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## **New US Maritime Strategy: Why It Matters**

*By Geoffrey Till*

### **Synopsis**

*The United States has just issued a new maritime strategy. It tells a good deal about Washington's current concerns in what it calls the Indo-Asia-Pacific Region and provides an agenda to which China and other countries in the region will have to respond.*

### **Commentary**

THE UNITED States has just released its new maritime strategy, which for the first time, has been officially made available in Mandarin. If it was meant as a signal to China, what will Beijing make of this? Will the Chinese see it as a challenge, or an invitation to cooperate in defence of a rules-based order?

'A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower: Forward, Engaged, Ready' appeared in March 2015. It aims to 'refresh' the strategy with the same primary title which first appeared back in 2007, and which has to a significant extent guided US maritime policy ever since.

### **More emphasis on US national interests**

Navies both reflect and help shape the international context. In a region as maritime as the Asia-Pacific, navies are especially important for this reason. Accordingly the production of a new maritime strategy by the region's most powerful naval force becomes a major event since it illustrates American preoccupations and sets a significant part of the agenda for the region's diplomats and other military forces at least for the next few years.

So the first question is how different is this new strategy document from the first version? The answer is quite a lot. There is now much less direct emphasis on the role of the US maritime forces - the Navy, Coast Guard and Marines - contributing to the defence of the global sea-based trading system. That aspiration is still there of course; it is implicit in the continuing accent on working with allies and partners in a 'global network of navies' to secure international stability and maritime security and on continued US determination to safeguard the freedom of navigation on which Washington thinks the system depends.

Instead, there is a more muscular emphasis on the defence of US national interests at sea. 'Defending our Nation,' says the accompanying fact sheet, 'and winning its wars is the core task of the US Navy and US Marine Corps'. This perhaps uncontroversial comment is reinforced by several other aspects of the new strategy.

Firstly, 'Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response' is now relegated from being one of the six main functions of the US Navy to being a sub-set of the capacity to project power ashore. This task had been given a new prominence in the 2007 version of the strategy and has been practised extensively over the past eight years, most recently in dealing with Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines.

No doubt the US Navy will continue to perform this function as it always has but its conceptual downgrading, which was probably done to provide space for treatment of 'all domain access', is nonetheless significant. This is especially true for the Asia-Pacific, a region where the incidence of such disasters is increasing and local navies are working hard to improve their capacity to respond.

### **Assuring "all domain access"**

The same deterrence and war-fighting emphasis emerges in the appearance of a new major function of maritime power - that of assuring 'All Domain Access'. In the consultation exercise that accompanied the 'refresh' process, many objected to the focus on this as the primary – or at least first mentioned - function of the US Navy; the basis of the objection was that this was not a mission but more a precondition for both sea control and maritime power projection ashore and which should instead be subsumed under those two functions.

Secondly, some critics alleged, it was too naked a response to the purported anti-access/area denial concepts of the Chinese, which would worry many - but not all - of America's allies and partners in the region.

Thirdly, it has pushed out the opportunity evident in earlier drafts of the refreshed strategy to re-define and re-emphasise 'forward naval presence' as a means of winning friends and influencing people. To such critics, the emphasis on 'All Domain Access' is indicative of a slow drift towards a more adversarial relationship with China whose naval expansion the new strategy pointedly says, 'presents both opportunities and challenges'.

### **How will the region respond?**

The old strategy was much criticised for being much more of a 'concept' than a strategy since it did neither seem to link up with other US strategic formulations nor go very far into 'ends, ways and means'. This version is very different as it does both. Partly because of radical and unforeseen changes in the international context - such as the rise of ISIS and new levels of Russian truculence - and continuing budgetary limits on US naval plans, the new document explores much more the question of *how* these functions are to be performed in a more difficult world and what the US Navy and Marine Corps need to do so.

In this clear bid to strike a better balance between US commitments and US resources there is a business-like focus on 'getting back to basics' - and that's what makes the emphasis on national interests and 'All Doman Access' so interesting.

All these initial interpretations of the new strategy can, and will, be both refuted and refined in the global debate about what all this means. These are complicated matters. There remains so much emphasis in the document on two aspects: the first is on the continuing rebalance towards the Asia-Pacific region (despite increasing concerns in Europe and the Middle East); the second is on the essential role of America's allies and partners as a means of narrowing the gap between what must be done and what can be done by the US alone.

As such, the response of regional countries to this new strategy will be key. Will they support the US determination to stay forward and to increase levels of naval and coastguard engagement? Will the region's more capable navies seek to become involved in the drive to develop the capabilities for 'all

domain access' or stand back from it, focussing instead on the less technologically demanding task of defending their own waters?

Key to how the region perceives the new US maritime strategy will be what policymakers in Beijing make of it. How will the Chinese interpret the US initiative to make the document officially available for the first time in Mandarin? Will they see it as an invitation to cooperate in defence of a rules-based order, or on the contrary, as an attempt to contain Beijing's growing maritime assertiveness?

The future of this maritime region will, in short, be partly determined by how local states craft their responses to the new American maritime strategy which has only just begun.

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