

In what way did the role of navies change in the early years of the Cold War?

John Phelan

After the horrors of the Second World War, the early years of the Cold War were a time when many people looked forward to a peaceful international security environment. Across the world defence spending was curtailed as economies rebuilt after the war. The future role of navies was fiercely debated especially in the context of the advent of nuclear weapons and the emergence of the Soviet Union as the new enemy. Senior defence officials and politicians in the US and the UK thought that some of the traditional roles of the navy, such as power projection and the security of sea communications would be taken up by long-range aircraft armed with nuclear weapons. Focusing on the US, UK and Soviet navies, this essay will show that while the role and structure of navies was put under significant political and interservice pressure during the early years of the Cold War, the traditional role of navies endured.

At the end of WWII, the US possessed the largest navy in world history.¹ While the war in Europe ended with the defeat of the German Army and the capture of the German capital, Berlin, and the war in the Pacific ended with two nuclear bombs dropped on Japanese cities, maritime power was critical to Allied victory in World War II. The role of navies of the Allies included: convoy protection; defence of sea communications; and amphibious operations.

The industrial might of the United States saw it overtake Britain with the world's most powerful navy by the end of WWII.² While it is generally accepted that the Cold War

¹ Samuel Huntington. 'National Policy and the Transoceanic Navy', *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* 80, no. 5 (1954): p. 484.

² Ibid.

commenced in 1947, the role, size, and structure of the US Navy was under attack as early as 1945. A US Air Force officer is quoted by Huntington, "Why should we have a Navy at all? The Russians have little or no Navy, the Japanese Navy has been sunk....There are no enemies for it to fight....In this day and age to talk of fighting the next war on the oceans is a ridiculous assumption."³ For navies in general, but the US Navy in particular, the two key matters that they had to address in the early years of the Cold War were: the advent of nuclear weapons and, the emergence of the Soviet Union as the new enemy. The atomic bombs dropped on Japan were delivered by US Army Airforce planes and improvement in aircraft range led air power strategists and politicians to believe that the atomic bomb would decide the outcome of future wars. These bombs would be delivered from the air, minimising the role of the Navy in any future war. The concept of mutually assured destruction, where both belligerents possessed nuclear weapons and effectively stopped the use of nuclear weapons in war, only developed in the 1950s after the USSR developed its own nuclear weapons. As a result, a future nuclear war dominated defence thinking in the US with the Air Force being the preferred delivery service in the late 1940s.⁴

The USSR had no offensive naval fleet in the early Cold War, and it became clear that any war to defeat it would primarily be fought on the ground in Europe, or with nuclear weapons. The US Army and Airforce made up most of the NATO troops permanently based in Europe as security against the possibility of a Soviet invasion of Western Europe. According to some, there would be no role for the triphibious force of aircraft carriers, attack aircraft, embarked marines and landing craft that had developed in the Pacific theatre in WWII.⁵ There was

³ Ibid.

⁴ George Baer. *One Hundred Years of Sea Power: The U. S. Navy, 1890-1990*. Stanford, CA : Stanford University Press , 1996, pp. 276-277.

⁵ Ibid, p. 275.

pressure for naval aviation to be transferred to the newly formed US Air Force and for the Marines to be moved to the Army. Naval officers argued against that change and for a diverse Navy on the basis that the readiness of this combined force within the Navy was higher than could be delivered by the Air Force or Army who needed to establish forward bases prior to being ready, whereas the carrier groups were always ready.⁶ One scenario held that in the case of war in Europe, the USSR would quickly defeat the combined NATO armies and the US would withdraw to Spain, the UK and North Africa, and rebuild for a counter-offensive in a similar scenario to WWII. To do this a very strong Navy, based on carrier groups would be required, to evacuate troops from Europe and for the subsequent invasion.⁷

As it became clear that the USSR was building a capable submarine capability, the US Navy argued that anti-submarine warfare was critical to sea control, and that this task was not suited to land-based aviation and required the anti-submarine warfare capability of naval aviation.⁸ The continued need for power projection capability by naval forces became apparent as early as August 1946 when a carrier group based on the *USS Franklin D. Roosevelt* was deployed to the eastern Mediterranean to counter a Soviet buildup on the Turkish border. In this case the US Navy assumed the role of ensuring freedom of navigation of sea lanes that had previously been the role of the Royal Navy.⁹

On the other side of the Atlantic, the Royal Navy faced similar challenges. The Second World War had significantly damaged Britain economically, and like America, it was looking for a peace dividend by limiting military and naval expenditure. The British Admiralty assessed that

⁶ Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power: The U. S. Navy, 1890-1990*, p. 280.

⁷ Joel J. Sokolsky. *Seapower in the Nuclear Age: The United States Navy 1949-80*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 3.

⁸ Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power: The U. S. Navy, 1890-1990*, p. 280.

