

MAHAN AND TURNER RESTORED: NAVAL POWER AND THE DEMOCRATIC STATE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

*Vice Admiral Tim Barrett, AO, CSC, RAN
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Introduction

Well, don't we live in interesting times? – That is uncontested. Equally uncontested is that despotic and kleptocratic governments and anarchic and terrorist splinter groups combine to erode public confidence in the values that unite the great democracies.

The tragedy of 9/11, the Madrid bombings in 2004, the London bombings in 2005, the incident in the Canadian Parliament in 2014, the ISIS beheadings in Iraq and the terrorist incidents in Sydney, Paris and Copenhagen remind us that our governments and publics feel insecure and under threat. When our security is under threat, so too are the values that define us as societies.

These are the values that we often sum up in the expression 'Rule of Law'—that all citizens are equally able to enjoy the freedoms of association, expression, belief, assembly and movement.

These are the freedoms upon which the cohesion and stability of the nations that we serve are based and States gain their legitimacy authority and credibility through their adherence to, and defence of, these freedoms.

As servants of the State, it is our duty to protect and defend these freedoms. And as leaders of our respective navies, it is our constant duty to refresh our understanding of the principles on which our services are founded. More than that, it is our duty to ensure that those principles have contemporary meaning and relevance to those whom we lead.

In leading my Service, I have many duties, but only a few trusts. One of those trusts is to develop and expand the naval art, doctrine and thinking to ensure that the Navy is always well positioned to support governments in achieving their fundamental duty to protect and defend the country and its people.

It is in that context, that my presentation today is placed. The key message of my presentation is simple—the defence of our nations' legitimacy, authority and credibility in the 21st century depends on our ability to project strategic lethal force over, on and beneath the sea.

And lethality is the key to our nations' ability to wage war. Just to be clear, let me say that again: **Lethality is the key to our nations' ability to wage war, and consequently, to maintain the peace.**

It is my honour to lead a Navy that has conducted combined and joint operations with the United States for almost a century, and to represent a country that has been an ally of the United States for over seventy years.

Together, it is important for us to ensure that we understand contemporary naval power in terms of its relationship with the constantly evolving nature of our democracies. And it is even more important that we are able to reassure our national communities that we who are entrusted with the power to wage war do so within the policies and directions determined by our elected governments. Because, make no mistake, the confidence that our national communities have in us is absolutely critical to our ability to deliver the results that our nations expect of us.

If there was one thing that joined the President of the United States and the Prime Ministers of Australia, Canada, Great Britain, New Zealand and South Africa at the hip over seven decades ago, it

was their mutual recognition that the unwavering support of the community was the essential prerequisite for victory. That is why I am honoured to accept the invitation to speak today.

Setting the Scene

To set the scene and with your indulgence, I would like to take a short trip down memory lane. In the March-April 1974 edition of *The Naval War College Review*, VADM Stansfield Turner, the former distinguished President of what continues to be one of the world's pre-eminent naval institutions, published a major paper entitled *Missions of the US Navy*.

Before getting to the substance of his paper, Turner set an ongoing challenge: to look carefully at which of our missions, best suit the tenor of the times. He said we should "take stock of our purpose in life in order to allocate the diminishing resources available to us – in the best possible way". This task is no less relevant today, than it was forty years ago.

Turner's core prescriptions – strategic deterrence, sea control, projection of power ashore and naval presence – remain as true today as they were then. They are worth repeating, because they are fundamental to my argument – strategic deterrence, sea control, projection of power ashore and naval presence. Well, you might say... why not end the presentation right there?

The answer, clearly, is that the balance between these core missions, and the strategic context in which we seek to achieve them has changed....That lethality is the key to our nations' ability to wage war has not changed....but, how we deploy and deliver that lethality has changed enormously.

Turner had a deep appreciation of the relationship between the State, as a political entity, and the Navy, as a principal vehicle for policy delivery in troubled times.

Our elected governments and the worried taxpayers they represent, are dazzled by costs. But, they have an unswerving ability to judge the value of what they pay for.

