

A lack of vision may cost us dearly

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The recent seizure and harassment by Iranian naval forces of container ships filled with consumer goods should be of great concern to American consumers and businesses.

Our nation's economic dependence on the oceans of the world is staggering. It is difficult to overstate the importance of safe passage throughout the oceans to our economy and consumers.

Ninety percent of the world's commerce travels by sea, including 60 percent of America's imports and exports; 95 percent of the world's intercontinental voice and data traffic travels through undersea cables, including trillions of dollars in banking transactions; and 75 percent of the world's maritime trade and half of the oil trade pass through a handful of international straits and canals.

From Coca-Cola Company to Wal-Mart to our local filling stations, every business in the region relies on the free flow of goods shipped by sea from and to the United States. And the global presence of the U.S. Navy is critical to ensuring that commerce at sea goes unmolested by terrorists, pirates and rogue nations like Iran.

We are well aware of the contributions the Navy makes to our military security. What we tend not to see are the daily and unique contributions that our blue water Navy makes to our nation's economic security. And this lack of vision may cost us dearly in the years ahead if it is not corrected.

The Navy, its sailors and marines, ships, aircraft, and equipment guarantee that the products and resources that fuel industry, meet consumer needs and facilitate the operation of virtually every economy in the world can travel from port to port along the fastest route possible and at the lowest cost to consumers and business.

The United States is a global power because of our military and economic strength, and both depend on secure, unhindered access to any region of the world that can be reached by ship. That access, in turn, is guaranteed by the strength and sustained presence around the world of our Navy-Marine Corps team.

But our Department of the Navy is currently underfunded and overextended, and if we do not take action we risk a broken Navy-Marine Corps team along with severe damage to the U.S. economy, our ability to support our allies and our leadership role in the world.

Out of the sight and minds of Congress and the American people, the very success the Navy is having in this essential aspect of its mission is ironically masking the need for increased support that would allow the Navy-Marine Corps team to be as successful in the future as it has been in the past.

Since 2001, the size of the Navy-Marine Corps team has been steadily cut. Their missions and operations have not. The years of responding to crisis after crisis, combined with a smaller budget and delayed maintenance and modernization, are crippling the Navy-Marine Corps team.

Aircraft designed to fly 6,000 hours are now expected to fly 10,000 hours. Ships and equipment break down more often and cannot return to service on time. Ships, crews, aircraft and equipment cannot continue the current pace

of operations, and the retention of trained personnel will suffer, ultimately leading to reduced readiness for combat and other missions. Ships on patrol must stay out longer because their replacements are still in maintenance. This debilitating cycle once started is hard to stop.

These trends cannot continue indefinitely without consequences for our nation. We cannot afford to erode the Navy's ability to conduct its military mission – or its economic one. Without a significant investment in the Navy's future, we are placing the strength of our economy and the health of the global economy at great risk.

As we have seen, the threats are increasing, not diminishing. What is diminishing is the Navy and Marine Corps ability to fulfill their missions and provide for our nation's military and economic security. We must not allow that to happen.

We must act now to invest in the Navy-Marine Corps team before it is too late.

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