

OPINION

**The US Navy in Distress**

Seth Cropsey

In February 2009, the Ticonderoga-class guided missile cruiser *U.S.S. Port Royal* ran aground about a half mile south of the Honolulu airport. The Navy's investigation found that the ship's navigational gear was broken and that the ship's fathometer wasn't functioning. In simple terms the bridge didn't know where the ship was. The investigation subsequently discovered that the commanding officer was exhausted, sleep-deprived, and that sailors who were nominally assigned to stand watch against such incidents were assigned elsewhere in the ship to cover manning shortages. Two months later the Navy's iron-willed Board of Inspection and Survey determined that problems with corrosion, steering, surface ships' firefighting systems, and anchoring were widespread throughout the Navy. Asked by *Defense News* to comment on these findings five former commanding officers agreed that smaller crews, reduced budgets, and fewer real-life training opportunities for over-worked crews were important causes for this catalogue of affliction. It's hardly a surprise. The Navy reported last year that 11,300 sailors were supporting ground forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. Reduced budgets, efforts to save money by cutting the size of crews, schemes to take up the slack with shore services, and all manner of 'labor-saving' devices parallel and reflect the Navy's increasingly distressed fortunes since the end of the Cold War.

The US Navy has not been as small as it is today since the administration of William Howard Taft when the Royal Navy filled the international role that America's naval forces eventually inherited and currently possess. As suggested by the past two decades of declining navy procurement, the rising cost of ships, hints from the Pentagon's Quadrennial Review now underway that previous goals for fleet size are open to question, and the public's focus on the nation's land wars in the Middle East, chances are that US naval shrinkage will continue.

The likelihood of a much diminished navy coincides in time with every current prediction of large global strategic change in the foreseeable future. Among National Intelligence Council estimates, Joint Operating Environment forecasts, the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment's studies, the UK Defence Ministry's Development, Concepts, and Doctrine Centre as well as similar predictive efforts undertaken by French and German national security experts, there is a general consensus. Proliferation, resource scarcity, environmental change, the emergence of new international power centres including non-state actors, significant changes in relative US power,

---

Seth Cropsey is Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute, Washington, DC. He served as Naval Officer from 1985 to 2004 and as deputy senior under secretary of the Navy in the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H. Bush.

failed states, and demographic change point to an increasingly unstable future and challenging international strategic environment. The common denominator in managing these problems is maritime power: force that can be applied to the shore from the sea, used to protect against missile-borne as well as stealthier ocean-borne Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), marshaled to alleviate the causes of massive immigration, and displayed to reassure allies and dissuade enemies.

Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have sucked the oxygen out of any serious effort to understand the connection between the large changes that strategic planners see in the future, Americans' expectations that they will retain their ability to wield global influence, the Navy's role in maintaining such influence, and the US fleet's slow evanescence. No attempt to connect fleet shape and size to the unfolding strategic environment exists as a referent for public debate. Indeed, civilian and military leadership maintains in the face of growing demand for ships to defend against relatively low threats – like piracy – as well as very dangerous ones – like the possibility of smuggled WMD reaching our shores – that 'capability' rather than number of ships is key to accurately measuring our naval power. With very few exceptions political leaders in both parties do not ask fundamental questions. What role does naval power have in preserving America's position as the world's great power in the middle of a fluid and troubling strategic environment? Even with Congress and administration support how can the nation's current maritime strategy achieve its own goals, to say nothing of the global objectives that Theodore Roosevelt saw so clearly?

The cooperative arrangements with foreign navies envisioned by the Navy's current maritime strategy may perhaps moderate problems of failing states and terror. But is this enough to manage other challenges? Is the Navy's current organization capable of addressing both conventional and asymmetric threats? Can today's highly structured and inflexible system for designing and building ships adapt quickly and cost-effectively to changes in the strategic environment? What, for example, do globalization, the growing dependence of the United States on sea-borne transit for strategic resources and minerals, and the likelihood of more dislocations such as continue from Somali piracy mean for the future of US national security?

