In the popular imagination a naval fleet is diminished by the loss of its ships in combat. Over the past quarter century valiant efforts of the crews of three U.S. Navy ships that suffered grievous damage in the Persian Gulf as a result, respectively, of a missile attack, a mine, and a suicide bomber prevented the loss of a U.S. naval combatant at the hands of an enemy—an event that has not occurred since World War II. However, there are two other more silent and insidious ways to shrink a navy: decommissioning ships, and failing to build them. The U.S. is engaged in both as the recent naval communication (excerpted below) and figures about naval shipbuilding noted immediately beneath demonstrate. The scenario that follows offers one possible consequence of the United States’ prolonged naval disarmament. There are many others. All lead to the same place, a self-inflicted loss of America’s great power status as a direct consequence of its navy’s inability to shape events, project power, and defend American and allied interests at a distance from our borders.

1. “Unclassified
Mar. 12, 2012
From: Chief of Naval Operations
To: All Hands
Subj: Projected Ship Inactivation Schedule Fiscal Year 2013
The Projected FY13 Ship Inactivation Schedule…is promulgated as follows:

- USS Crommeln (frigate, or FFG)
- USS Underwood FFG
- USS Curts FFG
- USS Carr FFG
- USS Enterprise (aircraft carrier)
- USS Klakring FFG
- USS Reuben James FFG
- USS Cowpens (cruiser, or CG)
- USS Anzio CG
- USS Vicksburg CG
- USS Port Royal CG”

2. The usual life expectancy of a naval combatant is upwards of 30 years. Knowing how many ships will be built over the next three decades gives a rough idea of how large a fleet to expect at the end of that period. The Navy’s 2013 budget plans to spend $11.9 billion (constant 2012) dollars each year for the next five years on shipbuilding. If this level does not decrease because of possible sequestration or budget cuts that a re-elected President Obama might propose or reductions demanded by the expense of servicing a rising national debt; and if the cost of ships continues to average $2 billion dollars while annual spending on shipbuilding remains constant, the Navy will be able to afford about 180 ships over the next 30 years. The size of the current fleet is 282 ships.

AP, Washington 24 November 2050. Nearing his 80th birthday former U.S. president Marco Rubio warned that the unfolding tragedy in southern France highlighted the
consequences of Congress’s failure to reverse the U.S. decline in naval power. The former president noted that the naval decline began at the end of the Cold War. “With less than a 200-ship fleet and three ships needed to maintain one permanently deployed,” said Rubio, “the U.S. today can keep a little more than 50 ships on patrol around the world.” “And we can’t even manage that,” said Rubio, long a supporter of strong naval forces, “most of our fleet is holed up in American waters and only dispatched if politicians can agree there’s a crisis overseas that’s worth a response.” “And even then,” he continued, “it’s a problem since someone always argues that sending U.S. naval force will heighten rather than reduce tension.”

Rubio’s comments followed a ballistic missile attack launched from the Middle East that partially destroyed the French city of Nice yesterday killing nearly 10,000 residents. France has said it will retaliate as soon as it is certain where the launch occurred. Iran has denied firing the missile but defense analysts agree that Iran is the only possible source of the attack. Paris’s decision in the late 2030s to stop building naval combatants equipped with ballistic missile defenses has left France with two such vessels. One of them was in dry dock when the attack occurred. The other was participating in NATO’s annual exercise in the Baltic that consisted of four frigates, one each from the U.K, Germany, Italy, and France.

Tensions between Iran and France have increased dramatically over the past few weeks following the French government’s national crackdown on radical Muslims who took to the streets in France’s major cities setting neighborhoods on fire, killing police and fire officials as well as civilians randomly, attacking businesses in broad daylight, and calling for new elections. The riots began when a Muslim candidate for the presidency was narrowly defeated in a run-off election. Large centers have been hastily constructed outside Bordeaux and Marseille to contain those awaiting trial on criminal charges associated with the mass riots.

