



## THE INFERIOR FLEET – A RISK TAKEN

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In the present article I set out to make an analysis of the concepts of current fleet and also of the inferior fleet in action, which have in common the quantitative and qualitative inferiority of forces and means. In naval conflicts the superior fleets quantitatively and qualitatively benefit from a considerable advantage in relation to the enemy. This advantage of the superior naval force, in most cases, leads to a rapid neutralization of the enemy naval forces, to the achievement of the freedom of navigation in the area of operations and to the fulfillment of the operative and strategic objectives. However, there is the possibility that an inferior naval force will avoid a decisive battle and the naval tactical actions it performs will greatly influence the conduct of events at sea. The novelty of this article is highlighted by the comparative analysis of the examples presented, which highlights the differences between the two concepts, so that the idea that an inferior fleet can act on the enemy's means of communication, can delay its actions for a short time, but without consistent support from the air force or allied forces, the inferior fleet will eventually lose the initiative and be defeated. Equipping ships of an inferior fleet with modern detection technique will qualitatively reduce the differences in a naval confrontation. The analysis of the naval confrontations shows that many naval battles and battles took place near the shore, from which we deduce the particularly important role that the air and ground forces have in supporting the naval forces.

**Keywords:** inferior fleet; current fleet; inferior fleet in action; naval tactical actions.

In this article I set out to analyze two concepts that encompass doctrinal and action issues, which are related to the expression of maritime power, the concept of fleet in existence and the concept of inferior fleet in action. Both concepts are specific to an inferior fleet, because I believe that, although they are developed by naval powers with limited possibilities of expression, there are significant differences between the two concepts. The novelty of this approach consists in the fact that, following a comparative analysis regarding the modus operandi of some fleets and doctrinal provisions in different schools of thought, those differences will be identified.

For this approach, we considered as a research hypothesis that the application of the concept of inferior fleet by a nation with access to the sea is suitable only for a short period of transformation of naval power and adaptation to new security threats in the region. To validate the research hypothesis, I proposed two directions of research, in which I want to make a delimitation of the two concepts and identify the implications for the expression of maritime power by applying the two concepts by states with maritime interests.

We have found that each state with access to the sea or the ocean has had to develop its naval power over time in order to protect its own merchant ships, defend its own coastline against aggression from the sea or to conquer new territories. The size of the fleets and the capabilities developed differ according to the maritime interests of each nation. Usually, nations with a developed economy have managed to consolidate their naval power so that their maritime interests are protected in different parts of the globe.

The assertion of a nation as a naval power involves a lot of investment in ships, combat equipment, port facilities, training bases, shipyards, naval education, and participation in national or international naval exercises or naval operations in alliances or coalitions.

In many cases, nations with access to the sea or the ocean, for economic reasons in particular, do not develop naval power at the pace of technological evolution. Establishing the architecture of the fleets is based on the maritime space to be defended and the situation of the security environment in the region. As a rule, these fleets are quantitatively and often inferior in quality to the dominant nations' in the region.

An inferior fleet does not have many options for expression and therefore must find solutions, following in-depth analyses of the situation in the

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region and potential enemies, in order to fulfill the missions entrusted to it.

It is obvious that an inferior fleet is a risk in a naval confrontation, but through the possibilities of maneuver, fire and technological equipment it can avoid a decisive battle and can decisively influence the course of action of the naval enemy.

In the follow-up of the article I will present some particularities of the concepts of fleet in existence and inferior fleet in action and I will highlight the differences between these two concepts.

### Conceptual delimitations

The concept of the existing fleet is very close to the concept of the inferior fleet in action with a common root, namely the inferiority of the quantities of forces and means available in relation to the enemy.

It is very unlikely that an inferior fleet will gain and maintain control of the sea, but the naval tactical actions it can perform can pose a danger to the enemy, cause the enemy to stop on an alignment and lose his initiative for the time being. An inferior fleet needs to continuously improve its capabilities in order to be able to react promptly in the event of a naval or air threat.

