The United States Navy is facing numerous challenges today, but the basic test of its continued relevance as a military organization can be summed up in a short statement: To provide, project and sustain superior seapower in an era of renewed and, most likely, prolonged great power rivalry. The service has faced comparable tests in the past, most recently during the Cold War – from which this chapter will attempt to distill some valuable lessons for naval analysis – and the period between the world wars. For the present generation of naval leaders and thinkers, however, a renewed focus on competing successfully against a highly capable opponent marks a significant departure. Certainly, maintaining a steady-state forward naval presence on a global scale, making meaningful contributions to the nation’s wars of choice, training for a broad range of missions often bearing little resemblance to naval warfare, and safeguarding the “organizational essence”\(^1\) of the service in times of strategic confusion all present significant challenges. Over the past 30 years, the U.S. Navy has become proficient at managing the uneasy balance between these conflicting goals. But it has also unlearned other, less “fungible”\(^2\) skills in the process – primarily those relating to serious militarized competition at sea. For all the hard work that is required to run the world’s leading navy during a strategic “interregnum,”\(^3\) primacy comes relatively easily when no one is making a serious attempt to challenge it.

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The environment in which the U.S. Navy finds itself today no longer conforms to this now-familiar paradigm. Unhelpfully, the challenge of reconciling numerous diverging priorities has not gone away. The level of external competitive pressures, however, is now on a different level than at any time since the mid-1980s. The Chief of Naval Operations’ updated Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority is plain-spoken in this regard:

China and Russia are deploying all elements of their national power to achieve their global ambitions. […] In many cases, they are gaining a competitive advantage and exploiting our vulnerabilities. Their activity suggests that Eurasia could once again be dominated by rivals of the United States, our allies, and partners. China and Russia seek to accumulate power at America’s expense and may imperil the diplomatic, economic, and military bonds that link the United States to its allies and partners. While rarely rising to the level of conflict, Chinese and Russian actions are frequently confrontational. And these actions are not only directed at the United States: China and Russia seek to redefine the norms of the entire international system on terms more favorable to themselves.

While high-level strategy documents coming out of the administration of Donald Trump have made this case with characteristic outspokenness, these are no longer very controversial points. For much of the last decade, both China and Russia have been engaging in what Jakub Grygiel and Wess Mitchell describe as “probing behavior” to test American resolve. At the same time, they have been acquiring military capabilities to offset and erode the United States’ military advantage – not least of all, its ability to project power at and from the sea. There is much to do, and not much time, if the U.S. Navy is it to parry and eventually overcome these chal-

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The first step in any such effort to maintain maritime superiority, however, should be to properly understand them.

It is this crucial first step which the present chapter will seek to address, primarily by leveraging historical insight. It will first try to pin down the task the U.S. Navy currently faces and link it to our desideratum: to get the opponent right, from the outset if possible. In the second step, it will outline a narrative, centered roughly on the first decade and a half of the Cold War at sea (1946-1960). In the third and final step, we will attempt to distill from this first phase of the Cold War at sea a number of anchor points for future analysis. As such, this chapter can perhaps be read as a modest supplement to Peter Swartz’s well-received 2013 CNA report on *Understanding an Adversary’s Strategic and Operational Calculus*, a treasure trove of valuable lessons from the latter part of the Cold War story. The basic premise of that report was that we can “gain insights that will help us understand [the strategic and operational calculus of 21st century adversaries] by examining similar cases from the past.” The premise of the present chapter, which I believe the author of the original report would share, is that by examining the past, we can also become better analysts.

Finally, the chapter may perhaps also serve as a reminder of how, even three decades after the passing of the Soviet naval challenge, a surprising amount of work remains to be done to fully understand this past challenge. As one generation of analysts lays down the mantle, as far as the trappings of official status are concerned, this chapter is also meant to provide some small assurance of others’ intention to carry on where they left off.

