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429

**Preparing
The Navy
For a New
Strategic Mission**

By W. Grover Coors



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Preparing the Navy for a New Strategic Mission

By W. Grover Coors

The world witnessed an unprecedented display of high technology weaponry in the recent war with Iraq. *Tomahawk* cruise missiles screaming down Baghdad streets behind astonished news reporters, and video cameras in the noses of smart bombs heading into ventilation shafts, provided us all with images we will not easily forget. But it was the *Patriot* missile that really stole the show. These remarkable rockets streaking skyward like aerial bombs on the Fourth of July signaled the beginning of a new era in which ballistic missiles no longer pose an indefensible threat. An equally significant, yet less publicized, occurrence of the war is to be found in the reports that an *Aegis* guided missile cruiser on station in the northern Persian Gulf tracked Iraqi *Scud* missiles in flight which could potentially have been engaged by the ship's own defensive surface-to-air missiles. The ramifications of this capability with respect to theater ballistic missile defense are significant where the U.S. Navy is concerned, and the potential for shipboard missile defenses has not gone unnoticed by the Strategic Defense Initiative Organization (SDIO). The conditions which permitted the successful deployment of the *Patriot* system—that is, a long time to transport and set up the *Patriot* batteries, and friendly territory on which to do it—were somewhat unusual and cannot generally be counted on. An *Aegis* cruiser, on the other hand, can be on station anywhere in the world very quickly and does not require the invitation of any sovereign power to be there. Rapid deployment to virtually any point on the earth has long been recognized as what makes naval forces unique as a means of projecting power; and it is easy to envision the *Aegis* ship fitting into the ballistic missile defense role.

Ambivalent Navy. The Navy, however, is facing a mission identity crisis relative to this newly discovered theater defense capability. Area defense, as well as defense of amphibious operations and shore and land-based targets, can be viewed as logical extensions of the traditional anti-air doctrine. But it must be recognized that once it is demonstrated that a Marine beachhead or port facility can be defended from ballistic missile attack by means of sea-based assets, then strategic targets can similarly be defended. This means that the Navy will not be able to concern itself solely with defending its own forward deployed assets, but will be called upon to defend strategic coastal population centers. The distinction between area self-defense and strategic defense of land targets may appear insignificant on the surface, but from the perspective of mission, the distinction is enormous. Strategic defense is a completely new mission for the Navy, which requires a new war-fighting doctrine. The Navy cannot afford to retain its characteristic ambivalence toward assuming missions outside of its historical role.

There are recent signs that the Department of the Navy has come to recognize the possibilities. In the September 1992 policy document, “...*From The Sea — Preparing the Naval Service for the 21st Century*,” it is stated, “We [the Navy] also need to turn our attention and explore potential naval contributions to other forms of conventional strategic defense. In particular, we are carefully examining the naval capabilities which could contribute to theater missile defenses.” It remains to be seen if the Navy can take full advantage of the opportunity before them.

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Strategic Threat. It is unfortunate that in the world of nuclear warheads the usage of the words “tactical” and “strategic” has come to denote weapon range rather than mission objective. This is the case with ballistic missiles, where intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) have been classified as strategic, and theater ballistic missiles have been classified as tactical. ICBMs are clearly strategic, but theater missiles with conventional as well as nuclear, biological, or chemical warheads also are strategic if deployed against civilian targets. It is the intended target that determines whether or not a weapon is strategic, not its range or warhead.

Strategic bombing was first employed in 1937 by the Japanese against Chinese civilian populations in an attempt to quickly force China into submission. Strategic bombing was employed by the Allies against Japan and Germany during World War II for essentially the same reason. Strategic objectives are achieved ultimately by subjugating the political enterprises and civilian populations of one’s opponents in war. *Scuds* were launched by Iraq primarily against strategic civilian population centers in Saudi Arabia and Israel, and it is hard to visualize this deployment as anything other than strategic. Conventionally armed, unguided ballistic missiles have never had much tactical utility. That is, inherent targeting inaccuracies render them to be little more than expensive long-range artillery against specific military targets. They do have substantial strategic utility, however, as a terror weapon or a weapon of retaliation, especially when the potential for use with chemical or biological warheads is considered. Proliferation of nuclear warheads will greatly enhance the strategic value of these weapons. We must not lose sight of the real reason that Third World belligerents seek to deploy ballistic missiles, regardless of effective range or warhead type—that is, to gain a strategic advantage over enemy neighbors either through direct aggression or the threat of retaliation. Furthermore, there is little reason to believe that Third World leaders will be as restrained in the use of nuclear weapons when they obtain them as the superpowers have been.

