

Admiral: New Maritime Strategy's 'Control of the Seas' Compares Well to Cold War Maritime Strategy



Rear Adm. James Bynum, shown here at a 2018 change of command ceremony. U.S. Navy / Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Diana Quinlan

ARLINGTON, Va. – The new tri-service maritime strategy released Dec. 17 by the chiefs of the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard pivots toward the great power competition that has been building up in recent years, and aspects of the strategy bear substantial resemblance to the Maritime Strategy of the 1980s put in place by the Navy at the height of the Cold War, a Navy admiral said.

The new strategy, Advantage at Sea, “places particular focus on China and Russia due to their increasing maritime aggressiveness, demonstrated intent to dominate key international waters and clear desire to remake the international order in their favor,” the three service chiefs, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Michael M. Gilday, Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David H. Berger, and Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Karl L. Schultz, wrote in the strategy’s forward.

“China’s and Russia’s revisionist approaches in the maritime environment threaten U.S. interests, undermine alliances and partnerships, and degrade the free and open international order,” the service chiefs said. “Moreover, China’s and Russia’s aggressive naval growth and modernization are eroding U.S. military advantages.”

With nearly 20 years of U.S. active combat in counter-insurgency warfare – mostly on and overland in Southwest Asia

– apparently winding down, the U.S. military is now focusing on the growing military prowess of China and increasing activity by Russia. China’s navy, plus a large coast guard and a naval militia, have grown in size and capability and are increasingly assertive, particularly in the waters adjacent to China, the East and South China Seas. China and Russia have developed and continue to develop missiles that threaten U.S. and allied naval forces in the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean and island bases such as those in Guam and Okinawa.

One of the five major aspects of the new strategy is “focusing on controlling the seas – which is returning to our past,” said Rear Adm. James Bynum, acting deputy chief of naval operations for Warfare Development, speaking to reporters during a Dec. 17 teleconference on the new strategy.

Asked by *Seapower* to compare the new strategy to the Maritime Strategy put in place in 1987 by then-Navy Secretary John Lehman, Bynum said “They compare very well, better than [they] contrast.”

Lehman’s Maritime Strategy emphasized maritime power as a key counter to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. With Soviet military power focused on a potential land campaign in Europe, Lehman proposed using the Navy to be ready to strike the Soviet homeland from the peripheral seas, greatly complicating and widening – encircling – the Soviet Union’s defense of its territory. With Soviet naval might also growing, Lehman also began a build-up of a 600-ship navy, a growth that was nearly achieved in full – 594 ships – before the fleet began to decline in number of ships after the end of the Cold War.

One of the key tenets here is the return to the thought process of control of the seas,” Bynum said. “We were just coming out of the Vietnam era where we had free, unfettered access to support operations in land-based warfare. We’re coming off of a similar though much more prolonged set of time in the Middle East. As we look away from that and acknowledge

there are global comprehensive actors out there where we no longer enjoy assured access in the sea, and assured access to the sea today because of those places where we need to go to confront those malign actors.

“I think that compares greatly with secretary Lehman’s thought processes and, frankly, some of that mindset shifted after what [then-Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Elmo] Zumwalt endured at the tail end of the Vietnam era as he had to reshape the forces,” Bynum said. “So, I think you will see in a lot of those strains that the power of the naval services is to provide access to the joint force.”