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Links Between Houthis, Communist China Suggest Scale of Challenge Ahead for Trump as America Rebuilds Naval Prowess

America's failure, under President Biden, to reopen the Red Sea to commerce suggests an existential crisis for the Navy.

By Steve Cohen

The United States Navy's nine-month-long skirmish with the Houthi rebels was a rude awakening, but it wasn't an existential crisis. Using the wrong tools on the wrong mission led, not unsurprisingly, to an unsuccessful outcome: the Houthis retaining control of one of the world's most important sea lanes. But with the election of Donald Trump, the Navy actually might have to fight for its very existence.

When the United States Ship *Eisenhower* carrier group returned from its deployment to the region, the Navy said it had fired 155 Standard-2 missiles against Houthi drones, 135 Tomahawk cruise missiles at land targets, and naval aircraft had launched nearly 60 air-to-air missiles and 420 air-to-surface weapons. Plus, the Navy proudly announced that it was the first time a female combat pilot had shot down an enemy drone.

Yet the Suez Canal and Red Sea — the world's third most trafficked sea lane accounting for 40 percent of all commerce between Europe and Asia — is essentially closed. Except to Communist Chinese-flagged ships, according to the former Central Command chief, General Frank McKenzie.

The retired four-star Marine general made that surprising announcement last week in a talk to cadets at the United States Coast Guard Academy, underscoring the link between the Iranian-backed Houthis and the Chinese.

The Navy's failure to re-establish control of the critical Bab el-Mandeb choke point threatens about 12 percent of the world's oil shipments. Keeping sea lanes open to commerce has been one of the Navy's core missions since the founding of the Republic. And its failure to do so questions its very existence.

To be fair, that failure was undoubtedly the result of the Biden administration's political fears of military escalation and casualties during the run-up to the election, but Navy leadership had an obligation to say to the commander in chief, "This is wrong, Sir" and resign. Someone probably — hopefully — said it, but didn't resign.

So, as a result, we shot \$2 million missiles at \$2,000 drones, depleting a hard-to-replace weapon that is in dangerously low supply.

America's navy is expensive to build, train, maintain, and deploy. The Navy's FY 2024 budget is more than \$255 billion of an overall Defense spending of \$849 billion. Carriers and their airwings are costly; so are submarines.

And attracting capable, dedicated people to serve in the military is getting more and more difficult. (Part of that challenge has been due to the Biden administration's dedication to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives, which runs counter the military's tradition of a level playing field and a meritocracy-based promotion system.)

So, as Trump gets ready to return his no-holds-barred leadership approach to Washington, the Navy and Congressional appropriators need to ask some very tough questions. I would start with four:

First, are we building the right type of Navy to deter foreign aggression and, if necessary, meet and defeat a range of adversaries? The challenges posed by a near-peer China with long-range carrier-killing hypersonic missiles is different than the threat posed by the Houthis. The Israelis recently deployed a high-low mix of long-range, large-payload piloted aircraft and inexpensive drones against Iran. We need a similar capability.

Second, can we fix our shipbuilding capability? America has only four shipyards capable of building Navy ships, and 17 dry docks to maintain them. By contrast, China subsidizes 20 major shipbuilding facilities, and 140 dry docks.

Plus, with little competition, shipbuilding costs continue to soar while quality is compromised. We need to consider building warships abroad and assess whether government-owned shipyards once again make sense.

Third, are we able to better explain to the American people why we need a Navy, and why service is important? With an ever-smaller percentage of the American public having served in the military — and knowing someone who has served is the single most important influencer is getting young people to even consider enlisting — we need to do a better job of telling the story and justifying the mission.

And fourth, are we inculcating in our military leaders the values and confidence to tell truth to power? At his Coast Guard Academy talk, General McKenzie told the cadets that he advised President Biden that it would be wrong to withdraw all American troops from Afghanistan, and the President chose not to follow his Centcom commander's advice.

I would like to know if General McKenzie considered resigning in protest, and the thinking behind his decision not to. That is not a criticism of the General's decision; it is a request to share his forty-plus years of experience and perspective.

A second Trump administration will not be business-as-usual. And for the Navy, it shouldn't be.

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