American maritime strategy has played a major role in binding together the international system that US foreign policy has aimed to establish since the beginning of the twentieth century. What are the consequences for the United States and its allies if those bonds crumble as a result of a shrinking Navy with reduced international presence, and a weakening ability to project power, provide stabilizing presence, and respond to serious crises? The widely-shared current assumption that the immensity of US-China trade eliminates the possibility of serious Sino-American conflict recapitulates the United Kingdom's decision a century ago that alliance with Japan was prudent and sufficient to secure the Crown's interests in the Far East. If this assumption proves wrong the consequences for US influence in the Pacific would be as disastrous for us as they were for Great Britain. The historically unprecedented half century of relative naval peace in the Mediterranean may continue indefinitely, but such a prolongation would be a freak of history. The re-deployment of major United States naval force from the Mediterranean to support operations in the Middle East and Central Asia, added to the declining US naval fleet would leave us with terrible choices if, for example, Turkey's drift towards Islamism yields a naval force with ambitions similar to those of her fifteenth century Ghazi Ottoman rulers. What are the long-term consequences as our ability to maintain a global naval presence which heretofore has been judged beneficent erodes?

The size, shape, and strategy of the US Navy are a critical element of America's position as the world's great power. Our ability to protect or rend asunder the globe's ocean-going lines of communication is inseparable from our position as the world's great power. But very few outside a small community of naval officers and selected military/foreign policy analysts appreciate the strategic results of American seapower's slow but steady diminution. The eventual impact of this weakening includes, but is not limited to, a major shift of power away from American influence in Asia; the shattering of such key maritime alliances and partnerships as those we currently maintain with Australia, India, Japan, and Singapore; the rise of China as a hegemonic power; a debilitating loss in America's ability to shape the future global strategic environment; and a powerful reinforcement of the perception that the United States is in decline.

Globally, the continued attrition of US naval force also means a serious threat to the security of the world's sea lines of communication and the choke points – such as the Straits of Hormuz – through which pass an increasing volume of global commerce, the departure of a visible and stabilizing American presence from allied ports as well as potential worldwide flashpoints, and the international perception that the United States is abandoning the critical element of military capability that undergirded the world system American policy has sought for over a century, seapower.

The consequences of a much diminished US fleet are complemented by the American public's ignorance of them, the slow yet steady pace of naval deterioration, and the increasing time and dismayingly large resources needed to recoup seapower surrendered slowly over decades.

### **How did this happen?**

Besides a natural contraction following the virtual disappearance of the Soviet navy as a significant blue-water threat the major reasons for the US Navy's shrinkage are:

- A public focus on the nation's land wars that overlooks both the increasing role the Navy has played in prosecuting them as well as the nation's enduring interest in sea power which will continue after the end of the Middle East wars including the struggle against radical Islam.
- Political leaders' assumption that the general security of the world's oceans is a given that requires little or no effort to maintain.
- National leadership and the strategic community's minimal and thus far unsuccessful effort to persuade the American public either that seapower remains critical to our national security and shaping the changing strategic environment, or to our future as a great power.
- The Navy's inability thus far to convince Americans that it possesses an effective strategy for achieving these goals, or even a solid rationale for its future growth and modernization.
- The growing and as yet unbridled cost of building ships.

The most tangible result is the continued withering of the US combat fleet which today numbers about 280 ships. This is less than half the size achieved towards the end of the Reagan administration buildup and 33 ships short of what the Navy says it needs to fulfill today's commitments. Nothing suggests a substantive reversal. Most signs point to additional decline over the long term. Four years ago the Navy's

projected fleet size had dwindled to 313 ships. There it has stayed . . . until May of this year when a senior Navy budget official, commenting on the proposed 2010 budget, suggested that the new Quadrennial Review now underway at the Defense Department will likely result in a smaller projected fleet size. Huge increases in current and projected national debt and the vulnerability of the military budget to help offset it increase the chance that without compelling events the nation's sea services will experience additional and perhaps drastic reductions. National indebtedness will grow from its current ratio of 40 per cent of GDP to 80 per cent of GDP in a decade. Servicing this will cripple the nation's ability to modernize and increase a powerful world-class fleet or drive us deeper into a yawning financial hole.