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9 Ibid., 1.
In October 1992, the U.S. Navy gave itself a capstone document for the post-Cold War era, written to “achieve a new consensus” on what the service’s purpose should be, now that the Soviet Union was gone. If ‘...From the Sea’ did not, in a formal sense, survive for very long among the flurry of service- and national-level defense reviews of the 1990s, its main ideas – the laser focus on the littoral, the elevation of strike warfare and expeditionary operations, and the reduction of sea control to a third-rate concern – became well entrenched over the following two decades. Over time, the Navy continued to deemphasize its more ‘traditional’ missions to the point some had largely turned into folklore. This tendency arguably found its culmination in the ‘postmodern’ grand design of the 2007 Cooperative Strategy for the 21st Century – an intellectually brilliant take on a global maritime system which might have been, had great power relations not taken a definite turn for the worse.

Conversely, James Holmes has described the updated version of A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority as a “bureaucratic sledgehammer” wielded by the then-CNO, Adm. John Richardson, in a determined “effort to repeal ‘... From the Sea’” and, presumably, most of what followed. With potential challengers – one of them clearly a rising power, the other in decline but consistently punching above its weight in recent years – josting for position, the Navy has turned its back on the debates of the last several decades and reembraced a set of priorities that have a deeply unfamiliar ring to them. As they showed their true colors, the revisionist powers have effectively reminded Western naval thinkers of a truth so basic that the need to restate it at all tells a story in its own right. The most natural task of a navy, according to this recent rediscovery, is not to conduct finely tuned public diplomacy, engage in disaster relief, bomb insurgents in Toyota Hilux trucks, or even to steady the nerves of twitchy allies,
but to prepare to wage war at sea. A navy’s value as a political instrument that deters, reassures, and supports others is not an intrinsic property of its being, we learn, nor bestowed upon it by some indiscernible higher power – rather, it hinges on the organization’s credibility as a maritime fighting force. It is ironic that Edward Luttwak should have made the same point in his classic 1974 treatise *The Political Uses of Sea Power*, which has often been cited in support of a self-serving mythology of seapower as an inherently more ‘political’ form of military power:

[T]he perceived balance of forces that determines the outcome of “peacetime” confrontations can only be construed [...] in terms of the predicted outcomes of putative battles, and it is such predictions that determine political attitudes and, therefore, decisions. [...] Unless actual fighting erupts, the interplay of potential military power in the conduct of relations between states is resolved only by the interaction of such predictions. \(^{15}\)

To take this thought to its logical conclusion, a navy that excels at secondary tasks, but not visibly and credibly poised to fulfil its original responsibility to the nation, lives in fear of being exposed for what it is: one very expensive paper tiger.

As is evident from *A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority* and other recent public pronouncements, the U.S. Navy is now fully aware that it must regain its capacity to “control the high end of maritime conflict.” \(^{16}\) It may not be enough, however, to approach a long-term strategic rivalry – which, by definition, involves an identified ‘other’ – by focusing on generic warfighting capability. Drawn deeper into such a rivalry, the antagonists will find themselves under increasing pressure to adapt their force postures to the specific threats they each face and match their strengths to an opponent’s weaknesses. The U.S. Navy’s observable tendency over the last seventy years or so has been to react to these pressures with the utmost pragmatism, steering well clear of accidentally and unpalatably reinventing itself. As Carl Builder remarks in his merciless study of *The Masks of War*, “[the] Navy does not need analysis to define its requirements; it has always

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known what its requirements were.”¹⁷ In turn, this has led the service to focus on solving successive narrow problem sets best described as “technological-tactical”¹⁸ in nature. With the big picture largely resolved by sincerely held convictions of what a ‘proper navy’ should look like, the service’s efforts to read its potential adversaries and arrive at an accurate understanding of their capabilities and intentions have frequently taken a back seat. As a result, the Navy has all too often allowed itself to prepare for war against a convenient caricature of its opponent.

This danger exists today, much as in the past. John Hattendorf has written that “[i]n contrast to officers in other branches of service, naval officers, by and large, have tended to ignore the value of and advantages to be found in historical insight.”¹⁹ As today’s generation of naval leaders opens a new chapter in developing their organization, they should not hesitate to fully embrace the margin of flexibility that is implied in his formulation. If the service is to steer clear of well-charted but perhaps forgotten shoals at the dawn of this new era of great power rivalry, a look at the map might be the best starting point. The trajectory of the U.S. Navy’s analytical effort during the Cold War era is particularly instructive in this regard.

