

# Why America Must Be a Sea Power

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*A naval-centric strategy will protect liberty, keep the global commons free, and shift boots-on-the-ground duties to allies*

**TO** retain its leading position within the global system, the United States should make a conscious decision to pivot back to being a sea power. It needs to recognize that it no longer has the means, nor the strategic acumen, to continue in its attempt to be all things to all peoples. Rather, at this point in its history, the nation should take stock of its unique geostrategic location in the northern, resource-rich portion of the Western Hemisphere, separated from the vicissitudes of the Eurasian landmass by two broad oceans.

Recognizing this, the country should commit itself, as its founders originally did, to taking full advantage of its geographic situation and implementing a comprehensive diplomatic, economic, and military strategy that focuses primarily on securing and stabilizing the four great global commons—the seas, air, space, and cyberspace—as a means of preserving the nation’s preeminent position while eschewing all-consuming and all-too-distracting foreign land-war commitments.

At its beginning, the nation understood that its strength lay in commercial free trade and diplomatic and military offshore influencing, but now the United States has wandered far from its origins. The question today is whether it has the capacity to recognize its new strategic reality and muster the strength of will to make the necessary changes in its internal national life to become a sea power once again.

Before considering this question, it is important to understand certain definitions. According to the British historian Andrew Lambert, author of the magisterial 2018 book *Seapower States*, great nations have been historically divided into either continental land powers or sea powers. According to Lambert, continental powers focus on land- or army-based strategies to control territories and resources. Examples of such powers include Persia, Rome, China, and Russia, among many others—all great empires cobbled together by successive conquering and annexation of expanding buffer zones. Sea-power states, which create strategic advantage through the exploitation of the unique military and economic characteristics of maritime capabilities and the unique openness of the oceanic environment, are quite rare. Tyre, Carthage, Venice, and Great Britain are among the very few small to medium-size nations that achieved great power through the wise pursuit of a sea-power strategy.

It is critical to understand that a continental power can use sea power — as Napoleonic France and the Soviet Union did—without becoming “sea powers,” because their strategic aims remained continentalist. It is also important to understand that terms such as “space power,” “nuclear power,” and even “air power” fail to translate into an overall national strategy because, while they do include both military and diplomatic components, they fall short in the absence of a sufficiently large economic component. Today some 80 percent of global trade by volume and 70 percent by value moves by sea. Additionally, some 95 percent of the global economy’s data travel between continents through undersea cables, and a growing portion of energy and raw-resource drilling and mining rises from the bottom of the oceans. Trade via the air as well as financial-services movements in cyberspace also make up a growing portion of “trade,” but these movements fall easily in line with a sea-power strategic approach to the world that seeks to protect American interests in the global commons against the growing aggressions of China and, to a lesser degree, Russia. The nation’s interests are found at sea and in the other global commons as much now as they were in the past.

The United States itself was founded as a sea power. Created from a group of colonies chartered by European powers, the 13 original states looked eastward across the Atlantic to sell their raw resources in Europe’s markets and buy advanced, finished, and manufactured goods from its more mature economies.

Americans have always instinctively understood the economic equation associated with the theory of the free sea, which allows for raw resources and finished goods to move in bulk on ships from locations where they are plentiful and cheap to markets where they are scarce, to be sold at a profitable price set by a competitive market.

The sea, which lacks the natural borders found on land, such as rivers and mountain ranges, allowed the American colonies and the nascent republic to flourish, and the Founders knew its value, which is why they built sea power into the young nation's structure by requiring in the Constitution that the Congress "provide and maintain a navy" as a means of both protecting and promoting the nation's seaborne commerce while only stipulating that Congress could "raise and support" an army when crises required. The Founders felt the need for sea power to be permanent but saw the need for land power as episodic.