We need to argue the demands that we place on the public purse in terms of the strategic benefits we deliver. Hence, we need to recalibrate Turner's central premises in the light of current and prospective strategic circumstances. But we cannot look at Turner in isolation.

We must also understand and reflect on Mahan's core propositions if we truly are to understand the relationship between Navy and State.

Mahan understood the essence of seapower, for—as Nicholas Lambert has argued—

“Mahan placed seapower within its global economic context”. Understanding this allows us to understand the centrality of seapower to the promotion of the interests of the State and its survival.

Lambert is correct: Mahan was a geo-politician, who possessed clear ideas on how the world worked!

Mahan wrote:

“Control of the sea by maritime commerce and naval supremacy means predominant influence in the world and is chief among the merely material elements in the power and prosperity of nations.”

He was not the first to make this observation.

Sir Walter Raleigh in the 16th century said: “He that commands the sea, commands the trade And he that commands the trade of the world commands the wealth of the world.” Both were writing about the indivisibility of thriving national commerce and the seapower—which enables and protects it.

Overview of current and prospective strategic circumstances

The global strategic pre-eminence of the US is being, and will continue to be, contested in ways that Turner could not have imagined in 1974. Turner's Navy was, in his words, "recuperating from the wounds of Vietnam". The contemporary US Navy is contemplating the consequences of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. And each of the allies who continue to support policies aimed at stabilizing the Middle East and Afghanistan show signs of the fatigue that impacts on popular support for prolonged engagement in distant theatres.

We are seeing new challenges to the rule of law, from both State and non-State actors, using threat vectors that are new and different. The concepts that underpin the 'freedom of the seas', as encapsulated by the great Dutch jurist, Hugo Grotius, in the seventeenth century, and on which maritime law has been founded ever since, are under threat as never before.

We are all confronted by the fracture of joint political and economic purpose in Europe, which could, in the extreme, result in the consequent erosion of joint strategic purpose.

We are witnessing the progressive rise of China, as a global strategic power and its ability to project its power at sea—as it works towards a blue water navy with access in both the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

We are also witnessing the rise of India as a significant maritime power.

At the same time a broader range of strategic threats has overtaken Turner's real and present strategic threat – the Soviet Union: States seeking to overturn the existing rule of law; States seeking an outlet to nationalism; and non-State actors who challenge the existence of States and their secular values.

And the Soviet Union's successor, Russia pursues adventurist policies that defy conventional ways of transacting international business.

Moreover, we are learning to deal with the asymmetric threat of terrorism, which successfully impinges on the confidence of the electorate, and in Africa and the Middle East seeks to impose on States – a fourteenth century model of autocratic power.

Understanding the ability to wage war

The great American novelist Mark Twain allegedly said, "History does not repeat itself... but it does rhyme."

One cannot help but note the resonances between the strategic circumstances facing us now and those of 1914, so deftly analysed by Christopher Clark, the Regius Professor of History at Cambridge (I mean the UK, not Massachusetts!) in his prize-winning study *The Sleepwalkers*.

So many contemporary leaders are again experiencing the same transfixing paralysis in the face of overwhelming difficulties. To paraphrase Clark, we can again observe the tendency for leaders to perceive themselves as operating under irresistible external constraints while placing the responsibility for deciding between peace and war firmly on the shoulders of their opponents.

It would be a bold national leader who confronted by the uncertainties, ambiguities and discontinuities of the contemporary strategic situation dismissed the ability to wage war as a thing of the past.

It is perhaps unfashionable to talk about waging war as a core capability of a democratic State: it seems at one level to be incompatible with the rule of law, itself based on the value of the human person. But at another level, it seems to be inevitable, since the central duty of any democratic

government is to uphold and defend the rule of law thereby preserving the peace. It is for this reason that I voice my support for the CNO's emphasis on 'war-fighting first' as the Navy's core responsibility.

