite accurately, for the distribution was that of police, not that of a military organization calculated for military use. So American ships, and those of other nations, were dotted singly around the world, in separate ports; with single beats, like that of a policeman.¹⁰

More generally, Mahan felt that shipping could be best protected by defeating the enemy's main fleet, which again argued for concentration of one's own fleet.

While we might regard Mahan's hemispheric perspective as home fleet oriented, he himself recognized, within that construct, that force allocation dilemmas could exist. Beyond the political pressures to divide the fleet between the coasts, he cites an incident from the Spanish-American War in which public fears of a Spanish attack on the East Coast "...prompted the American Government to keep the so-called Flying Squadron in Hampton Roads instead of close to the probable scene of war."¹¹

For Mahan, there was little tension between the various missions of the U.S. Navy in his era. A concentrated fleet in Western Hemisphere waters was the *sine qua non* of naval strategy, and this logic of concentration extended to potential wars with other great powers. Maritime trade was important to the United States, but perhaps not the existential issue it was to Great Britain. The US had some overseas possessions, but not the globe-girdling chain of colonies that constituted the British Empire. Thus, in the context of the Monroe Doctrine, rising colonial naval powers and the Panama Canal, the concept of a concentrated home fleet for hemispheric defense constituted not just the pivot, but the alpha and omega of his approach to naval strategy.¹²

Corbett

Although Sir Julian Corbett wrote his famous treatise on the principles of maritime strategy in the second decade of the Twentieth Century, he, like Mahan, based his themes on an analysis of the Anglo-Dutch and Napoleonic Wars. However, whereas Mahan had to extrapolate the lessons learned to an insular Western Hemisphere, Corbett's England was in the middle of the historic naval arena. Key to the formation of Corbett's logic was the proximity of the English coastline to those of its enemies. In this situation the naval missions of commerce protection and homeland defense, as well as offensive operations against the enemy fleet, substantially overlapped. However, Great Britain possessed a globe-girdling empire that required security.

Thus, the distribution of naval power was a continuing dilemma. Corbett devotes an entire chapter to an intricate analysis of force concentration and distribution that is altogether more sophisticated and nuanced than Mahan's approach, simply because geopolitical circumstances forced it to be so.

However, Corbett admits that the home fleet is the foundation for the layers of his logic:

Whatever the enemy opposed to us, and whatever the nature of the war, we must always keep a fleet at home. In any circumstances it is essential for the defence of our home trade terminals, and it is essential as a central resource from which divisions can be thrown off to reinforce distant terminals and to seize opportunities for counterstrokes. It is "the mainspring," as Lord Barham put it, "from which all offensive operations must proceed." This squadron, then, being permanent and fixed as the foundation of our whole system, it is clear that if, as in the case of the French Wars, the enemy's lines of operation do not traverse our home waters, close concentration upon it will not serve our turn. If, on the other hand, as in the case of the Dutch Wars, the lines do traverse home waters, a home concentration is all that is required.¹³

The British dilemma of maintaining a strong home fleet while providing security for far-flung political and commercial interests even extended to ship design. During his tenure as First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Jackie Fisher, in an attempt to circumvent the force distribution dilemma made more difficult by constrained budgets, conceived of a plan to build battle cruisers; heavily armed but lightly armored and fast vessels that would not be appropriate for service with the home battle line but would be able to exercise command in distant waters. He was never able to fully implement this plan due to the development of a fast battleship – HMS Dreadnought – and an array of political, institutional and economic factors.¹⁴

Concentration, as a principle of naval warfare, is at the heart of the home fleet concept. However, owing to his different geopolitical perspective, Corbett has a bit different emphasis than Mahan. Mahan, as we have seen, was fighting against the idea of dividing the battle fleet between the two coasts. Corbett attempts to counter those who advocated close concentration of the home fleet. Such pressure for concentration was due in part to a misreading of Mahan, whose influence in Europe

at the time was considerable. Corbett distinguishes between concentration, which he regards as a strategic focus, and mass, which, in his book, is the physical joining of forces.

In naval warfare at least this distinction between concentration and mass is essential to clear appreciation. It leads us to conclusions that are of the first importance. For instance, when once the mass is formed, concealment and flexibility are at an end. The farther, therefore, from the formation of the ultimate mass we can stop the process of concentration the better designed it will be. The less we are committed to any particular mass, and the less we indicate what and where our mass will be, the more formidable our concentration. To concentration, therefore, the idea of division is as essential as the idea of connection. It is this view of the process which, at least for naval warfare, a weighty critical authority [Mahan] has most strongly emphasized. "Such," he says, "is concentration reasonably understood – not huddled together like a drove of sheep, but distributed with a regard to a common purpose, and linked together by the effectual energy of a single will."¹⁵

Based on this we may conclude that when it comes to the operational disposition of the home fleet, both writers were of a similar mind, at least in principle. Whether or not a single massed fleet was formed, the key was unity of purpose and the ability to bring dispersed squadrons together in a timely manner. This notion will be critical as we examine the post-9/11 environment.

