As geopolitical tensions rise across the globe, America faces an uncomfortable truth: our current defense spending, particularly for the U.S. Navy, is woefully inadequate to confront the mounting threats of the 21st century. Amidst whispers of a potential World War III, it’s critical to acknowledge that our military budget, especially for the Navy, falls far short of the resources needed to maintain our maritime supremacy. As we sleepwalk toward potential conflict, the question is not whether we will adapt but whether we will do so in time.

President Biden’s proposed FY2025 budget of $257.6 billion for the Department of the Navy is insufficient to ensure our fleet’s modernization and expansion. Inflation outpaces the budget, while China rapidly expands its naval capacity, presenting a direct and growing threat. Both Biden and former President Trump have recognized China as the most significant challenge to U.S. maritime dominance. In fact, Chinese provocations in the Taiwan Strait and around America’s exclusive economic zones underscore their ambitions to challenge us on the open seas.

The Chinese Navy’s recent provocations—maneuvers near U.S. destroyers, aggressive exercises around Taiwan, and incursions into the Bering Sea—aren’t mere posturing. These actions are deliberate steps toward testing and weakening America’s naval resolve. China’s massive Bohai Shipyard dwarfs our shipbuilding output, boasting the capacity to build more ships in a month than the United States can in a year. Meanwhile, the U.S. Navy remains bogged down by Cold War-era mentalities and an industrial base that struggles to keep pace with maintenance, let alone new ship construction.

Simply put, America cannot afford to be complacent. The fleet we have now, while still the world’s strongest, is ill-equipped for the technological and logistical demands of modern naval warfare. It is time for a transformative approach—one that balances the agility of cutting-edge, unmanned systems with the tried-and-true power of manned vessels.

We are at a crossroads. The Navy must either expand or face the perilous consequences of

strategic inaction. This is not just about building more ships; it's about building a fleet designed for the conflicts of tomorrow, not the ones we faced yesterday. For example, China's hypersonic missiles, unmanned systems, and advancements in artificial intelligence leave our current fleet vulnerable. Without innovation, we risk entering a conflict we are unprepared to win.

The first step is revitalizing our shipbuilding industry. America's shipyards are world-class, but they are underutilized. States like South Carolina house a wealth of skilled shipbuilders and suppliers, yet our public shipyards are largely focused on maintaining existing vessels rather than constructing new ones. We need to change that. Expanding the physical footprint of U.S. shipyards and investing in modern production facilities will help mitigate the gaps in our naval capabilities.

Further, we should explore partnerships with our allies to accelerate production. A model like the AUKUS agreement, which pools resources between the U.S., UK, and Australia for submarine production, could be adapted for unmanned naval platforms. These unmanned systems are game-changers. They have already proven their worth in the Ukraine-Russia conflict, where naval drones have hampered Russia's Black Sea Fleet. These technologies are less expensive, quicker to build, and can perform a variety of missions—from reconnaissance to combat operations—without putting sailors' lives at risk.

The Navy's current roadmap, which aims for 381 battle force ships and 134 unmanned vehicles, is promising. However, we cannot wait until 2043 to reach these goals. China's Navy is on track to have 435 ships by 2030, and their shipbuilding capabilities continue to grow at an alarming pace. Our current trajectory will leave us outgunned and outmaneuvered, placing our sailors in harm's way with inadequate resources.

In order to expedite shipbuilding and maintain our edge in naval technology, we need a bold new approach to funding. The formation of a "Fleet Investment Fund" is one such idea. This

fund, separate from the typical budgetary constraints, would ensure the Navy receives consistent funding above inflation to address procurement, maintenance, and development needs. By locking in this funding, Congress would safeguard against the political wrangling that often stalls defense spending, ensuring that our Navy remains ready for future challenges.

Building the fleet of tomorrow will require more than just money. It will demand a wholesale transformation in how we think about naval warfare. Drones, unmanned submarines, and next-generation amphibious vessels must become the backbone of a fleet that can quickly and effectively respond to threats across the globe. This fleet must be scalable, agile, and capable of operating in the most contested maritime environments.

At its core, this is not just about defending America’s shores—it’s about securing the global commons. For decades, the U.S. Navy has been the world’s premier maritime force, ensuring freedom of navigation in critical trade routes and protecting the interests of our allies. But as history has shown, adversaries are emboldened by American hesitation and deterred by American strength. Our Navy has always adapted to the challenges of its time. Now, more than ever, it must do so again.

President Theodore Roosevelt once said, “A good Navy is not a provocation to war. It is the surest guaranty of peace.” If we are to safeguard the peace, we must first build the Navy to defend it.