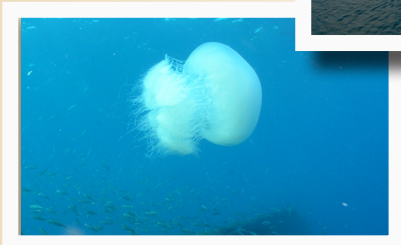
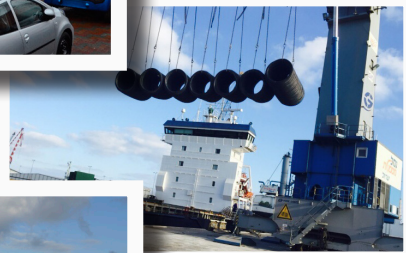
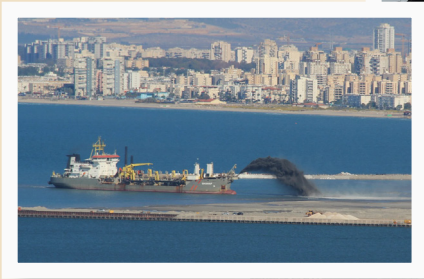


MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2018/19

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Future U.S. Naval Capabilities

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Capabilities and Strategy

There is little to be gained by looking at future naval—or any—capabilities absent consideration of what kind of challenges are likely. Before the 9/11 Attacks, Donald Rumsfeld’s writing as Secretary of Defense focused on “capabilities-based planning.” Although the term now carries a set of bureaucratic connotations, the phrase’s original intent was simply to remind American policymakers that, in an uncertain world, the best safeguard against failure is a long-term vision. By better foreseeing threats and challenges, the US could adapt to a variety of crises while still securing its long-term objectives. Such thinking is particularly important for the armed services. If done correctly, it offers insight about the future of military and political confrontation, and a greater understanding of how best to dominate their enemies. If done incorrectly, or not done at all, it leaves them woefully underprepared. This is particularly true of the sea services. Airplanes, tanks, battle rifles, missiles, artillery are all expensive. But naval ships both typically require more resources overall to produce and will remain in service much longer than other military assets. Clear strategic thinking that in turn guides procurement and force structure, therefore, is critical for naval superiority and success.

Such strategic thinking has sometimes eluded policymakers from the Cold War’s end until today. Of greater concern, some of the attempts at strategic thinking yielded the wrong conclusions and identified the wrong policies. The US will find increasing difficulty in attempting to stay “ahead of the curve.” It must instead catch up to the current international system, with its new mix of threats and challenges.

Specifically, the threats that Russia, China, and Iran pose to American and allied interests and values are all heavily maritime in nature, indicating that great power competition in the 21st century will involve a distinct naval component. Two major force structure questions exist for the US Navy. First, what will the role of the carrier be? Will the Navy move away from its current Carrier Strike Group format, and if so, what will replace it? Second, how will unmanned platforms in the air, on the sea, and below it change the Navy’s capabilities and structure?

Hanging over these questions, however, is the central issue of funding. If the Navy is unable to secure proper funding, all the above questions are functionally irrelevant.

For example, as U.S. national debt passes \$20 trillion dollars on its upwards curve, the portion of the annual budget that must be spent to service the debt is projected to rise to more than 25 percent. Combine this with the spending required by law on social welfare programs and the amount left over for defense shrinks. Substantially.

Maritime Competition and New Threats

The current strategic environment is defined by three actors that are hostile to American and Western interests – China, Russia, and Iran. Although the three are not formally allied, and possess differing, and potentially contradictory, long-term interests, for the foreseeable future these three states will actively and passively cooperate against the United States and its allies.

China poses the greatest threat. After decades of economic development, China is finally prepared to increase its international assertiveness. The word in Beijing nowadays is that since China's former public declarations of intent about "peaceful rise" have not borne out, other means must be sought. China's strategy has two long-term objectives. First, it aspires to become the leading power in Asia, in part, by ejecting the US from the region. In the short-term, this involves applying pressure to America's alliance networks, building a naval force that can challenge the US and its allies for maritime superiority in the East and South China Seas, and subjugating Taiwan.

In the long-term, China will expand its naval footprint even further, operating around the globe and fielding a true blue-water navy with advanced capital ships that can challenge the US in a direct confrontation. Second, China desires to gain control of the Eurasian heartland and other resource-rich regions, to leverage their material wealth and in turn expand its own economic and military power. Chinese investment in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and the One Belt One Road project in Central and South Asia and the Near East facilitate this objective. Chinese naval power clearly has a major role to play in this project. China is constructing a fleet that is capable of launching amphibious assaults against Pacific island strongholds, supported by a missile and naval aviation force that can blunt or turn back an American response.

Russia, despite its decreased relative power, is also a significant adversary. Putin retains the Soviet and Imperial dream of dominating Europe to ensure Russian security from invasion and cement its status as a great power once again. This strategy requires that Russia pressure NATO, which can be done most effectively at its weakest points – its maritime flanks. Hence, Russia has consolidated its control

over the Black Sea, conquering most of the Georgian coastline and annexing Crimea. It has now progressed to the next phase of its strategy, increasing its presence in the Near East to gain control over the Eastern Mediterranean. An advanced submarine force, supported by small but lethal surface combatants and naval aviation, allows Russia to achieve these goals at sea.

Iran underscores the geographic link between Russia and China. Iranian imperial ambition stems from its ancient history and contemporary religious fervor. Its theocratic government seeks to dominate the Islamic world. Now that Iran has consolidated its grip on Iraq and Syria, it is freer to project power at sea, particularly in the Red Sea and Eastern Mediterranean, where its proxy Hezbollah dominates Lebanon. Iran lacks the resources and basing capabilities of Russia and China but is mastering the use of long-range missiles and irregular forces to wield its hard power.