The nation's love of the sea went beyond its governing documents, finding its way into the early nation's popular art and literature. The nation's westward expansion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, and then its Wilsonian decisions to pursue foreign alliances and join world-spanning wars in Europe and Asia in the 20th century, began a shift in strategic outlook from that of a sea power to a traditional continentalist view. The end of the Cold War and the "end of history" singularity that followed generated a hyperpower moment when Americans thought that they could be and should be simultaneously a land power and a sea power. Two decades and two global war-on-terrorism campaigns later, the nation now finds itself both strategically and economically exhausted, even as Russia, and more importantly China, are on the rise as great-power competitors. The nation has reached a moment of decision and will have to make a choice as to its strategic path. But fortunately that path has already been made clear.

**BOTH** China and Russia have begun to move strategically, and they have chosen with care the places where they wish to compete. As traditional continental powers that govern through authoritarian, autocratic models, China and Russia seek to preserve internal political stability at all costs. In fact, they have both invested, commensurate with their economic abilities, in a military system of systems grouped under the label "anti-access/area denial" intended to push potential enemies far back from their land and oceanic borders. They have even gone so far as to ignore centuries, if not a millennium, of strife between their peoples in order to form a pseudo-alliance, creating a tenuous peace along their long land border that lets them focus their competitive energies against the United States and the West. Thus their strategic focus is on the four global commons: air, cyberspace, space, and, most important, the seas, where they have chosen to compete strongly by deploying new generations of advanced aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers, and lethally silent nuclear-powered fast-attack submarines.

They compete in the commons because they disregard traditional Westphalian rules against territorial acquisition and because these common areas serve as media not only for the transfer of wealth and trade but also for the transmission of destabilizing concepts and ideas that pose long-term threats to authoritarian states. Authoritarian land powers thus fear the seas for the same reason that our nation's Founders celebrated them: The concepts of the free seas and free trade are foundational to the Enlightenment's concepts of individual freedom and liberty. It is for this reason that China and Russia have increasingly sought to extend their territorial sea claims over increasingly large swaths of the high seas and to change the laws, rules, and norms that govern this 71 percent of the earth. They are seeking to establish controls over the free market as well as to build firewalls and other barriers against the transmittal of destabilizing political ideas. The bottom line is that the most proximate and real threats to American national interests—economic, diplomatic, and military—lie at sea, which is ironic, given our previous preponderant strength in that domain.

War and strife had been common conditions upon the oceans since mankind first began to understand the advantages of seaborne trade millennia ago. Incidents of piracy, maritime battles, and large oceanic wars dominate the past 25 centuries, finding industrial culmination over the past 500 years as single-ship and fleet actions took on characteristics of lethal efficacy on the high seas. But nearly all oceanic war and piracy incidents suddenly ceased in 1945 as the United States Navy emerged from World War II with a fleet of over 6,000 ships, an unimaginably preponderant force. In the shadow of this fleet and the security it provided, the United States was uniquely positioned to reshape the world in its philosophical image. Committed to free trade from its founding, it reformed the global economy first via the Bretton Woods

conference, which created the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and then, just a short while later, through the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, which opened national and colonial economies that had long been closed to free, unencumbered trade—which immediately soared across the newly liberated seas.

With a large U.S. Navy on persistent patrol in 18 maritime regions of the world, covering both ends of every sea line of commercial exchange and ensuring the security of every global maritime chokepoint, conditions on the planet dramatically improved. For the next 70 years, trade and its causal metric, the global domestic product, climbed exponentially, raising billions of people out of extreme poverty while dramatically lowering global illiteracy rates. Lives improved through the mass movement of goods, at affordable rates, from places where they were plentiful to places where they were scarce. One need look no further than the recent blocking of the Suez Canal by the container ship *Ever Given*, and the subsequent disruption of economic markets worldwide, to understand both the importance and the fragility of the global maritime system that the United States has sponsored and protected. In short, the United States changed the world in the space of three generations. But today those improvements are under threat.

