The Decline of U.S. Naval Power

Sixty ships were commonly underway in America's seaward approaches in 1998, but today there are only 20. We are abdicating our role on the oceans.

By MARK HELPRIN

Last week, pirates attacked and executed four Americans in the Indian Ocean. We and the Europeans have endured literally thousands of attacks by the Somali pirates without taking the initiative against their vulnerable boats and bases even once. Such paralysis is but a symptom of a sickness that started some time ago.

The 1968 film, "2001: A Space Odyssey," suggested that in another 30 years commercial flights to the moon, extraterrestrial mining, and interplanetary voyages would be routine. Soon the United States would send multiple missions to the lunar surface, across which astronauts would speed in vehicles. If someone born before Kitty Hawk's first flight would shortly after retirement see men riding around the moon in an automobile, it was reasonable to assume that half again as much time would bring progress at a similarly dazzling rate.

It didn't work out that way. In his 1962 speech at Rice University, perhaps the high-water mark of both the American Century and recorded presidential eloquence, President Kennedy framed the challenge not only of going to the moon but of sustaining American exceptionalism and this country's leading position in the world. He was assassinated a little more than a year later, and in subsequent decades American confidence went south.

Not only have we lost our enthusiasm for the exploration of space, we have retreated on the seas. Up to 30 ships, the largest ever constructed, each capable of carrying 18,000 containers, will soon come off the ways in South Korea. Not only will we neither build, own, nor man them, they won't even call at our ports, which are not large enough to receive them. We are no longer exactly the gem of the ocean. Next in line for gratuitous abdication is our naval position.

Separated by the oceans from sources of raw materials in the Middle East, Africa, Australia and South America, and from markets and manufacture in Europe, East Asia and India, we are in effect an island nation. Because 95% and 90% respectively of U.S. and world foreign trade moves by sea, maritime interdiction is the quickest route to both the strangulation of any given nation and chaos in the international system. First Britain and then the U.S. have been the guarantors of the open oceans. The nature of this task demands a large blue-water fleet that simply cannot be abridged.

With the loss of a large number of important bases world-wide, if and when the U.S. ...
power and presence to preserve the often fragile reticence among nations, to protect American interests and those of our allies, and to prevent the wars attendant to imbalances of power and unrestrained adventurism.

And yet the fleet has been made to wither even in time of war. We have the smallest navy in almost a century, declining in the past 50 years to 286 from 1,000 principal combatants. 

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