⁹ Ibid, p. 283.

the role of the post-war Navy would remain as it had been in previous centuries. In peace, the Navy would prepare for war and have the strength to deter aggression as well as supporting British foreign policy. In fighting a war, “the Navy would have to destroy enemy sea and air forces, defend imperial sea communications, attack enemy sea communications and co-operate with the other services in amphibious operations.”¹⁰ Like in the USA, critics argued that in a future nuclear war with the USSR, the Royal Navy’s role in the protection of sea communications would be reduced and therefore the large carrier groups would not be required.¹¹

The 1954 ‘Salisbury Committee’ was tasked with writing a defence policy that took account of the advent of nuclear weapons but also reduced defence spending by 10%. The policy required the services to structure for the role of deterrence in the Cold War rather than being ready and capable to fight a hot war from its outset. There was pressure on the Navy’s aviation capability where significant savings could be made and the capability taken up by the RAF and nuclear weapons. The Admiralty made strong submissions that naval aviation was an essential capability needed to perform deterrence and support limited war as well as the defence of sea communications.¹² These arguments were eventually accepted by the government and aviation survived in the Royal Navy.¹³

Other European countries played lesser roles in maritime affairs in the early Cold War. The Germans and Italians had to reposition their countries as part of the West after being the enemies during WWII, while France, the Netherlands, and Belgium largely confined their

¹⁰ Benbow, Tim. “The Royal Navy and Sea Power in British Strategy, 1945–55.” *Historical Research : The Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 91, no. 252 (2018): 375–98. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2281.12216>. p. 377.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 393.

¹² Edward Hampshire, ‘The Battle for CVA01’ in *British Naval Aviation: The First 100 Years*, eds. Dr. Tim. Benbow, Professor Greg. Kennedy, and Dr. Jon. Robb-Webb. Farnham : Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2013. p. 125.

¹³ Benbow, “The Royal Navy and Sea Power in British Strategy, 1945–55.” p. 396.

navies to defensive and direct support roles and left the control of sea communications to the Americans and the British.¹⁴

In the early years of the Cold War, the Soviet Navy faced similar challenges to that of its former allies in the USA and UK. The Soviet economy was in a parlous state and the money needed to rebuild the navy was in short supply. The primary role for the Soviet Navy was “to provide the state with a credible defense against any possible seaborne attack.”¹⁵ The Soviet Navy had no capable aircraft carriers in the early years of the Cold War and no funded plans to build any that would be required to construct a balanced naval force. While relatively secure on its land border with the West in Eastern Europe, the USSR believed that it remained vulnerable to amphibious assault in the Baltic and Black Seas.¹⁶ To counter this threat submarines and airpower were required. A capable submarine force was built using captured German technology and Soviet technological innovation. Airpower was restricted to airfields however, due to the lack of aircraft carriers.¹⁷ Though less capable than the US Navy, the Soviet Navy posed a real threat to sea communications in the event of a conventional war in Europe. The Soviet navy sent MiG-15 and crews to the Korean War where they fought in aerial combat against US Navy and Airforce aircraft.

Conditioned by two total wars in their lifetimes, and the future threat of a nuclear war, British and American policymakers paid little attention to the prospect of limited war and the role for navies in limited war in the first years of the Cold War. The Korean War, starting in 1950, changed that, with the US Navy as well as the Royal Navy and Commonwealth allied navies

¹⁴ Till, Geoffrey, ‘Holding the Bridge in Troubled Times: The Cold War and the Navies of Europe’ (2005) 28(2) *Journal of Strategic Studies* 309.

¹⁵ Christopher C. Lovett. ‘The Soviet Cold War Navy’ in *The Military History of the Soviet Union*, eds. Robin Higham, and Frederick W. Kagan. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Accessed September 25, 2024. ProQuest Ebook Central, p. 238.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 239

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 239.

playing a significant role in that war from offensive air and naval gunfire support to ground forces, over-the-shore logistics to the significant amphibious operations such as the landing at Inchon.¹⁸

With hindsight, it is possible to reflect that the role of navies changed little in the early years of the Cold War. Defending sea communications and power projection remained key roles for navies during the early years of the Cold War and beyond. Paradoxically, the proliferation of nuclear weapons prevented their use, and the predicted demise of navies in favour of air-delivered nuclear weapons failed to occur. Despite attacks on their role and funding, the US Navy and the Royal Navy survived and kept their naval aviation assets and amphibious capability.

Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power: The U. S. Navy, 1890-1990*, pp. 322-24.

Bibliography

Baer, George W. *One Hundred Years of Sea Power : The U. S. Navy, 1890-1990* . Stanford, CA : Stanford University Press, 1996.

Benbow, Tim. “The Royal Navy and Sea Power in British Strategy, 1945–55.” *Historical Research : The Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 91, no. 252 (2018): 375–98. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2281.12216>.

Hampshire, Edward. ‘The Battle for CVA01’ in *British Naval Aviation: The First 100 Years*, eds. Dr. Tim. Benbow, Professor Greg. Kennedy, and Dr. Jon. Robb-Webb. Farnham : Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2013. p. 125.

Lovett, Christopher C. ‘The Soviet Cold War Navy’ in *The Military History of the Soviet Union*, eds. Robin Higham, and Frederick W. Kagan. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Accessed September 25, 2024. ProQuest Ebook Central, p. 238.

Samuel Huntington. ‘National Policy and the Transoceanic Navy’. *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* 80, no. 5 (1954).

Sokolsky, Joel, J. *Seapower in the Nuclear Age: The United States Navy 1949-80*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991.

Till, Geoffrey. “Holding the Bridge in Troubled Times: The Cold War and the Navies of Europe.” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 2 (2005): 309–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390500088379>.