Is A 'One-And-One-Half-War Navy' Up To Today's Global Challenges?

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There is an urgent problem that Britain's Royal Navy and the U.S. Navy share: Both forces are dangerously inadequate in today's geopolitical environment. And the immediacy of this challenge is being overlooked.

We need to move past the all too comfortable approach of talking about those shortfalls of naval force levels as if they are *approaching* problems. The problems are here now, and the situations' seriousness should be clear to anyone who can count, has access to a globe, recognizes that not all of a nation's naval units can be deployed simultaneously and grasps the fact that even the most powerful ship or aircraft cannot be in more than one place at one time.

At 276 ships, the U.S. Navy is now operating at a tempo that is overstretching people and equipment, and senior U.S. naval leaders have been saying for some time that the current force — in terms of both people and platforms — is undersized.

There are, for example, virtually no credible authorities who claim that the current U.S. Navy can simultaneously handle extended major conflicts in two different theaters. In strategic terms, the current U.S. Navy is frequently described as a 1 1/2-war navy.

In reality, however, history and today's global instabilities indicate that extended two- or three-theater conflicts are strong possibilities, perhaps even probabilities.

A similar numbers shortfall, but on a different scale, afflicts the Royal Navy. With a total force of 40-plus ships, Britain's navy currently ranks below France, India and Japan, to say nothing of China, whose navy outnumbers those of Britain, France, India and Japan combined.

It's clear that Britain's ability to act independently with a major naval force — as she did in the Falklands in 1982 and will surely have to do again at crises points in the future — has almost disappeared, ship by ship and squadron by squadron in the past 25 years.

How has this happened? Both Britain and the United States have rich maritime pasts, dramatic histories that unequivocally demonstrate the critical role navies play in national security and prosperity. The problem is that those histories and the lessons learned that relate to our own lives and times are being ignored.

Further, there is a pernicious myth within Britain and the U.S. that compounds our loss of historical awareness: the popular wisdom that a larger naval force is not affordable.

The reality is that affordability is not the real issue. The truth is that both countries have chosen *politically* not to support a larger force.

The evidence that makes this case is not measured in British pounds sterling or U.S. dollars. The critical common denominations are the respective percentages of gross domestic product devoted to national defense by each country. Those GDP figures vividly define how relatively unimportant national defense currently is to each nation. In the case of the U.S., the amount of GDP devoted to national defense is roughly 4%. In the case of Great Britain, the amount is roughly 2.5%.

To fix the value of national defense at figures like that, given today's threats, is simply absurd on the face of it — and dangerous. Each nation could and should be devoting at least 5% of GDP to its national defense. If the political and media establishments of each country would take hold of that reality, it would be a start toward changing the biases in favor of entitlement and domestic discretionary spending to a shift toward what should be government's first priority: a proper defense.

Such a shift could also be the start of needed naval rebuilding programs for both countries.

Congress recently provided an example of the murky thinking involved in the current U.S. defense budget process. The irrationality of that process was illuminated in the media coverage of a recent special funding bill for the prosecution of the Iraq War.

The legislation had some eye-popping attachments, including $75 million for peanut storage, $250 million for milk producers and $15 million to protect rice fields from salt water. All in all, there was more than $20 billion in highly questionable new federal spending — spending that is totally unrelated to national defense — attached to a time-sensitive defense spending bill.

Simply put, the add-on of $20 billion was the price paid by congressional Democrats to secure the final few votes needed for passage of the bill in its controversial form — a form that would establish a time limit on strong U.S. military involvement in Iraq. The bill was a small but stunning example of the disconnect between rationality and the miasma of politics-first legislating in the defense budgeting process.

At a time when 95% of global trade still travels over the oceans, and when naval power remains arguably the most effective and efficient means of consistently projecting national power in dangerous times, the myth that the U.S. and Great Britain cannot afford to rebuild their navies must be exposed for what it is, a misleading misconception.

It won't be easy, and the difficulty of the challenge was articulated by former President John F. Kennedy:

"The great enemy of the truth is often not the lie — deliberate, contrived, dishonest — but the myth — persistent, persuasive and *unrealistic.*" (Emphasis added.)

Britain's Vice Adm. Lord Nelson framed the proposition in his inimitable style and with an emphasis on the naval component of military power in a letter to Earl St. Vincent. The letter, strikingly relevant to our own times, was written from HMS Saint George in 1801, just before Nelson departed for the Battle of Copenhagen:

"I want Peace, which is only to be had through, I trust, our still invincible Navy."

The irony of that statement in today's world is thunderous.

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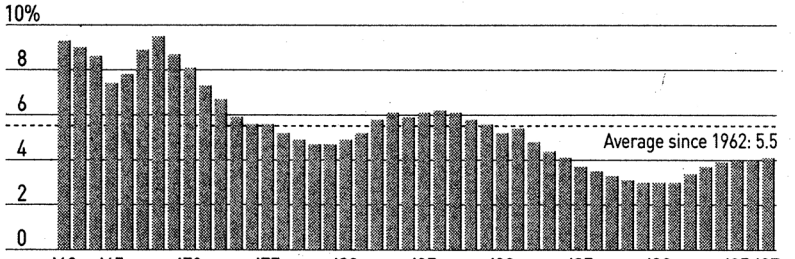
Bear Any Burden?

The U.S. spends roughly 4% of GDP on defense today. That might sound like a lot, but since 1962, defense spending has averaged 5.5% of GDP. With the proliferation of new threats around the world, including terrorism, a militarized China and a resurgent Russia, it might be time to push defense spending back to historic levels.

U.S. defense spending as % of GDP



Source: Office of Management and Budget