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COMMENTARY

America Can't Afford to Cede the Seas

Does the U.S. want to continue as a great power? China's navy is set to surpass our fleet by 2030.



The USS Ronald Reagan, USS Nimitz and USS Theodore Roosevelt in a joint exercise with the South Korean navy in the East China Sea, Nov. 13, 2017. PHOTO: YONHAP NEWS/NEWSCOM VIA ZUMA

By *Seth Cropsey*

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The escalating territorial disputes in the Pacific between China and America's allies create an ever-more-urgent need for U.S. sea power. But even as China rapidly expands and modernizes its navy, the Trump administration has not proposed enough funds to maintain America's maritime advantage. Beginning with the coming 2019 federal budget, the president and Congress must commit to funding a full, modern fleet—or risk ceding essential U.S. and allied interests.

American sea power has secured the Pacific since the end of World War II, assuring safe and open trade, while defusing conflict throughout the region. Maintaining a powerful navy for these ends is hardly an American innovation: No great state or empire has ever retained its status without pre-eminent sea power. The histories of Athens, Venice, Spain, Holland and England show that losing control of the oceans leads ineluctably to losing great-power status.

The rapid growth and improvement of China's naval forces is the major challenge to American sea dominance today, and likely for the foreseeable future. Retired Capt. James Fanell, former director of intelligence for the U.S. Pacific Fleet, stated in 2015 that China's combat fleet will reach 415 ships in 2030. Beijing is particularly focused on adding submarines, amphibious vessels and small surface combatants. The buildup demonstrates China's clear intention to dominate in coastal regions and amphibious operations—domains in which the U.S. has pre-eminence today.