Conference Report

The First Sea Lord’s Sea Power Conference 2018
Maritime Strategy in the Twenty-First Century

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RUSI Conference Report, June 2018

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The First Sea Lord’s Sea Power Conference 2018: Maritime Strategy in the Twenty-First Century

After a long strategic holiday, the security community is once again engaged with maritime strategy. As the opening remarks of Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson made clear, a changing threat environment has made sea power a focal issue to a degree that has not been matched in the recent past. Within this context, the First Sea Lord’s Sea Power Conference represented an effort to bring together decision-makers and leaders from across the academic, military and think tank domains in order to provide a forum for cross-domain discussions regarding the future of sea power and the ramifications of a twenty-first century threat environment for maritime strategy.

External Dimensions of Sea Power: The Maritime Environment in the Twenty-First Century

The three major trends shaping the environment in which Western navies will operate in the twenty-first century include:

- The emergence of what Antulio Echevarria has dubbed as ‘gray zone conflicts’.¹
- The informationisation of the operating environment.
- The extended reach of shore-based anti-ship capabilities and the attendant possibility of the emergence of sea powers without navies.²

The evolution of warfare techniques in the maritime domain was clear from the conference presentations. Recent events such as Russia’s silent blockade of Ukraine’s coast illustrate how actions short of overt conflict were nonetheless being used to alter the strategic geography of a region – effectively transforming vast swathes of Ukraine’s coastline into a ‘no-go’ zone for shipping via a combination of naval mining and low level maritime interdiction. A similar trend might be viewed in the Asia-Pacific, where China’s People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has integrated its forces with civilian craft such as fishing and coastguard vessels as part of a strategy of silent coercion. As illustrated by events in Scarborough Shoal in 2012, the effective integration and control of the Chinese maritime militia allowed for operational success (enforcing

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a particular Chinese claim), while controlling escalation. The pattern of island building in the South China Sea, which has seen artificial islands take on an increasingly militarised role, follows the familiar script of low level altercations gradually eroding a region’s strategic balance through a series of steps that are short of outright war.

Delegates heard of one possible response to this shift: the creation of quasi-constabulary forces. Light, flexible and easily deployable forces might be able to successfully counter challenges to the status quo at a level of interaction short of war. Importantly, adopting this approach would also equip navies with the tools to be successful in anti-piracy and anti-smuggling operations. However, lessons from the land environment would offer evidence that ‘little green men’ can only operate when backed by ‘big green tanks and even bigger green missiles’. The hybridity of hybrid warfare lies precisely in the fact that conventional forces play a powerful, if tacit role in allowing the power with a conventional advantage to dominate the escalation ladder and dictate the tempo and scope of a strategic interaction.\(^3\)

The second major trend was the impact of the information revolution on the maritime environment. The onset of the information revolution (with the emergence of increasingly accurate information-gathering mechanisms and the means to collate and process data from multiple streams provided by machine learning), portends substantial transformations in the way that warfare is conducted at the operational, and perhaps strategic, level. On the one hand, the enhanced capacity for data gathering and triangulation between multiple information streams amplifies certain strengths of Western militaries, particularly in the anti-submarine warfare domain. On the other hand, the increasing dependence of navies on digital connectivity in order to function effectively exposes them to the risk of a cyber attack effectively serving as an augmentation to traditional A2AD (anti-access and area denial) capabilities.

Importantly, such changes could suggest the arrival of an era of sea power without capital ships. If connectivity enables long-range strike capabilities to influence events at sea either from the land or from bastions (as recently witnessed in the Caspian Sea), effects could be delivered from the land or mounted on a medley of relatively cheap vessels such as corvettes, frigates and even cargo ships.

The third trend, delivering sea control without a navy, was as a form of territorialisation of littoral areas. Such an approach would require maritime powers to find ways of projecting power into the littorals, or risk having them turned into no-go zones.

Another, more radical, view expressed at the conference outlined that while the old Mahanian focus on concentration is still valid, that concentration may now refer to concentration of effects through dispersed tactical activity. Once unrealistically costly, a multitude of physically dispersed assets would be required in such a neo-Mahanian model. But the arrival of artificial intelligence (AI), autonomy and robotics may make this a reality sooner than many had previously thought,

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\(^3\) Stephen Covington, ‘The Culture of Strategic Thought Behind Russia’s Modern Approaches to Warfare’, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, October 2016, p. 9.
with land-based missiles, networks of cheap missile-equipped autonomous ships, and swarming drones becoming capable of overwhelming even the most sophisticated and adept foe.

It seems that the traditional aims of sea control, to projecting power ashore, may now be achieved without deploying a preponderant local naval force. The capacity to swarm a region might be sufficient to ensure both safe transit for amphibious vessels and, often, to project firepower ashore from afar, as Russia demonstrated in its 2015 Syrian intervention. As such, Western navies might focus less on dominating the littorals and more on the sort of networked standoff capabilities needed to project power in support of local allies on short notice. Using the model of the Japanese ‘bicycle blitz’ across Malaysia, John Arquilla has argued that cruise missiles mounted across a variety of cheap vessels could do much of the power projection work that was historically vested in carrier forces.⁴

**Internal Dimensions of Sea Power: Unresolved Tensions**

As panels on the information revolution made clear, navies may well have reached an inflection point with respect to how they extract human resources from the population. An information-rich environment might well require a more educated and technically specialised pool of personnel. At the level of the officer corps, the conceptually fluid environment of the twenty-first century may well require officers who have had time to engage with higher order issues of strategy and the changing character of war.

