

Congress Should Incentivize Forward Naval Presence in Key Areas

Brent D. Sadler

KEY TAKEAWAYS

A deficit of ships meant the sole U.S. carrier strike group in the Western Pacific had to relocate to cover the recently announced Afghanistan withdrawal.

U.S. naval presence in Indo-Pacific waters has been limited. This must change if the nation is to effectively compete with China and Russia.

Congress should provide more resources to ensure greater forward maritime presence in decisive theaters such as the South China Sea and Eastern Mediterranean.

Headlines were ablaze in April 2021 with President Biden's announcement that the U.S. military would depart Afghanistan by the 20th anniversary of the attacks of September 11, 2001. And then the operational realities set in: Without adequate planning, the Navy was forced to send its sole aircraft carrier strike group in the Indo-Pacific to cover this withdrawal. The timing is awful, as tensions in the South China Sea and around Taiwan have steadily worsened since March 2021. Leaving East and Southeast Asian allies and partners exposed like this is symptomatic of deeper issues impacting naval presence that Congress can help address.

Even with advance planning, naval presence in strategically important Asian waters has been limited. Consider that over the summer of 2020 the Navy surged two carrier strike groups to the South China Sea for the first time since 2012 despite a series of

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib6099>

The Heritage Foundation | 214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE | Washington, DC 20002 | (202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

Chinese provocative acts there.¹ Such paucity of presence was not because the 2018 National Defense Strategy or the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance (also known as the Rebalance to the Asia–Pacific) did not explicitly call for an increased presence. Rather, it was the non-availability of warships—despite the strategic implications that such paucity could have on security partnerships and alliances.² Given the importance of forward presence in the day-to-day great-power competition playing out at sea, efforts to increase forward presence should be given greater consideration.

Enhancing Forward Presence in Decisive Theaters

The root cause of limited naval presence in decisive theaters is a combination of too few ships and conflicting near-term operational demands on that small fleet. Congress, through its power of the purse and oversight responsibilities, can address both. One solution is to build a larger fleet—which should be pursued anyway, even though it offers no near-term relief. However, the 2022 Biden defense budget request does not take that approach, although Congress should address this shortfall. But even given increased emphasis on shipbuilding, the ships delivered would likely be late to need as China races to expand its influence throughout maritime Asia.³

Another option is to more narrowly focus existing U.S. naval forces in key areas of greater strategic value to China and Russia while increasing naval operating tempo.⁴ Ordinarily, repositioning naval assets and increased presence requires the commitment of senior national leaders; however, Congress can encourage forward presence in defined geographic areas through various means.

Both the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI) and the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) provide an opportunity to resource increased forward presence. The EDI, announced in 2014, has been used in this manner to resource rotations of Army brigade combat teams. PDI was created in fiscal year (FY) 2021 to provide accounting of relevant efforts across the Department of Defense (DOD) but a dedicated budget of additional monies was not provided for U.S. Indo–Pacific Command. This is why the current FY 2022 budget proposal includes \$4.9 billion in platform procurement that is also reflected in the Navy and the Air Force budgets, leading Indo–Pacific Command to now request an additional \$890 million in unfunded PDI requests.⁵ This “platform-centric” approach would fund an already planned destroyer, oiler, and F-35 aircraft, but it misses Congress’ intent for PDI.⁶ Senate Armed Services Committee members were quick to make public that they were disappointed. Senator Jim Inhofe (R–OK) said that the President’s proposed budget “gets the Pacific Deterrence Initiative all wrong.”

