

The Trident Returns

Reactivating the U.S. Second Fleet and Revitalizing Anti-Submarine Warfare in the Atlantic

Admiral Gary Roughead, U.S. Navy (Retired)

The reactivation of the U.S. Second Fleet on August 24, 2018, is a prudent and timely recognition of again having to deal with an increasingly capable and assertive near-peer Russian navy in the operational space of the Atlantic Ocean and its critical sea-lanes linking the United States to its NATO allies. The Second Fleet's return also resets the U.S. Navy's command organization in the Atlantic so that it is better aligned to generate and oversee the operational readiness of naval forces in what is and will be a complex, demanding and active environment.

Raising the Second Fleet flag again is not what matters; it's what the headquarters will do that will make the difference.

Acknowledge Capability Atrophy and Operational Realities. U.S. and NATO naval forces have diminished and atrophied—from their exercising and training capabilities to honing the necessary skills and conditioning for future operational demands, especially when it comes to theater anti-submarine warfare (ASW) in the Atlantic. For nearly two decades, the U.S. military has focused on fighting conflicts in Afghanistan and the Middle East. While the United States must remain present and vigilant in the region, Russia's assertive behavior, investments in its navy, and technological competence require us to look anew at the Atlantic.

Deal with Reality. The size of the Atlantic has not changed, but the U.S. and NATO navies are much smaller than they were during the Cold War. There is always a tendency to highlight and hope what the force will be, but the Fleet must work with what it has. ASW is a complex and high-intensity operational requirement. It is a mix of art and science. This expertise was regionally focused on the Atlantic Ocean and honed to a fine edge in the Cold War, but today, there is limited recognition of both the difficulty and grinding pace of theater ASW. The first step the United States and NATO must take is to conduct a brutally honest assessment of current ASW forces, weapons, and expertise. These forces,

organizations, and people must be assigned where they are most valuable and effective. Ship, submarine, and aircraft squadron leadership, operational headquarters, and training cadre are the front line of ASW and must be a priority. If it means having the best leaders and operators forego a coveted joint assignment, so be it.

Embrace Technology but Don't Bet the Farm on Power Point. Advancing ASW technology has not been the U.S. Navy's highest priority. The Fleet should assess quickly what technology exists and where the best work (e.g., government laboratories, universities, and private sector) is being done for the Atlantic's operational environment. Similar to the force structure assessment called for above, there must be an equally brutal assessment of the current work being done and the competence and experience of scientific talent in U.S. and NATO government research labs and centers. The efforts of those organizations must be focused on what is operationally driven rather than research for research's sake. Such a review should also assess, and alter as necessary, the processes for sharing information and collaborating on cutting-edge technologies with our NATO allies that are often inhibited by technology transfer rules that remain anchored in a different time. The Second Fleet Commander and the China-focused Seventh Fleet Commander must be a combined, forceful, coherent voice for research and engineering priorities, as well as cooperation and collaboration in all aspects of ASW.

Bring the Best Operators and Thinkers Together to Develop a Handful of Operational ASW Concepts. The concepts must reflect current U.S. and NATO force capabilities, as well as capacity and variations on availability and commitment. Past is often prologue, so a good place to begin the creative journey is the Maritime Strategy and the good, rigorous analytical work that CNA conducted in the 1980s. It is important to remember that the United States and NATO believed they were at a disadvantage to the Soviet navy back then too.

Model and Simulate Operational Concepts. The operational concepts should take advantage of the extraordinary advances in modeling and simulation, which have not been applied aggressively to complex ASW. As the operational concepts are taking form, it will be vital to simultaneously build the supporting models to be as efficient as possible.

Scrimmage the Teams with the Game Plans. Much like how top athletic teams condition with "two-a-days," The Second Fleet and NATO should conduct "two-a-year" war games at the Naval War College to test, cull, and refine operational concepts as well as organizational options and technology priorities. The analysis following these games should influence future training syllabi, prioritize procurement and research, and inform future simulation and live at-sea training.

Practice Makes Perfect. What are the training ranges, simulators, and availability of representative target submarines that will be part of the training? And if they don't exist, how can they most quickly, effectively, and efficiently be produced? Furthermore, you must practice where you are going to play. For instance, the North Atlantic in winter is not the same as the Persian Gulf. The Fleet must operate for extended periods in the high latitudes on ASW focused deployment; just passing through will not adequately condition the force. This should be reflected in the U.S. Navy's upcoming Arctic strategy.

Be Ready to Pay the Price. We must acknowledge that revitalizing ASW in the Atlantic is a substantial investment in capability that cannot be achieved under current funding

levels. The Fleet must tally the bill, and the U.S. and NATO navies must take the decision to invest to win.

Gary Roughead is a former United States Navy officer who served as the 29th Chief of Naval Operations from September 29, 2007, to September 22, 2011. He previously served as commander of the United States Fleet Forces Command and as the 31st commander of the United States Pacific Fleet. He retired from the U.S. Navy after 38 years of service.

Expert Reactions

Even More Demanding Than During the Cold War

In his article “The Trident Returns,” Admiral Gary Roughead points out that the Second Fleet’s major task will be to reestablish a credible ASW capability in the North Atlantic. This is a viewpoint shared by several of my colleagues in Europe.

The potential threat posed by a modern submarine today is far greater and more diverse compared to 20 years ago. However, our capabilities and skills to hunt for submarines in the North Atlantic have diminished.

The establishment of Joint Force Command Norfolk/US 2FL is an acknowledgment of this threat potential, and at the same time, raises expectations that our capacity within ASW will improve. Fewer ships and aircrafts coupled with more quiet submarines make the ASW challenge in the North Atlantic even more demanding than during the Cold War. It is paramount that NATO nations work together to improve this warfighting area.

I fully support the areas that Admiral Roughead points to as vital for improving our capability. ASW has always been a combination of technology, skills, and experience. In the short term, the emphasis needs to be put on improving our existing capabilities. In this regard, practicing ASW in a relevant and demanding environment is key to improving our skills.

Technology development will, however, be the most important field to secure an adequate capability for the future. Undoubtedly, Admiral Roughead has a very good point at the end—revitalizing our ASW capability does not come for free.

– Admiral Haakon Bruun-Hanssen, Norwegian Chief of Defense (NOR CHOD)

A Clarion Call to Action

Admiral Roughead’s “to do list” for the new Second Fleet Commander and NATO’s Maritime Commander is a clarion call to action. Since the so-called end of the Cold War, all NATO nations paid little attention to the advancement of ASW, having been distracted by far more immediate threats in the Middle East and Afghanistan as well as shrinking military budgets. While our collective eyes have been off the ball, both Russia and China have invested significantly in both submarine research and new platforms as well as ASW capability.

We would do well to remember that the ultimate success of the ASW engagement with the Soviets in the latter half of the twentieth century hinged on the attention that wise heads had earlier directed concentrated efforts toward ASW investment, research, and training. This underpinned the timely development of battle-winning equipment and operational techniques. We also had the advantage—over a period of time—to hone our training and operations to develop teams with live, hands-on experience in the art of ASW craft.

Today, we no longer have such a deep pool of experience, and it is a truism that you can't teach experience. New technologies are worthy of investment, but as the essay suggests, such research should be operationally driven for we simply do not have time for unfocused academic research.

It is not too late for either the Second Fleet or the maritime nations of NATO to reassess their priorities and pay closer attention to the new realities of a modern submarine threat. While no single element, I surmise, can do the trick on its own, all the strands put forward by Admiral Roughead—combined with matching funding—is a bold and necessary first step.

– Admiral Sir Mark Stanhope GCB OBE DL (Former First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff)

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