

Sea Power Makes Great Powers: History reveals a country's rise and decline are directly related to the heft of its navy. So why is the United States intent on downsizing?

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The number of ships a country possesses has never been the sole measure of its power at sea. Other factors, of course, play a role: The types of ships it has—submarines, aircraft carriers, destroyers—the manner in which they are deployed, the sophistication of their sensors, and the range and lethality of their weapons all make a difference. Still, on the high seas, quantity has a quality all its own. And over the past several decades, U.S. ship numbers have seen a dramatic overall decline.

The 1980s and 1990s marked the beginning of this downward trend. The U.S. government at the time cut subsidies for the nation's commercial shipbuilding industry, eventually hobbling the shipyards it would need to build a bigger fleet. With the end of the Cold War, policymakers went a step further, slashing funding to the U.S. Navy to create a shortsighted peace dividend.

Now, with defense budgets flat or declining, leading Defense Department officials are pushing a “divest to invest” strategy—whereby the Navy must decommission a large number of older ships to free up funds to buy fewer, more sophisticated, and presumably more lethal platforms.

China, meanwhile, is aggressively expanding its naval footprint and is estimated to have the largest fleet in the world. Leading voices simultaneously recognize the rising China threat while also arguing that the United States must shrink its present fleet in order to modernize. Adm. Philip Davidson, who led U.S. Indo-Pacific Command until he retired this spring, observed in March that China could invade Taiwan in the next six years—presumably setting the stage for a major military showdown with the United States—while Adm. Michael Gilday, the chief of naval operations, has argued that the Navy needs to accelerate the decommissioning of its older cruisers and littoral combat ships to free up money for vessels and weapons that will be critical in the future.

Taken together, these views add up to strategic confusion and an obliviousness to history.

Centuries of global rivalry show how a country's power—and its decline—is directly related to the size and capability of its naval and maritime forces. The ability to ship goods in bulk from places where they are produced to places where they are scarce has long represented an expression of national power. Athens had a robust navy as well as a large merchant fleet. Carthage in the third century B.C., Venice in the 13th and 14th centuries, and the Dutch republic in the 16th and 17th centuries also fielded merchant and naval fleets to pursue and protect their interests. In this way, they were able to transform their small- and medium-sized nations into great powers.

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Following the Napoleonic wars in the early 19th century, a large Royal Navy effectively knitted together the British Empire upon which “the sun never set.” By the latter half of that century, the British maintained a “two-power standard,” whereby the size of the Royal Navy had to meet or exceed the next two navies combined. That ultimately proved unsustainable. It was the doubling of the U.S. Navy battle force under President Theodore Roosevelt that catapulted the United States to global power and prominence. Most historians view the 14-month world cruise of new U.S. battleships—Roosevelt's Great White Fleet—as the birth of what would come to be known as the American Century.

The dramatic expansion of the U.S. fleet through two world wars—finishing the later conflict with more than 6,000 vessels, by far the largest navy ever afloat—set the country on its superpower path. Finally, Ronald Reagan's 600-ship Navy, as much a public relations campaign as it was a shipbuilding plan, helped convince the Soviet Union that it would not win the Cold War.

Throughout history, large naval and merchant fleets represented not just a power multiplier but an exponential growth factor in terms of national influence. All historical sea powers recognized this—until they didn't.

In October 1904, Adm. John "Jackie" Fisher was appointed first sea lord of the Royal Navy. He arrived in office certain who the enemy was—Germany—but also with clear direction from civilian leadership to tighten his belt and accept declining naval budgets. Fisher's solution to this strategic dilemma was to dramatically shrink the fleet in order to pay for modernization while also concentrating the remaining ships closer to Great Britain. His investments in modernization were breathtaking—most notably the introduction of a steam-turbine, all-big-gun battleship, the HMS Dreadnought, which would lend its name to all subsequent battleships that followed, transforming global naval competition.

But Fisher paid for his modernized vessels by massively culling the 600-ship Royal Navy he inherited from his predecessor. "With one courageous stroke of the pen," then-Prime Minister Arthur Balfour approvingly stated, Fisher slashed 154 ships from the Royal Navy's active list. Fisher classified some of these ships as "sheep," which were sent to the slaughter in the breakers' yards; others as "llamas," downgraded but retained in the reserves; and still others as "goats," which retained their guns with the stipulation that no further maintenance funds would be allocated to them.

The cull, however, wasn't cost-free. Most of the cuts were taken from gunboats and cruisers assigned to nine distant stations where Britain had national interests, such as in Asia or Africa. The cuts generated great criticism not only from within the Royal Navy, which was manned by officers with long experience and strong views regarding the importance of a naval presence overseas, but also from the British Colonial and Foreign Offices, which instantly recognized that they would no longer be able to call on readily available Royal Navy ships to support the nation's diplomatic interests.

Ultimately, Fisher did modernize his fleet in the short term. Both the Dreadnought class battleships as well as their consorts, the smaller Invincible-class battle cruisers, rendered all previous designs instantly obsolete. What Fisher did not anticipate was that his contraction and modernization of the Royal Navy would create two simultaneous effects: It destabilized the international environment, and it triggered a global naval arms race.

Britain had already been under pressure in the Far East and had asked Japan for assistance protecting its interests there, but now it found itself without a fleet of sufficient size to defend its interests in other geostrategic locations like the Caribbean and Africa. It had to trust a new partner, the United States, to take on that job. The only alternative would have been for Britain to simply forgo its colonial interests in order to focus on what it viewed as the preponderant German threat in the Baltic, North Sea, and northern Atlantic Ocean.