What ‘Third Battle’? How the Navy got it wrong in 1946-1960

The main premise of this chapter is simple: looking at some of the vexing difficulties of interpretation that analysts faced during a previous period, which also featured rapid technological change and intensifying competitive pressure, can – and should – serve to stimulate debate in our time. Regrettably, however, many of the best treatments of the Cold War at sea have focused on the latter part of the confrontation, when official assessments of the Soviet Navy’s capabilities and intentions improved very considerably.²⁰ Much less attention has been devoted to a more pertinent question: how the U.S. Navy got its opponent wrong in the first place. The re-

¹⁸ Haynes (2015), 81.
The remainder of the chapter will attempt to partially explain this deficit by examining why the U.S. Navy’s effort did not accurately understand the Soviet Navy during the first phase of the competition, from 1946-1960, and how such an outcome might be avoided in the strategic rivalries that are likely to shape great power relations the coming decades.

The U.S. Navy entered the Cold War very much in a state of transition. In August 1945, it had stood victorious, at the height of its power. Within less than a year, the wartime force had been largely dismembered in one of the most radical demobilizations ever undertaken. Of 6768 ships in the active force on V-J-day, roughly 18 per cent remained in the inventory by mid-1946. By mid-1948, the number of major combatants had fallen to 291 ships, the number of aircraft dropped 76 per cent from the wartime maximum, and serving naval personnel had been cut by 87 per cent to 475,000. At the same time, the United States’ naval mastery was now completely uncontested, with no rivals in sight as far as the eye could see. In turning the tide in the Atlantic and convincingly defeating Imperial Japan in the Pacific, the Navy had eliminated its own intellectual reason for being – or so it seemed at that moment. George Baer aptly summarizes the train of thought that must have featured prominently in naval officers’ anxious dreams during these early Cold War days:

Absent a maritime enemy, and with air-atomic warfare the apparent mode of the future, the Navy did not have a mission. The Navy’s offensive sea-control doctrine had become irrelevant. The force supporting the doctrine could be demobilized or transferred. History had passed the offensive Navy by. The service should return to its pre-Mahanian task of patrol. […] The [Army Air Forces] should take over carrier air

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and the Army should take over the Marine Corps. [...] In a war of the future the Navy would be a support service.23

In the unhelpful context of the post-war debate about defense unification, wherein the Navy could be reduced to providing sealift and, perhaps, a perfunctory presence on the high seas, this was an existential threat to its organizational essence, at the heart of which stood carrier air power. Against the backdrop of this potentially dire situation, the Navy began to refocus its operational planning for a possible confrontation with the Soviet Union.

By early 1946, the Cold War confrontation was getting into gear, although considerable uncertainties remained at the time as to how the U.S. would approach its fledgling rivalry with the newly instated Communist bloc. There was little doubt, however, that the Soviet Union would be the center of gravity of American national military strategy. On the Eurasian landmass, the implications of the Soviet Union’s post-war activities were unmistakable: While any territorial buffer in Eastern Europe would result in a significant improvement of his strategic situation, Stalin would happily gobble up whatever the Western powers were not prepared to defend. He would do this not because he was seeking world domination at any cost, but because he was “[r]uthless and opportunistic”24 in his pursuit of the Soviet Union’s perceived core interests. To ensure the long-term survival of the Soviet experiment, he intended to build a “fortress”25 and any addition to the “wide buffer zone of pro-Soviet states”26 was welcome. Haunted by what Vladimir Pechnatov calls the “Barbarossa syndrome”27 and fully aware of the terrible price their country had paid for letting down its guard, Stalin and his coterie reverted to a defense strategy reminiscent of Imperial Russia and other past continental empires.28 For them,  

28 Ibid., 92.
no defense could ever be deep enough but, at the same time, no amount of additional depth was worth initiating another great power war. In its pursuit of continental security, the post-war Soviet Union was brutally expansionist and defensive, brazen and prudently self-restrained – all at the same time and without any great dissemblance. Without the insurmountable ideological chasm and the difficulty of stepping outside their incongruous oceanic mindset, U.S. defense planners might have paused their pursuit of a vast military infrastructure for forward defense on a global scale and seen in their opponents’ preoccupations a glimpse of their own “Pearl Harbor syndrome” sensibilities.

