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At one time, the United States Navy had an offensive sea mine warfare capability and it was pretty good. During World War Two, U.S. offensive mine warfare made a major contribution to the defeat of Japan. Delivered by aircraft, surface ships and submarines, U.S. mines blocked Japanese harbors, blocked off key passageways and caused the sinking of some 150 naval vessels and nearly 2 million tons of merchant shipping. U.S. mines also provided security for critical ports and anchorages. In 1972, President Nixon employed offensive mine warfare to close the North Vietnamese port of Hai Phong as part of his effort to force that country to the negotiating table. A little known fact is that the U.S. Navy conducted offensive mine warfare against Iraq during Operation Desert Storm in 1991.

A review of the popular literature on mine warfare and even the current U.S. Navy publications on the subject would leave one with the impression that there is only one form of mine warfare, mine countermeasures. This is the effort to detect and negate hostile mines. The U.S. Navy's mine warfare community is focused, one might even say fixated, on the mine threat. Now there is a reason for this. Since the end of World War Two, hostile mines have damaged or destroyed more U.S. Navy ships than any other threat. There is a host of advanced, difficult to detect mines available on the open market. China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has an extremely large arsenal of mines and is investing in new designs.

The U.S. Navy is taking significant steps to enhance its ability to deal with hostile mines by enhancing its mine warfare countermeasures capabilities. The future of U.S. mine countermeasures is the Littoral Combat Ship with its mine warfare mission package. This package consists of nine integrated technologies that will constitute a quantum leap in the ability to detect and neutralize sea mines at longer-ranges and with less risk to ships and crews. The first mine warfare mission package is now undergoing testing.

Over the past four decades, the U.S. Navy has allowed its offensive mine warfare capability to deteriorate. The U.S. Navy understands just how much of a problem sea mines can be. Their flexibility and cost-effectiveness make mines attractive weapons. The cost of producing and laying a mine can be as little as 0.5 percent of the cost of removing it, and by some estimates it can take up to 200 times as long to clear a minefield as to lay it. So why has the U.S. Navy abandoned offensive mine warfare?

As it considers how to deal with emerging threats in the 21st century, the U.S. Navy needs to rediscover offensive mine warfare. Whether it is countering the Iranian threat to Persian Gulf shipping or addressing the growing power of the PLAN, offensive mine warfare could provide part of the solution. In the event of hostilities with Iran, a few mines in Iranian ports could effectively neutralize the Iranian Navy and the Republican

Guard. Together with Japan, the U.S. Navy could bottle up the PLAN fleet simply by mining the passages through the Ryukyu island chain. What makes such a strategy particularly attractive is that neither the Iranian Navy nor the PLAN has a significant mine countermeasures capability.

To have an effective offensive mine warfare capability the U.S. Navy would have to invest in developing and acquiring advanced sea mines and the means to deliver them. Navy leaders, struggling to defend an unaffordable shipbuilding plan, probably would oppose the expenditure of any funds on offensive mine warfare. But this would be penny wise and pound foolish. An offensive sea mine capability could free the U.S. Navy from the need to defend access routes in the Persian Gulf and Western Pacific and allow it to focus scarce ships, planes and submarines where they had the greatest leverage.

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