Possible reductions in overall numbers are complemented by cuts in programmes. Defense Secretary Gates last year announced a further delay of the next generation of cruisers which are the large vertebrae of a powerful surface fleet's spine. His decision came less than a year after the Navy determined that a new generation of destroyers was too costly – estimates of the two lead ships in the class had reached \$3.3 billion per ship – and should be largely cancelled in favor of reopening the production line for the previous generation, the DDG-51 class. Technical problems leading to cost overruns effectively ended the Navy's plan to build midget submarines for its special warfare commandos after the price tag for the lead vessel in its class was delivered at more than five times its originally projected cost of \$80 million.

The Navy has sought to call attention to its gradual decline. The Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) told the House Armed Service Committee in May 2009 that 'we are stretched in our ability to . . . modernize and procure the Navy for tomorrow.' He admitted that the Navy will have to reduce its carrier fleet from its 11 to 10 for at least three years, i.e. between when the next carrier scheduled for decommissioning is retired and when its replacement (the *USS Gerald R. Ford*) joins the fleet. This reduction increases both the interval between when a departing carrier leaves its patrolling area and its replacement arrives along with the associated risk of absence during a crisis. More important, the number of new and untested combat systems aboard the Ford class suggests that the US carrier fleet will be restricted to ten ships for significantly more than three years.

The Navy has had no more success addressing the diverse causes of decline than it has experienced in calling attention to them. Nor have others. Such experts as the Congressional Budget Office's naval analyst, Eric Labs produce data for Congress that show a doubling in the average cost of naval combatants between 1981 and 2001. Before he left the Senate this past summer Mel Martinez noted that 'the Navy settles for single-digit ship procurement each year' (*Politico* 8 June 2009).<sup>1</sup> Congressional Research Service naval analyst Ronald O'Rourke informs Congress that China has built or is now building four new classes of nuclear and conventional-powered attack and ballistic missile submarines and that at their current rate of construction China could field a submarine force larger than the US Navy's within the foreseeable future.<sup>2</sup> The US Naval Institute's lead publication, *Proceedings*, publishes an article that asks but does not answer the question 'why do we have a Navy?' ('Fear and Loathing in the Post-Naval Era', *Proceedings*, March 2009).<sup>3</sup>

Andrew Krepinevich's 'The Pentagon's Wasting Asset' (*Foreign Affairs*, Summer 2009), recasts the issue of military transformation against the background of a financially weakened United States.<sup>4</sup> Krepinevich argues that American financial decay combined with greater allied reluctance to assist in defense will force the United States to 'pursue a more modest strategy', one which, among other essentially *technological*

fixes, requires a larger submarine force armed with conventional cruise missiles, long-range, carrier-launched unmanned aircraft, and similar advances in unmanned underwater platforms. Although it calls for strategic decisions Krepinevich's argument rests on technology as a strategic *deus ex machina* for the United States. This is no more likely to succeed in reversing the Navy's fortunes than it is in providing the broad strategic ideas needed to convince Congress and the public that a substantial increase in the size and capability of the US fleet represents a wise investment in national security.

But if arguments have failed to spark congressional and public interest, neither have events. In 2008, and for the first time since the Cold War, a major Russian naval flotilla visited Latin America and held joint naval exercises with the Venezuelans. Also for the first time since Cold War days, a detachment of Russian ships called at Havana. In the spring of 2009, Moscow sent four warships from its Pacific fleet to the Bahrain port of Manama. They followed a Russian squadron's port visit to the Omani port of Salalah. Besides extensive naval coordination between Russia and Iran another significant result of the Russians' naval visit is that Gulf ports that had previously serviced US Navy vessels added new clients. In early August of 2009, US officials confirmed that Russian nuclear-powered attack submarines had resumed patrolling off the US East Coast.