Ayatollah Rafsanjani, the Supreme Leader of Iran, had warned days earlier that “Iran would not stand idly by and allow Muslims to be oppressed and placed in concentration camps anywhere in the world.” French political parties and the influential newspaper Le Figaro demanded a full-scale NATO retaliation and observed that France was still exposed to additional ballistic missile attacks. Former President Rubio told the New York Times that the withdrawal of all U.S. naval forces from the Mediterranean a decade ago as a result of budget cuts had been a mistake. “The ballistic missile defenses carried aboard U.S. naval vessels in all likelihood would have been able to thwart the attack on Nice,” Rubio said. Iran possesses ballistic missiles that can reach the entire continental U.S. The American military’s alert posture was upgraded to DEFCON 2 following the attack as President Aaron Schock called for an emergency session of the U.N. Security Council and dispatched his Secretary of Defense to a hastily called NATO meeting in Brussels.

Special to the New York Times, 26 November 2050. As riots spread across Europe to Holland and Britain and included Germany’s large Turkish-speaking population NATO’s
General Secretary, Hakim Langsam, admitted that European members lacked the ability to defend themselves against possible future missile attacks. He called on the U.S. to honor its Article Five commitments to NATO and deploy eight destroyers equipped with ballistic missile defenses to the eastern Mediterranean at once.

At the White House U.S. President Aaron Schock told a press conference that “the U.S. will stand firm with its NATO allies.” But the Schock administration so far has offered no official response to the General Secretary’s request for U.S. ships equipped with ballistic missile defenses. American forces in Europe have gone on high alert while an additional two ships have been deployed to join the carrier strike group currently deployed to the Persian Gulf. The Pentagon announced that one of these ships, the U.S.S. Gabriel Giffords has been fitted out with modules that allow it to sweep for mines while the other, the U.S.S. Saul Alinsky is equipped with the Navy’s ballistic missile defense system. Both ships are over a decade beyond than their planned service lives. The 12-day transit of these small combatants from the U.S. East Coast will bring to a total of eight the number of U.S. vessels in the 93,000 square mile Gulf. The Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), the official Iranian news service, issued a statement calling U.S. naval deployments “belligerent.” It quoted an unnamed senior ayatollah who threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz and destroy “the U.S. aggressor” if the two additional U.S. ships so much as approached” the Strait.

Retired U.S. naval officers dismissed the Iranian threats as insupportable and pointed to the huge difference between Iran’s large but inferior navy and the U.S. Navy’s technologically advanced—but smaller—number of combatants in the Persian Gulf. Former Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Wainwright Thrift said that any attack on the U.S. Navy would be answered by overwhelming force delivered by drones and manned aircraft from the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Gerald R. Ford.

CNN Online, 28 November 2050. At approximately 1840 (local time) a Chinese-owned and operated oil tanker, the Zheng He, loaded with a 200,000 deadweight tonnage cargo of crude oil was struck by a mine and is now burning out of control in the Strait of Hormuz. The Zheng He was enroute to the port of Dalian in northeast China. Three crew members escaped and were rescued by passing vessels. The remainder of the crew is missing and presumed lost. Several minutes later an escorting Chinese Haizhou-class destroyer hit a second mine and sank with the loss of all hands.

The possible destruction of the Zheng He comes at a difficult moment for the Chinese economy. Decades of strong growth have come to an end last year as energy demand has far out-stripped supply with annual GDP growth falling in reverse proportion to the emigration of young Chinese males who are unable to find marriageable-age women.

China’s Foreign Ministry issued a statement demanding compensation for the loss of the destroyer, compensation to its crew’s families, and full payment for loss of the Zheng He and cargo. China’s defense minister announced that a battle group composed of three
aircraft carriers and accompanying escort vessels had been ordered to leave patrolling in the Indian Ocean and sail for the Persian Gulf. They are expected to arrive within 8 days.