The concept of the existing fleet and the concept of inferior fleet in action are usually developed by small naval powers in confrontations with large naval powers. Most of the confrontations took place near the coast, where the inferior naval power benefited from the advantage of the configuration of the coast, the depths and the fire cover of its own actions.

Depending on the chosen strategy, an inferior fleet can be actively involved in combat actions specific to guerrilla warfare (strike and flee), thus applying the concept of inferior fleet in action.

The concept of an existing fleet is applied by a naval power by keeping naval forces in a safe place, protected from the enemy actions until the end of the conflict or until a time when the conditions for engaging in combat are met after receiving reinforcements so that it would be able to execute naval tactical actions against the enemy.

Below I will present some relevant examples of how the concepts of existing fleet and inferior fleet in action have been applied in various naval confrontations.

### Means of expressing the concept of existing fleet

In order to analyze the concept of the existing fleet, we chose two relevant examples for the mode of action of some naval powers during a conflict.

The first example is the mode of action of the Argentine naval forces during the Falkland War. The conflict between Argentina and Great Britain took place between April 2 and June 14, 1982, a conflict that erupted following the invasion of the English Falkland Islands by the Argentine armed forces. The Argentine fleet participated in the conflict through a naval force composed of 1 aircraft carrier, 1 cruiser, 6 destroyers, 2 classic submarines, 1 amphibious transport ship, 5 patrol ships, 3 corvettes, 10 auxiliary ships and 15 merchant ships. On the other hand, the British Intervention Force participated with 5 nuclear submarines, 2 aircraft carriers, 10 T-21 frigates, 4 T-22 frigates, 4 Leander frigates, 7 destroyers, 2 assault ships, 3 patrol ships, 2 hospital ships, 4 dredgers, 40 auxiliary vessels and 10 landing craft.

In the face of such a naval force, the Argentine navy tried a surprise attack. The attack failed, and the Argentine Destroyer General Belgrano was sunk. It was decided to withdraw the Argentine ships in the territorial waters, from where they tried sporadically, without success, to break the naval blockade formed by the British.

Thus Argentina did not risk the loss of warships in direct confrontations, but applying this strategy was not able to help Argentine forces already landed on the Falkland Islands. Adopting this passive attitude, the concept of the existing fleet was applied, probably also in view of the very large quantitative and technological differences between the two opposing naval forces.

The second example is the mode of action of the Yugoslav naval forces during Operation Allied Force. Operation Allied Force was NATO's response to the implementation of UN Security Council resolution no. 1199 of 23 September 1998 amid Serbian military action against Albanians in the Kosovo region.

On March 24, 1999, NATO forces attacked Yugoslavia. Operation Allied Force ran from March 24 to June 11 and included the use of 1,000 aircraft from Italian bases and aircraft carriers deployed in the Adriatic Sea. The operation also involved the launch of Tomahawks from ships and submarines.



The naval forces participating in the Allied Force had the mission to monitor the air and naval space of Yugoslavia in the first phase and later the launch of the Tomahawk cruise missiles to hit targets on the territory of Yugoslavia.

NATO forces deployed in the Adriatic Sea were impressive. Thus, the USA deployed the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, amphibious assault ships (USS Nassau, USS Pensacola, USS Nashville), cruisers (USS Philippine Sea, USS Vella Gulf; USS Leyte Gulf), destroyers (USS Thorn, USS Gonzales, USS Nicholson, USS Ross, USS Peterson), nuclear submarines (USS Miami, USS Norfolk, USS Albuquerque, USS Boise). Great Britain participated with the aircraft carrier Invincible, the frigates (HMS Somerset, HMS Iron Duke, HMS Newcastle), the submarine HMS Splendid. France participated with the aircraft carrier Foch and 2 frigates, Italy deployed the aircraft carrier Giuseppe Garibaldi, 2 frigates and 1 submarine, and Germany deployed 1 frigate.

The Yugoslav Naval Forces deployed in the port of Kotor (Montenegro) consisted of 10 classic submarines, 4 frigates, 16 missile carriers, 15 torpedo boats, 8 minesweepers, 6 dredger ships, 15 landing craft, most of which were of Russian origin which were in an advanced state of physical and moral wear.