Also in the spring of 2009 China harassed two US military ocean surveillance ships in international waters off the coast of China. Weeks later Beijing increased its naval patrols in the South China Sea – through which half the world's oil tanker traffic passes – arguing that more protection for Chinese fishermen was required in the face of neighboring countries' disputed fishing claims.

The media may have lost interest, but pirates continue to operate off the Somali coast as a successful hijacking of the Spanish trawler *Alakrana*, and the large Chinese bulk carrier, *De Xin Hai* in October demonstrates. The US press barely noticed in May when the Australian defense minister, Joel Fitzgibbon declared “the beginning of the end of . . . the almost two-decade long period in which the pre-eminence of our principal ally, the United States, was without question.” Australia is doubling the size of its submarine fleet and purchasing 100 (United States) Joint Strike Fighters, three destroyers, and eight frigates. Echoing his then defense minister's strategic reflections, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd observed in May that “in a period of global instability Australia must invest in a strong, capable, and well-resourced defense force”.

The importance that the Australian Government attaches to the specific threat of China's growing naval capability in the Western Pacific is neither matched nor attended at the senior levels of the US Government – as the likelihood of continued decreases in US naval power indicates. Chinese naval modernization of submarine and surface vessels continues apace. This includes the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) effort to use over-the horizon radars, satellites, sea-bed sonar networks, and cyber-warfare in the service of anti-ship ballistic missiles equipped with maneuverable reentry vehicles meant to deny the US Navy access to large portions of the Western Pacific. It is but a question of time until all the bases that support US military power in Asia fall within range of precision-guided Chinese missiles.

The prospect that China has embarked on an aircraft carrier construction programme that will greatly expand its ability to project power has failed, outside US naval circles, to register interest or concern that a significant challenge to American maritime power is underway. China announced in October that it would build a class of 10,000 ton destroyers, almost two-thirds larger than any destroyer in their current fleet and capable of carrying new, long-range, supersonic anti-ship missiles. Combined with

their aircraft carrier programme these new surface vessels indicate that China's naval planners have raised their sights beyond denying the US Navy access to the Western Pacific and are striving for the ability to shape events at large distances from their homeports. As Singapore's former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew put it at a dinner in Washington in late October, 'A blue-water fleet with aircraft carriers cannot just be to deter foreign intervention in a conflict Taiwan and the Mainland'.

China is at the high end of potential maritime threats. But, the Navy is equally critical to addressing the asymmetric challenges for which many military planners predict unrestricted growth. Naval forces play a key role in humanitarian crises and disasters, restricting drug and human trafficking, monitoring the transit of dangerous and illicit cargoes, maintaining order at sea in general, collecting intelligence, acting in concert with diplomacy, and helping to protect increasingly endangered sovereignty. These functions are critical to alliance relationships, the continued perception of American global influence, and the international stability that today's conventional wisdom sees as increasingly at risk in the future. But while these and related naval missions have produced abundant and positive results for American and allied security over the previous century, the extraordinary efforts that were undertaken to achieve them are now taken for granted.

Neither arguments nor facts have produced a discernible reaction in either the US executive or legislature. The issue is that the diminution of the US Navy and the growing threat it confronts are *not* an issue.

