Carriers Are Forward Presence

By Capt. Robert F. Johnson, USN (Ret.)

Forward presence demonstrates U.S. commitment, strengthens deterrence and facilitates transition from peace to war. . . . Because of their limited footprint, strategic agility, calculated ambiguity of intent, and major strategic and operational deterrent capability, naval forces are invaluable. Our ability to rapidly move these forces in 1993 and again in 1994 from the Mediterranean Sea and the Arabian Gulf to positions off the coast of Somalia and Kuwait demonstrates extraordinary utility and versatility . . . the carrier battle group, in particular, has been an unmistakable sign of U.S. commitment and resolve in the Central Region.

General Binford Peay, U.S. Army
Commander in Chief, U.S. Central
Command

AN Joe Hendricks

I n the summer of 1950, U.S. aircraft carriers operated in the vicinity of Taiwan to dissuade the People's Republic of China (PRC) from carrying out hostile acts against that island. Forty-six years later, carrier battle groups were again operating in Far Eastern waters in response to PRC pressure on Taiwan. In 1948, the Sixth Fleet—built around carrier task forces—began sustained operations in the volatile Mediterranean Basin; almost 50 years later a carrier-centered presence is still there.

The geopolitical situation in both regions has changed dramatically since the early cold war years, but the value of an American carrier presence in these and other important areas endures.

Forward Presence and Naval Forces

Forward military presence, combined with other elements of national power, helps to shape the international environment by influencing the perceptions and conduct of potential adversaries, friends and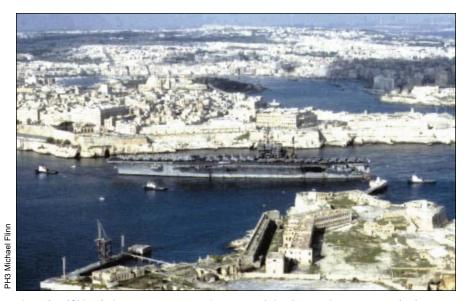 allies, as well as neutral nations in key areas around the globe. The objective is to demonstrate a firm commitment to allies and regional security so that war—and the costs in blood and treasure—can be avoided in the first place. The National Military Strategy echoes this theme by placing peacetime engagement and deterrence and conflict prevention on the same level of importance as fighting and winning our nation's wars.

Consequently, a credible U.S. military presence is critical to the maintenance of regional stability. "Presence" forces are a means of deterring potential aggressors, and they can act as an early defensive and enabling force if deterrence

George Washington (CVN 73) exhibits the unique attributes a carrier brings to forward presence during its '96 Med cruise. Left, an Aviation Ordnanceman prepares to load a VA-34 A-6E *Intruder* with laser-guided bombs. Top, *GW*'s supply needs are met by *Mount Baker* (AE 34) and USNS *San Diego* (TAFS 6). Above and right, an SH-60H *Seahawk* from HS-5 lands in Glamoc, Bosnia during a range reconnaissance mission in June and crewmember AW2 (AW) Brad Shupert shares part of his MRE with local children. Inset, an HS-5 *Seahawk* touches down on *Enterprise* (CVN 65) as she and *GW* conduct turnover operations in July.

America **(CV 66) demonstrates another part of the forward presence mission: assuring friends and potential allies of our solid committment to peace and stability in their region.** *America's* **port visit to Valletta, Malta, in January 1996 was the first U.S. Navy carrier visit in over 25 years.**

from limited, stand-alone combat actions, to enabling actions that allow the deployment of follow-on forces, to full-scale hostilities.

Most of the diplomatic and military impact of U.S. naval forces results from the presence of aircraft carriers. Other warships and task forces are important—Tomahawks give many surface warships and submarines a precision strike capability and amphibious ready groups provide expeditionary warfare capability—but aircraft carriers and their embarked air wings are the key to the effectiveness of U.S. naval forward presence forces.

The Carrier Contribution

The U.S. aircraft carrier force has all of the advantages that apply to sea-based forces plus the unique combat capabilities conferred by sea-based aviation. Air power in general is playing an increasingly critical role in the framework of

fails. Beyond this, a reassuring forward presence can underpin broader national interests, such as gaining political and economic access. Activities such as exercises and personnel exchanges foster military-to-military relationships that can ultimately form the basis for collective security arrangements in peacetime and military coalitions during conflict.

The U.S. military's forward presence posture in a specific area will take into account the prevailing security environment and the types and level of threat. This, in turn, dictates which forces will be used. No matter which forces are chosen, however, to be an effective deterrent they must be both visible and lethal. Additionally, they must be usable; forces that are deployed but are inhibited from action by a web of host-nation restrictions may be visible, but they are not very lethal.