In Brussels an emergency meeting of NATO ministers failed to reach agreement on a “proportionate response” to Iran’s attack on Nice. The Frankfurter Allgemeine reported that NATO air strikes against Iran had been ruled out because member states could not defend against subsequent ballistic missile attacks on Europe and because NATO ground forces lacked the combat power and amphibious and logistics ships to launch an invasion aimed at toppling the clerical regime. Secretary General Langsam denied reports that air strikes had been ruled out. He repeated an earlier statement that called on Washington to stand by its Article Five obligations, specifically to dispatch ballistic missile defense ships from their current position in U.S. home waters to the Mediterranean and to send “large amphibious forces” to the aid of a fellow NATO-member state that had been attacked. Defense analysts in Washington and London responded with puzzlement to the Secretary General’s call noting that with one remaining division, the U.S. Marines are no longer available for NATO operations. The White House said that it is consulting with NATO and exploring options for a response to the attack against France but affirmed that the U.S. Navy currently possesses fewer than the minimum number of ballistic missile defense ships required to protect the U.S. and that its first responsibility must be to defend the American homeland against possible similar Iranian ballistic missile attacks.

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Bob Bopkes, Washington Post, 30 November 2050. Chinese street protests at the sinking of a destroyer and the mining of the oil tanker Zheng He in Beijing have turned violent. The violence began in front of Iran’s embassy and has spread throughout Beijing. Protests have also begun in Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Shanghai, three of China’s largest cities. The protests were originally directed against Iran but quickly changed into anger over the stagnating Chinese economy and what many of those in the streets now acknowledge is the Communist Party’s alleged failure to sustain the economic progress of the last half century. A recent cyber attack against Chinese state-owned banks—for which officials blamed the U.S. government, which has denied the charge—is also sparking anger as thousands of businesses have seen significant and unaccountable losses in their bank accounts and stock holdings. Chinese premier Sun Mingnan has pledged to retaliate for the sinking of the PLAN destroyer and the mining of the Zheng He. He has tried to rally support for the government by urging citizens to “stand together against the foreign warmongers.” In a similar attempt China’s Central Military Commission has increased the alert status of the naval and rocket forces across the Taiwan Strait where the Republic of China’s Democratic Progressive Party’s military leadership has partially mobilized their air defenses and navy.

-30-

Xinhua, (Official Chinese government news agency) 2 December 2050. In response to the Republic of China’s partial mobilization of military forces the Chinese government today announced a partial blockade of Taiwan. The Ministry of Defense in Beijing
declared that arriving ships would be allowed through the naval cordon sanitaire, but that ships leaving Taiwan’s ports would be stopped, searched, and turned back if they contained cargoes. Noting the attacks on Chinese shipping and a naval vessel in the Strait of Hormuz, the expansion of anti-government violence in large Chinese cities, and Taipei’s “aggressive efforts to join with imperialist forces that seek China’s destruction,” a Ministry spokesman echoed the Chinese premier’s recent statements. “All of China’s people must come together to defend the motherland.” “The PLAN’s surface, air, and submarine forces will enforce the blockade and guarantee the unity of the Chinese state,” added the Defense Ministry’s spokesman.

The Wall Street Journal (lead editorial) 3 December 2050

We regret the Schrock administration’s decision not to challenge China’s naval blockade of Taiwan. But with only 35 ships available to be deployed to the Western Pacific and a second dangerous international crisis brewing in the Persian Gulf as the result of Iran’s attack against France what other choice did the president have? Our former allies, Japan, Korea, and Australia have long since made what can only be described as an accommodation with China’s ever increasing navy. This was never an accommodation our former allies desired. But, again, what were their choices? Resistance without the support of a strong coalition leader? This was never an option and the leaders of our erstwhile allies warned us about the possibility repeatedly and with courage as the U.S. disarmed unilaterally. Following in the footsteps of the Royal Navy’s drawn-out descent from ruling the waves, the U.S. Navy has steadily declined for the past 60 years. Where the U.S. Navy was once composed of about 600 ships it surrendered nearly half of these within two decades of winning the Cold War. In the years between then and now it gave up another third of its remaining strength. The U.S. fleet today numbers 198 ships and many of these are not equipped to assert command of the seas in the face of Chinese naval strength. The decisions made years ago to end production of the most survivable portion of the nation’s nuclear deterrence, ballistic missile submarines, were based on financial, not strategic reasons. When added to our insufficient number of ships equipped with defenses against ballistic missiles the U.S. is only slightly more protected than France proved to be against nuclear attack. The decline of America as a great seapower is a dismal story of bipartisan neglect and strategic dementia for which both the executive and legislative branches are responsible.