### **If a debate occurs and there is no one to hear it does it make any sound?**

A dearth of key articles and books written for general audiences demonstrates the lack of a national debate over the link between the Navy's fortunes and the nation's security. Still, there are exceptions. Robert Kaplan's November 2007 article, 'America's Elegant Decline', published in *The Atlantic* is a *tour d'horizon* of navalist opinion that acknowledges the role of great navies in preserving international stability. Kaplan ultimately accepts the decline of the American fleet, confident that our reduced circumstances parallel England's of a century ago which Kaplan argues 'saved the world in succeeding decades'. A favorable comparison to England's position a century ago is like attributing strategic wisdom to a doomed man for asking for a smoke to delay his execution. England's fate offers no hope for the extended future.

Intended for a much narrower readership is an alternative set of ideas offered by Wayne Hughes (Captain, USN, Retd.), in a Naval Postgraduate School study presented to the Secretary of Defense's Office of Net Assessment in June 2009. Hughes is dean emeritus at the Navy's Postgraduate School. He does not accept the inevitability of diminished US global maritime power, but argues, together with his co-contributors, that US defense planning since the end of the Cold War has paid insufficient attention to blue water operations, that the United States requires a broad mixture of ship types including less expensive patrol craft to support small friendly naval forces globally, as well as the construction of small carriers that would complement a reduced large-carrier force. The Hughes study agrees that America must retain a quantitative and qualitative advantage over Chinese naval capabilities, and that such an edge requires a growing US submarine force, supplemented by very quiet – and less costly than nuclear – diesel submarines. Most important, and in distinction from Kaplan's view, Hughes et al. contend that sea power is the foundation of American influence and prosperity and cannot be diminished without serious, far-reaching consequences for overall US national security.

Naval War College professor Carnes Lord's unpublished speech at Claremont's graduate school in April of this year is an excellent summation of the US Navy's current problems, the limitations of substituting cooperative naval arrangements for continued American naval dominance, the strategic advantages at risk in surrendering naval pre-eminence, and the historic dangers of doing so.

Andrew S. Erickson and Lyle J. Goldstein, both associate professors at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island have written widely and knowledgeably about the rise of China's navy. They have, for example, examined the development of the PLAN through the eyes of Chinese strategists, naval designers, retired senior officers, and leading party officials. Their work demonstrates China's view of nuclear submarines' usefulness in staying at sea for extended duration and at great distances from their homeland. This insight is one of many that show the evolution of Chinese thinking about the PLAN from a coastal to an increasingly blue-water navy.

Erickson and Lyle's most recent book, *China Goes to Sea*, looks at the growth of China's navy in light of other powers, ancient and modern, that have possessed conflicting or at least competing maritime and continental strategic needs. The implicit strategic question they raise about diverting China from its naval ambitions by forcing it to concentrate on its traditional continental vulnerabilities is an important contribution to such policy debate as exists about naval competition for dominance of the Pacific. No single article or book but the body of Erickson and Lyle's careful scholarship illuminates the potential of the strategic changes that will occur in the Pacific if current naval trends in the United States and China continue unchanged.

The Congressional Budget Office's analyst's findings, previously noted, that envision a less than 200 ship navy based on the increasing cost of shipbuilding, decreasing procurement accounts, and reductions in the number of ships purchased annually is a reasonable and objective effort to look into the fleet's future size. The current administration's budget, which would cut defense spending from its current level – which is below the 45-year average of 5.3 per cent of GDP – to 3.0 per cent, is an important document that powerfully shapes the policy debate not only by substantially reducing non-operational military spending, but by emphasizing irregular, “asymmetric” warfare at the expense of maintaining the capability needed for a robust, globally distributed naval force.

Equally important is the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) which the administration will publish early in 2010. Current indications suggest that this QDR will agree with conventional strategic ideas that identify future threats in failed states, climate change, globalization, increased competition for resources, and demographic changes in the Middle East, and proliferation. This will reflect Secretary of Defense Gates' emphasis on irregular warfare while underscoring growing threats to the international commons – i.e. the sea, air, space, and cyberspace.