However, the demands of the changing technical environment run at cross purposes to the capacity of navies to compete with the private sector for the pool of recruits who often best fit these requirements.

A second issue is the maintenance of redundant personnel in supporting roles – particularly in shipbuilding. While redundant roles may strain financial assets, they also offer system resilience in the event of a crisis – as was best demonstrated in the Falklands War, where the refitting of commercial vessels for naval service was carried out at an impressive tempo, in no small measure due to the availability of a skilled workforce that was effectively on standby in non-crisis years.

With regards to recruitment issues, several possible solutions that were offered included working with the recruits one has by offering on-the-job training in relevant specialisations. Alternatively, it was suggested that the pool of recruits be reduced, with resources targeted at securing a small group of highly skilled individuals. In addition, organisations might rely on private military companies, like Military Professional Resources Incorporated, which are often able to provide their recruits with salaries that are competitive at private sector levels to provide higher skilled labour. Another model might be that of Israel’s intelligence unit 8200, which has managed to attract talent by building itself a reputation for helping its recruits into prestigious private sector jobs after their service, but, as a result, has a substantial pool of high skilled reservists.

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⁴ Arquilla, *Operating in the Gray Zone*, p. 70.
Prevailing Questions

Four underlying tensions regularly arose during the conference:

- The difficulty in striking a balance between responding to immediate threats and long-term planning.
- A lack of ownership, with projects changing hands at regular intervals, complicating accountability for delivery.
- The degree to which public–private partnerships should be sought.
- The balance to be struck between lethality and affordability.

With regards to the conundrum of competing present and future priorities, resources must be directed to deal with the competing demands of planning for a major maritime threat, constabulary duties and some mixture of the two in a hybrid format. Whether the threats of today will retain their significance is difficult to predict, as indeed is the appropriate portfolio of investments that a navy should maintain.

Some preliminary responses to the issue emphasised the balanced force approach championed by figures such as Admiral Richard Hill. Alternative approaches revolve around creating a dual use force, a distinct possibility in the era of netwars. Equally, one might opt for what Nassim Nicholas Taleb dubs a ‘barbell approach’: emphasising the mitigation of risk in most areas but devoting a small percentage of ones portfolio to high risk and high reward options. In a naval context this might imply offloading constabulary duties to local powers while offering low-risk support in the form of naval advise and assist missions or arms sales, and pursuing a broadly traditionalist naval procurement policy coupled with a few substantial investments in war-winning capabilities in at least one particularly important theatre that the navy predicts will matter most in the future. Each approach comes with benefits and pitfalls. The first approach offers resilience against geopolitical shifts, but a balanced force also suffers from the so-called ‘curse of the middle’ – where attempting to do two tasks simultaneously runs the risk of doing neither very well. The netwar concept promises high rewards if light and versatile forces can truly be used in both low-intensity and high-intensity conflict, but its utility depends on the success of still nascent technologies. A programme of resource direction in this vein risks the fate of France’s Jeune École, which failed by effectively being too ahead of its time – creating a ‘fleet of experimental craft’ with little immediate utility.

As for the barbell approach, it offers a method of balancing risk-taking with mitigation, which has certainly proven valuable in other domains, but might not be sufficiently radical should the changes portended by those who propose a radical rethinking of maritime power be proven correct.

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Effectively, each approach requires decision-makers to ponder how best to balance risk mitigation and opportunity exploitation when determining how resources are directed in the realm of research and development.

The issues of creating permanent stakeholders and striking the right balance between public and private ownership of a project are subjects that the UK’s maritime sector are no strangers to – with projects such as the Astute class submarine demonstrating the trade-offs between the two.

As for the balance between lethality and affordability, a number of the panellists noted that defence integration across alliances might go some way towards allowing powers to avoid this trade-off, although, as the debates surrounding Sir John Parker’s recommendations in the UK illustrates, this remains an issue to be grappled with.

Deductions

- There has been a lack of analysis regarding the long-term future of naval warfare. A compelling narrative was lacking as to what the range of futures might look like, without immediate reference to legacy platforms.
- The absence of discussion regarding the mix of high and low warfare, and the efficacy of capital ships in an era dominated by information and technology was a significant concern.
- The inability to come to terms with potential trade-offs between efficiency and resilience in military industrial policy requires more work from government and industry.
- In common with discussions in the land environment, the aspirations for collaboration with industry in order to share scarce human resources was never grounded in sufficient detail to warrant optimism.

Peter Roberts is the Director of the Military Sciences programme at RUSI.

Sidharth Kaushal is a Research Fellow for Sea Power at RUSI.