Recalibrating Turner

There are two propositions I would like to explore briefly in order to recalibrate Turner's prescriptions:

- Clausewitz's 'War is the continuation of policy by other means', and
- Bismarck's 'Politics is the art of the possible'.

In the common speech of our societies, 'war' has come to mean sustained action against something that we do not like: the war against illiteracy, the war against poverty, the war against disease.

But for those of us in the business of warfare, it has a much more terrible meaning. War is the sustained use of extreme violence and targeted lethality by political organisations where one organisation or a coalition of organisations aims to destroy another organisation or coalition of organisations.

War is waged for political purposes.

War is the sustained use of extreme violence and targeted lethality by political organisations where one organisation or a coalition of organisations aims to destroy another organisation or coalition of organisations. It is defined by violence, destruction, and suffering and death on a massive scale. War is the most serious social act available to human beings.

Philip Bobbitt's *Shield of Achilles* offers us a sobering judgement – war is the crucible within which constitutionality is forged. In other words, war is the episodic and cataclysmic pre-condition for re-drawing the compacts that enable societies to form and to co-exist.

That is why the war against Islamic terrorism is so transfixing and so critical.

The corollary of Bobbitt's thesis is that the ability to wage war is intrinsic to the nature and purpose of the State. War, as Clausewitz tells us, is the continuation of policy.

But what is policy anyway?

Essentially, policy comprehends the principles on which leaders take decisions in the interests of the State and its citizens.

As Sir Ernest Satow reminds us in his *Guide to Diplomatic Practice* – the training manual for young diplomats in years past – Diplomacy is the conduct of relations between independent States on the basis of intelligence and tact.

War, on the other hand, is the conduct of relations between independent political bodies when intelligence and tact has been replaced by belligerence and aggression.

There is in fact no sharp break between peace and war. War becomes inevitable when peace cannot be maintained and pursued. Peace is not the absence of war. Rather, it is the other way round—war is the inevitable consequence when peace disappears.

Clausewitz understood the peace-war spectrum—that a State's ability to maintain and preserve the peace extends to its ability to wage war. But the spectrum is not linear. Rather, it is characterised by political and strategic ambiguity, and fundamental discontinuities as leaders take decisions without a full appreciation of risk.

Consequently, deterrence, in Turner's conception of the term, only has meaning if the State is able to address the failure of deterrence by employing lethality that is both strategic and proportionate. Deterrence is sanctioned by the ability to wage war and prevail. So the ability to wage war is a core element of 'continuity' in policy.

But Clausewitz goes much further. War is not just the continuation of policy. It is the continuation of policy 'by other means'. Without the ability to wage war, the State is unable to 'continue policy'. In other words, without the ability to wage and win war, the State fails to fulfil the central demand on it—to ensure the protection of its citizens and its own existence. As the preamble to the US constitution points out, 'the common defense' is the most solemn duty of government.

The constant that underpins the State's ability to continue policy by other means is the armed force available to it and its willingness to use that force.

What is the defining element of a State's ability to wage war? As I foreshadowed at the beginning of this presentation, the defining element is lethality. This is the central concept that allows us to recalibrate Turner's four core prescriptions. This is because deterrence, sea control, power projection and naval presence are all consequences of the State's ability to deliver strategic lethality.

And this is where the 'art of the possible' comes into play: by ensuring the dedicated availability of lethality within the panoply of State power, it remains possible for the State to wage war, and hence to maintain the practice of politics.

In that ultimate sense, politics is only possible when the employment of lethal force remains a consideration.

I want to demonstrate this theoretical approach in a practical example.

As a young officer, filling an exchange posting with the RN, I saw firsthand the UK's deployment of naval power to retake the Falklands, itself a consequence of a profound strategic miscalculation by Argentinean President, Galtieri.

The key to the UK's success was the ability to prosecute and demonstrate decisive lethality. The sinking of ARA *General Belgrano* (previously the USS *Phoenix*), by HMS *Conqueror* was an exercise in strategic lethality. Sadly for *Belgrano*, there was no rising from the ashes. Lethality was total.