The final document is more likely to identify multi-lateral efforts aimed at strengthening legal solutions to protect the international commons than it is to recommend that the United States embrace traditional means of preserving order in an increasingly troubled world. The chances are as remote that the new QDR will favour reversing naval decline as they are likely that the document will support continued naval contraction. DoD's current emphasis on asymmetric warfare risks exposure to a far broader and lethal form of asymmetry, one in which the United States is as unprepared for traditional threats as we are constrained by insufficient time and resources to correct the imbalance. One of the few constants in strategy is that threats for which a state prepares beget those for which it does not.

A document published by the Navy, itself, deserves mention among those that have framed the policy debate. Although its arguments have failed to make a public impression they would shift public understanding of the Navy's *raison d'être* away from Theodore Roosevelt's oceanic idea of naval power, and towards Thomas Jefferson's idea of a small lightly armed force. The Navy published a new maritime strategy in October 2007 calling it "A Cooperative Strategy for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Seapower. This article emphasized deterring rather than winning wars, as well as humanitarian and disaster relief missions. Although these missions are not new and have been a regular part of naval operations for decades, the emphasis on them as central to US maritime strategy *is* new.

The Navy's new recruiting ad reinforces this emphasis. It notes 'the anguish of those less fortunate' as it shows sailors helping flood victims; it speaks of the US Navy as 'a global force for good' with an image of the Navy's hospital ship, *Mercy*, in the background to provide potential recruits with a clear understanding of what the good is. This may indeed attract recruits although there are always the Peace Corps, the Red Cross, Oxfam, and a host of other international relief organizations for those who believe that protecting the United States against armed threats is best achieved through vaccinations and warm blankets. However, mirroring the maritime strategy itself, the recruiting ad also features traditional Navy combat missions, an implicit admission that the need for spirited young sailors has not disappeared. But the Navy's public face, and thus its institutional self-concept fails to make clear which set of missions most accurately describes what kind of Navy is best suited to advance the nation's maritime interests.

The word 'China' is absent from the strategy. The logic behind this ear-splitting silence is that naming names will defeat the strategy's objective of deterring war. Chinese military planners have yet to be persuaded. They continue to build a force that can keep the US Navy out of the Western Pacific. To its credit the maritime strategy does insist that freedom of maneuver and access to the world's oceans will be maintained as will international sea lines of communication. But the Navy's unwillingness so far to connect the new strategy with the ships or naval capability required to execute it raises questions about the document's practical value. The more perplexing issue is whether a maritime strategy based in large measure on multi-lateral naval cooperation in the service of nation-building/humanitarian assistance/disaster relief operations as well as traditional war-fighting missions while highlighting the former can achieve the public interest and acceptance to support either.

The most attention that the new maritime strategy has received in the policy community since its unveiling two years ago was vice-presidential candidate Joseph Biden's remark late in last year's presidential campaign last that 'I'll tell you what we cannot afford . . . a thousand-ship Navy.' However, no serious proposal existed for the United States to build a thousand-ship fleet. Prior to publication, a draft of the Navy's new maritime strategy had referred to a 'thousand-ship fleet' as a shorthand reference to a large maritime coalition composed of US combatants as well as those from other participating nations. This term had long since been scuttled in exchange for the less bellicose-sounding 'global maritime partnerships'. Biden was unaware both of the change and the fact that the Navy had never proposed a fleet of a thousand ships.

His lack of understanding is a fair mirror of the larger policy community's inattention. A handful of members of Congress – for example, Rep. Ike Skelton, Rep. Joe Sestak, Sen. Joe Lieberman, Sen. John McCain, Sen. Jim Webb, and representatives



from the small number of districts where shipbuilding and naval defense contracting remains an important source of jobs – understand the Navy’s decline and the issues noted above.

Aside from a few members of Congress, naval and military analysts, the defense press, and the military itself there exists little knowledge of, and less concern about, the large consequences for US foreign policy of continued American naval decline, the role that maritime forces and strategy should take in defending against current and anticipated strategic challenges, the likelihood that the fleet will continue to shrink, and the daunting task of recovering lost ground. There is an equal lack of appreciation for the need to air these questions and subject them to national scrutiny.

