

The U.S. Naval Buildup and Asia under the Trump Administration

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The United States is a seafaring nation. Founders arrived by ship and developed America into a major economy via open commerce across the oceans. In 1890, U.S. Navy Captain [Alfred Thayer Mahan](#) produced one of the single-most influential studies on maritime power. *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* analyzed the close linkage between national strength and prosperity and naval power. As Mahan wrote, “the history of sea power, while embracing in its broad sweep all that tends to make a people great upon the sea or by the sea, is largely a military history....”

A Navy Renaissance?

Recognizing the enduring importance of maritime power, President Donald Trump pledged to rebuild the U.S. armed forces in general and the navy in particular. As a result, in 2017, the United States is focused a new on international cooperation backed by strong naval power. Before that, in the run up to the ending of the hotly contested 2016 presidential election, then-candidate Trump vowed to maintain “Peace through strength” in no small part by restoring the navy fleet to a size that [last existed around 1998](#). Specifically, he promised to [“build a Navy of 350 surface ships and submarines.”](#) to include 12 aircraft carriers.

Although seapower cannot be reduced to just a number, the oceans are vast and ships cannot be in two places at the same time. Quantity, as the old aphorism goes, has a quality all its own. Numbers matter because the U.S. Navy seeks to retain a visible presence and surge capacity in not just the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean, but also the Persian Gulf, the Mediterranean Sea, and

elsewhere. In addition, naval modernization programs are underway throughout the Asia-Pacific region, but in no country as much as China.

The [emergence of China's blue-water navy](#) has enormous implications for the littoral countries of the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and the Yellow Sea. As the PLA Navy order of battle surpasses the U.S. Navy fleet in quantity (and by one estimate may comprise a [500-ship navy by 2030](#)), it is also catching up in technological quality. Moreover, China's strategy of dominating its near seas is offensively reinforced by an increasingly impressive [PLA rocket force](#), law enforcement and maritime militia and the fortification of maritime outposts. These seapower instruments are buttressed not only by a mixture of soft-power inducements such as Belt and Road Initiative, but also an unrelenting information campaign and periodic coercion.

The U.S. Navy inventory of 275 ships is less than half the size of the force that existed at the end of the Cold War. During the Reagan administration, Secretary of the Navy John Lehman successfully promoted a nearly 600-ship navy. The pendulum is once again swinging back in the direction of a larger navy.

The Reagan-era naval modernization program supported a serious [maritime strategy](#). It was designed to thwart Soviet plans for establishing major nuclear submarine bastions or sanctuaries and using an open-ocean or blue-water navy to undermine U.S. interests. The end of the Cold War was a most welcome development, but it simultaneously deprived the navy of an overarching rationale.

Hence, it is significant that there is now an incipient renaissance in U.S. naval strategy and support for the idea of maritime power. Certainly, President Trump is committed to that goal, and the case for reversing the decline of American naval mastery has been widely noted in the U.S. literature on strategic studies.

As Seth Cropsey wrote in his 2013 book, *Mayday: The Decline of American Naval Supremacy*, the United States discovered that, “Seapower is the most cost-effective and efficient means of indirectly diverting the efforts of other states.” He added, “More than any other military instrument, seapower can serve as a *preventative* force, one that if maintained vigorously reassures friends of support, reminds allies of American commitment, and can prevent states without navies from developing them. It can accomplish these objectives from a great distance.”

Retired [Admiral James Stavridis](#) recently penned another important book on seapower, one that cogently describes the critical security, economic, and environmental dimensions of the oceans. In *Sea Power: The History and Geopolitics of the World's Oceans*, Stavridis explains that the vast bulk of commerce flows over the seas, that other major powers (especially China) are busy modernizing their navies, and that our allies and partners also rely on assured access to the maritime commons. Furthermore, all of humanity is potentially threatened by ocean acidification, a scourge that could deprive the world of oxygen.

Earlier this year Chief of Naval Operations Admiral John Richardson put forth a concise set of guidelines and a vision for the [Future Navy](#). He reached two fundamental conclusions: “First, the nation needs a more powerful Navy, on the order of 350 ships, that includes a combination of manned and unmanned systems. Second, more platforms are necessary but not sufficient. The Navy must also incorporate new technologies and new operational concepts.”

Budget Realities

Despite the recognition and political support for rebuilding the U.S. Navy, financing the ambition remains a singular challenge. Even supporters of the current administration are concerned about a budget that falls far short of expectations.

[The baseline budget submission](#) for the next year (October 2017-September 2018) requests \$171.5 billion, a 7 percent increase from the navy budget enacted in fiscal year 2017. Following top-level defense guidance, the initial priority is readiness before building capacity and improving lethality in subsequent years. Accordingly, the fiscal year 2018 budget would fund a battle force of 292 ships, including 11 aircraft carriers and 32 large amphibious ships; deliver 12 new combatant ships; begin construction on 8 new ships; and pay for a range of manned and unmanned naval aviation platforms, including 91 airframes.

The budget provides additional money for a variety of new and innovative systems, including new ship and aviation designs, an anti-ship version of the Tomahawk missile, solid-state lasers, cyber resiliency, next-generation electronic warfare jammers for the EA-18G Growler, an enhanced Global Positioning System, advanced undersea systems, ship defenses, carrier drones, and [“state of the art missile defense”](#) systems to protect forces and bases in the region.

