



## Strategy Shelved: The Collapse of Cold War Naval Strategic Planning

by Steven T. Wills.

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In *Strategy Shelved*, US Navy Captain (ret.) Steven Will (Center for Naval Analyses) argues that the Navy's strategy community was unable to produce a global maritime strategy after the Cold War. In short, the Navy and the larger defense community "shelved" the Navy's established bureaucracy, whose job it was to produce maritime strategy. Wills seeks to explain why exactly this occurred.

Besides the end of the Cold War and the absence of a global Soviet maritime threat, Wills finds other causal factors: (a) the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reform Act, (b) the Revolution in Military Affairs in the 1970s and 80s, and (c) the timing and outcome of the 1991 Gulf War between a US-led coalition and Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Wills also shows how organizational realignments within the Navy contributed to the demise of its once well regarded "strategy shop."

The end of the Cold War removed the unifying, common threat of the Soviet Union and replaced it with uncertain regional threats. The Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 gave greater authority to regional commanders and reduced the need for a service-based strategy; the 1991 Gulf War showcased the power that a regional commander could wield. [US Navy] Service chiefs ..., having lost their strategic authority, ultimately turned to the business of preserving force structure and devising operational art for its employment under regional command control. (199)

By "regional commanders" Wills means (in Defense Department parlance) a Global Combatant Commander (GCC), e.g. Commander, Central Command (CENTCOM).

Wills's work complements an earlier study by Peter Haynes entitled *Toward a New Maritime Strategy*.<sup>1</sup> But the two works differ in focus. Haynes concentrates on the production of naval strategy by USN officers (and some civilians) from the early Cold War to 2007. Wills, on the other hand, looks at external factors that clarify the failure to formulate a global maritime strategy in the 1990s. Haynes's book is more extensive and historical in scope, while Wills's work is more polemical. In effect, Wills has described the triumph of the defense unification movement attempted by the US Army near the end of World War II, and then aided in that effort by the newly established US Air Force after 1947. Wills details the events that finally put the Navy's control of the strategic employment of the fleet under the aegis of a unified defense establishment that parceled out the fleet as hostages to the regional strategies of the GCCs.

A great strength of this work is that its author is an "insider," privy to the matters he discusses. Many of the Navy's foremost strategists (e.g., the authors of the 1984 Maritime Strategy) are mentioned in Wills's acknowledgements as consultants for his manuscript. A downside of that

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1. Subtitle: *American Naval Thinking in the Post-Cold War Era* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2015). Haynes is a USN Captain with a PhD in security studies.

strength is a “hard slog” prose style for those unused to reading RAND or Center of Naval Analysis documents and studies of US naval force structure.

Wills has described a problem the US security community desperately needs to think about—strategy on a global scale. However, he leaves his readers to infer possible solutions to this problem. These might include a scaling back of GCC authority and a return to the Chief of Naval Operations of the authority not only to produce maritime strategy (which it does regularly these days),<sup>2</sup> but also to secure buy-in for that strategy from the rest of the US Defense community and the national security leadership, to include the president and congressional leaders. Sea power remains a tough sell, but Wills’s efforts to make the case with *Strategy Shelved* deserve as broad an audience as possible.

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2. The latest US Maritime Strategy, viz. “Tri-Service Maritime Strategy” (2020), is available online.