When substituting crews to keep ships forward deployed and on station did not provide needed savings Congress cut and the administration assented. When doubling the length of time sailors were expected to remain deployed did not satisfy the green eyeshades Congress and the administration cut again. When withdrawing the U.S. fleet to home waters to respond to crises only when necessary ended American global presence without providing savings to maintain a stable sized fleet, Congress cut again. With each decision to reduce the military and the Navy in particular the argument was made that even draconian reductions in defense spending represented only miniscule cuts in the national debt, but to no avail. As is now clear U.S. leaders have failed to reduce the debt
by paring defense as the same measures have succeeded at diminishing the nation’s strength and the backbone of its international security strategy.

Now the piper must be paid. A crisis has left our only remaining Asian ally in imminent danger of having its lifeblood of exports, stopped utterly. Of other allies in the region we have none. Our remaining ships lie at anchor in San Diego weeks away from coming to the rescue, and more important, insufficient in number to make a difference against a China that can concentrate much of its naval force on enforcing the blockade it has declared. Without the motivation of any clear or stated rationale we have deliberately placed ourselves in a position where we are torn between the moral imperative to honor a solemn agreement to protect a friend or defend our strategic interest in keeping open a passageway that supplies energy to us and those left in the world who we still call allies. Worse yet, we can do neither. Yes, the president has said that if Beijing’s aggression changes from a blockade to an airborne attack or actual invasion, U.S. forces will defend Taiwan. But there has been no movement of our Pacific Fleet and whether it could arrive in time or mount the combat power to turn back a Chinese lightning thrust to seize Taiwan is in doubt. The consequences of this impotence are clear. They will haunt the U.S. around the world perhaps without relief. It may be too early to say that we have recapitulated Britain’s capitulation that began a century and a half ago. It is not too early to say that we have taken a long stride in the same direction.

**Le Figaro, 5 December 2050.** NATO Secretary General Hakim Langsam declared as successful the airborne attack against several Iranian key ballistic missile launch facilities and associated command and control nodules. French and English bombers escorted by fighters also attacked and destroyed much of Iran’s air defense system as well as bases where troops of the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution (IRGC) were stationed. American tankers assisted in refueling European combat aircraft in the operation dubbed “Flying Carpet” as did American fighter escorts that had been pre-positioned during the past few days at airfields in southern Europe. Iran denied that it had sustained any serious damage and claims to have shot down 15 allied planes. However, a spokesman for Supreme Ayatollah Rafsanjani vowed “swift and harsh retaliation against the Great Satan for these acts of barbarism.” NATO reports the loss of a single fighter aircraft but has issued no further details yet except that the pilot was rescued by search-and-rescue units based aboard the U.S. aircraft carrier, *Gerald Ford*. NATO spokesmen declined to answer reporters’ questions about additional military operations against Iran except to say that analysts were reviewing bomb damage assessment imagery and would issue a statement later in the day.

**FLASH FLASH FLASH 2132 hours EST 7 December 2050 CNN Online.** CNN reports that the American aircraft carrier, *USS Gerald R. Ford*, has been attacked by naval and air forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran and is stopped dead in the water approximately 30 nautical miles north of Dubai. The ship is on fire, and listing to starboard. Flight operations have been suspended. Aircraft from the *Ford* that were airborne at the time of the attack have been diverted to nearby airfields in the Gulf States. The Pentagon confirmed the report less than 20 minutes ago. In a brief statement the Office of the Secretary of Defense acknowledged that “coordinated attacks from Iranian
submarines, air, land and sea-launched missiles, aircraft, and swarms of small boats on suicide missions had diverted the aircraft carrier’s escorts and succeeded at incapacitating the *Ford.*” A Pentagon spokesman said that it was too early to identify which of the attacking craft penetrated the carrier’s elaborate defenses, and there is as yet no information on casualties. The spokesman said that the ship was “in no danger of sinking” but that the attack had resulted in a “mission kill,” which is military terminology for a vessel having effectively been rendered incapable of conducting combat operations. Those of the *Ford*’s surface escorting ships, two Littoral Combat Ships, and one destroyer, that can do so are assisting in rescue operations. Reached by phone at his home in Augusta, Georgia, former Chief of Naval Operations Raymond Birk said that while it was too early to determine how the carrier’s defenses had been breached, the number of escorting surface vessels that compose carrier strike forces had decreased by a half over the past 25 years. “It is almost certain,” the admiral noted, “that the decrease in number and combat power of the surface vessels that make up a carrier strike group was an important contributing cause of this national tragedy.” Admiral Birk noted that depending on the damage suffered by the *Ford*, the Navy would be reduced in the foreseeable future to seven aircraft carriers, almost enough to keep two continuously deployed around the world.