While the Soviet approach for territorial security could be readily observed, its implications at sea were inevitably more ambiguous. What role would the Soviet Navy play? Would it be “little more than a faithful handmaiden to the army” as during the Great Patriotic War? Or would it follow in the wreckage-strewn wake of the German Kriegsmarine and challenge the Western maritime powers’ undisputed command of the sea? For the U.S. Navy of the early Cold War, finding the ‘right’ answer to these questions was not primarily a matter of sifting through limited evidence, but about finding a role that would allow it to repossess the sunlit uplands of organizational relevance. Because any attempt to usurp the Air Force’s atomic mission of hitting Soviet ‘strategic’ targets would draw its unqualified wrath, the Navy’s only real chance of crowbarring into the all-important nuclear enterprise was by focusing on naval targets. Therefore, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that it had to be the Soviet Navy and, seeing as its surface force and naval aviation could barely qualify as a speedbump even vis-à-vis the much-diminished U.S. Navy of the late 1940s, it had to be the submarine threat that it could potentially pose.

The man to create an operational concept along those lines was, of course, Chester Nimitz’s brilliant wartime Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans, VADM Forrest Sherman. As Deputy CNO for Operations in 1946-47, he

31 Barlow (1994), 115-117.
held the Navy to the tradition of forward deployment and offensive operations. He preserved the Navy’s diversity of functions and forces. He kept carriers at the core of his planning and proposed that they be given the option of delivering conventional or atomic weapons. All this he presented in the name of sea control and as an alternative to the big-bang plan of air enthusiasts. Deep air strikes, with or without atomic capability, thus became part of a sea-control strategy for a forward deployed, offensive, fleet Navy, a strategy that preserve the centrality of the aircraft carrier.33

The threat to sea control to justify this was the Soviet long-range, high-speed diesel submarine and its infrastructure. The solution, Sherman famously declared, “is high emphasis on attack at the sources of the trouble.”34 By turning submarines primarily into a land-based target set, and strike warfare a means into offensive sea control, the Navy preserved its organizational essence and found itself a nuclear role. There is more than just one bureaucratic lesson from this ‘reframing’ masterclass. The one desirable outcome it did not result in was good analysis of the Soviet submarine problem.

The reasoning behind U.S. estimates

During the late 1940s, the Navy worked itself into a threat inflation frenzy, with analysts outdoing one another in how fast they expected the new long-range diesels to come of the production line. In 1946, Nimitz expected a fleet size of “several hundred”35 by the early 1950s. The Office of Naval Intelligence expected that the Soviets could build 300 by 1950 – a “conservative estimate”36. This was again increased to 1,000 boats inside a three-year period, which translates into a monthly build rate that would have left the Kriegsmarine green with envy during most of World War II.37 When none of this materialized by 1950, the expectation was corrected downward to 200 boats a year, which at this stage could almost pass for

33 Baer (1998), 289.
34 Palmer (1990), 33.
36 CAPT George R. Phelan, quoted in ibid., 165.
modesty. We now know that the Soviet Navy did not receive even a single modern, long-range diesel submarine during 1946-1952.

Based on the evidence that has come to light since, the actual build rates of Soviet diesel-electrics with the range to operate against transatlantic convoys west of the GIUK gap were probably as follows: in all of 1953, one, in 1954, four, in 1955, two, in 1956, eight, in 1957, ten, in 1958, three, in 1959, five, in 1960, six. Of those units, five were converted into primitive ballistic missile submarines. The Soviets did build a very large class of medium-range submarines – the Project 613 or Whiskey-class – that CIA analysts, who were less specialized but also more open-minded about the matter, later found “could not be effective against US sea lines of communication to Europe.” The ratio of medium- to long-range types was roughly 10:1.

This is not what a recipe for a Third Battle of the Atlantic should have looked like. But the reasoning that many early analyses of the Soviet submarine problem appear to have used was persuasive enough to allow even a good analyst to fall for it, in the absence of countervailing evidence:

- The Soviet Union’s actions so far had been expansionist, in line with its universalist ideology.
- If the observable behavior had been consistently offensive, probably the motivations behind it were offensive too.
- A nation with an offensive grand strategy would want the instruments for offensive action – including an offensively oriented navy.
- As a power with predominantly continental interests, limited recent naval experience, a backward surface force and facing a far more capable coalition of seapowers, the logical instrument for offensive naval action was the submarine.