One other aspect of concentration requires examination, and that is the concept of the flotilla. Since the presidency of Thomas Jefferson there existed for many decades a school of thought in the United States that continental defense was most appropriately conducted by coastal forts and local gunboat flotillas. Mahan argued that so structuring naval defense of the extensive U.S. coastline would be both ineffective and unaffordable. A mobile fleet of capital ships could intercept a threat at any point and overpower it.¹⁶ Corbett saw things a bit differently because of the more constrained geography of the English Channel and the limited number of vulnerable ports. In his view a flotilla was a necessary ingredient of homeland defense, and it was part of the home fleet's mission to support it.¹⁷ Over its history the US has organized various kinds of flotillas – the mobilization of civilian yachts

and small craft for anti-submarine patrol in World War II comes to mind – but ultimately, especially in the post-9/11 era, it is the U.S. Coast Guard that has assumed that function, which is one reason CS21 was signed by the Commandant of the Coast Guard as well as the Chief of Naval Operations and Commandant of the Marine Corps. The salient point is that even in a global navy, the home flotilla function must somehow be performed. When not adequately addressed, public pressure will capture parts of the battle fleet, as was the case in the Spanish-American War and, as will be seen, was potentially the case right after 9/11.

The US Home Fleet 1945-2001

By 1945 any seaborne threat to the United States had evaporated – at least until the emergence of Soviet missile launching submarines. Throughout this era the US had a virtual home fleet in the form of naval units undergoing work-ups in preparation for overseas deployment. Contrary to Mahan’s prescriptions, the U.S. fleet was almost evenly divided between the coasts, but due to the absence of a threat, this violation of the principle of concentration did not produce vulnerability. Rather, such dispersal enhanced security by keeping the fleet from being disabled by a single nuclear bomb. Routine training exercises in the American littoral ensured there would be naval forces available for unexpected contingencies such as disaster relief.

The advent of a submarine threat off the coasts in the world wars and the Cold War spawned a new kind of “flotilla;” long range maritime patrol aircraft. An array of naval air stations on both coasts provided extensive surveillance against potentially hostile submarines and also kept track of surface traffic. However, the post-Cold War drawdown has resulted in the closure of many of these bases and the substantial reduction of this flotilla function.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union did not, however, eliminate seaborne threats to the homeland. Increasingly, criminal narcotics organizations used the sea to smuggle their goods into the country. Over the years these groups have adopted a variety of clever methods, including use of shipping containers, high speed “cigarette boats,” and most recently homemade submarines. Stemming the flow of drugs has been problematic; the extensive US coastline and shifting, innovative smuggling schemes thwarting a comprehensive solution. The bulk of the responsibility falls on the Coast Guard, with the Navy allocating such forces as it can spare from other

commitments. Drug runners are interested in making money, not making political statements, but the danger is that they could be infiltrated, subverted or extorted by a terrorist organization that seeks to insert people or weapons into the country. This is the threat that drives the modern instantiation of the home fleet.

The Home Fleet Post-9/11 and CS21

Time has dulled the feeling of dread felt by so many Americans in the immediate wake of the 9/11 attacks. Where and when would the next attack occur? Many were convinced that another one was imminent. With the massive increase in airport security, it seemed logical that al Qaeda or others would attempt to use the sea as an avenue of attack. The Coast Guard was pitifully small in relation to the coastline it had to cover. Trying to inspect all the containers coming into our ports would virtually shut down the economy. Pressure descended on the Navy to help out. A program of wargames was initiated at the Naval War College to assist in the coordination of Navy and Coast Guard efforts. After the initial two games, the Navy suspended the program. Various reasons were provided publicly, but the key problem was the potentially catastrophic impact on the Navy's global force deployment strategy if even limited forces were tied to home waters. The Navy desperately needed an alternate concept for homeland defense – an alternative to a home fleet.¹⁸

