

Cracks in the Hull—Urgent Action Required to Ensure the U.S. Navy’s Role in Great-Power Competition

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Recent incidents and scandals in the U.S. Navy have undermined the service’s strategic mission, while the challenges from Russia and China are intensifying.

The Navy must restore confidence in its seamanship while aggressively bolstering the maritime rules-based order and building a fleet that can fight and win wars.

The DOD and the Navy must commit to a significantly larger fleet of manned and unmanned ships to sustain Naval forces in decisive theaters to check Russia and China.

The past few years have been hard on the U.S. Navy. The never-ending “Fat Leonard” influence-peddling scandal,¹ a series of serious collisions in 2017, and recent and frequent senior leadership changes in 2019 and 2020 have taken their toll on the Navy’s morale and effectiveness. Yet, the challenges confronting the nation from China and Russia are intensifying. If left unreformed, these are challenges that today’s Navy will struggle to meet.

Compounding the Navy’s strategic and operational challenges is the loss of confidence that this bad run of events has seemingly caused. As of this writing, fires that started on July 12 were still burning on the USS *Bonhomme Richard* in San Diego. While a blemish on the Navy’s reputation, this fire highlights the ever-present danger and risk with which sailors live. Getting out of this rut is an imperative, both for the safety of the sailors and to reverse China’s and Russia’s

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib5097>

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successes in the competition playing out below the level of armed conflict, and which is changing conditions at sea and on land.

Call for Action

In order to regain its leading role, the U.S. Navy must:

- Restore public confidence in its seamanship while better competing in the peacetime day-to-day contest over the principles of a maritime-rules-based order. This order gave rise to the post-Cold War explosion of freely moving capital across opening markets, underwriting the greatest growth of prosperity and reduction in poverty that the world had ever seen; and
- Develop and build a fleet that can win wars and that can be reconstituted quickly in and in-between wars.

To do both, the Navy needs to address various cracks in its institutional “hull” by invigorating its relationship with Congress and the electorate, rethinking its role in the wider government, and overhauling outdated operational and bureaucratic frameworks. The most pronounced of these cracks include:

Lack of a Coherent and Sustained Vision. Most troubling has been the confusion that turmoil in the most senior ranks has caused, beginning with the last-minute withdrawal of prospective Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Admiral William Moran in August 2019, then the firing of the Secretary of the Navy in November 2019, followed by the acting Secretary of the Navy’s departure in April 2020. In this environment, control of the Navy’s future fleet building plan—the Integrated Naval Force Structure Assessment (INFSA)—was for the first time taken over by the Secretary of Defense. It has not been helpful that the Navy first argued in its 2016 Force Structure Assessment (FSA) that more than 653 warships would be needed to meet Combatant Command needs and then, in the same document, stated that 355 would be adequate.² Such divergences strain credibility in the absence of an accessible articulation of how those smaller forces would be adequate.

Questionable Resilience. The Navy’s demonstrated inability to return ships to service is unacceptable. After their collisions with commercial ships in 2017, it took the USS *Fitzgerald* over a year to depart its dry-dock³ and almost two years to return to sea; and the USS *McCain* spent nine months in dry-dock, to eventually return to sea in October 2019.⁴ With a small fleet, quick turnaround on battle damage repairs is vital.

In sustaining forward operations, the availability of the necessary sealift to move critical material and personnel in crisis is doubtful. In September 2019, the Department of Defense conducted its largest no-notice sealift activation exercise—Turbo Activation 19-Plus, with 61 ships. Results were troubling but not surprising: The Commander of the Transportation Command (TRANSCOM) testified in December 2019 that the Ready Reserve Fleet, which provides sealift for the military, is facing challenges in being available for large-scale inter-theater force deployment without delays.⁵ At the time of the exercise, the Ready Reserve Fleet consisted of 61 vessels of which only 39 were ready for tasking.⁶ Of additional concern is the late 2018 admission by the Navy that it lacks capacity to escort sealift during combat, this as Russian and Chinese navies increasingly hold previously secure sealanes at risk.⁷ Lastly, the coronavirus pandemic has exposed systemic weaknesses: As at-risk workers stayed home, the Navy activated more than 1,600 reservists to maintain critical maintenance and production timelines, and sidelined the aircraft carrier USS *Theodore Roosevelt* for weeks in the Western Pacific.⁸

Moderately Effective Demonstrations of Maritime Power. While overall, more forward presence is needed, there are some bright spots. Hugely positive was the July 2020 prolonged deployment of two U.S. carrier strike groups in the South China Sea. Its timing heightened its strategic impact, assuring regional partners amidst Chinese interference of Malaysia's survey operations by the ultra-deep drill ship *West Capella*, large-scale Chinese naval exercises, prolonged cross-strait tensions over national elections in Taiwan, and months-long protests over the imposition of Chinese security laws in Hong Kong. This significant show of force has outwardly been effective, but changing Chinese and Russian threat perceptions and altering Chinese and Russian behavior requires that such operations be frequent and sustained.

The U.S. Navy as it is now is unable to sustain the forward presence needed to pace the Chinese and Russian maritime challenges let alone shape them; the last time coordinated multiple carrier operations were conducted in the South China Sea was in 2012.⁹ This situation necessitates greater coordinated deployments with the Navy's sister services to achieve the desired strategic impact. While such joint deployments cannot replace the Naval presence, emerging maritime capabilities, such as the Army's ground-launched anti-ship cruise missiles, the Air Force's long-range maritime patrol and anti-shipping missions, and the Marine Corps' evolving expeditionary amphibious forces, can complicate Chinese and Russian calculus and contribute to effective deterrence. However, given the nature of

great- power competition, deterrence can no longer be the only or primary objective of U.S. Naval presence.

