NAVIES TRIMMING THEIR SAILS AS ROLES SHIFT WITH THE TIMES

FRANCOIS VREŸ AND MARK BLAINE

IN A world that constantly changes, military forces must keep in step and adapt in order to remain relevant instruments of policy. Navies are no exception and pressures for adaptations to better defend maritime territories are a feature of what naval forces face.

Navies have a critical role to play in the security architectures aimed at securing the maritime interests of countries through awareness, policing, enforcement and maritime defence.

Navies remain primary instruments of military coercion operating on and from the sea. Naval war-fighting rests on a theory of naval warfare, roles and tasks that enable navies to be more than mere war-fighting organisations. They must react to multiple political demands to do more than just war-fighting. The pressures compel them to respond.

Navies react in various ways to what their foes and policy-makers demand. As opposed to shedding war-fighting roles, as proposed by some, they show flexibility and rather migrate along their roles and tasks to keep in step with changes. Some large navies execute several roles simultaneously, smaller navies change between war-fighting and secondary roles, while several navies prefer to dedicate their resources largely to roles other than war-fighting.

Navies also tend to adapt to changes rather than shedding "old" and assuming "new" roles and tasks. In the case of China, a large naval militia augments the Chinese navy, with certain naval tasks executed by civilian vessels when required. In Iran, the Iranian Navy features alongside a smaller, but independent naval force (the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Navy) geared for asymmetric warfare in the Persian Gulf.

Sri Lanka, in fighting the Tamil insurgents, and countries bordering the Gulf of Guinea off West and Central Africa show how navies choose to respond to threats below the war-fighting level by fighting asymmetrically or turning to policing. While narratives for slashing war-fighting roles continue to pressure decisions about navies, a more nuanced reality underpins their contemporary roles.

Decisions about their tasks and roles tend to shift along a spectrum that includes co-operation with other maritime agencies to address non-traditional maritime security threats below the level of naval warfare. Navies have evolved to ply their trade over this shifting landscape of threats and vulnerabilities, rather than heed calls to reject the old and assume new roles.

Not all are equipped to respond successfully to ever-changing maritime threats. They rather dedicate their organisational culture and assets to address the rise and decline of threats and vulnerabilities. Modern blue water navies from China, the US, Japan, Russia and the EU, for example, simultaneously conduct policing, diplomatic and simulated war-fighting postures off Africa and in the South China Sea.

The small, Sri Lankan Navy has demonstrated how a navy could migrate between traditional and non-traditional roles and tasks when national interests are threatened by insurgents. The Gulf of Guinea exemplifies how navies co-operate with multiple state and non-state agencies across regions, to mitigate non-traditional maritime threats that endanger national and regional security and, specifically, human security.

Navies remain an important coercive power instrument for governments to ensure they can use the oceans as a safe landscape for transportation and extracting resources. Opposing navies are no longer the only, or even most dangerous threat for navies to respond to. Powerful and armed non-state actors are also part of the maritime threat. Decision-makers must empower their navies to adapt, build partnerships and strengthen capacities to keep the oceans safe.

The outcome is one of role migration, rather than stark rejection of traditional naval tasks and roles amid a policy and security environment calling for multiple naval contributions. Overall, navies must be seen as indispensable power instruments in the hands of policy-makers, and policy tools that offer more than war-fighting capabilities to successfully negotiate and secure the shifting naval and maritime security landscapes.

Professor Vreÿ and Captain Blaine are with the Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa at Stellenbosch University. This article is based on Global Challenges in Maritime Security: An Introduction (2020)