Although there were possible options for response at sea, Yugoslav decision-makers decided not to use naval forces in battle, so Allied naval forces acted unhindered in the Adriatic. Yugoslav decision-makers probably focused their efforts in one direction: the survival of naval forces<sup>1</sup>. The non-involvement of the Yugoslav naval forces in naval tactical actions during Operation Allied Force somewhat led to two conclusions.

The first conclusion is that the huge quantitative and qualitative difference between the two naval forces was realized and decision makers were against trying to develop naval tactical actions doomed to failure and most likely resulting in loss of equipment and personnel.

The second conclusion concerns the need to keep the Yugoslav fleet alive in order to have options to respond in the event of disputes with naval forces of the countries in the region Yugoslavia had disputes which.

### **Means of expressing the concept of inferior fleet**

In most naval confrontations between the belligerent forces there were differences in the amount of forces and means available. In most cases one of the parties was inferior in number of ships or technologically. The role of a fleet, even if it is inferior, is to act and use all possible tactics to achieve the tactical objectives entrusted.

The concept of the inferior fleet in action stems from the strategy adopted by Lord Admiral Torrington in June 1660, when he was in command of an English fleet and decided not to decisively engage a French fleet, superior in terms of number of ships. He deployed his subordinate forces on June 26, 1660, near the English coast and called for support forces. The British government did not approve the addition of forces and the order was to engage in a naval battle under the given conditions.

Finally, the naval battle took place on June 30, 1660, was an expected defeat of the English fleet, called the defeat at the Beachy Head, but had the effect of stopping the French invasion<sup>2</sup>. The result of the battle was a tactical victory for the French fleet, an insufficient victory to achieve the strategic objective of landing on the English coast, due to the losses suffered during the naval battle.

Another example in which an inferior fleet through tactical combat actions managed to achieve a strategic objective is represented by the Iraqi navy during the First Persian Gulf War. After the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Iraqi naval forces developed a complex system of coastal defence by intensively carrying out actions to plant mine dams in the Persian Gulf along the Iraqi and Kuwaiti coasts. The strategic concept of defending the coast against the multinational coalition was to wage a war on time-aligned alignments. Thus, for five months, Iraqi naval forces launched more than 1,300 mines into six dams, forming an arch of a circle of 150 nautical miles from the Kuwaiti border. Coastal mine dams and mine dams were launched against landing actions. Under these conditions, dredging proved to be a necessity from the first days of the conflict between Iraq and the Multinational Force formed around the USA for the liberation of Kuwait. Dredging units from the USA, Great Britain, France and Belgium were deployed in the Persian Gulf, dredging was also carried out with helicopters, but all the dredging



actions carried out failed to prevent damage to the Tripoli helicopter landing craft. Iraqi naval forces hampered the maneuvering of Multinational Force ships in the Persian Gulf, several ships belonging to the Multinational Force were damaged and the strategic objective of preventing the amphibious landing was met. The mode of action of the Iraqi naval forces showed that in order to achieve the objectives of strategic and operational level, tactical combat actions are needed to be successful<sup>3</sup>.

It can be said that the inferior fleet in action is based on the strategy of avoiding a decisive battle against a superior enemy and through the tactical combat actions it performs, it prevents the enemy from gaining absolute control of the sea. The main methods of action used by the inferior fleet in action, as a rule, are the attacks and raids carried out by surprise in order to cause as many losses as possible to the enemy<sup>4</sup>. The concepts of fleet in existence and inferior fleet in action can be determined by the inferiority of the amount of forces and means, the lack of initiative, the tactical situation at the level of the theater of operations or from political considerations.

**Implications regarding the expressing of naval power by means of putting into practice the doctrinal concepts of existing fleet and inferior fleet**

Generally speaking, by avoiding a decisive battle, the inferior fleet maintains its capabilities to act in a timely manner so as to contribute effectively to the achievement of operational and strategic objectives.

Over time, the inferior fleets carried out naval tactical actions with positive results through attacks carried out by surprise on targets on the enemy coast or by executing attacks on enemy communication lines. The conditions of success for an inferior fleet are closely related to the geographical position, the combat potential, the strong will to fight and the mode of action of the enemy.