**AP Washington 8 December 2050, 0630 EST.** The White House announced that the *U.S.S. Gerald R. Ford* sank this morning at 0610 EST with a loss of at least 4000 men and women. Before the huge ship sank missiles from a U.S. submarine patrolling in the Indian Ocean had already launched retaliatory strikes against Iran’s main naval base located at Bandar Abbas astride the Strait of Hormuz. The Pentagon reported that early assessment indicates that much of the port facilities and nearly all of the naval base’s defenses have been destroyed. However, only a few minor Iranian naval combatants were in port at the time of the attack. President Schrock will address the nation at 1000 EST.

**8 December 1000 EST, The White House, The President.** Just over 12 hours ago Iran’s military attacked American naval forces on duty in the Persian Gulf. The U.S. Navy’s mission was to keep the peace in a dangerous region and to ensure the safe passage of energy for the entire world. I am saddened to report the loss of the aircraft carrier *U.S.S. Gerald R. Ford* and the destroyer, *U.S.S. Eric A. Pulliam* along with over 4,200 brave men and women who died during the attack and in its aftermath. I offer my deepest condolences to the families and friends of the crew who fought valiantly to save their ship. They gave their lives to defend us, to preserve an international order that America has sought to establish and maintain since we became a world power a century and a half ago. Since this outrageous and unprovoked attack I want the nation to know how we have answered. First, I have ordered the Navy to take immediate and forceful action. The Iranian navy’s major port facility, at the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz—international waters that Iran has long threatened to close—has been destroyed. While the U.S. does not currently possess sufficient naval resources to replenish our forces in the Persian Gulf without abdicating our responsibilities in Asia and while Iran’s recent and cowardly missile attack on a large French city requires our naval forces’ availability to defend the United States against similar attack, I have consulted with our NATO allies
on how best to invoke that part of the NATO Treaty that regards an attack on one member as an attack on all. Specifically the U.S. will ask its NATO allies to assume responsibility for a large portion of the naval mission that the U.S. has up until now performed in preserving stability and maintaining free passage in the Persian Gulf. The largest portion by far of oil that comes out of the Persian Gulf is used by China and by our European allies. It is appropriate that they assume greater responsibility—as we have long repeated—for its protection. I have ordered the Navy to reposition its ballistic missile defense-equipped ships to provide the strongest possible defense against an Iranian attack on America. I have called the heads of state of all NATO members to ask them to meet here in Washington two days from now to agree on a shared response. Our goal is to free the Iranian people from the servitude and tyranny that has oppressed them for 70 years and threatens now to engulf the world in a conflict it has not seen in over a century. Finally, I have spoken at length with Chinese premier Sun whose country has also suffered as a result of the Iranian state’s murderous actions. We have discussed the possibility of shared responsibility for peacekeeping and the security of the Persian Gulf’s international waters. I am pleased to report to you that although there are disagreements on some issues, the areas of agreement far outnumber them. These discussions continue at this hour and will, I trust, lead to greater security for both our nations. Finally, let me assure you that our country’s defenses are as strong and capable as ever. We retain the world’s finest military. I have the highest confidence in their ability to protect America and our allies. There should be no cause for anything except confidence. We shall weather these storms and emerge as we always have—victorious, strong and confident of a more secure future. May God comfort those who grieve for their loved ones lost in the service of a grateful nation, and may God bless the United States of America.

