US Naval Strategy Toward Northeast Asia: Past, Present, and Futures

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Abstract

The history of the United States' role in Asian affairs bears a distinct maritime and naval legacy. In turn, that history contributed significantly to the emergence of a US naval tradition. Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries these two facets interacted in momentous ways, transforming the United States into a Pacific power. US strategy toward the region throughout the Second World War, the Cold War, and today's post-Cold War era has been markedly maritime in nature, despite the prominence of two major land wars in Korea and Vietnam. Although the post-Cold War era has broadened US security policy in sometimes controversial ways, and the US Navy has adapted to these changes, the Asia-Pacific region has not shed its maritime character. While part of larger global shifts, US policies toward its two Northeast Asian allies in Japan and South Korea—with China looming in the background—have retained echoes of the former Cold War and harbored hints of a potential new Cold War. There are heightened prospects for US-ROK, US-Japan, and ROK-Japan naval cooperation.

However, those prospects are influenced by the chances for ROK-DPRK tension reduction (perhaps leading to unification) and by shifting priorities within the evolving defense policies of the US, Japan, the ROK, and the PRC. If the three Asian states pursue relatively bold and innovative security policies, it could have serious consequences for the conventional wisdom regarding US policy in Asia.
American strategy toward the Asia-Pacific region emphasizes Northeast Asia because of the prominence of the United States’ two regional allies—Japan and South Korea—and the growing US concern about China’s potentials. An important component of that overall strategic posture is the role of the US Navy in the region. This article shall evaluate the history, current status of, and future prospects for history and current status of, and future prospects for, US naval strategy toward the Northeast Asian sub-region of the Asia-Pacific. Use of the plural “futures” is intentional, signaling that alternative scenarios for US naval policy shall be explored. However, application of the phrase “US Naval Strategy” is far more appropriate for the past than it is for the contemporary era or any vision of the future because of the ways in which the post–Cold War era has created an emphasis on jointness within US national strategy. Although the thrust of this analysis shall be on contemporary and prospective uses of the US Navy in Northeast Asia, it is worthwhile starting with the origins of US naval involvement in this portion of the Pacific.

Prior to launching this analysis two disclaimers are in order. First, the views expressed here do not represent the position of the US Navy or any other agency of the US government. Secondly, and very salient in light of the approach taken in this analysis, I wish to emphasize that my qualifications for writing it do not include being either a naval historian or a naval strategist. Rather, my specialty is East Asian politics with a strong interest in international affairs and what is loosely described as “grand strategy.” This paper is written from that perspective and, for the former approach, the reader is urged to consult the writings of qualified naval strategists who happen to be turning their attention to the Asia-Pacific region.

1 In addition to the author’s previous books and articles that addressed US “grand strategy” in Asia, a recently completed volume, Grand Exit Strategy: U.S. National Defense for the 21st Century, is forthcoming (London: Frank Cass Publishers).