**THE** world we have created is not the world that China and Russia wish to live in. Its very openness and expansive freedoms threaten the domestic stability of these authoritarian powers, which recognize that the free sea can no longer be defended by the U.S. Navy. Having fallen from 6,000 ships in 1945 to a bare 296 deployable ships today through a series of ill-informed assumptions regarding an enduring ideological victory and the value of “peace dividends,” the American fleet is no longer large enough to persistently protect its interests across the globe. Through underinvestment in its Navy, the United States has created a vacuum and invited a competition in the large maritime global commons, one that it can ill afford to lose.

Because the United States has presented itself as a global leader, it must continue to lead globally so that the security structure it has created can sustain itself. Should China in the South China Sea or Russia in the Arctic successfully create and then sustain a carve-out to the concept of the free sea, should either create a local sphere of influence, it will make a lie of the entire American-led global system, introduce instability, and most assuredly lead to a disastrous and costly war. But there is an alternative to such a cascade of failure: a decision to return to the Founders’ intent of placing naval power first in our national strategy, reduce American boots-on-the-ground continentalist commitments around the world, and focus on investing in maritime commercial trade and a naval offshore-balancing military strategy.

Recognition of the need to reduce boots-on-the-ground commitments should be quick. Our strategic situation is not at present aligned with a continentalist, land-power approach to the world. On our own continent, situated between two friendly, unthreatening, and much smaller states (in terms of their population and economic power), we have no need for a large standing army. Maintaining one over the past 70 years has, in some cases, served as an excuse for nation-building and foreign-policy adventurism. While some might also state that our alliance commitments force a requirement for a large land component upon us, we should recognize that the size of our army has served all too often as an excuse for allies to under-invest in their own security as well as to shift resources toward their own domestic social-welfare programs. Ultimately, a focus on a sea-power strategy will assist other nations by encouraging them to right-size their own national security apparatus to meet the current generation of threats.

It is important, even critical, to understand that investment in commercial maritime trade is crucial to returning the United States to its historical position as a sea power. Before 1981 the United States government recognized its civilian merchant fleet as a core strategic reserve of maritime power. Commercial ships could carry merchant trade, but they could also carry logistical supplies for the military in wartime. Shipyards could build new ships for civilian fleets as well as the Navy, but they could also repair ships damaged in wartime operations. Shipyards also drove other portions of the economy. For every shipyard blue-collar job, five to seven well-paying positions were created in upstream parts and component suppliers.

It was a complicated industrial process that was subsidized as a longstanding policy by the federal government, which recognized that a robust and resilient shipbuilding sector was a critical component of a comprehensive national security strategy. These subsidies, however, were ended in the 1980s, and U.S. shipbuilding subsequently withered even as other nations in Europe and Asia continued to subsidize their own shipbuilders. Today China, the world's largest shipbuilding nation, has over 1,200 shipyards, one of which produces more tonnage per year than the entirety of U.S. shipbuilding. Today China, South Korea, Japan, and Europe control and profit from their participation in a growing and thriving global shipping market while the United States sits largely on the sidelines.

Critics may say that returning to a policy of providing subsidies to our shipbuilding industry would go against free market principles. But we must recognize that every other shipbuilding nation provides such subsidies, to the great benefit of its industries, its economy, and its national security. Returning subsidies to American shipbuilders does nothing more than provide a level global-competitive playing field for them and increase the resilience of our overall national security infrastructure. Additionally, any strategy to confront China on the high seas must include a detailed investment and management plan for the nation's shipbuilding infrastructure so that we can quickly and efficiently rebuild this part of the nation's economy while strengthening its security. The nation is perhaps fortunate that there is already an acknowledged need to reenergize the civilian shipbuilding base, because most of the nation's strategic sealift fleet needs to be recapitalized.

