



PERSPECTIVES

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Declining US Naval Power Does Not Augur Well for Eurasia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: As US naval power declines, other powers – such as China, Russia, and, to a lesser extent, India and Iran – are set to increase their presence in the world’s naval lanes. Because American power depends on its dominance at sea, Washington’s ability to control Eurasia is coming under increasing pressure.

The sovereignty of small countries across the Eurasian landmass is largely contingent upon direct US support and power. It is therefore worthwhile to track changes in American power and in Washington’s vision of its military posture around the globe – a subject that is under-discussed by analysts and politicians.

The starting point for this discussion will be an understanding that US power in Eurasia, popular opinion notwithstanding, has always been of relatively limited character. This is due to the fact that the US is a sea power surrounded by large swaths of water. Its ability to reach the depths of the Eurasian continent through the deployment of troops is therefore constrained.

Like all other sea powers before it, the US – even during the Cold War – always had to rely on regional powers to pursue its geopolitical aims. Saudis have been important in the containing of Iran; Ukraine now contains Russia; Japan and other Asia-Pacific states limit Chinese power. US reach seems astounding on the map, but strategists have always understood that this was only possible because of Washington’s astute perception of regional balances of power, geopolitical rivalries among Eurasian powers, and – most of all – America’s preponderance at sea.

This last point is critical. Let's start with simple numbers. The Earth as a planet is relatively modest in size, 25,000 miles in circumference at the equator, while its total surface area is 197 million square miles. This means that nearly three-quarters of the planet is water. The power controlling the world's oceans thus controls numerous economic and military developments around the globe. Americans have long understood this; hence their efforts since the late 19th century to expand their naval capabilities.

The 20th century was an American century, but things are changing. The Chinese and the Indians are building navies, the Iranians are growing assertive in the Persian Gulf, and the Russians are flexing their muscles in the Black and Baltic Seas as well as the Arctic Ocean.

The Chinese are particularly important to watch. It could be that Beijing, through the deployment of large numbers of ships, is hoping to influence US strategic thinking without engaging US power militarily – to dilute it rather than tackle it head on. Regardless, its object is to limit US reach in the South China Sea.

Pure numbers and overreach are also to blame. Consider this. During the Cold War, the US deployed fleets of up to 1,000 ships overall, mostly in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans as well as in the Mediterranean Sea. Today, the number of competing sea powers has risen, and the US needs to cover the whole world – but it must do so with fewer than 500 ships.

Another probable reason for the decline of US naval capacity is globalization. The faster the pace of globalization, the greater the need to control every corner of the world, as a minor military confrontation in Asia, Europe, or the Middle East might transform into a global problem.

Sea powers throughout history have proved far more long-lasting than land powers. Sea power is, in fact, the best indicator of a nation's power.

The US might hope to retain its global dominance by enlisting allies with similar geopolitical aspirations. But doing so would mean the US is essentially admitting its relatively weak position as a naval power (an “elegant decline,” as some might describe it). It could spend more on the Navy and build new fleets, but the cost of doing so can reach as high as the accumulated GDP of tens of African and Asian states.

This is, in many ways, what the British experienced before World War I. Great Britain had been a primary naval force in the world for almost two centuries (especially in the 19th century), but the gradual rise of the US and German naval fleets threatened the British order at sea.

One reaction of the British elite at the time was to simply dismiss the trend and proclaim that their power would always remain unmatched. It is difficult to admit one's own declining power.

What does all this mean for small states along the borders of larger ones like Russia, China, and Iran? Those small states rely on the US for their security. But in the long run, when the focus of the US's grand strategy grows more focused on containing China at sea, Washington will be less able to address the Russian Navy in the Black Sea, Iranian vessels in the Persian Gulf, or possibly even the growing Indian fleet in the Indian Ocean, some time in the distant future. The US simply does not have sufficient naval resources to hand.

American naval ascendancy in the early 20th century was gradual, a state of affairs the British did not want to admit. The two world wars made the decline of the British fleet an established fact. But psychologically, it was relatively easy for London to give up its primary role. The US, after all, shared essentially the same culture and had been Britain's ally in both world wars.

The US-China competition is fundamentally different. The cultures are entirely dissimilar, and there is a good deal of mutual distrust.

In any case, the Americans will have to make some concessions to the Chinese. Even if they settle for a condominium arrangement in the South China Sea, that would still be a major step forward for Beijing.

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