

## **THE U.S. MILITARY'S "MARITIME STRATEGY" AND FUTURE TRANSFORMATION**

*Wang Baofu*

In October 2007, the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard jointly released the "Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower," which aroused widespread attention in international military circles. The new U.S. "maritime strategy" focuses on future security threats. It not only puts forward some new concepts, but also demonstrates many aspects of future military strategic adjustment and the development trends of military transformation.

### **1. THE U.S. MILITARY'S "MARITIME STRATEGY" IS PROFOUNDLY INFLUENCED BY [AMERICA'S] SEA POWER TRADITION**

The United States is a country with a tradition of being a "sea power." It can be said that the ability of the United States to become the world hegemon is directly related to its understanding of the oceans, its comprehension of sea power, and [its] emphasis on maritime force development. And this tradition originates from the prominent American geostrategic scholar Alfred Thayer Mahan. Mahan's "Sea Power" thinking had long-term influence on the development and evolution of U.S. maritime strategy. This point can be seen very clearly from America's modern development and historical trajectory.

After the end of the Cold War, the U.S. maritime strategy was repeatedly revised, but never separated itself from Mahan's sea power theory. In 1991, in order to adapt to changes in the maritime security environment, and more effectively use maritime power, the United States specially established a "naval strategic research group" and quickly introduced the maritime strategy white paper "From Sea to Land," [thereby] revising the long-adhered-to "Maritime Strategy." "Forward deployment" changed to "forward presence," having a foothold in "maritime operations" changed to "from sea to land," [and] "independently implementing large-scale sea warfare" changed to "support army and air force joint operations."

The "9/11" terrorist attacks produced a tremendous assault on the U.S. security concept. National security and military strategy underwent a major adjustment. The U.S. maritime strategy changed accordingly. It put forward the goal of constructing naval forces possessing information superiority; devoted to developing forward presence, maritime capability for comprehensive superiority

in land assault, and information warfare; and addressing twenty-first century maritime security threats.

This time, the introduction of the U.S. military's new "maritime strategy" can be said to be one of the most far-ranging adjustments in the last twenty years. It not only has new judgments and positions concerning maritime security threats, but more importantly has new thinking regarding how to use military power to meet national security objectives. This is the greatest distinction between the new "maritime strategy" and its predecessor.

## 2. THE U.S. "MARITIME STRATEGY" PUTS FORWARD NEW THINKING REGARDING HOW TO ADDRESS SECURITY THREATS

The most prominent feature of the U.S. military's new "maritime strategy" is to put "preventing war and winning war" in equally important positions. The pursuit of absolute military superiority, stressing the defeat of any opponent, has always been the core of U.S. military strategy. The objective of using military force to prevent war is embodied to some extent in U.S. military strategic deterrence theory, but it is very rarely placed at the same level as winning wars in important strategic documents. In the new "maritime strategy," this type of overbearing, offensive language is relatively reduced, and there is noticeably more emphasis on "strategic cooperation" to jointly address future maritime security threats.

The concept of "cooperation" put forward by the new strategy refers not only to cooperation among the three strategic forces of the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard, but also to military strength and national cooperation in the fields of diplomacy, etc.; even more important is the emphasis on international cooperation. The new strategy stresses that the majority of the world's population lives within several hundred kilometers from the ocean, 90 percent of world trade is dependent on maritime transport, [and] maritime security has a direct bearing on the American people's way of life. Faced with the increasingly serious maritime threats, "no country [in the world] has adequate resources or forces to ensure the security of the entire maritime area," no single country has the ability to deal with international terrorism single-handedly. Therefore, international "strategic cooperation" is an important way to achieve maritime security. Likewise, developments in globalization and informatization\* will also propel the evolution of naval strategies.

\* Chinese sources use the term "informatization" [信息化] to describe the utilization of information technology, networks, and even command automation to improve military performance. For details on the role of "informatization" in transforming China's navy, see Andrew Erickson and Michael Chase, "Information Technology and China's Naval Modernization," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (2008), pp. 24–30; and "PLA Navy Modernization: Preparing for 'Informatized' War at Sea," Jamestown Foundation *China Brief* 8, no. 5 (29 February 2008), pp. 2–5, available at [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

To implement the new “maritime strategy,” the U.S. military proposed huge programs to develop a “thousand-ship Navy,” [and] build “Global Fleet Stations.” The purpose for developing the “thousand-ship Navy” is to strengthen allied naval cooperation and communication, through joint maritime operations involving each nation, and deal with the increasingly complex maritime security environment. By building “Global Fleet Stations,” naval forces will provide global protection. To achieve this goal, the U.S. military has already begun to deploy new “Fleet Stations” in world focal point regions. This new concept

---

. . . 美国能够成为世界霸权国家与其 . . . 对海上力量发展的重视有直接关系. . . 马汉的“海权”思想对美国海上战略的发展演变产生了长远的影响.

*The ability of the United States to become the world hegemon is directly related to its . . . emphasis on maritime force development. . . Mahan’s “Sea Power” thinking had long-term influence on the development and evolution of U.S. maritime strategy.*

---

advanced in the strategic documents of the U.S. military can only be regarded as a major transformation in its understanding of the application of military force in the realization of national interests, following setbacks in earlier unilateralist and preemptive strategy.

Although the U.S. military’s new “maritime strategy” elaborates on the importance of “international cooperation,” it has not given up its maritime hegemonic mentality. Regarding core national interests at sea, such as the right to freedom of action at sea, sea lane control, and deploying forces in important strategic regions, the new strategy and the three sea power principles put forward by Mahan of maritime military strength, overseas military bases, and sea line control are exactly the same; it can [therefore] be said that the U.S. “maritime strategy” has the same spirit.