However, neither EDI nor PDI have been used to facilitate a marked increase in forward naval presence or clearly define geographically where additional naval presence should be directed. And the PDI funding that is focused on forward presence is miniscule: The FY 2022 PDI budget proposal includes \$15 million for operations in Combatant Commanders Direct Mission Support.⁷ In an interesting twist to the way forces are managed, a ship operating in international waters off the California coast could qualify for such funds just as much as a ship actually operating in the South China Sea would. Moreover, these operational PDI funds have little impact, representing less than 0.1 percent of the Navy's FY 2022 proposed operating budget for warships, which includes training, maintenance, and operating costs.⁸

The Total Costs of Forward Presence

For every forward-deployed warship, three are in the homeland at various stages of crew rest, maintenance, and training readiness. Sending warships more often or on longer deployments comes with added costs. Longer deployments have resulted in visible wear on warships and subsequent overloading of maintenance capacity in the shipyards,⁹ further squeezing tight budgets. It is also important to recognize the human cost of longer deployments: The strain on sailors asked to be away from family for longer times can contribute to attrition rates, making it more challenging for the Navy to man a fleet that is already undermanned by as much as 15 percent.¹⁰ In addition, longer deployments reduce commanding officers' time to train and build unit cohesion.¹¹

The Navy's budget for overseas deployments is included in its Operations and Support accounts, which are planned years in advance of an actual deployment. Any unexpected expenses or emergent operations could be funded through internal DOD reprogramming requests or via special action of Congress, such as during a national crisis. But as Heritage analyst Frederico Bartels has written, reprogramming requests are cumbersome and often take as long as six months to be processed.¹² Under normal conditions, the Operations and Support budget funds operations within the Navy's annual budget, and any changes to the intent of monies authorized over \$10 million requires congressional approval.¹³

Is Forward Presence Effective?

The short answer is yes: Forward naval presence, coordinated with other government actions, has resulted in effective diplomacy. For instance, in

late April 2020, the USS *Gabrielle Giffords* patrolled in the vicinity of the Panamanian-flagged *West Capella* as it conducted deepwater surveys in a part of Malaysia's exclusive economic zone that is disputed by China. Operational tempo built up to include Air Force bombers in May and sustained dual aircraft carrier operations in the South China Sea in July.¹⁴

Amidst this activity, on July 13, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo issued the first clear U.S. opposition to China's maritime claims.¹⁵ Given the economic nature of the *West Capella's* survey operations, this statement, adroitly matched with U.S. naval presence, resonated with U.S. partners in tangible ways:

- Indonesia conducted naval drills in the South China Sea,¹⁶
- The Philippines decided to leverage its 2016 maritime arbitration win against China,¹⁷
- Malaysia submitted a protest note to the United Nations regarding China's excessive claims,¹⁸ and
- Vietnam expressed support for the U.S. position while it was chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.¹⁹

In a region not known for explicitly challenging China, the above actions were remarkable and occurred within weeks of Secretary Pompeo's July statement and after months of a visible and sustained U.S. naval presence. Additionally, it was notable, given the tension surrounding these events, that there was no physical harassment at sea.

What Congress Can Do

Given the demonstrated efficacy of naval power deployed to decisive areas, it seems clear that Congress should make it easier for theater commanders and Navy leaders to deploy and sustain ships to areas such as the South China Sea and Eastern Mediterranean.

Considering all this, Congress can devise a resourcing approach tied to the annual National Defense Authorization Act and defense authorization bills that enables forward presence in decisive theaters in a way that improves diplomacy while being mindful of the added burden on sailors. There are several actions to consider:

- First, the Navy will need to carefully balance increased forward presence with the need to sustain the material condition of forward-operating ships and crew proficiencies. To do this, the Navy should provide Congress with qualitative and quantitative benchmarks on readiness of forward-operating ships and aircraft.
- Second, Congress should request that the Secretary of Defense precisely define the one or two decisive theaters that forward presence is most needed for targeted funding. It is recommended that this should be constrained to the South China Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean, with a narrow littoral (i.e., 12 miles inland) defined to allow for port visits, air operations, and additional maritime activities of all services.²⁰
- Third, Congress should create a forward naval presence line of funding within the force design and posture lines of effort of both the PDI and EDI. Forward naval presence funds would cover operations and maintenance conducted within the key decisive theaters to enable greater day-to-day maritime presence in the near term while enhancing forward presence in the longer term. An expanded network of in-theater sustainment capacity and partnerships would prove critical in saving damaged warships and retuning them to a potential fight. Congress should also consider co-development or modernization of allied and partner nation training facilities to enhance interoperability of forward forces while they are deployed to decisive theaters (e.g., Kota Belud range in Sabah, Malaysia).
- Lastly, Congress should require Indo–Pacific and European Commands to provide an accounting of maritime presence and associated expenses in the decisive theaters prior to submitting new budgets. These reports would inform future years’ funding of forward maritime presence accounts in the EDI and PDI.