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38 Ibid. Breemer, for one, believes that the Soviet shipyards were quite incapable of putting out such numbers. See Jan S. Breemer, Soviet Submarines: Design, Development and Tactics (Surrey: Jane’s Information Group, 1989), 80.
• Given its offensive strategy and availability of an advanced design (the captured German Type XXI), the main limitation for Soviet submarine construction would be industrial capacity, which could be roughly estimated.

• Expected construction equals maximum industrial output.

• How the Soviet Union would employ its submarine fleet was not known, but to U.S. planners was self-evident: “We would go for the sea lanes, and going for the sea lanes is what would hurt us most, so they will go for the sea lanes.”

The result, of course, would be that most frightening scenario: a Third Battle of the Atlantic, much like the one the U.S. Navy had recently fought alongside its Royal Navy and Royal Canadian Navy allies. A Soviet submarine campaign was the U.S. Navy’s original Cold War fear, later complemented by other, even more awe-inspiring scenarios, but never really resolved until the waning days of the confrontation. Had such a ‘Third Battle’ along the SLOCs fully materialized, NATO forces along the Central Front might have been starved of equipment, fuel, and personnel and thrown back into the sea. The theory, history and geopolitics of Western seapower all required that the Navy take such an eventuality seriously. In reality, this was a battle only one side was preparing for.

An alternative analysis

How do we know that this was the case? Given that submarine operations were then even more difficult to observe than they are today, and access to pertinent archival materials from the former Soviet Union remains difficult, there are two main approaches a naval analyst can rely on to test a superficially plausible argument creating a bad analytical outcome. The first is hardware analysis. In some form or other this is inescapable if we are to correlate theory – ‘ours’ and ‘theirs’ – with capability. The second is “liter-

41 This mirror-imaging logic is often implicit rather than explicit. One can, however, find statements to that effect. See, e.g. Joint Chiefs of Staff, “JSPG 496/10 – 11 May 1948 – Crankshaft,” From Crankshaft to Halfmoon vol. 7, ed. by Steven T. Ross and David Alan Rosenberg (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1989), 49. On mirror imaging, see also: Robert B. Bathurst, Intelligence and the Mirror: On Creating an Enemy (Oslo, London: Sage/PRIO, 1993).

ary intelligence”⁴³, which reached its apex in the hallowed halls of CNA during the 1970s. Both methods were available to early Cold War analysts, as was much (but not all) of the evidence we have today available to us. The aim here is not to rate the performance of a past generation of analysts, however, but to find out which questions we need to ask to prevent similar outcomes in the future.

Pairing Michael McCGwire’s excellent systematic for making sense of Soviet naval building programs with some other relevant data points, this is what a highly compressed version of an after-the-fact hardware analysis can tell us about Soviet submarine construction during 1946-1960:⁴⁴

- Assuming a lower-than-average “lead time”⁴⁵ of eight years for diesel submarines, the decisions to build the Zulu-class long-range submarine and the Whiskey-class medium-range submarine would have reflected requirements formulated during the Great Patriotic War.
- From the timeline and their main design features, we can conclude that both submarines reflected conservative Soviet design practices. Neither type was designed as ‘convoy killer’ along the lines of the German Type XXI. The Whiskey-class, in particular, was not designed for oceanic operations far out into the Atlantic.⁴⁶ The Soviet Navy was modernizing, but it certainly was not reinventing itself.
- The Stalin era modernization plan originally called, among other things, for a very large number of submarines.⁴⁷ The planned ratio between medium- and long-range units was 5:1, the observed ratio was 11:1. If the Soviet Navy was to operate against NATO’s lines of communication across the Atlantic, this was a criminally inefficient distribution of resources, even by Soviet standards.
- With only twenty-six units, of which five were converted, the Zulu-class production run was also much smaller than the average Soviet production batch for diesel submarines, which according to McCGwire’s analysis was “unlikely to be much less than 40 to 50.”⁴⁸
- The Soviet Navy’s ability to operate against the main SLOCs could have improved significantly with the mass production of an improved medi-

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⁴³ Swartz (2013), 37-42.
⁴⁵ Ibid., 180.
⁴⁶ Central Intelligence Agency (2017), 8.
⁴⁷ Polmar and Noot (1991), 140.
⁴⁸ McCGwire (1973), 182.
um-range type, the Project 633/Romeo. This program was cancelled in favor of nuclear construction, with only twenty units constructed for the Soviet Navy, many of which we can chalk up to what MccGwire calls “pipeline inertia”\textsuperscript{49}.

