

Rep Luria Letter to President Biden on Maritime-centric National Defense Strategy

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The following is a March 26, 2021 letter from Rep. Elaine Luria (D-Va.) to President Joe Biden calling for a maritime-focused national defense strategy. Luria is a former surface warfare officer and is currently the vice-chair of the House Armed Services Committee.

March 26, 2021
President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave.
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden,

I write at a critical juncture in our nation's history, as we find ourselves again engaged in a great power competition with two nations who have demonstrated overt hostile intent towards our interests and those values such as individual liberty and human rights that we hold most dear. Because each of the major powers involved in this new era of competition is equipped with strategic nuclear weapons, the focus of these competitive interactions has moved towards open "global commons" such as space, cyber-space, and, I believe, most importantly the world's oceans. I am writing you to request that your administration develop a National Defense Strategy, that acknowledges and prioritizes the maritime nature of the current strategic environment.

I read with great anticipation your March 2021 *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*. While I appreciated the overarching theme of diplomacy first and foremost, I am reminded of the words of Theodore Roosevelt, "Speak softly and carry a big stick – you will go far." Many have interpreted this phrase as a call to prepare for war, but Roosevelt intended its use as a prelude to diplomacy. As he noted, "We lay equal emphasis on

the fact that it is necessary to speak softly; in other words, that it is necessary to be respectful toward all people and scrupulously to refrain from wrongdoing them, while at the same time keeping ourselves in condition to prevent wrong being done to us.”

Since our founding we have been and remain today a maritime nation—a people who understand the connection between the movement of trade and ideas to the betterment of humanity. The authors of the Constitution charged the Congress “to provide and maintain a navy,” an order to provide permanent support and protection for key values such as free trade, free movement on the seas, and the defense of individual liberty. Across the span of our history, we have defended free trade, the rights of seamen, and have declared war more than once when those rights have been trampled upon.

It is no accident that the ascendancy of the US Navy to global primacy following World War II marked the beginning of a seventy-year era which saw the greatest rise in global economic

output and the sharpest decline in illiteracy and extreme poverty in the recorded history of humanity. Because we spoke softly through our support of ideals, even as we first built and maintained our naval “big stick,” the world was interconnected in a manner never imagined.

Today, however, those connections have begun to fray and in no small part because in the thirty years following the Cold War our participation in counter-terrorism campaigns distracted the nation strategically, and we have allowed our naval force to shrink, its readiness to decline, and our supporting industrial infrastructure to rust, and these facts were noticed by those who oppose our values and look to exploit our vulnerabilities. As we decreased our battleforce from 592 ships in 1989 to 375 in 1997 and dropping below the 300-ship barrier in 2003, we also reduced our daily global maritime presence from 150 ships to just over 100 across the same period. Meanwhile, China and Russia rushed to fill the vacuum we created. Piracy, the enemy of free trade, has been on the rise and the two rising competitors, seeking to take advantage of our weakened state, have advanced broad, expansive territorial waters claims over the South China Sea, the East China Sea and the Arctic Ocean. Such claims, if allowed to

stand, could create a “cascade failure” of the interconnected global trading system where today, in an 80-plus trillion-dollar global economy, 80% of trade by volume and 70% by value travels upon the sea and a vast majority of data in our information-driven economy travels under the sea via cables. The U.S. and its allies must understand that Mare Liberum, the free sea, is a fragile, all-or-nothing, concept that must be uniformly supported if it is to survive and continue to benefit all of mankind through the dramatic economic growth, prosperity, and improvement of the human condition it has enabled.

I suggest urgency, Mr. President, because the threat to our nation and its interests— on the seas— is proximate and real. Both the outgoing and incoming Indo-Pacific commanders have testified that China may move militarily in the Pacific within the next six years. Before we focus on a Battleforce 2045 plan, we need a Battleforce 2025 plan—and we need it now.

The looming naval crisis in the Pacific will be an all-hands-on deck effort and every available ship will be needed. We must quickly determine what manned and unmanned ships we can build and identify where within our shipbuilding industrial base they can be built—starting tomorrow. Additionally, we should identify which of the soon-to-be-decommissioned ships within our current fleet can be extended and furthermore, evaluate those ships that can be reactivated to provide critical capabilities and naval presence. This will require significant infrastructure investments in our current repair shipyards, and even the identification of additional repair capacity elsewhere within our industrial base.

Now is not the time to cut our defense spending—reality requires that we spend more to meet our defense needs. Today’s defense spending as a percentage of GDP does not approach the levels of the 1980s, when we built our fleet to nearly 600 ships—ultimately providing a credible, convincing deterrent to the Soviet Union. In May of 1982, President Reagan signed National Security Decision Directive 32 which succinctly laid out the National Security Strategy of the United States vis-a-vis the Soviet Union and ultimately contributing to its collapse. This directive formed the foundation of the 1984 Maritime Strategy, which is arguably the most successful naval strategy since

World War II. A similar, clearly delineated and actionable plan is necessary today.

Today, our fleet of just less than 300 ships is stretched to its limits, yet the demand for naval presence to meet these global threats is as great or greater than in the 1980s. Naval presence is the foundation of our conventional deterrent and we must act rapidly to ensure that we can maintain our maritime supremacy—or else we will cede it to those who do not share our values and the freedoms we uphold. We must be present protecting critical sea-lanes, providing a credible deterrent, and persistently operating in their backyard; China and Russia must understand that if clearly delineated red lines are violated, we will act to defend our allies, interests, and ultimately our values—over theirs.

Samuel Huntington noted in his 1954 article *National Policy and the Transoceanic Navy*, “The fundamental element of a military service is its purpose or role in implementing national policy... If a military does not possess such a concept, it becomes purposeless, it wallows about amid a variety of conflicting and confusing goals...” I ask you to provide this guidance through a clear and unambiguous National Defense Strategy that is maritime in its focus, designed to protect our broad national interests, backed by the appropriate resources, and anchored by full support of our nation in order to protect the values and freedoms that define us. John Adams once described the Navy as “the shield of the Republic.” Mr. President, we must act now if it is to remain so.

[signed]

Elaine Luria