### 3. THE “MARITIME STRATEGY” INDICATES SOME CHANGES IN THE NATURE OF THE U.S. MILITARY’S FUTURE EVOLUTION

The U.S. military’s new “maritime strategy” was deliberated for two years before being issued. This period coincided with a time during which the United States was bogged down in a quagmire in the war in Iraq and intense conflicts were breaking out between the ruling and opposition parties. Within the Bush administration, the neoconservatives fell into disgrace, and a number of individuals at the helm of the Defense Department such as [Donald] Rumsfeld and [Paul] Wolfowitz left one after the other. Regarding such major issues as the Iraq War, military transformation, and future military development, many people have undergone [a transition to] new thinking. Although the new “maritime strategy” is not the result of systematic reflection, in many ways it has already revealed these development trends.

The new “maritime strategy” indicates a transformation in U.S. thinking concerning the use of military force. As the only superpower in the world today, on the basis of comprehensive national strength, the United States obviously enjoys a superior status. No one doubts U.S. hard power, especially its powerful military strength. However, since “9/11,” the United States has pursued a unilateralist foreign policy and relied excessively on military means to resolve all security problems, not only damaging its hard power, but also seriously setting back its soft power. Damage to hard power can possibly be recovered from in a relatively short period, but damage to soft power requires not only a long period of great exertion but also policy changes. Since 2007, around the issue of the use of soft power, the U.S. academic community carried out an unprecedented great discussion. The renowned U.S. think tank “Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)” held special seminars [in which] former major government officials and expert scholars such as Zbigniew Brzezinski, Richard Armitage, [and] Joseph Nye proposed that in order for the U.S. government to extend its hegemonic rule the United States must attach great importance to the coordinated use of hard and soft power. [They] proposed to use hard and soft power in coordination as “rational strength” [smart power] in order to realize strategic national security goals. This is the context in which the U.S. military’s new “maritime strategy” was introduced; and many of its proposals reflect this new way of thinking about achieving national security objectives and safeguarding national strategic interests.

The new “maritime strategy” reflects tentative rethinking of the Iraq War. As the Iraq War enters its fifth year, the United States has already expended the high cost of nearly four thousand human lives and five hundred billion U.S. dollars. Because the war is still continuing, it is difficult to predict its future development. The U.S. military still cannot, and does not, have a systematic summation of conditions in progress, but the U.S. intellectual elite is in the process of comprehensively rethinking the war, and this is beginning to have an impact on policy-making departments. At the beginning of the Iraq War, in the face of universal opposition from the international community, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld advanced the unyielding position that “it is not the coalition that determines the mission, but the mission that determines the coalition.” Through the passage of time and events, today the U.S. military’s “maritime strategy” has already taken “international cooperation” as an important principle. This contrast indicates that the United States security and military strategy will face a major new adjustment. The U.S. presidential election has already begun, and “change” has already become a demand of mainstream American society. Regardless of whether the Republican Party or the Democratic Party

comes to power, adjustments and changes in the U.S. government's foreign policy are inevitable.

The new "maritime strategy" indicates that future U.S. military transformation will have new changes. U.S. military transformation issues were already mentioned as early as during the Clinton administration, but really started in a comprehensive manner after Rumsfeld entered the Pentagon. To promote transformation, Rumsfeld put forward a series of radical measures, causing enormous controversy at the high levels of the U.S. military. The war in Iraq, in fact, became a testing ground for U.S. military transformation. Rumsfeld advanced restructuring measures, such as large-scale reduction of the army, the reduction of large-scale combat platforms, and adjustment of the structure and composi-

---

作为世界军事变革的领头羊，美国海上战略变化值得关注。

*As a bellwether of world military transformation, U.S. maritime strategic transformation merits close scrutiny.*

---

tion of troops, etc.; many of which were overturned in the course of the Iraq War. The newly appointed U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral [Michael] Mullen is not only the new strategy's planner and organizer, but also has maintained independent thinking as one of the senior high ranking military officers. As Chief of Naval Operations, [Admiral] Mullen repeatedly suggested that "the old maritime strategy had sea control as a goal, but the new maritime strategy must recognize the economic situation of all nations, [and] not only control the seas, but [also] maintain the security of the oceans, and enable other countries to maintain freedom of passage." It is precisely through his promotion that the new "maritime strategy" was introduced.

Without any doubt, the U.S. Navy chose the timing of the promulgation of the new "maritime strategy" to promote its own interests. Military spending has always been the focus of competition among the armed services. For the maritime forces to obtain a larger share of the future defense spending pie, they must lead strategic thinking and initiatives. Six years after the "9/11" incident, it is difficult to convince people that emphasizing naval development is important to combat international terrorism. Precisely because of this, some people and military industrial interest groups have worked together to frequently concoct a "Chinese naval threat theory" or "Russian maritime threat" argument.

Because of its wide-ranging mobility, the Navy is known as the "international service." This distinguishing feature of maritime forces gives them the advantage of viewing the world from a global perspective. In a period of relative peace and stability, how to employ maritime forces to safeguard national security is the common task facing each nation's naval construction. Because the United States is a country that places maritime power above all others, its maritime strategy

can be better described as serving its global hegemony rather than safeguarding the world maritime order. As a bellwether of world military transformation, [therefore], U.S. maritime strategic transformation merits close scrutiny.

---

**TRANSLATOR'S NOTE**

This article was originally published in *Study Times*, 22 January 2008, [www.lianghui.org.cn](http://www.lianghui.org.cn).