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## Rebuilding the U.S. Navy Won't Be Easy

But it can be done with the help of shipbuilding allies and more money to train defense-industry workers.

By Seth Cropsey

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The U.S. Navy is a ship without a rudder. The longer the service is allowed to decay, the more precarious America's strategic situation will become. Turning things around won't be easy. The best solution would be to retain every combat ship in the current fleet and encourage allies to pitch in with their own industrial bases. This expansion will require substantial funding, particularly in the workforce.

The Suez Canal is one of the world's busiest maritime highways, connecting the Mediterranean and Red seas and creating a shortcut for ships sailing from the North Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. This route is the center of the broader Eurasian trade system on which American power relies. It has helped the U.S. become one of the wealthiest, most powerful nations in the world. It has also enabled the construction of alliances across Eurasia, as powers ranging from Germany and Poland to South Korea and Japan are far less threatened by a U.S. that seeks commercial access and upholds freedom than by a China or Russia that demands a monopoly on commerce.

Since 2023 the Houthis have harassed ships exiting and entering the Suez Canal but sunk few vessels. Well-trained American and allied surface combatant crews have intercepted scores of missiles and drones, and U.S. Navy strike fighter squadrons have bombed Houthi missile launch sites. Nevertheless, insurance premiums for the Suez route have increased, and the Suez Canal Authority has lost almost 70% of its shipping traffic despite lower transit fees.

Countering the Houthis would take several months of intense pressure. The U.S. would need to deploy a surface action group of up to five warships, alongside a Marine expeditionary unit. Ideally a Wasp or America class "lightning carrier," a flat-decked amphibious assault ship with a squadron of Marine F-35s, would work alongside a maritime patrol squadron and Navy SEAL units supported by U.S. Air Force and Space Force reconnaissance and communications.

The campaign would take about six months, considering the dispersion of Houthi assets, the Houthis' ability to redeploy launchers, and the limitations White House casualty sensitivity would impose on operations. Interdiction, search and seizure of Houthi-bound shipping would prevent weapons smuggling from Iran. The U.S. warships could intercept missiles launched at commercial shipping, provide convoy escorts, and strike Houthi command-and-control sites.

The issue is that the U.S. Navy can't spare these ships.

The number of ships in the Navy has shrunk since its Trump administration high of 296 and, as per construction and procurement funding, won't reach more than 300 ships until 2032. Maintenance and repair delays have piled up rapidly. Only 60% of the attack submarine fleet is deployable at any given time. The rest is tied up in maintenance. Two supercarriers are out for an additional year-plus due to unspecified turbine damage. The U.S. is retiring surface warships faster than it can build them. Its new ships, most notably the Constellation class frigates, carry half the firepower of an Arleigh Burke class destroyer at around two-thirds of the price. The Navy has also struggled in vain for nearly two decades to retain talent.

Sea control is nonnegotiable for a dominant maritime power. The U.S. needs to deploy its forces from North America and shift them between different parts of Eurasia. If it can't maintain a strong naval presence, it will be forced to follow the British rental-cum-alliance model, and its credibility across Eurasia will decline rapidly.

This decline comes at the worst possible geopolitical moment. Russia continues to prosecute its war of conquest against Ukraine, hoping to alter dramatically the European balance of power and shatter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Iran and its proxies are mounting attacks on Israel

as China prepares for war. Beijing is pursuing the largest military buildup since World War II. Its navy already outnumbered ours. It has gone from fielding one experimental carrier to multiple purpose-built carriers in under 15 years and will soon deploy its first catapult-equipped carrier. It is also expanding its nuclear arsenal and improving its submarine capabilities.

America's response to these worrying global developments should be a revitalization of American shipbuilding, aided by cooperation with allies. South Korea has several high-quality naval yards that produce top-line small and medium-size warships, along with submarines. Though U.S. Navy requirements differ from those of other countries, there is much to gain from contracting with yards that can deliver warships on time and at or under budget.

The U.S. will still have to build some of its own ships. Foreign firms can't supply the missile-armed surface combatants, submarines, amphibious warships and carriers that are required to project power. Accomplishing a large-scale naval expansion will require an enormous workforce training program that brings in a new class of technicians. Without this, the naval industrial base workforce will shrink to ineffectiveness and desuetude in another 15 years, given its ageing personnel. I have been hearing this concern from companies in the naval shipbuilding industry for well over a decade. Training takes time, as does the construction of new yards and equipment.

In the interim, the U.S. can turn to its more robust aerial industrial base, using a flood of new maritime patrol aircraft to maintain maritime awareness and heavy bombers to conduct strikes. This will mean negotiating with allies to ensure use of air bases—a difficult, but worthwhile step.

Finally, and most important, strong U.S. naval leadership is needed to explain the causes of the navy's sinking fortunes, detail its consequences for American prosperity and security and argue forcefully for remedies—beginning with a strategy to deter war in the Pacific. From the White House to the Pentagon, such leadership is critical to retaining a strong U.S. position in the world.

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An Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer transits the Suez Canal, Dec. 18, 2023. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY  
IMAGE

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