An expanded civilian shipbuilding capacity will make it easier to take the next step to once again becoming a sea power: rebuilding the United States Navy. The modern fleet is highly complex. Phased-array radars, passive sensors that constantly scan the expanded electromagnetic spectrum, ballistic missile-defense systems, and hypersonic cruise and boost-glide systems all include technologies that exceed the imaginations of most Americans. These systems and the ships that integrate them are expensive to build and are made more so by the lack of capacity and competition within the shipbuilding sector. Today there are just two American shipyards that build destroyers and two others that build submarines. While that may seem like competition, it's not much, and there needs to be more.

The nation needs to expand its fleet if it is to maintain its position in the world and its notion of the free sea and free trade. We will need a Navy battle force of around 450 ships, up from the previously mentioned 296 ships. We can accomplish it along two paths: building new ships, and extending the lives of the ships we already have. To do this, we need more shipbuilding yards and more drydocks to perform complex overhauls and ship-modernization programs. During World War II the Navy operated ten industrial shipyards and could contract building and repairs to 50 additional commercial drydocks around the nation to service large combatants. Today the Navy operates just four shipyards and can call upon fewer than 20 commercial drydocks, and many of those are in the wrong locations. Aside from one yard in San Diego, there is not much shipbuilding or ship-repair capacity on the nation's west coast, where most of the demand for these services would occur in a potential war with China.

If we craft a strategy that rebuilds our shipbuilding and repair yards, recreates our merchant fleet, increases our participation in the global shipping economy, and expands our Navy, other components of the nation's return to sea-power status will follow. If ships and the sea become an increasing part of our economic life, they will also once again become part of our national conversation and even make their way into our popular culture, both high and low. The sea would once again be a theme of art, literature, and music. Already the nation's film industry and theaters are eagerly awaiting the thrice-delayed (because of COVID) premiere of the sequel to *Top Gun*, a major film event that will once again celebrate naval aviators, their aircraft, and the massive carriers that launch and recover them.

**THE** Founders understood the cultural, military, and economic importance of the sea and enjoined their successors to consider the nation's geostrategic position in the world, protected as the great bulk of it is by two broad oceans. Washington himself in his final address said, "Why forgo the advantages of so peculiar a situation?" A shift to a sea-power strategy would allow the nation to continue to uphold its support for a free sea, free trade, and individual freedom while also shifting the burden for providing local, boots-on-the-ground security to the allies that are more proximate to security threats in Asia and Europe. After all, it is difficult to make the argument to the average American that it is necessary to invest more in

the security of nations that spend less than 2 percent of their GDP on defense than those nations themselves do. A sea-power strategy will place the onus for local security firmly upon those nations' shoulders while retaining the promise of offshore but accessible American support.

To repeat, the nation can no longer economically or strategically afford to continue its attempt to be all things to all peoples. Continued efforts to do so at this point can only produce mediocre performance across the spectrum of strategic engagement. Instead, the nation should pursue excellence in a focused band of that engagement.

If the nation's leaders carefully consider the United States' geostrategic position in the world, then the answer to the question whether the nation can once again be a sea power is easy. Given that a preponderance of the nation's interests lie on or under the world's oceans; that those same oceans, representing an open global commons, are where both China and Russia are seeking to offshore the global competition away from their home territories and toward the global air, space, cyberspace, and sea commons; and that resurrecting the nation's shipbuilding industrial base provides a clear path for revitalizing an important sector of the national economy, it seems that a pivot to a sea-power-focused national strategy represents a natural, coherent decision.

This is not to say that other aspects of national defense or national life should be neglected. In fact, we also need to invest more in our air, space, and cyber forces, which along with our Navy patrol and protect the global commons. In an era dominated by competitive pressures and fiscal constraints, however, prioritization is a must, and such prioritization should follow a broadly understood and publicly accessible argument. Five hundred years of thought, economic development, and military struggle have created the current prosperous global environment, but one generation of strategic hubris and confusion has put it all at risk. The nation should once again return to the wisdom of the Founders and make the global commons the central focus of our national-security strategy. The United States must become a sea power again.