For these reasons, naval forces will play a key role in the U.S. forward presence posture in most overseas regions. Stationed in international waters, naval forces give U.S. policy makers a wide range of options, free from the political and diplomatic constraints associated with the use of bases on foreign soil. They can be positioned adjacent to a crisis area ashore almost indefinitely,

their presence being immune from veto by a foreign government. Naval forces can maintain a discreet over-the-horizon stance that does not discomfit friendly governments who find it politically difficult to cooperate openly with the United States. Conversely, they can engage in a highly visible show of force, ratchet-

"In a crisis you need visible, credible, sustainable combat power—right now, not next month. And you cannot afford to wait for somebody else's permission to position it or employ it. That's why the forward-deployed aircraft carrier continues to be the most flexible weapon in our nation's arsenal."
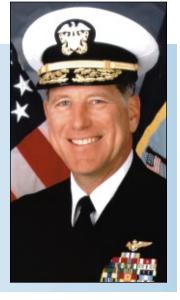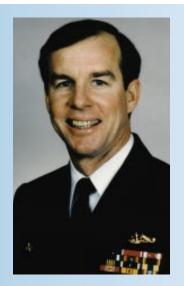
VAdm. Steve Abbot
Commander, Sixth Fleet

ing their visibility up or down as required by the situation.

On-scene U.S. naval forces have a significant ability to project power ashore. This power can be asserted quickly, without a preparatory build-up. It is multifaceted, covering a wide array of missions and operational tasks and running the gamut

U.S. national security and national military strategy. Control of the air makes all other missions possible. Offensively, air power allows the United States to attack all elements of the enemy's military and its supporting infrastructure—a capability dramatically demonstrated during Operation Desert Storm in 1991. As

"**A** forward-deployed carrier in the Fifth Fleet sends two very distinct messages. First, it reminds potential aggressors that we are present and ready—right now—to quickly defeat them with a formidable, flexible and lethal force if they upset the peace. With a carrier in the area, there is no comfort zone for aggressors to make serious threats or to take provocative action in hopes they can gain an advantage while we take time to deploy forces from the rear. They know a carrier is always present, ready and able to quickly check any threat. That's deterrence! Second, maintaining a carrier on station demonstrates our resolve, and assures our friends in the region that we are solidly committed to supporting them in the effort to ensure peace and stability. Presence and deterrence are about being visible to both friend and foe—here for peace, yet ready and able to support our friends."

VAdm. Thomas B. Fargo
Commander, Fifth Fleet

a deterrent, U.S. air power confronts potential enemies with a force that can neutralize much of their military and economic strength, which they do not have the means to combat directly. As such, air units that are forward-deployed in peacetime may be the most visible and lethal—and therefore most credible—peacetime presence assets available to U.S. regional war-fighting commanders in chief (CINCs).

Both the Navy and the Air Force can provide air power, but much of the Air Force's combat aviation cannot escape the shackles of the political constraints that come with land-

basing. For example, Air Force composite air wings that have operated from air fields in Saudi Arabia and Turkey since 1991, flying missions over southern and northern Iraq, are certainly visible and perceived as

lethal by Iraq's leadership. But they can only be used for narrowly defined missions—any change or addition to their current mission must be approved by the governments of the two nations. Both of these governments would be hard-pressed to approve an expansion of the U.S. air presence or a broadening of their mandate, if it became necessary. Indeed, because of domestic political reasons neither one is completely comfortable with the U.S. presence in the first place.

When regional countries are asked to provide access, basing or logistics support for U.S. land-based air operations, their governments can hold a veto over the size and composition of the force. An example of the latter sort of restriction came during Operation Deliberate Force in September 1995, when the Italian government refused to allow the United States to deploy F-117 stealth fighters to its air bases. Once deployed to a theater in response to a crisis, land-based forces also cannot easily and quickly redeploy to another, for both political and logistical reasons.

Carriers face no such constraints. Supported by underway replenishment groups and seaborne logistics, carrier battle groups are essentially free to move where and when U.S. decision makers desire. They can maintain varying degrees of visibility, and can be withdrawn and rein-

A VF-31 *Tomcat* from *Carl Vinson* (CVN 70) escorts an Air Force B-52 as part of Operation Desert Strike. In September 1996, air- and surface- launched cruise missiles were released on targets in southern Iraq in response to violations of UN sanctions.

troduced into the theater as the United States sees fit, without diplomatic repercussions. Carrier battle groups also embody significant combat power, from the carrier air wing to the impressive number of Tomahawks carried on board the carrier's accompanying surface warships and submarines. Carrier battle groups may not provide all the combat power needed in every situation, but they do provide a depth of capability and freedom of action unmatched by any other force package of similar size.