Part of the problem was that a capital ship-oriented fleet was ill-suited for either defeating or deterring the new kind of threat. There were too few ships in the Navy and Coast Guard combined to conduct effective patrol, even if such an approach was feasible, which it wasn't. Moreover, interdiction of any kind on the high seas is problematic for any number of tactical and political reasons. Information was clearly the key; if the presence of terrorists or weapons on a vessel was confirmed and the vessel located, interdiction could be handled in port by law enforcement, the Coast Guard or, in exceptional circumstances, by Special Forces. How to generate such information? Clearly, the preferred method was to obtain intelligence at the source. Once this realization settled in, the Navy restarted the wargaming program, which focused on information handling and division of responsibilities. Initially, Navy officers conceived of the problem as a layered defense, much as tactical air defense is structured for a carrier battle group. Navy forward deployments, along with foreign

navy cooperation seemed thus to be the first line of defense and an actual part of the home fleet solution. However, this concept quickly fell afoul of international navies' perceptions. They did not want to see themselves as part of a US defensive perimeter, let alone the preferred outer layer.

Over the next several years the wargames spawned a number of procedural improvements, including the Maritime Operational Threat Response (MOTR) interagency conference call. Shore-based maritime operations centers (MOCs) were established to enhance wide area command and control. However, in isolation, all of these measures were at best stop gaps and the comprehensive solution continued to elude the Navy. Meanwhile, in the absence of fresh attacks and with wars in Afghanistan and Iraq absorbing national attention, the Navy enjoyed a breathing spell from the pressure to keep forces in home waters (beyond the normal work-up forces).

The ultimate solution emerged gradually in the thinking of then-Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Mike Mullen and his deputy for operations and strategy Vice Admiral John Morgan. The problem of preventing smuggling – now incorporated under the rubric of maritime security – was simply too vast for even the total combined strength of the Navy and Coast Guard to address. Any chance of success would require extensive international cooperation. A globe-girdling network of cooperating navies and law enforcement agencies was the emergent concept – the functional equivalent of a home fleet in the modern strategic circumstances. The questions became how to achieve it and what it would look like.

To understand how the modern version of a home fleet was created, we have to go back to Corbett's idea of a "strategic centre;" the pivot around which fleet operations revolved. Perhaps linked to a specific geographic point, the more salient aspect was distribution with regard to a common purpose, as Corbett quoted Mahan saying. How would the U.S. Navy generate global unity of purpose to stop terrorist and other illegal smuggling? The answer that was arrived at through a lengthy strategic gaming process was "defense of the global system." The games highlighted the fact that virtually every country in the world had a stake in the effective functioning of the global system of trade, finance, communications and security. However, this system is vulnerable to disruption by a number of threats, terrorism being one. Therefore,

any nation that benefits from the system has a responsibility to contribute to its security.¹⁹ This was the underpinning logic for the new “strategic centre” that would provide unity of purpose for global maritime security cooperation. However, simply proclaiming this logic would not be enough. In the first instance nations would need to voluntarily participate, so any obstacles to that participation would have to be overcome. Second, a way to mechanize the partnership would have to be developed.

In June 2006 when Admiral Mullen called for the development of a new maritime strategy, he already understood the key concept of global maritime security cooperation, but thus far his effort, which he termed “a thousand ship navy,” had not achieved much momentum internationally. One of the main obstacles was the widespread political animus toward the United States created by the 2003 Iraq invasion. Many felt the US had abandoned its traditional status quo policy and was selfishly throwing its weight around. The Navy overcame this obstacle by inviting almost every navy to participate in the CS21 development process and in prominently emphasizing that defense of the global system was a principal mission of the U.S. Sea Services. Along with an assertion that preventing wars was as important as winning them, and emphasis on a variety of peacetime missions, the 2007 document produced a dramatic reversal of perception.²⁰ The US was depicted on the strategic defensive which, according to multiple foreign heads of navy that talked to this author, provided “political top cover” with their own governments so that they could move out and cooperate with the USN.

The reason foreign navies were moving out to engage the USN was not to help the US defend itself. Their interest was first, defending their own homelands, but in the hierarchy of national security needs, economic well-being and having a favorable world order follow closely. In cooperating with the USN for defense of the global system they were addressing sovereign national goals connected with those two needs. The spinoff effect was increased maritime homeland security for the United States. CS21 is not, however, an exercise in manipulation. Rather, it reflects a United States whose interest and future is more tightly intertwined with others. Admiral Mullen, in his speech to the Naval War College in June 2006 articulated the matter like this: “Where the old Maritime Strategy [referring to the 1980s document] focused on sea control, the new one must recognize that the economic tide of all

nations rises – not when the seas are controlled by one – but rather when they are made safe and free for all.”²¹

