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CSBA Sees Strategic Benefits To Distributive Lethality

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The U.S. Navy's philosophy of distributive lethality – arming more ships with more powerful missiles – will likely have more of an impact on naval strategy than operational concepts, according to Bryan Clark, military and naval analyst for the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments.

“The main value of Distributed Lethality is strategic rather than operational,” Clark says. “Adding more offensive capacity to ships is very helpful in Phase 0 or 1, before the shooting starts. [Adding] more offensive missiles shows the enemy the surface fleet could quickly retaliate or even initiate hostilities in a crisis situation. This may change the enemy's calculus on whether to initiate aggression. But unless the Navy also significantly increases the defensive capacity of surface combatants, they will have to retreat from the conflict area once the shooting starts.”

For example, he says, “An LCS [Littoral Combat Ship] with Harpoon missiles can threaten the enemy's surface ships early in a fight, but only has 21 RAM [rolling airframe missile] interceptors to protect itself,” Clark writes. “These will be used up against about 10 ASCMs [antiship cruise missiles] that cost the attacker only \$40 million, compared to \$500 million for the LCS and its mission package.”

There are ways to significantly increase the defensive capacity of surface combatants, he says. "The Navy plans to put a second RAM launcher on LCS when it becomes a frigate, which can engage another 10 or so ASCMs, and a SLQ-32 "Sewip-lite" electronic warfare system that will not have an active countermeasure system to defeat ASCMs. This won't be enough to dissuade an enemy from simply attacking the frigate with another 10 ASCMs. If the Navy instead worked out a way to put a full Sewip system with active countermeasures on the frigate, its defensive capacity could be increased by about 10-30 engagements per minute against RF [radio frequency]-guided ASCMs with an essentially unlimited magazine. In the future, the Navy could equip all surface ships with guided projectiles such as the Hypervelocity projectile [HVP] being developed by OSD[SCO] that can hit ASCMs and achieve high rates of fire [depending on the gun]."

Putting offensive missiles on amphibious ships would make them more capable threats to the enemy, he acknowledges. "This wouldn't make the amphibians any more likely to be attacked, since a ship full of Marines would be a pretty attractive target already. It would give the amphibious ships a broader range of power projection tools, and could provide supporting fires to forces ashore. As with surface combatants, however, it is essential the Navy improve the defensive capacity of its ships so the amphib carrying missiles and Marines isn't easily taken out of the fight. Today, they only have CIWS [close-in weapon system] or RAM, which could be overwhelmed by a dozen ASCMs. With a gun using HVPs and SEWIP, amphibians would make themselves much harder targets."

Navy surface warfare leadership is trying to be "vague" about how it actually plans to implement distributive lethality, he says, because it believes there is value in keeping the potential enemy in the dark about what equipment is being considered for what ships.

"I don't agree," he says. "The potential enemies will figure this out, while the vagueness denies our allies and partners the information that would assure them our approach is effective. It also limits the ability of Congress and other stakeholders to support the concept. People in the Navy will argue they will give special briefs to the people who 'need to know,' but these efforts do not reach all the people who could help or hinder the initiative."