There were other knock-on effects. Having surrendered its dominant lead in overall ship numbers, Britain found itself in a new naval arms race in which its previous, sunk-cost investments in older ships offered no benefit. To its dismay, Britain began this new arms race from nearly the same position as its geostrategic rivals. Soon every European power, as well as the United States and Japan, was building modern dreadnoughts, and Fisher and his navy were unable to maintain or reestablish their previous two-power standard.

Today, Fisher's strategy would be recognized as a divest-to-invest modernization plan. And the lesson is clear: Britain found that it was unable to preserve even the facade of being a global power; it was quickly reduced to being a regional maritime power on the periphery of Europe.

The ensuing conditions of international instability, shifting alliance structures, and the global arms race contributed to the outbreak of World War I and the end of empires, including Britain's.

The United States currently faces many of the same strategic challenges that Britain confronted just over a century ago. Much as the Balfour ministry faced strategic strain from the distant Boer War—as well as expanding domestic social instability and the rise of Germany—the United States is dealing with the

chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, domestic civil unrest, and a rising China. Additionally, the White House Office of Management and Budget has attempted to impose on the Defense Department similar fiscal strictures to those that Balfour levied on Fisher's Admiralty: flat to declining budgets and demands to be more efficient. As a result, the Pentagon has made the decision to cut back on its shipbuilding plans, starting construction of only eight new ships in the next year, half of them auxiliaries, while accelerating the decommissioning of seven cruisers, dropping the fleet to an estimated 294 ships. Congress has indicated that it will seek to expand these numbers, but the future is increasingly murky. The U.S. naval strategy will produce a fleet too small to protect the United States' global interests or win its wars.

Given that even the most capable ship can only be in one place at a time and that the world's oceans are vast, the fleet as planned will not meet the demand for a naval presence detailed by the various four-star regional combatant commanders around the world. On average, their requests equate to approximately 130 ships at sea on any given day, nearly half of the present fleet. Today the Navy deploys, on average, fewer than 90 ships per day, creating gaps in key regions where America's interests are not being upheld. The Navy previously sought efficiencies that would allow it to "do more with less," by curbing training or the time ships spent in maintenance. The result, however, was an uptick in serious accidents at sea and a decline in the material readiness of the battle fleet.

Still, the overarching U.S. naval strategy, stated repeatedly by defense leaders during this spring's round of congressional hearings, is to "divest" of older platforms in order to "invest" in newer platforms that, although fewer in number, would possess a qualitative edge over those fielded by competitors. As history reveals, this strategy will produce a fleet too small to protect the United States' global interests or win its wars. Ultimately, the U.S. shipbuilding base and repair yards will atrophy to a point where they will not be able to meet the demand for new ships nor provide repairs when war almost inevitably comes.

To avoid the mistakes of the past, Congress should follow its constitutional charge in Article 1 and allocate funds sufficient to both provide for a newer, more modern fleet in the long run and to maintain the Navy that it has today as a hedge against the real and proximate threat from China. Such an allocation requires a 3 to 5 percent annual increase in the Navy's budget for the foreseeable future, as was recommended by the bipartisan 2018 National Defense Strategy Commission.

Both steps are crucial. Weapons like hypersonic missiles and directed energy mounts like the much-hyped railgun are changing the face of warfare, although not its nature, and the United States must invest to keep up with its competitors in China and Russia, which are already fielding some of these systems in large numbers. However, the Navy, as the day-to-day patroller facing these two rival great powers, cannot shrink the size of its battle force. As both Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt and later Ronald Reagan all understood: Great powers possess large, robust, and resilient navies. Conversely, shrinking fleets historically suggest nations that are overstretched, overtasked, and in retreat. Such revelations invite expansion and challenge from would-be rivals. To meet the demands of the current strategic environment, the U.S. Navy must grow—and quickly.

Not even a fleet of 355 ships, the number advanced by the Obama administration in its closing days, will be sufficient to reestablish conventional deterrence on the high seas. Instead, the United States should seek a fleet of 456 ships, comprising a balance between high-end, high-tech ships such as nuclear attack submarines and low-end, cheaper small surface combatants that can be added to numbers quickly. It should also seek to extend the lives of the ships it has now in its inventory to cover the short-term threat. The United States can do this by scheduling these ships for service life extensions of their hulls and power plants and for modernization of their combat systems and associated sensors within the constellation of the nation's civilian ship repair yards.

This endeavor will be expensive. Each Ticonderoga-class cruiser or Arleigh Burke-class destroyer could cost as much as half a billion dollars to repair and modernize, but replacing each cruiser and destroyer with a new ship would cost \$3.5 billion and \$1.9 billion, respectively, and such repair and modernization efforts would have the additional effect of rejuvenating the nation's ship repair capacity that has lain fallow for too long.

The United States began the 20th century as a peripheral power. First, Theodore Roosevelt's work to upbuild the Navy, followed by the efforts of the Wilson administration to meet the demands of a world war by tripling the size of the fleet, helped place the United States in a strong position at sea. This position was strengthened during the late 1930s, when Rep. Carl Vinson worked with FDR to expand the size of the Navy prior to World War II through three shipbuilding bills that culminated in the 1940 Two-Ocean Navy Act. It was those efforts, taken in times of peace, that allowed the U.S. Navy at the end of World War II to seize center stage.

Now, in this third decade of the 21st century, the United States must not ignore the rhymes of history, repeating the mistakes of the sea power that came before it—Britain—by lulling itself into the false belief that it can divest to invest in a brighter future while China maneuvers to overtake it. It must have larger defense budgets that will allow for a sea power-focused national security strategy in the face of rising threats. The United States must recognize yet again—as others have before it—that on the world's oceans, quantity has a quality all its own.