With a major political obstacle to cooperation removed, mechanization of cooperation became a matter of spontaneous generation. Unity of purpose having been substantially achieved, a number of the more capable regional navies began to build maritime domain awareness (MDA) systems. Information generation and sharing being key to disrupting smuggling, these regional systems combined sensors, data processing and formal subscription by countries in the region. Such systems arose in the Mediterranean (Italy’s TRMN), the Baltic (Sweden’s SUCBAS) and the South Atlantic (Brazil’s SYSTRAM). By 2010, additional multi-country gaming at the Naval War College revealed the emergent architecture of the global maritime security partnership. A global internet-carried maritime traffic picture based on reporting by automatic identification systems (AIS) carried on ships larger than 300 tons provided general situational awareness to everyone. The regional, subscription-based MDA systems provided for the sharing of more sensitive information among member countries, making these systems the keystone of the architecture. Finally, routine international exercises and gaming, partly conducted as part of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) generated face-to-face familiarity among naval officers, law enforcement personnel, intelligence personnel and policymaking staffs. Thus the most sensitive information could be passed by phone or other means on a bilateral, agency-to-agency basis.²² While this architecture is still evolving and is nowhere near universal or air tight, it is at least sufficiently developed, along with other efforts such as the Container Security Initiative, to provide the US Navy with credible top cover with Congress and the American people. It has literally done the best thing it can to secure the homeland against terrorist attack from the sea.

The Home Fleet Going Forward

As has been seen, the concept of a home fleet necessarily generates resource allocation dilemmas for navies. Those dilemmas occur on several levels; physical distribution of existing naval forces, force design and investment, and organizational focus and ethos. The situation is no different today and if anything will become more problematic in the future as naval resources shrink and the terrorist threat evolves.

Mahan and Corbett each attempted to resolve the dilemma, at least in part, by emphasizing the mobility of naval forces. If they could not be in two places at once, at least their mobility permitted timely movement to intercept any threat to the homeland. Jackie Fisher tried to resolve the problem through the design of a specialized ship for distant operations, relieving such demands on the home battle fleet. The USN tried to square the circle through the creation of a global maritime partnership.

None of these efforts fully succeeded in resolving the inherent dilemma. Budgets are always at the heart of it; no navy, with the possible exception of the WWII USN, has had enough ships and sailors to provide for comprehensive home defense while at the same time developing adequate force to secure its nation's world-wide interests. The global maritime partnership might appear to sidestep these resource issues – relying on extensive foreign help – but such is not the case. Nice words in a strategy document have certainly been usefully catalytic, but global naval cooperation requires care and feeding. The USN must conduct a constant and extensive program of forward engagement. The underlying principle as expressed in CS21 is that trust and confidence cannot be surged; it must be cultivated on a continuous basis. CS21 establishes a structure for the needed force distribution; concentrated, combat credible forces in the Middle East and East Asia to deter war and to handle violent contingencies; and globally-distributed, mission-tailored forces to carry out an array of peacetime engagement missions. While this structure appears to be well-suited for the maintenance of the global maritime partnership, budget realities and institutional opposition have perpetuated the home fleet resource dilemma. The U.S. Navy has actually attempted to execute the CS21 strategy, but it has done so with the requirements of supporting two wars superimposed on it. The net effect has been over-tasking of forces, which has resulted in deferred maintenance, extended deployment times and shorter turnarounds. This is not a sustainable situation. One potential answer is to build specialized engagement ships that cannot operate with the battle force but are cheaper to build and operate – a first cousin to the Jackie Fisher battle cruiser scheme. This idea, as a broad solution, has met with institutional opposition from those who feel the Navy's job is war at sea and therefore should only build high-end combatants. In fact, the Navy has moved in the direction of specialization with the

construction of the Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) and the High Speed Vessel (HSV), an adaptation of an Australian-designed ferry. Whether these vessels will be procured in sufficient numbers or used effectively to perpetuate the vital home fleet requirement remains to be seen.

The U.S. Coast Guard is an integral part of the modern home fleet picture. Despite its small size and its extensive responsibilities for maintaining safe navigation in both rivers and coastal waterways, the USCG has attained outsized significance in achieving maritime homeland security. It has also deployed units and personnel overseas to directly support maritime security operations and to provide training and capacity building to smaller navies and coast guards. One school of thought maintains that the mission of maritime security ought to be given over in its entirety to the Coast Guard. However the analysis provided in this article suggests that the home fleet function is inherently naval, and even an expanded Coast Guard, operating National Fleet cutters of new design, could not adequately perform it.