- The improved long-range type – Project 641 or Foxtrot-class – was a direct replacement for the Zulu, which was obsolescent even at the time of its introduction. Fifty-eight were built in an extended, fourteen-year production run. Only fourteen of those had been delivered by 1960, by which time construction had shifted to nuclear types that were turned out at a slower rate and in even lower numbers.

- It will be remembered that the Kriegsmarine’s stated requirement for a successful operation against the SLOCs was 300 boats, almost all of which would have been based on the Bay of Biscay with direct access to the operational area.\textsuperscript{50} Based on this more favorable geostrategic situation, the ratio between German medium-range (Type VII) and long-range (Type IX) production runs was roughly 4:1.

In other words, with a long-range SLOC interdiction campaign in mind, the numbers do not add up and neither does the logic. It is easy to see why this was the case, once we accept that Soviet submarine construction during 1946-1960 was geared towards a different end entirely: extended territorial defense at sea. This system of concentric defensive circles, which would eventually extended up to 1,000 nautical miles from the Soviet coast, is actually well documented in the open-source literature.\textsuperscript{51} The CIA’s analysts – decried as blissfully ignorant amateurs by naval intelligence, but relatively free from parochial service-level interests – ultimately arrived at the same conclusion.\textsuperscript{52} While Colonel Penkovsky’s indiscretions helped shape the early debate within the CIA in favor of a defensive interpretation of Soviet naval strategy,\textsuperscript{53} the feared counter-SLOC scenario of 1946-1960 could actually be taken apart simply by looking at numbers, distances, estimated ranges and endurance. ONI disagreed – on what exact basis, we still do not know. But, as of this writing, our conclusion on techni-

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 181.
\textsuperscript{52} Hattendorf (2004), 121-29.
cal and operational grounds should be that the U.S. Navy – and its allies – got it wrong. The fact that the overall narrative of the ‘Third Battle’ has not crumbled completely over the decades has something to tell us about the questions that should have been asked but were not.

Turning briefly to the limitations of ‘literary intelligence’, Soviet writings – which are often far from approachable – are predictably more ambiguous and more easily reinterpreted than hard empirical evidence. Soviet naval officers did at times mention long-range interdiction as a third or fourth priority, once the main missions had been accomplished. Others saw it as an alternative that should be pursued or as a desideratum for the future.54 Once we correlate these statements with other evidence, however, they barely make a difference: Even if orders of priority are reversed, oblique references collected and construed to form a superficially coherent picture, and the intentions of some restated as an organizational grand design, the case for long-range interdiction does not hold water. If the interest of the Soviet leadership had been in cutting the main SLOCs across the Atlantic, it would ultimately both have said so and enshrined this priority in a specialized building program. This is what would later happen with regard to the anti-carrier program and the SSBN “matching force,”55 which can both be traced with some confidence to political decisions reached in the late 1950s.56

To properly throw down the gauntlet, one can even expand this case against the ‘Third Battle’ analogy to encompass subsequent decades as well: There was never a phase of the Cold War at sea during which the Soviet Navy had a primary interest in interdicting NATO’s sea lines of communication west of the GIUK gap. To the extent that interdiction did come into play, it appears that the Soviet Navy fleetingly examined a possible focus on anti-SLOC capabilities in the mid-1970s.57 By that time, however, James McConnell, Bradford Dismukes and others were already tracing the more significant shift towards bastion defense – the same shift that ONI eventually embraced and that figures so prominently in the history of the Maritime Strategy.