The bottom line is that ballistic missiles of all ranges pose, and will continue to pose, primarily a strategic rather than a tactical threat. The *Patriot* missiles deployed in the Gulf were engaged in strategic defense even though they were designed for tactical air defense. There was no mission conflict in the Gulf, however, because the *Patriot* batteries were set up specifically with theater ballistic missile defense in mind. The way that *Aegis* ships are currently deployed does not permit them to become merely floating *Patriot* batteries regardless of technical capability. This will become the source of a mission confusion for the U.S. Navy if the issue is not addressed in advance.

Reassigning combatants designed for fundamentally tactical roles to perform strategic missions has always posed a problem for Navy planners. In the early 1950s, when the Navy feared it would lose out to the Air Force in the strategic arena, supercarriers were built capable of launching bombers with nuclear payloads in addition to traditional tactical aircraft. The Navy has never been comfortable with the ambivalent mission requirements of strategic and tactical operations aboard a single platform. In the late 1950s it was appropriately recognized that the proper platform for carrying strategic ballistic missiles had to be a new class of submarines in order to avoid this ambivalence. The first Polaris SSBN, *George Washington*, had previously been the attack submarine, *Scorpion*. It was modified with the addition of a 130-foot ballistic missile midsection. Looking at the differences between SSNs and SSBNs today and how they are deployed, one would probably not recognize the common ancestor despite the obvious technological similarities. The differences, in fact, are not highlighted by technology at all, but rather by the distinct mission each platform must carry out—each class optimized for its own unique role. The net result of maintaining clear mission distinction is that today the SSBN represents the strongest leg of the strategic triad and the SSN is free to pursue its unique attack and battle group support role.

Overburdened *Aegis*. Despite this experience with submarines, there has been a tendency of late in the U.S. Navy to expect too much of a single platform. The multi-role concept for surface warships makes a lot of sense from a budgetary standpoint, and the mission flexibility afforded by modern *Aegis* cruisers and destroyers is impressive; but the Navy will not be able to disguise ballistic missile defense as merely an extension of anti-air doctrine. Commitment of *Aegis* ships to strategic defense is potentially debilitating to the Navy order of battle if the consequences of this are not fully contemplated. *Aegis* warships were designed and equipped to perform a tactical defensive mission primarily in support of the carrier task force. These ships are already overburdened with tactical responsibilities. Adding a strategic mission on top of everything else risks compromising the platform's effectiveness. It is unthinkable that these extraordinarily capable vessels would be broken out from the carrier group to take up station off some coast, and tasked with a new strategic defense mission under the control of a unified commander or other command structure.

Bold New Mission. The time has come for the Navy to recognize that a substantially new mission is appearing, to which it can make a major contribution for national security and world peace. Strategic defense against ballistic missiles is a task the Navy can handle capably if it chooses to do so. The mantle of theater ballistic missile defense will fall increasingly to the Navy in the absence of a viable space-based system, and this bold new mission demands a new class of ship to be created specifically for the job. Currently deployed *Aegis* ships should not simply be adapted to the new mission, but a new ship class based on *Aegis* technology should be designed. These ships may not need as much ASW capability or helicopter facilities, but they will require upgraded self-defense systems and extensive modifications to Battle Management and Command, Control, and Communications (BM/C³) systems as well as new missile interceptors compatible with the vertical launch system. The Navy should be willing to promote this new platform as a lower-cost, lower-risk alternative to other SDI concepts. The Navy has a rare opportunity to plot a new course out of the post-Cold-War doldrums by taking a proactive position with respect to strategic theater defense. If the approach taken is to treat strategic theater ballistic missile defense as an addendum to the traditional Navy Cold War mission, a unique opportunity to abate an ominous threat to world peace may well be lost.