Jason Li, Staff writer, The San Francisco Chronicle, 10 December 2050. The White House announced that President Schrock and Chinese premier Sun met privately yesterday to discuss the crisis in Europe, the Persian Gulf, and in the Western Pacific. To assure security the meetings were held aboard an American aircraft carrier, the U.S.S. Barney Frank, approximately 20 miles out to sea from its homeport of Pearl Harbor. The two leaders discussed for eight hours and issued a communiqué following their meeting. Text of the communiqué follows:

“The leaders of China and the United States agree that the current crises in Europe, the Middle East, and the Western Pacific must be contained and ended. The nuclear threshold has been crossed and the potential for more disastrous results exists unless the world’s two great powers act boldly in the interest of harmony and world peace. China and the U.S. agree to share responsibility for maintaining freedom of navigation in the international waters of the Persian Gulf as well as in its approaches. To this end the Peoples Liberation Army (Navy), the PLAN, will maintain a permanent naval presence in the Persian Gulf consisting of at least three aircraft carrier battle groups. Chinese naval forces will protect international shipping. The PLAN will provide port security, protect oil platforms, clear mines, defend against piracy, perform board and search operations as necessary and assist in keeping the region’s peace. The U.S., when requested by China will supply such additional forces as are needed for logistics and maintenance and repair.
China and the U.S. further agree that peace in the Strait of Taiwan is necessary and indispensable to stability in the region. The United States urges a peaceful resolution to the current dispute and will henceforth regard the resolution of outstanding issues between the Peoples Republic and Taiwan as an internal matter that requires dialogue and mutual compromise.”

12 December 2050 RIA Novosti (Official News Agency of Russia) From his office in the Kremlin President Vladimir Putin released the following statement regarding the so-called “Oahu Communiqué” that was issued two days ago by the Chinese and American leaders. The 98 year-old president offered congratulations to both nations on what he called “an historic agreement.” Text to follow:

“The Oahu Communiqué will be welcomed by all peace-loving peoples of the world. China’s assumption of peace-keeping responsibility in and just outside the Persian Gulf will relieve the U.S. of the excuse to intervene militarily as it pleases in the Middle East and encourage the sentiment shared by both American political parties to reduce defense spending. The large American defense cuts that can be anticipated as a result of Washington’s reduced naval commitments will make the U.S. more like other states and less able or disposed to cause mischief by acting alone or at the head of forced coalitions. I expect that the spirit of non-intervention will moderate America’s aggressive foreign policies elsewhere in the world. Israel will no longer be able to rely on American naval presence to protect the natural gas it wrongfully draws from undersea deposits off its coast. Iran can breathe more easily knowing that American combatant vessels no longer threaten its ability to retaliate if attacked by enemies. European members of NATO, an obsolete and unnecessary organization, will no longer feel the hot breath of Washington breathing down their necks to contribute to maintaining expensive navies. India will be released from the burden of having to patrol vast oceanic areas as it seeks to balance between Beijing’s legitimate concerns about the security of the sea lanes that bring them oil and Washington’s endless prodding to buy more weapons. New Delhi can look forward to reaching the same peaceful accord with China that has transformed all of East Asia into a quiet and calm region. The people of Taiwan will eventually realize the benefit of the Oahu agreement as well. They will soon see the advantages of reduced defense expenses, an end to tension with the mainland, and the pleasures of reunion and tranquility with a peaceful benefactor.