54 Herrick, Soviet Naval Doctrine and Policy, vol. 1, 143-146.
The fear that the Soviet Navy might throw its best general-purpose submarines against the sea lanes if it was not given a good reason to keep them close at hand was, of course, plausible enough. In that sense, building submarines for bastion defense also added to the Soviet counter-SLOC potential. But it was never what those Shchukas, Liras and Shchuka-Bs were meant to do. Before a shift to a counter-SLOC concept could take hold, the U.S. Navy had already preempted it by way of the Maritime Strategy. The Soviet submarine force’s single-minded focus on SLOC interdiction had been born not in Moscow, Severomorsk or Vladivostok but in the minds of Western analysts who prudently worst-cased the threat using incomplete information – or who elected not to stir up any cognitive dissonance concerning such a basic matter, lest they leave their superiors in a state of profound irritation. Thus, the early assumption that the Soviet Navy was preparing for an all-out offensive against the SLOCs became “an article of faith” not just in ONI’s reporting, but also in Western naval thinking more broadly. Over time, it created analytical path dependencies that put mainstream treatments of the Soviet naval challenge off the scent for the best part of three decades.

The full account of the Soviet Navy’s strategic role and operational preferences is still waiting to be unearthed in Russian archives – quite possibly by historians who have not yet been born, given the political direction the country has taken. Ultimately, the innermost logic of this seemingly hermetic organization is perhaps best unlocked not by studying its pronouncements or its artifacts, but the temperament of its commanders. Sergey Georgyevich Gorshkov, despite his ideological orthodoxy and bureaucratic ambition, was not a fanciful man. Throughout the decades of his tenure, the limiting factors remained the same – distances, numbers, shortcomings of materiel and personnel. As seen from Moscow or the Kola, the central Atlantic is a hostile place and far away. But Gorshkov’s Navy had come to know its customers well and its basic assumptions about the main adversary had been sound all along. If war came and the politicians let it, the U.S. Navy they thought they knew was always going to come for them. And there, under a dreary northern sky, the sharks would be wait-

58 Swartz (2013), 3.
ing— not to win a battle, but to do their worst and take many young Americans to the bottom with them. That day never came, but to many close students of the Soviet Navy, the conjecture will ring true nonetheless.

Understanding the enemy’s calculus: some additional inferences

As things went, the U.S. Navy’s efforts to understand its likely Cold War opponent failed gracefully. Their deficiencies did not explode into the open in the form of an intelligence failure with real operational consequences, and the grim resonance of the term ‘Battle of the Atlantic’ infused the Navy’s ASW undertaking with a degree of urgency it might otherwise have lacked. The Soviets were, after all, building submarines and the creation of an extensive technical infrastructure for ASW and investment in a ‘high-end only’ submarine service were appropriate counters to that. Fortunately for the Navy and NATO, the Soviet approach did not have the makings of a “competitive strategy”\(^60\). Most Western investments in sea control along the Atlantic “lifeline”\(^61\) were fungible enough for use against a Soviet Navy that would patiently lie in wait for a great bloodletting of allied projection forces on their way to assail the rodina. Any shortcomings in the U.S. Navy’s adaptation to the challenge were unlikely to be fatal, then. This has served to permanently mask the serious deficiencies which afflicted Western analyses of the Soviet naval threat during much of the Cold War era. However, since we cannot assume graceful failure to be the norm, these intellectual skeletons should nonetheless be dragged from

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60 For Mahnken, the concept of competitive strategies “focuses on the peacetime use of latent military power – that is, the development, acquisition, deployment, and exercising of forces – to shape a competitor’s choices in ways that favor our objectives.” Thomas G. Mahnken (ed.), *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History, and Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 7. Rosen explains the logic of competitive strategies as “[getting] competitors to play our game, a game that we are likely to win. This is done by getting them to make the kind of mistakes that they are inclined to make, by getting them to do that which is in their nature, despite the fact that they should not do so, given their resources.” See Stephen P. Rosen, “Competitive Strategies: Theoretical Foundations, Limits, and Extensions,” in *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History, and Practice*, ed. by Thomas G. Mahnken (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 12.

the closet, so that they may yet serve a useful purpose in the education of a new generation of analysts.

With that goal in mind, we can reaffirm that in terms of analysis the U.S. Navy’s approach to competing with the Soviet Navy left much to be desired. It took the rarest of events – the coincidence of a major windfall of timely, high-fidelity technical and human intelligence with at least a decade of painstaking groundwork by trustworthy outsiders – for the Cold War Navy to eventually start getting inside its opponent’s strategic and operational calculus.