Core Proficiencies of Seamanship and Warfighting in Question.

During the summer of 2017, the U.S. Navy experienced the worst peacetime accidents in more than 41 years when the USS *John S. McCain* and USS *Fitzgerald* collided with commercial vessels. These incidents claimed the lives of 17 sailors during two unrelated routine “independent steaming” operations in the Western Pacific. Subsequent Navy reviews identified several broad institutional recommendations, most notably: “The creation of combat ready forces must take equal footing with meeting the immediate demands of Combatant Commanders.”¹⁰ Despite the fact that the Navy implemented several maintenance and training reforms to improve fleet and aviation readiness, more is needed. As then-CNO Admiral John Richardson testified in April 2018, it will take several years of leadership oversight and stable funding to ensure that the Navy’s sailors and platforms are returned to required states of readiness, at the earliest in 2021.

The Navy’s goal remains being “ready to fight and win” a war.¹¹ However, competitors like China and Russia have studied the U.S. military and developed approaches that challenge the Navy below the level of armed conflict, approaches that too often lack an effective response. Acknowledging today’s reality and closing this strategic and tactical gray zone has been a focus of the past several years, in a concept that Indo–Pacific Command’s Admiral Philip Davidson calls “Win Before Fighting.”¹² In this concept, because of the maritime nature, the Navy figures prominently. However, securing the nation’s maritime interests requires the Navy to be effective in both the gray zone and war-fighting. To achieve this dual effectiveness, the Navy must be reformed and recapitalized.

Recommendations for Restoring Naval Effectiveness for Great-Power Competition

The Department of Defense and the Navy should:

- **Commit to building a fleet of more than 600 manned and unmanned warships**, with a pronounced near-term increase in production. Building on a Heritage Foundation analyst’s 2018 minimum-fleet recommendation, this larger fleet would include a significant number of unmanned platforms and several new platforms.¹³ Both the 2016 FSA’s upper recommendations based on meeting Combatant Command requirements, and the work done by Bryan Clark of

the Hudson Institute, should inform recommendations on optimum fleet numbers and composition.¹⁴ Much as President Ronald Reagan's 600-ship Navy did in the 1980s, tangible commitment to this course can deter adversaries by giving the Navy the means for a forward deployed and effective presence, and the capacity for training that sustains war-fighting proficiencies and seamanship.¹⁵

- **Equip, deploy, and sustain Naval forces in decisive theaters charged with challenging and changing Chinese and Russian maritime behavior.** Top priority should be given to maintaining a significant, visible Naval presence in the South China Sea and in the North Atlantic. Such a presence would be a baseline for episodic surges of additional forces under the concept of “dynamic force employment” and the postponed large-scale exercises, first called for by the CNO in 2018.¹⁶
- **Execute a decade-long comprehensive national seapower initiative to invigorate and expand industrial capacities and competition,** while enhancing Naval infrastructure resilience. Such an effort would expand on the Navy's ongoing \$21 billion, 20-year Shipyard Infrastructure Optimization Plan (SIOP) to modernize its four public shipyards and reduce maintenance backlogs. As highlighted by a December 2019 Government Accounting Office audit, the Navy continues to experience delays of 75.4 percent of planned maintenance, shortages of experienced shipyard workers, and prevalence of poor material condition at Navy shipyards.¹⁷ Given the need for a larger fleet and persistent maintenance backlogs, shipyard modernization alone is not adequate, and the number of facilities must be increased.¹⁸
- **Articulate a comprehensive vision for the Navy's role in concert with all branches of government and industry in great-power competition.** To this end, the March 2, 2020, CNO announcement of a forthcoming maritime strategy that brings together the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard is helpful.¹⁹ However, a more effective approach would have also included the Army and the Air Force, as well as key players of the inter-agency process (such as the Department of State and the Department of Commerce) while not sacrificing emphasis on achievable maritime strategic effects.

Congress should:

- **Enact a comprehensive and sustainable national program to regain competitiveness of U.S. maritime industries.** This program should be developed in concert with the maritime services (principally the Navy), appropriate leaders in industry, and local communities. Critically, this program must address multiple long-standing maritime infrastructure and resilience issues that put sustaining and expanding the Navy at risk.

Conclusion

Failure to meet these challenges will cede the maritime domain and its associated rules-based order to the fancies of China and Russia. This is a risk made dire as these two revisionist powers increasingly coordinate maritime operations, such as their combined July 2019 aerial circumnavigation of the disputed Takeshima/Dokto Island in the Sea of Japan. A strong Navy has been a bedrock of the nation's security, as well as an assurance of its prosperity through secure trade. To ensure that this remains the case, the nation urgently needs to build, train, and sustain a Navy that can effectively compete in peacetime and win in war.

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Endnotes

1. The “Fat Leonard” scandal is a corruption scandal and ongoing investigation within the U.S. Navy involving ship support contractor Glenn Defense Marine Asia (GDMA), a subsidiary of the Glenn Marine Group. At the heart of the scandal was GDMA, run by Leonard Glenn Francis, a Malaysian national known as Fat Leonard for his then 350-plus-pound weight. Leonard bought access to sensitive ship schedules and favoritism for contracting multi-million dollar ship support deals. Craig Whitlock called the scandal “perhaps the worst national-security breach of its kind to hit the Navy since the end of the Cold War.” Craig Whitlock, “‘Fat Leonard’ Scandal Swells; Three More Navy Figures Charged,” *The Washington Post*, May 27, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/fat-leonard-scandal-swells-three-more-navy-figures-charged/2016/05/27/2e1d7b0e-2442-11e6-aa84-42391ba52c91_story.html (accessed August 4, 2020).
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