However, some analysts remain unimpressed by the initial budget submission. For instance, a leading U.S. defense [expert at the conservative American Enterprise Institute](#) has sharply criticized President Trump for not following through on his campaign promise to rebuild the military. The initial budget request offers to repair readiness but not buildup the U.S. Armed Forces. It “represents a more muscular status quo at best,” writes Mackenzie Eaglen. With a focus on balancing the overall national budget, the administration’s 2018 defense budget calls for most investment to support immediate operations and long-term development, “while discounting the long bar of the medium term, wherein most strategic and military risk lies.”

Although the Trump administration’s fiscal year 2018 defense budget request totals \$668 billion—which would represent a 5.5 percent increase over the previous year’s spending—a serious overhaul in defense spending is being deferred for at least another year. [Secretary of Defense James Mattis](#) knows that the 2011 Budget Control Act’s spending caps will have to be eliminated

if sustained military modernization is to be undertaken. Even then, the Department of Defense will have to pursue new reforms to show that it is spending taxpayer money wisely.

Ending government-wide spending caps known as sequestration will be necessary if President Trump is to achieve his goal of rebuilding the U.S. Navy. Even so, there is no one quick fix to substantially enlarge and improve the fleet. Navies are built over decades. Jerry Hendrix and Robert O'Brien offer one thoughtful prescription for how the Trump administration could successfully and relatively rapidly build [a 350-ship navy](#). They would combine new investment with funding the refurbishment of older yet still useful platforms to expand a more powerful fleet. Even if sequestration were repealed, some variant of the Hendrix and O'Brien concept might well be adopted by the administration.

Beyond budgets, the United States will still need to refine a multi-faceted naval strategy for both near-term gray-zone situations and coercion, and long-term, high-end competition. A full articulation of the Trump administration's strategy for the Asia-Pacific region remains to be made, but this seems simply a matter of time.

President Trump, Naval Power, and the Asia-Pacific Region

While the Trump administration will not refer to a pivot or rebalance to Asia, it continues to focus on the growing importance of the region. At the 2017 [Shangri-La Dialogue](#), Secretary Mattis underscored that America's enduring commitment is based on a clear recognition that U.S. and Asian interests are increasingly intertwined. Although the Trump administration has continued the Obama administration's practice of using freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) to push back on excessive maritime claims, the region is watching closely for signs as to whether the United States is fully committed to maintaining a rules-based regional order.

Early signs suggest the Trump administration is indeed serious about working with allies and

partners to maintain a rules-based order. In Singapore, Secretary Mattis explained: “We oppose countries militarizing artificial islands and enforcing excessive maritime claims unsupported by international law. We cannot and will not accept unilateral, coercive changes to the status quo. We will continue to fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows, and demonstrate resolve through operational presence in the South China Sea and beyond. Our operations throughout the region are an expression of our willingness to defend both our interests and the freedoms enshrined in international law.”

At the Shangri-La Dialogue, the American defense chief repeated the military posture priorities of his predecessor when he declared that “currently 60% of all US Navy ships, 55% of Army forces and about two-thirds of Fleet Marine forces are assigned to the US Pacific Command area of responsibility. Soon, 60% of our overseas tactical-aviation assets will be assigned to this theatre.”

In effect, Secretary Mattis focused on the same [lines of effort](#) outlined by the Obama administration to achieve a rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region. These lines of effort are: to strengthen alliances, encourage strong and responsible partners, and strengthen U.S. military capabilities in the region. Furthermore, Mattis emphasized the Trump administration’s support for moving beyond America’s traditional hub-and-spokes alliance system. Hence, less formal [networked security](#) cooperation—to include bilateral, trilateral, and “minilateral” exchanges, exercises, and arms transfers--can reinforce what Secretary Mattis describes as an [“interconnected region.”](#)

For instance, the United States has undertaken its first-ever transfer of a Coast Guard cutter to Vietnam, while at the same time encouraging key ally Japan to bolster its maritime cooperation with Hanoi. And the Trump administration is continuing to support the development of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, as suggested by meetings with ASEAN counterparts by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in Washington and Secretary of Defense Mattis in Singapore.

President Trump has announced his intention to participate in the East Asia Summit and the APEC meetings in Manila and Hanoi respectively this November.

Not only is the United States seeking to build on the last administration's Maritime Security Initiative aimed at boosting the capacity of partners around the South China Sea, but it is also discussing with Congress a major reassurance initiative designed to reinforce U.S. capabilities and posture in the Asia-Pacific region. Secretary Mattis said he is working with leaders in Congress on "an Asia-Pacific Stability Initiative that complements the ongoing, large-scale investments in our budget to improve and reinforce US military capabilities across the region."

This reassurance should be well received in Asia, especially in areas such as the South China Sea where China's assertiveness and island-building might be countered. As U.S. Pacific Command's [Admiral Harry Harris](#) put it, "Fake islands should not be believed by real people."

Nonetheless, a pair of FONOPs [around Mischief Reef](#) in late May and [near Triton Island](#) in early July will not dissuade a determined, probing China adamant on creating a de facto control over the south China Sea, despite the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration Panel findings on the basic lack of legal standing of the nine-dash line and other claims. As analyst Ely Ratner has argued, the United States will need to do more to check China's creeping assertions of sovereignty in the [South China Sea](#). Ratner's position reflects a dominant American strand of thinking, although Australian [Hugh White's assumption](#) that China has already won the contest to control the South China Sea is also part of the evolving strategic discourse.

The Trump administration is looking for allies and partners to shoulder greater responsibility for forging a broad security counterweight to China's assertiveness. Amid dynamic developments in the region, one fact remains clear: naval power will remain vital, not only for contending with a bounded major-power [geopolitical competition](#), but also for securing stability and prosperity at

large for decades to follow.

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