The intelligence breakthrough that made the Maritime Strategy of the 1980s possible can perhaps be thought of as a “grey swan”\(^\text{62}\) – a highly significant development that we know is possible, but that is in fact likely \emph{not} to happen (again) and, in any case, is largely beyond our control. In the roughly \textit{thirty-five years} before that improbable coincidence began to bear fruit, the only group of people to come close to actually understanding the Soviet Navy was a tiny band of analysts, who kept poking the hornet’s nest until something actually happened. They were a crew of proudly nitpicking obsessives, whose inclination was to look very closely at the evidence, repeatedly revise their own judgements, and then look again \textit{even more closely}. The impression their exchanges leave behind is they mostly wrote for, and talked to, each other. The narratives that underpinned Peter Swartz’s \textit{Understanding an Adversary’s Strategic Calculus} tell their story well.\(^\text{63}\) Outside this small circle, however, tired clichés suffused with naval-ist ideology far too often passed for satisfactory analysis.

Without going so far as to draw any hard and fast ‘lessons’ from what is a very condensed narrative indeed, the following questions can be proposed as intellectual anchor points for analysts who would prefer to make their own mistakes, rather than repeating those of a past generation:

- How much time and effort has gone into understanding the adversary, not in the terms of ‘blue’ theories of naval warfare, but on his own terms? Mirror imaging, whether it is half-conscious or unconscious, is always bad analysis – even when it works. But the problem does not stop there: Even when mirror imaging is avoided, the adversary’s logic is all too often reduced to a convenient caricature or an easily remembered catchphrase. While this is difficult to avoid, the analyst should

\(^{62}\) For lack of an authoritative source on this fairly new concept, see Investopedia, “Grey Swan,” https://www.investopedia.com/terms/g/grey-swans.asp.

\(^{63}\) Swartz (2013), 7-36.
not be the one doing the caricaturing, even when pressured to get to the punchline.

- Are the assumptions the analyst has made about the political and strategic level of the competition skewing her assessment of the opponent’s operational calculus, or vice versa? An assessment of operational preferences should be derived from empirical evidence. If insufficient evidence is available, or the evidence gives rise to irresolvable contradictions, judgment should be withheld. The possibility that assessment of the operational calculus cannot be extrapolated to the strategic and political levels should be guarded against equally carefully.

- Once an initial judgement has been made, how well does it hold up as new evidence becomes available? Are there any cracks appearing in the analytical edifice? It is the analyst’s responsibility not to paper over such cracks, but to experimentally revise the initial judgement as soon as contrary or significantly modified patterns begin to emerge. A failure to regularly reflect on what has been learned since the initial assessment constitutes a serious lapse of tradecraft and professional ethics.

- Does the analyst really understand how supporting assessments provided by others have come together? If the process by which a judgement has been arrived at has not been made visible, the inclination should always be to ask probing questions in a friendly but determined fashion.

- Does a change in the evidentiary basis of one judgement affect other judgements that are tied together in a presumed causal chain? If one element in the ‘main line’ of the chain fails, that causal chain has been falsified and is in need of revision.

- Once some of its supporting judgements have been revised, as they eventually will be, does the overall narrative concerning the opponent’s strategic and operational calculus still hold up? The narrative falls with the integrity of the supporting line of argument, no matter how deeply entrenched it has become. If an assumption or supporting assessment is beginning to falter, the analyst’s inclination should not be to sustain it against the odds, but to kick it hard and see what happens.

The main conclusion to be drawn from this chapter, however, is this: once they take hold, the path dependencies resulting from defective analyses can become inordinately difficult to unravel – in fact, some never are. Only historical insight, sound methodology, good training, an ingrained habit of active self-reflection, and the healthy skepticism of likeminded peers can prevent such outcomes from recurring in the future or, at any rate, mitigate their impact. The likelihood of getting it wrong initially will always
remain high. But in this new era of geostrategic competition, as in the one 
that came before, the cardinal task and systemic responsibility of the naval 
analyst – civilian or military, inside or outside the rarefied world of secret 
intelligence – is to chase her every nagging doubt, down the rabbit hole, 
deeper and then deeper yet, until she gets it right eventually.

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