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Oceans So Wide, A Navy So Small

Defense: The new Obama budget does little to restore American sea power, which has reached lows not seen for almost a century. Who's noticing? You can bet that Beijing is.

Go to the website of the Obama administration's Office of Management and Budget, and you'll find a list of 23 links to "Fact Sheets on Key Issues" in the president's proposed 2013 budget. Most are about how Barack Obama's spending blueprint will benefit this or that group, from farmers and college students to seniors and "the LGBT community."

Notably missing is national defense. Maybe the president just doesn't find the topic interesting.

Well, we're interested. And the American public should be interested too, because the budget fails to give the U.S. what it needs to maintain its power in a dangerous world. Nowhere is this clearer than in the spending plans for the Navy.

Sea power has been out of political fashion for some time, and the neglect shows. Late in the 2000s, a decade focused on counterterrorism and land wars, the Navy's active ship count sank to its lowest level — 278 — since before World War I. At that 2007 nadir, it was at less than half its strength of 20 years before.

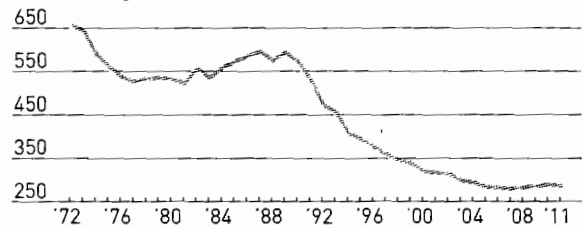
It has increased only slightly in the past four years, and the new Obama budget would bring only modest net increases after taking ship retirements into account. It's also scaling back from the prior budget. The new spending plan proposes building 10 ships in 2013, down from 13 proposed for the same year in the 2012 budget.

Raw active-ship numbers are not a precise measure of strength. What really counts is how those numbers fit the missions. The Navy had 6,768 active ships at the end of World War II. There's no reason to aim that high now. On the other hand, the world of the 1980s, when the Navy was twice as large as it is now, doesn't look radically different from that of today.

Back then, U.S. sea power played critical roles all over the world, from protecting Persian Gulf shipping lanes to restraining an autocratic power that dominated much of Asia. Today, power in Asia is shifting toward

Spread Too Thin?

The count of active U.S. warships is half what it was in the Reagan era



Source: Naval History and Heritage Command

China, with Russia still an ambitious player. But the oceans haven't shrunk a bit. And the biggest of them, the Pacific, needs a strong American presence more than ever.

China is still just dipping its toes in the water; it has one aircraft carrier, an old Soviet retread, to America's 11. But it clearly wants to make the 21st century its own, and it doesn't need a navy the size of America's to make the U.S. look weak.

All it has to do is wait until the U.S. Navy is stretched too thin to maintain its current presence off China's shores. Then it will be free to intimidate Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Vietnam and other nearby states — all of which are under the U.S. Navy's umbrella.

Strength makes friends. And nothing makes American strength more visible (or reassuring) to friends than the presence of U.S. warships. Potential foes get the message too.

China was publicly miffed last July when three U.S. ships participated in a joint exercise with Rear Adm. Tom Carney, who led the naval exchange, said at the time that the U.S. would "maintain a presence in the Western Pacific and the South China Sea as we have for decades, and we have no intention of departing from that kind of activity."

We hope he's right, but an overextended Navy can leave gaps that ambitious rivals will be tempted to fill. It's a mighty stretch to police the planet's oceans with fewer than 300 ships.