But more important than any single of these positive developments are the implications for the entire world of the Oahu agreement. Geography, not its so-called democratic principles, has been the single most important enabler of Americans exceptionalism. Geography separated America from the great continents. The Atlantic and Pacific were huge moats that protected America from other people’s troubles. But the Americans were not satisfied. No. They insisted from the beginnings of their history in building a powerful navy. Its great strategic purpose was to intervene in other peoples business and create a sea-borne fortress in addition to the oceans that already gave the U.S. sufficient protection. This led, for example, to meddling in the affairs of the Soviet Union, interfering in internal issues between China and its neighbors, and asserting claims to
international waters at the expense of small states like Libya. Much of this was accomplished by a powerful navy. The Oahu agreement acknowledges that the days of American naval dominance have ended. The U.S. will now have to live with the same realities as the rest of the world. It can no longer act at a distance to preserve its selfish interests at home. The American people will have to meet threats at their borders. Fulfilling the intention of that wise and far-seeing early American president, Thomas Jefferson, the U.S. will have “such a naval force only as may protect (its) coasts and harbors.” The Oahu agreement will eventually turn Jefferson’s dream into fact. It spells the end of American exceptionalism and the international influence the U.S. gained with a powerful global navy that it used for selfish purposes. The world will be a safer and more secure place. For this we can be thankful.”

_The Times of India_ (the world’s largest circulation English language daily) editorial, 14 December 2050

A little over a century ago our first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru told the nation on the eve of independence that “at the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awaken to life and freedom.” Amidst the darkness, he alluded, the light of liberty would shine forth. There can be no comparison between the close of British colonial rule and what appears to be the end of America’s benign protection for an international order that supported free trade, human rights, democracy, and, yes, self-determination. But make no mistake about it. This is precisely what the Oahu Communiqué portends. The U.S. after decades of slowly retreating from its position as a great international power which depended ultimately on its visible presence around the world in the form of seapower has handed over _de facto_ responsibility for an ordered international system to China.

This will have profound and lasting consequences, not only for us but for the world. China does not see international free trade as global good to be protected for all. China sees in the immensity of Asia’s markets a golden vein to be mined for its own benefit. The assurance of China’s naval dominance in the Pacific adds military and economic gravity to its claim as the center of Asian trade. This will come at the expense of America’s commerce with the entire region. And lest it be forgotten, the entire region amounts to well over half the world’s population. American merchants who think that commerce is separated from the diplomatic and military influence that accompanies predominant seapower don’t know anything about Venice’s wealth which dried up when its naval influence was overshadowed by the Ottomans, or Holland which experienced a similar fate when its naval power was overshadowed by England, or for that matter England itself whose national wealth relative to other nations shrank in tandem with its evanescing naval reach.

The U.S. is still suffering from the national debt it assumed decades ago. Can American leaders possibly imagine that surrendering responsibility for freedom of international navigation, the global influence and more important, security, that seapower provides, and the alliances it nourishes will improve the U.S. economy? Do they not see that China has few problems with the world’s scorpions; that the Chinese will not lift a finger to
restrain North Korea, Iran, and Turkey all of which possess nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them anywhere? As China’s navy becomes the world’s most visible and powerful one what sort of international order will they support? Will China’s leaders care whether the Strait of Hormuz or the Suez Canal is blocked so long as vessels of their choosing are allowed to pass? Will they oppose pirates so long as their own ships are unmolested? If Russia’s tightening grip on Europe leads toward threats or worse, will China’s navy protect such military assistance as the U.S. might still wish to send across the Atlantic to Europe’s defense?

We do not raise these questions altruistically. The Oahu Communiqué means the end of an era that began with the naval superiority that England established during the Napoleonic Wars. True, that dominance at various times disadvantaged India. But on the whole it established and maintained an ordered international system based on liberal principles. When England gave up the mantle, it passed to the U.S. which shared the same principles and strove for a similar international order. India benefitted from this order, as a democracy, as a trading nation, and as one that—like the U.S.—depends on stability and security to prosper. And India will suffer as the order is replaced. The Oahu Communiqué is a descent into a darkness from which “the life and freedom” that Prime Minister Nehru praised at the dawn of our independence may take centuries to re-emerge.

Epilogue


“The Navy is going from a fleet of roughly 313 to a fleet of roughly 300, a GOP congressional aide said in an email.”

The aide’s quote is not clear. The fleet’s current size is actually 282 ships. The new budget plans to reduce the target size of the fleet from about 313 to about 300 ships for most of the next three decades and achieving even these numbers will—in the face of possible sequestration, more defense budget cuts, and the certainty of increased national debt—require a sustained increase in its current shipbuilding budget of approximately 40 percent.

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