### **So what?**

The United States faces several alternative naval futures. Failure to build a fleet that answers the nation’s enduring need for flexible maritime forces or reverse the effects of serious and sustained naval decline will produce a navy-lite, one that looks more and more like a coast guard. Forgetting the bond between effective maritime strategy and discouraging likely future challenges is certain to embolden and generate increasingly formidable naval competition: With continued effort China can shed its ‘near peer competitor’ status and become the real thing. The inability to re-consider fundamental assumptions about the shape of naval forces erodes one of the United States’ traditional strengths, a flexible concept of maritime strategy as an essential element of national defense strategy. Failure to discipline the costs of building and maintaining naval forces, or to reduce a multiplying and largely unaccountable defense bureaucracy sentences the US combat fleet to either reduced size or capability – or both. The incapacity to identify affordable technologies foreshadows the end of the innovation and ingenuity that has characterized the American fleet since the post-Revolutionary War Navy built its first six over-size frigates that served effectively as capital ships from the western Atlantic to the central Mediterranean.

All these pathologies result in a much diminished US Navy. All are grave. None is as debilitating as the Navy’s self-induced drift towards conceiving of itself as a coalition-organizing and land-oriented deterrent to local conflict. This essentially continentalist idea possesses strong attraction for the Defense Department’s flavour *du jour*: multi-lateralist approaches to land-based asymmetrical challenges. But it is a death knell for a globe-spanning, trans-oceanic, strategic maritime force as well as the *idea* of such a force upon which both supreme naval competence and public support depends.

The late Samuel P. Huntington wrote in his famous article for the May 1954 issue of *Proceedings*, ‘If a service does not possess a well defined strategic concept, the public and the political leaders will be confused as to the role of the service, uncertain as to the necessity of its existence and apathetic or hostile to the claims made by the service upon the resources of society.’ A maritime strategy of deterrence through ‘thinking locally and acting globally’, as the oft-seen bumper sticker advocates, matches the sensibilities of most Western European populations today. It will never command the same respect and support as a strategy based on the nation’s need to protect against multiplying ballistic missile threats and seaborne WMD. Its silence about the dangers of China’s rising naval power is a strategic blunder as well as a lost opportunity to educate and gather public support. Maritime strategy that seeks lesser

goals threatens irreparable damage to our alliances, prestige, and the international system that American policy has labored to create for the past century.

The notion of using the Navy as a ‘global force for good’ – as the recruiting ad promises – isn’t bad and isn’t new. It could also be relatively inexpensive since building, renting, or buying small vessels linked to a mother ship and configured to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief is cheap compared to the cost of combatants. But the humanitarian mission is subordinate to the United States’ greater strategic objectives. The global-force-for-good idea turns on its head the influence that maritime force – in the absence of traditional navy-to-navy struggles for sea control – was supposed to exert over a strategic littoral area and transforms it into a kind of public diplomacy that seeks to shape public attitudes in potentially hostile regions by demonstrating American good will.

In failing to marshal the domestic political support necessary to maintain a large, capable, robust maritime force, this approach will reduce the Navy to an instrument of coastal or perhaps hemispheric defense. This puts at risk the nation’s capacity to meet with confidence an increasingly fragmented strategic future. It shatters the perception of the United States as a great power. It calls into question our future ability to clear the seas of a potential enemy’s naval and merchant shipping at precisely the moment when a would-be great power, China, is constructing maritime forces that could resurrect a naval contest of wills such as the one that withered when an essentially continental power, the Soviet Union opposed an essentially maritime power, the United States. Identifying China as a potential naval competitor threatens neither the truth nor peace. There is no better assurance of continued peaceful competition with China than a maritime strategy that retains a powerful US combat fleet in the western Pacific.

