

As Adm. Phil Davidson, nominated to lead the U.S. Pacific Command, told the Senate in April: China “is no longer a rising power but an arrived great power and peer competitor.” He added that “China has undergone a rapid military modernization over the last three decades and is approaching parity in a number of critical areas; there is no guarantee that the United States would win a future conflict with China.”

The White House has proposed expanding the U.S. Navy to 355 ships, but its plan is too slow and underfunded. The full fleet would not be complete until 2050 at the earliest. Although President Trump proposes to dedicate \$20 billion for new ship construction in 2019, and about the same in constant dollars in each of the next five years, the Congressional Budget Office estimates the project requires an additional \$6.6 billion a year over the next 30 years. Without increased funding, the fleet will be smaller in three decades than it is today, and China’s navy could surpass it by 2030.

Americans would quickly see the consequences of ceding power in the Pacific. Already, China’s growing navy may soon aim to control movement around the first island chain in the East China Sea, which stretches from Japan to the Philippines.

If Beijing gains control of the region, it could hamper America’s coordination with its allies and cast doubt on the U.S. security umbrella. The White House would find it more difficult to prevent distant crises from escalating into direct threats. American business around the world, meanwhile, would be decimated. China would suddenly become the more appealing partner for trade and security. The global maritime order, which has long maintained that the East and South China Seas are international waters, would be replaced by a regional system based on “Chinese characteristics”—the euphemism by which the Chinese Communist Party refers to its brand of state control.

This is not a *fait accompli*; American sea power can be restored. But it will require the U.S. to decide that its status as the world’s great power is worth preserving. The Navy’s evolutionary approach to modernizing its fleet must be replaced by a revolutionary approach, increasing the current fleet’s technological advantage. And by 2035, the fleet should be expanded to no fewer than 375 ships.

The U.S. must also prepare to engage China’s navy. That means situating U.S. forces within striking distance of the East and South China Seas, with enough troops on hand to police the region effectively. It also means responding in kind to China’s existing provocations. The U.S. should bolster its military and naval support for Taiwan. The Pentagon should lean forward by actively planning to defend the entire first island chain, as well as to blockade the Southeast Asia straits, through which oil from the Middle East now flows to China.

Conflict may come sooner than most Americans imagine. This month alone, Beijing is reported to have placed anti-ship cruise missiles and surface-to-air missiles on three artificial islands in the South China Sea. The U.S. also recently said that American military pilots in Djibouti have been hit with lasers fired from a new Chinese base. The Pentagon has filed a diplomatic *démarche* requesting that China investigate, but mere diplomacy won’t suffice in the game Beijing is playing.

Timidity deters nothing. It encourages the increasing Chinese aggression. But so far America’s plans to upgrade the U.S. combat fleet have been diffident. To remain the world’s dominant maritime force, U.S. sea power will have to be trained, equipped and exercised. On this rests the future of the U.S. as a great power.

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