Through the tactical combat actions performed, an inferior fleet can delay the actions of the enemy, cause the deployment of several forces at sea by the enemy and depending on the losses of the enemy can cause changes in the concept of action of the enemy.

It must be understood that in order to act effectively and be successful in trying to weaken

the enemy's fighting power, an inferior fleet must not be much inferior to the enemy. An inferior fleet needs combat capabilities in the air, on the water surface and below the water surface to act in a coordinated and effective manner against a superior enemy.

Usually in peacetime the sizing of a fleet is determined by the geo-strategic situation in the region, the length of the coast, economic development and the maritime interests of the state. Fleet size in peacetime is a good indicator of how operational and strategic objectives will be achieved in time of war.

Personally, I believe that in order to operate successfully, the inferior fleet needs capabilities especially in the air and naval field, well-defended deployment bases, an integrated maritime image of the area of operations, an advantageous positioning of forces in relation to the enemy and a realistic conception of action.

There are few cases when an inferior fleet has carried out tactical actions at long range from the shore. One such example may be the mode of action of the American fleet before the Battle of Midway. As they sailed to Midway, Admiral Chester Nimitz, commander of the U.S. Pacific Forces in the North Pacific, ordered subordinate forces to perform only tactical naval wear and tear operations and not engage in decisive combat with the Japanese naval forces in order to avoid exposure of cruisers and aircraft carriers<sup>5</sup>. It must be admitted that the American navy was not much inferior to the Japanese fleet.

In most cases, the inferior fleet operates close to its own coast, and the conduct of combat actions is usually jointly performed with the air and land forces.

When the inferior fleet operates near its own coast, most likely, the strategic objective is not to allow the enemy to make an amphibious landing at the coast. In order to increase the chances of success, the inferior fleet must act from positions that can be covered by the air or land forces. By doing so, it is possible for the inferior fleet to compel the enemy not to carry out a direct attack but to perform a series of maneuvers and combat actions which would lead to greater wear and tear of enemy forces, delay landing at the coast and obtaining time to supplement its own forces in the area of operations.



Focusing on the Black Sea, a semi-closed sea, we admit that the Russian Federation and Turkey have naval forces far superior to the other states bordering the Black Sea. Also, the length of the coast of the two countries represents more than half of the total Black Sea coast. The other states bordering the Black Sea, Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia and Ukraine have positioned themselves over time on different positions depending on the political regimes. After the fall of the communist regimes, Romania and Bulgaria underwent a series of political, economic and military transformations in order to join the NATO alliance (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), an objective successfully achieved in 2004.

After the dismembering of the Soviet Union in 1991, the newly formed countries bordering the Black Sea, Ukraine and Georgia permanently expressed a desire to join the North Atlantic Alliance, but their efforts were systematically halted by direct or indirect action by the Russian Federation. The two states have failed to develop their navies in a competitive manner, and perhaps because of this they have suffered painful defeats in the face of the Russian Federation's much stronger Black Sea Fleet.

The confrontation between the fleet of the Russian Federation and the fleet of the Republic of Georgia in August 2008, was decided very quickly in favor of the Russian Federation. Thus, against the background of political and diplomatic tensions between Georgia and the Russian Federation, on August 7, 2008, the Georgian army entered the READY to FIGHT state. At the time of the conflict, the Georgian naval force consisted of 181 officers, 200 military non-commissioned officers, 114 soldiers and 36 civilians<sup>6</sup>.

The ships of the Georgian naval force, a total of 21 small ships of different classes and types of ships, of Soviet origin, physically and morally worn out, were in two naval bases in the ports of Poti and Batumi. The Russian naval group called DATORIA consisted of the cruiser Moskva commander ship, a destroyer, three anti-submarine warships, two missile carriers, three landing craft, an electronic warship, a shipping vessel and a tugboat. The Russian naval group also benefited from strong air support consisting of bombing fighter jets. The official mission of the Russian group was to support its own ground forces engaged in the conflict and

to carry out the transport of Russian refugees from the conflict zone. The mission was later changed to "support the ground forces to withdraw Georgian troops from South Ossetia and Abkhazia and then destroy the entire Georgian military capability"<sup>7</sup>.