Long-term friction exists between these three partners. China's goal of Eurasian hegemony will eventually trigger a negative Russian reaction, as military and political effects follow Beijing's economic expansion into Central Asia (and potentially the Eastern Mediterranean). Russia has no desire for physical control of the Near East, and fears the enmity of the Islamic world, whereas Iran's expansionist policies could make vulnerable Russia's foothold in Syria. But for the near future, China, Russia, and Iran will remain a tacit illiberal entente, designed to challenge America's position and its allies in nearly every region, and particularly at sea.

Fleet Structure – the CSG, Distributed Lethality, and Unmanned Systems

With the return of great power competition, and increased potential for maritime confrontation, the US Navy's role in safeguarding American interests and allies is once again paramount. The Navy's focus has returned to sea control, rather than the power projection missions that dominated the 1990s and 2000s. Controlling specific geographical chokepoints and maritime spaces – namely the Baltic, Eastern Mediterranean, Strait of Hormuz and of Bab al-Mandab, Strait of Malacca, Strait of Lombok, South China Sea, and East China Sea demands a fleet better optimized to fight at sea and for the sea, rather than one intended to strike shore targets. However, two structural-technological issues must be confronted before projecting the US Navy's future structure and capabilities: the persistence and role of the Carrier Strike Group (CSG), and the prevalence of unmanned systems in the fleet.

The CSG has defined the US Navy's structure since the Second World War. The Pearl Harbor attack thrust the carrier into its current role as a full-fledged capital ship

– American admirals, drawing off two decades of tactical, operational, and strategic testing and refinement – employed aircraft carriers in coordinated offensives against their Japanese counterparts. The Carrier Air Wing, known as the “Sunday Punch,” was the US Navy’s greatest offensive weapon. Comprised of air superiority, strike, and anti-submarine platforms, the Carrier Air Wing was flexible enough to respond to nearly any threat at sea and support amphibious assaults. Each fleet carrier group, known as a Fast Carrier Task Force, included escorting ships to keep the flat-top itself out of harm’s way by surrounding it with a shield of antiaircraft fire, and checking any surface or undersea movements against the capital ships.

Technology has advanced, but today’s CSGs closely resembles their Fast Carrier Task Force antecedents. Largely defensive surface combatants carry air defense systems that can intercept enemy missiles, while the air wing provides the CSG’s offensive punch. Today’s air wing has decreased in diversity, while modern surface combatants lack—in relative terms—the naval offensive capabilities of their predecessors, but the basic operational concept remains unchanged.

Still, modern advances in networking and weapon and sensor range have called this CSG structure into question. Counter to oft-repeated assertions, the missile has not eliminated the need for naval power. In fact, the missile arguably amplified the efficacy of naval forces, increasing their range, and diversifying their potential missions. However, centralizing combat power on a small set of capital ships may not be the most efficient or effective method to structure naval forces today. This is not to say that the need for aircraft carriers has vanished. American naval operations in the 1980s, beginning with *Ocean Venture* '81, demonstrated the ways in which communications technology enabled fleets to reorganize their tactical deployments. Considering advances in unmanned technology, it may be time to take the next evolutionary step, and reconsider how weapons and systems are distributed throughout the fleet, alongside developing new tactical deployment structures.

Unmanned technologies concurrently drive the potential move away from the CSG structure. Historically, the decisive concentration of firepower in any form of warfare has required physical colocation. From the hoplite phalanx and Roman legion to the French cavalry lance or Prussian line regiment, this has remained true throughout the 20th century, even as airpower, rail movement, and motorized and mechanized vehicles became common in modernized militaries. This explains the need to create large, heavily armed surface warships (and submarines), organized into battle

squadrons, a staple of naval operations since Themistocles led his triremes against the Persian fleet.

Unmanned technology and increasingly effective networking capabilities, alongside long-range missiles, could allow military forces to modify this staple of conflict. Today, a central authority can coordinate and control geographically dispersed forces, bringing their firepower to bear on any number of targets without moving these platforms as an organized battle squadron. Smaller warships have always been more flexible than their capital ship counterparts. But that advantage in flexibility has never offset the advantage the capital ship holds in firepower. Such broad-scale coordination would threaten to overturn this formulation, allowing smaller manned and unmanned surface combatants and submarines working in conjunction to deliver the same amount of firepower as a CSG. Moreover, this dispersed force is much less vulnerable to enemy strikes, scattered as it would be over many miles of ocean. Additionally, an enemy would encounter far greater difficulty in identifying this network's Clausewitzian center of gravity – the elimination of one node in the network would not threaten the entire squadron.

Finally, I cannot overstate the questions about the U.S.' willingness to pay for a modern, appropriately-sized fleet. The current administration wants to build a 355-ship fleet and reach this goal in 30 years. Achieving this requires a commitment from every president and Congress between now and the middle of the 21st century. And even at current, increased defense spending levels, the fleet will not meet President Trump's goal. To do so would require a sustained increase of about 25 percent over the average spent on shipbuilding over the past three decades. As with other enterprises, fleet modernization and expansion demand steady and sustained funding over many years. In the current U.S. political climate, it would be a mistake to assume such funding.

Finally, statements from senior Trump administration officials about future defense budgets as well as the Republicans' loss of a majority in the House of Representatives point to reduced resources for building a larger US naval fleet. Decreased resources for defense will hurt efforts to grow the fleet as they introduce uncertainty into the industrial base required to build up US naval forces.