In addition, carriers routinely shift between geographic theaters and crisis areas. Since 1993, U.S. carriers have been called on to leave station in the Adriatic, where they were supporting United Nations and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) operations in the former Yugoslavia, in order to respond to Iraqi threats to the Persian Gulf region. The process can also work in reverse: In August 1995, *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN 71) was hurriedly recalled from the eastern Mediterranean (where she was standing guard against potential Iraqi threats against Jordan) to take part in the opening round of strikes against the Bosnian Serbs in the Balkans. In December, *America* (CV 66) steamed from the Persian Gulf to the Adriatic in just nine days to support NATO peacekeeping operations in the Balkans. And in March 1996, *Nimitz* (CVN 68) left her station in the Persian Gulf to join *Independence* (CV 62) off Taiwan, coincident with Taiwanese elections and threatening naval exercises by the People's Republic of China.

These movements showcased the mobility of carriers and their battle groups. In each case, these ships arrived in theater ready for combat, with no prior logistical build-up or prepositioned supply pool required. Each battle group took its own logistics support with it from one theater to the other, placing little or no strain on U.S. airlift or sealift assets. And each movement did not have to be preceded by a round of diplomatic negotiations.

Inadequate Alternatives

New forward-presence concepts are proposed that promise to reduce the need for overseas carrier deployments. Would-be carrier "replacement" systems often have warfighting value, but they cannot by themselves duplicate the operational flexibility and capability of the aircraft carrier and its air wing.

Some have argued that "presence" forces based in the United States that can move rapidly to the scene of a crisis can deter as successfully as units deployed overseas. This line of reasoning, vociferously advocated by former Air Force Chief of Staff General Merrill McPeak, argued that visibility does not always require forces on scene because highly lethal forces such as long-range bombers could reach any crisis area in about a day. Their ability to influence the decision making of a prospective foe, therefore, should be the same as that of forward-deployed forces.

In today's world there is no basis for accepting this argument as anything more than an untested theory. A similar argument for the effectiveness of Air Force B-36 bombers as a global deterrent was made in the late 1940s—right before the Korean War broke out, along with a host of other crises. Now, as then, it appears that visibility is crucial for conventional deterrence.

Long-range bombers operating from the United States could—with massive aerial tanker and other support—maintain a presence of sorts in the airspace over a potential flashpoint, but the constancy and cost-effectiveness of such a presence would be doubtful. In addition, in the absence of full-scale conflict, bombers represent a rather one-dimensional form of military power. For this reason, tactical aircraft have been the fixed-wing air assets of choice for overseas presence missions because of their omnipresence, their ability to perform a wide range of offensive and defensive missions and their proximity to potential

crisis areas. Conversely, launching a stream of bombers from the continental United States to keep one or two constantly visible in the airspace above places such as Bosnia or Iraq for years on end would be a waste of valuable resources, let alone inconceivable as a viable operational plan.

Another proposed alternative to the carrier, the arsenal ship concept—a large, missile-carrying platform—ignores the tactical and operational flexibility that carriers bring to U.S. naval forces. Arsenal ships undoubtedly could add to the offensive punch of deployed naval forces, but like bombers their utility is limited to certain narrowly defined missions. Unlike the carrier air wings, these ships cannot perform all of the prospective missions that the Navy might have to undertake: They could not enforce no-fly zones, nor could they conduct aerial interception or escort missions or operations such as the one that forced down the *Achille Lauro* hijackers in 1985. They could not act as a base from which to paradrop Naval Special Warfare units or match a carrier's joint command-and-control capabilities. Even as missiles and unmanned systems are taking on greater roles, they cannot match the flexibility and adaptability of manned aviation, and their launch platforms cannot be modified as a carrier can to absorb

new or expanded missions.

Bombers, arsenal ships and other assets will have great value under some circumstances, but they are not the carrier's equivalent in terms of flexibility, capability and usefulness to the U.S. leadership and war-fighting commanders. This is why carriers have been used in roughly 75 percent of the crises to which the Navy and Marine Corps have responded since 1991.

Former Commander in Chief of the U.S. Central Command, Marine Corps General Joseph P. Hoar, noted that "when CINCs get together to discuss what we ought to be sharing among ourselves, we don't argue about submarines and bombers. . . . We argue about carriers and amphibs. We need them out front." n

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There is nothing "virtual" about *John C. Stennis*' (CVN 74) brand of deterrence!

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