The Georgian naval forces engaged in intercepting the Russian naval group were composed of five fast patrol ships equipped with ship-to-ship missiles. The Russian naval group opened fire on Georgian ships, sinking two of them. The other Georgian ships made their way to their own ports where a few days later they were sunk by Russian Special Forces.

Following these actions of the Russian Federation, Georgia was left without battleships, the Coast Guard being the only one that through patrol actions ensures the protection of maritime interests.

The illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by the Russian Federation and the forced takeover of Ukrainian warships in the port of Sevastopol strengthened the Russian Federation's position on the Black Sea. The Russian Federation positioned offensive air capabilities in the Crimean Peninsula through which it can project its power throughout the Black Sea basin. The naval strategy of the Russian Federation is to complete the Black Sea Fleet with new types of ships equipped with cruise missiles against ground targets or with new generation ship-to-ship missiles, in order to be able to design its naval power in the Mediterranean as well.

Until the Russo-Georgian War, the danger of conventional military aggression in the Black Sea was unlikely, but now local conflict zones in Ukraine, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and even Transnistria create insecurity in the Black Sea region<sup>8</sup>.

Romania, even if it is a NATO member, must be prepared to respond effectively to potential threats through the Romanian Naval Forces, especially in the area of responsibility. The Romanian Naval Forces are undergoing an extensive transformation process aimed at achieving combat capabilities capable of responding to the challenges of the security environment in the Black Sea basin. Emphasis is placed on achieving and maintaining technical interoperability and action with partner vessels belonging to NATO and EU Member States.



We must not forget that although the Romanian Naval Forces have combat capabilities in the air, on the surface of the water and underwater, they mostly have ships whose lifespan has exceeded 20 years and special attention is required for the acquisition of ships and new generation equipment that responds effectively to existing threats in the security environment.

Romania has an inferior fleet in terms of quantity and quality compared to the fleet of the Russian Federation and Turkey, but NATO membership along with Turkey and Bulgaria provides security in defending naval interests.

### Conclusions

From the examples presented it can be deduced the idea that the inferior fleet cannot engage in a decisive battle. Depending on their capabilities and the capabilities and intensity of enemy action, the inferior fleet must find opportunities for action in a limited space and time so as to achieve tactical victories in an attempt to contribute to the achievement of operational and strategic objectives.

It has been shown in most of the cases presented that an inferior fleet cannot gain control of the sea but can only perform specific actions to embargo the sea or limit the enemy's entry into a particular maritime space. In order to operate effectively, an inferior fleet must not be much inferior to the enemy fleet. It needs combat capabilities in the air combat environment, on the surface of the water and below the surface of the water, to determine the enemy to use as many resources as possible in an attempt to achieve their objectives.

Acting on the principle of strike and flee, the inferior fleet can gain sporadic, moral victories and can cause the enemy losses of technique and human lives that might affect its image and credibility. State-of-the-art radar technology discoveries, complex high-precision weapon systems, unmanned vehicle technology, the development of long-range hit vectors tend to reduce the gap between an inferior fleet and a superior enemy, especially near the coast. In addition to this statement, the inferior fleet needs the support of the air force and even the ground forces to be able to act effectively for as long as possible.

From the analysis of the two concepts I can say that the research hypothesis stated at the beginning

of this article has been validated. The application of the concept of inferior fleet is especially appropriate as long as the naval forces are in the period of transformation, the prolongation or permanence of this concept representing an assumed risk.

It has been shown that the inferior fleet is not able to operate efficiently for a long time and any loss of technique and personnel considerably diminishes its fighting power. Equipping ships with modern equipment and continuously improving capabilities in all combat environments is essential for an effective response to any threat to the security environment.

Generally speaking, the fleet of a state is the main response option in case of a naval conflict and from this point of view the architecture of a fleet is generally determined by the economic factor, geographical positioning, security environment in the region and the maritime interests of the state.

### NOTES:

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7 *Ibidem*, p. 57.

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