

The Navy's Past - and Future: An Introductory Primer
By Anthony Cowden

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By the end of the Cold War, the Navy had absorbed the operational level of war lessons learned from WWII – how to maintain a campaign of tactical engagements over a protracted period – and modernized the Navy to enable it to pursue the Maritime Strategy published in 1986.

With the end of the Cold War, and peace dividend budget cuts being enacted, the Navy decided to prioritize the construction of new combatants over everything else, including the ability to regenerate combat forces in support of an operational naval campaign. The Navy, I believe unconsciously, decided that a forward-based force overly dependent on foreign bases and facilities could meet the historic mission of the U.S. Navy to fight its fights “over there.”

To further understand this argument, and to see what can be done to fix things, the following readings are recommended:

[*Fighting the Fleet: Operational Art and Modern Fleet Combat.*](#)¹ “Because none of the other fleet functions <Screening, Scouting and Striking> can persist at the operational level of war without a base force, basing is the most important fleet function.” A fleet’s operational reserve is in its base, and yet Navy decisions over the past three decades have conspired to weaken the base. Read the book to learn how operational art is used to bring the four fleet functions together at the operational level of war.

[“Expeditionary or Forward Based?”](#)² An examination of the force structure and expeditionary capabilities of the current Fleet.

[“A Timeless U.S. Navy Strategy.”](#)³ Since the Goldwater–Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, the U.S. Navy

¹ <https://www.usni.org/press/books/fighting-fleet>

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https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/07/23/expeditionary_or_forward_based_114601.html

³ <https://centerformaritimestrategy.org/publications/a-timeless-u-s-navy-strategy/>

no longer has the ability to say how it's forces will operate – that is the purview of the Geographic Combatant Commanders (GCCs). However, that doesn't mean the Navy can't have a strategy – this is that strategy.

[“Updated: An Expeditionary Navy for an Era of Great Power Competition.”](#)⁴ To implement the Navy's strategy, and provide relevant warfighting forces to the various GCCs, the Navy needs to re-structure itself to return to being a truly expeditionary force - this is that force structure.

The themes contained in these articles formed the basis of recommendations made to the last and currently nominated Chief of Naval Operations in a series of articles:

[“Some Unsolicited Advice for the Next CNO”](#)⁵

[“Rebalance the Fleet Toward Being a Truly Expeditionary Navy”](#)⁶

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⁴ https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2023/04/25/updated_an_expeditionary_navy_for_an_era_of_great_power_competition_895584.html

⁵ https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2023/07/31/some_unsolicited_advice_for_the_next_cno_969640.html

⁶ <https://cimsec.org/rebalance-the-fleet-toward-being-a-truly-expeditionary-navy/>

⁷ <http://stariconsultingservices.com/>

⁸ <https://www.usni.org/press/books/fighting-fleet>

⁹ <https://www.amazon.com/Naval-Institute-Almanac-U-S-Navy/dp/1591141311>