The thrust of this article has been to illuminate the continuing relevance of the home fleet concept for modern maritime strategy. Even in an era of almost total maritime dominance by the US, the function cannot be ignored. It is, rather, the pivot of maritime strategy, directly or indirectly influencing both operations and programmatic decisions. Modern conditions have dramatically altered the nature of the home fleet, but the inherent logic remains valid. As always, the home fleet bedevils the calculations and plans of navies, and especially the US Navy, many of whose officers would like to ignore it. However, they do so at the nation's peril.

Understanding and accepting the concept will aid in the intelligent resolution of the resource dilemmas it inevitably spawns. Admiral Mullen, in his June 2006 address to the Naval War College, evinced an instinctive understanding of the problem: "So I am here to challenge you. First, to rid yourselves of the old notion – held by so many for so long – that maritime strategy exists solely to fight and win wars at sea, and the rest will take care of itself. In a globalized world the rest matters a lot."²³

¹ US Navy, US Marine Corps and US Coast Guard, "A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower,"

<http://www.navy.mil/maritime/MaritimeStrategy.pdf>

² Halford MacKinder, *Britain and the British Seas* (London: 1914, D. Appleton and Co.), p. 12

³ S. Austin Allibone, *Prose Quotations from Socrates to Macaulay*, (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippencott and Co., 1880), <http://www.bartleby.com/349/authors/160.html>

-
- ⁴ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power on History, 1660-1783*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1987), p. 138.
- ⁵ Julian Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1911), Part II, Chapter I, pp. 87-104.
- ⁶ Lanchester F.W., "Mathematics in Warfare" in Newman, J.R, ed., *The World of Mathematics*, Vol. 4 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), pp. 2138-2157
- ⁷ Corbett, p. 138.
- ⁸ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Naval Strategy*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1911) p. 18.
- ⁹ Ibid, p. 6.
- ¹⁰ Ibid, p. 5.
- ¹¹ Ibid, p. 39.
- ¹² Care must be taken to understand that Mahan wrote a number of books and he evolved, or perhaps better put, refined his views over the years. His seminal work, *The Influence of Sea Power on History*, was published in 1890. The compendium of his lectures on naval strategy, cited heavily in this article, was published in 1911. Mahan is most famous for his broad geopolitical analysis of sea power, but, stemming from his experiences as a faculty member and President of the Naval War College, he developed subsequently his views on the specifics of naval strategy.
- ¹³ Corbett, 135.
- ¹⁴ Angus Ross, "Four Lessons That the U.S. Navy Must Learn from the Dreadnought Revolution," *Naval War College Review*, Autumn 2010, (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press), pp. 119–143.
- ¹⁵ Corbett, 117.
- ¹⁶ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Naval Strategy*, (London: Sampson, Low, Marston and Company Ltd., 1911), pp. 150-153.
- ¹⁷ Corbett, p. 121.
- ¹⁸ The author was a member of the Naval War College Wargaming Department at the time and this information is based on his recollections of discussions with Navy Staff officers.
- ¹⁹ Robert C. Rubel, "The New Maritime Strategy, The Rest of the Story," *Naval War College Review*, Spring 2008, (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press), pp. 71-72.
- ²⁰ The author was then Dean of the Center for Naval Warfare Studies and was assigned at the time to design and direct the Naval War College research and gaming project that produced the concepts embedded in CS21.
- ²¹ Admiral Michael Mullen, "Remarks as delivered by Adm. Mike Mullen Current Strategy Forum Naval War College, 14 June 2006," http://www.navy.mil/navydata/people/cno/Mullen/CNO_CSF140606.pdf
- ²² US Naval War College Wargaming Department, Maritime Domain Awareness Operational Game Report, available at <https://www.usnwc.edu/Research---Gaming/War-Gaming/Documents/Publications/Game-Reports.aspx>
- ²³ Mullen, op cit.

*The Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy Studies
aims to promote the understanding and analysis of
maritime history and policy and to provide a forum
for the interaction of academics, policy-makers
and practitioners.*

Corbett Papers

Series Editor
Professor Geoffrey Till

Editorial Assistant
James Bosbotinis

Editorial Board

Professor Geoffrey Till
Professor Greg Kennedy
Dr Jon Robb-Webb
Dr Tim Benbow
Dr Andrew Gordon

The Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy Studies
Defence Studies Department
Joint Services Command and Staff College
Defence Academy of the United Kingdom,
Shrivenham, Swindon, SN6 8LA, United Kingdom

Email: corbettcentre.jscsc@defenceacademy.mod.uk
Copies of previous Corbett Papers are available from:
[http://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/dsd/research/
researchgroups/corbett/publications/corbettpapers.aspx](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/dsd/research/researchgroups/corbett/publications/corbettpapers.aspx)