## Rebirth

More important than any other single obstacle to naval recovery is the absence of a national debate over maritime strategy. Other subjects that should be aired publicly are the Navy’s current fortunes and future prospects. The third issue that requires public focus is the Defense Department’s preoccupation with counter-insurgency at the expense of the balanced strategy that Secretary of Defense Gates mentioned in the title of his January 2009 *Foreign Policy* article. Such balance is needed to answer the breadth of threats that America will face in the future simultaneous with the war against jihadism and certainly extending beyond its conclusion.

These large questions are critical to the nation’s future security. But their public discussion is more urgent now than at any time since the end of Second World War because the precipitous rise in public debt will force the United States to make strategic choices that could be sidestepped in the past when paying off creditors did not consume the resources of the federal budget. The Congressional Budget Office predicts that interest on national debt will increase from its current level of less than five per cent of the federal budget to nearly 15 per cent in 11 years, a very short stretch measured in the time it takes to reconstitute a depleted fleet.

There are many fixes to our current maritime predicament that could yield positive results: more effective alliance management; the return of the thousands of sailors now serving in the Central Command to their jobs in the Navy; greater reliance on purchasing less expensive commercially-built vessels; a re-examination of long-held convictions about the superior design and cost advantages of multi-purpose warships; a reconsideration – in the absence of an opposed amphibious landing since Inchon – of

the role of amphibious forces; greater use of fixed price contracts; a fundamentally decentralized and accountable defense acquisition bureaucracy in which naval leadership is held responsible for acquisition performance including cost discipline; a continental strategy that distracts potential competitors from their naval ambitions. Such changes would address strategic challenges as they provided the basis for constructing a capable and affordable force.

But of all these, none is more important than a reconsideration of our maritime strategy and how best to implement it. The current one hangs from the nail of cooperative activity with foreign, i.e. mostly coastal, naval forces to deter war through a combination of providing local maritime security and good will in the form of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. These services benefit the United States. There is no good reason to withdraw them. But they bear the same relation to the United States' status as a great power that prescribing painkillers does to the more complex activity of a cardiologist: important, but subordinate. If maritime strategy hews to these subordinate functions the Navy will continue its retreat from the public's awareness, and thus, support. If the maritime strategy is modified and clearly articulated to reaffirm the Navy's role as an ocean-spanning and critical element of national strategy for maintaining American influence and peace in the Western Pacific and elsewhere, preserving the alliances that are critical to US security, defending against proliferating ballistic missile threats, sustaining the international system, and demonstrating American resolve to remain a pre-eminent power there's a very good chance that the public will remember, understand, and support the strategy along with the force needed to execute it.

Congressional purse strings may not be loosed at once if at all. But there will be no doubt what the stakes are. And the debate will turn on questions that the public is likely to understand are meaningful. At the very minimum this will assure that the nation's maritime strength – or lack of it – is the result of deliberate choices rather than an unconsidered retreat into strategic insignificance.

## Notes

1. Sen. Mel Martinez, 'Shipbuilding a National Imperative,' *politico* 44, 2009, at <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0609/23401.html>
2. Hearing on 'The Implications of China's Naval Modernization for the United States', US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, June 11, 2009, at [http://www.uscc.gov/hearings/2009hearings/hr09\\_06\\_11.php](http://www.uscc.gov/hearings/2009hearings/hr09_06_11.php).
3. Barrett Tillman, 'Fear and Loathing in the Post-Naval Era', *Proceedings* 135(6), 2009, at [http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/story.asp?STORY\\_ID=1896](http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/story.asp?STORY_ID=1896).
4. Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., 'The Pentagon's Wasting Assets', *Foreign Affairs*, July 2009, at [http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65150/andrew-f-krepinevich\\_jr/the\\_pentagons-wasting-assets](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65150/andrew-f-krepinevich_jr/the_pentagons-wasting-assets).