The continued delivery of decisive lethality against Argentinean forces on the Falklands determined the outcome of the war. Lethality was the cause, and deterrence was the consequence. So also were sea control, power projection and naval presence.

Similarly, the continuing deployment of US Strike Groups in the Arabian Sea-Persian Gulf right now delivers decisive lethality against the IS forces in northern Iraq.

Sea Control, Lethality and the Recalibration of Turner's Core Prescriptions

As noted earlier, the strategic supremacy of the US is increasingly contested—as the strategic supremacy of the US is contested, so too is the power of the USN.

Mass is no longer the determining factor, although, as Stalin said, "quantity has a quality all of its own."

For 21st century naval power, the determining factor is the ability to deliver the kind of lethality that destroys the adversary's ability to prosecute war. This is strategic lethality!

The failure of deterrence is never the failure of strategy. Strategy is all about fighting and defeating the adversary by decisively employing lethal force. Deterrence is simply another consequence of having the ability to win!

I wonder whether you have the same experience listening to your young officers that I have when I listen to mine. For some of them, 'sea control' has become a shibboleth – a concept around which they can rally, but means whatever they want it to mean.

The fact is that sea control is increasingly out of the reach of modern navies. But where sea denial comprehends decisive lethality as the ultimate sanction against the adversary's attempt to access focal areas, the desired strategic effect is achieved.

So what does 'sea control' really mean? It is important to understand what Turner meant by 'sea control'. He was recalibrating and providing contemporary meaning to Mahan's more ambitious concept 'command of the sea'. This was a static concept that, in Mahan's day, did not address the increasing dynamism of the war at sea afforded by new technologies and new operational concepts.

Turner intended a "more realistic control in limited areas and for limited periods of time". As he said in 1974, "It is conceivable today to exert air, submarine, and surface control temporarily in an area while moving ships into position to project power ashore or to resupply overseas forces."

Importantly, conflicts such as the Falklands demonstrated that a static approach to seapower was no longer viable ... if it ever was.

Capabilities able to exploit the sea in one domain (for instance the RN's SSNs in the underwater domain) denied the Argentinean forces their ability to exploit the sea for their own purposes using their capabilities optimised for other domains (for instance surface warships exploiting the sea surface domain).

The lens through which we need to view sea control is the lens of domain exploitation for maximum strategic effect—capitalising on the adversary's vulnerability in order to prevail.

Similarly, the strategic effect delivered by Turner's power projection mission is equally well delivered when the State's strategic systems are able to deter and defeat possible adversaries.

And the strategic effect of the fourth of Turner's missions – naval presence – is delivered when the undetected, and we hope undetectable, elements of the naval force-in-being constrain the adversary's freedom of action.

This, I think, is what Philip Bobbitt is getting at when he identifies the swing that has taken us away from target—or threat-centred strategies—to vulnerability-centred strategies where the targets are less important than the exploitation of vulnerability and the denial of opportunity.

Conclusion

Turner's fundamental prescriptions remain as relevant in 2015 as they were forty years ago. What has changed is threefold.

First, the geo-strategic circumstances in 2015 differ significantly from those addressed by Turner. The strategic pre-eminence of the US is increasingly contested, and the strategic commitment of some western nations is under domestic challenge.

That means that we must identify and exploit the vulnerabilities of potential adversaries.

Second, Turner's four missions must be seen as the consequence of deliberate strategic policy, the starting point of which is lethality and the ability of the State to guarantee its efficacy.

And third, as the CNO said in his public lecture in Canberra on 10 February this year, our ability to achieve sea control “depends on our ability to understand and exploit the opportunities available to us in the undersea, space and cyber domains”.

So, here is my final take-away.

We who advise our governments on their ability to wage war and lead our navies in their implementation of our governments’ direction to deliver the lethality that defeats aggressors, must be ever vigilant to ensure that our doctrine and our force deployment policies are able to overcome the challenge of constantly changing circumstances.

Lethality remains the key to our nations’ ability to wage and to win war.

Thank you.