Naval Warfare in the 21st Century
By Joseph Miranda

US Naval Supremacy

The US has been militarily involved in the Middle East for several decades, including the First and Second Gulf Wars, the Somali peacekeeping operation and the current fighting in Afghanistan. Those operations have required America to maintain naval supremacy in the Indian Ocean and its approaches. Until recently there were no nations in the region capable of challenging the US Navy at sea; however, that situation is now changing, as both India and China are developing their own sea power.

The US has several advantages in global naval warfare. One of them comes from its Navy’s vast experience since World War II in conducting major operations from the oceans. The main element of US naval power projection has been the carrier battle group, recently redesignated carrier strike groups. They each consist of an aircraft carrier plus supporting warships and logistical vessels. Aircraft carriers were a major factor in concentrating combat power and providing air cover in the Korean, Vietnam and Gulf Wars. They’ve also been useful in providing shows of force; for example, executing the naval quarantine that brought an end to the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, and in establishing a presence in the Persian Gulf and the Straits of Hormuz during the Reagan era campaign against Iran.

The downside of US naval power is that it has had...
little recent experience in combat operations against major enemy ships. The last large-scale surface-and-air battle involving the USN was in 1945 against the Japanese. Most actions have been against light craft and oil platforms. That’s not unusual given the USN operating against the Japanese. Since then, the USN has continued that practice, today maintaining large numbers of such support vessels in the active inventory and many more in reserve. In the Indian Ocean and on protracted periods in the Pacific with the support of fleet trains: major formations of oilers, cargo ships, repair craft and other support vessels. The USN has possessed an advantage in that area. The later years of World War II saw extensive logistical support due to the length of the lines of communication back to America. Even so, the USN was able to speedily reinforce the region in the event of further communist advances. The RDF became the predecessor for today’s Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) in order to have air units assigned directly to them, providing immediately on hand close support and airlift. Expeditionary units can be based on large amphibious warfare ships (LHA and LHD classes). These vessels contain berthing spaces for landing craft and assault units, as well as docks for helicopters and close support aircraft. The US has 10 LHA/LHD, all of which have flight decks. They therefore also need to be considered when evaluating effectiveness against insurgents and in mobile situations, their its periphery the US has also established a considerable infrastructure. For example, Diego Garcia is the site of a major US base, and there are more in the Persian Gulf states and Saudi Arabia. Since the end of the 1970s the US has had a de facto alliance with Egypt, which has secured the Suez Canal route for resupply and reinforcement via the Mediterranean. (What impact the 2011 uprisings in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East may have on that situation is not apparent at the time of this writing early in 2012).

The base structure was initially built up during the Cold War to counter the possible threat of a Soviet advance into the Middle East. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 gave urgency to the situation, with the US forming the Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) in order to be able to this was the Central Command, the headquarters that presently controls US operations in the Middle East. By building an infrastructure of bases, airfields and docks – the latter containing pre-positioned heavy equipment – the introduction of major combat units into the region in a crisis would be facilitated.

Another advantage the US has is its Marine Corps (USMC). The Marines have both the doctrine and experience with large amphibious operations and sustaining expeditionary forces. Marine units are specifically organized for that kind of mission. Initial landings can be made by battalion-sized Marine Expeditionary Units (MEU), a larger Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB), or even a Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF), which amounts to a reinforced division. All of those formations have air units assigned directly to them, providing immediately on hand close support and airlift. Expeditionary units can be based on large amphibious warfare ships (LHA and LHD classes). These vessels contain berthing spaces for landing craft and assault units, as well as docks for helicopters and close support aircraft. The US has 10 LHA/LHD, all of which have flight decks. They therefore also need to be considered when evaluating effectiveness against insurgents and in mobile situations, their...