Potential Concerns

Taking such an approach raises two concerns:

1. Involving Congress in the operational decisions of the armed services could be viewed as beyond its constitutional mandate. By crafting the approach as an enticement of forward presence via the EDI and PDI,

Congress would not violate the executive's prerogative in determining operational matters—per various precedents.²¹ Moreover, such action complies with Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution, which charges Congress “To provide and maintain a Navy; to make rules for the government and regulation of the land and naval forces.”

2. Two, if the Armed Services build their budgets to fund planned deployments, there is no assurance of an increase of forward presence in decisive theaters. While the Services are free to craft their budget proposals as they see fit and to seek reprogramming of funds as appropriate, the provision of additional funds through PDI and EDI would serve as an enticement for ever greater levels of presence.

Conclusion

Congress should establish a forward naval presence line of funding within PDI and EDI, which enables greater forward maritime presence in decisive theaters for great-power competition with China and Russia.

Given the strategic implications and the intensifying competition with China and Russia, Congress can and should enable effective forward presence. Only by being “there” can the military secure U.S. asymmetric advantages in security partnerships and complicate efforts to undermine U.S. interests through grey-zone tactics.

Brent D. Sadler is Senior Fellow for Naval Warfare and Advanced Technology in the Center for National Defense, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation.

Endnotes

1. Commander U.S. 7th Fleet, "Ronald Reagan, John C. Stennis Carrier Strike Groups Operate in Philippine Sea," <https://www.c7f.navy.mil/Media/News/Display/Article/1690818/ronald-reagan-john-c-stennis-carrier-strike-groups-operate-in-philippine-sea/> (accessed June 3, 2021).
2. 2016 Navy Force Structure Assessment, December 14, 2016, p. 1-2, https://news.usni.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/FSA_Executive-Summary.pdf (accessed June 3, 2021).
3. Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Report to Congress on the Annual Long-Range Plan for Construction of Naval Vessels, December 9, 2020, pp. 3-4, 6-7, and 9-10, https://media.defense.gov/2020/Dec/10/2002549918/-1/-1/1/SHIPBUILDING%20PLAN%20DEC%2020_NAVY_OSD_OMB_FINAL.PDF (accessed June 3, 2021).
4. Kevin D. Scott, "Joint Publication 3-35: Deployment and Redeployment Operations," Joint Chiefs of Staff, January 10, 2018, pp. 1-2 to 1-5, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_35.pdf (accessed June 3, 2021).
5. Jack Detsch, "More Money for Biden's Asia Pivot," *Foreign Policy*, June 8, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/08/biden-pentagon-asia-china/> (accessed June 9, 2021).
6. "[T]he Secretary of Defense shall: (1) provide increased presence by positioning the right capabilities in key locations in order to respond to adversarial threats in a timely manner; (2) enhance prepositioning, infrastructure, and logistics; (3) strengthen the capability of United States forces and allies and partners in the region; (4) increase readiness through training and exercises." Sense of Congress Regarding Indo-Pacific Deterrence Initiative, H.R. 6613, 116th Cong., Sec. 2, April 23, 2020, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/6613/text#toc-H31DAC46ACA144F9C9DBE925702AC02E0> (accessed June 10, 2021).
7. Office of the Under Secretary of Defense Comptroller, Department of Defense Budget Fiscal Year 2022: Pacific Deterrence Initiative, p. 3, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2022/fy2022_Pacific_Deterrence_Initiative.pdf (accessed June 7, 2021).
8. Department of the Navy, FY2022 Budget Estimates, "Justification of Estimates," May 2021, exhibit O-1, p. 2, https://www.secnav.navy.mil/fmc/fmb/Documents/22pres/OMN_Book.pdf (accessed June 7, 2021).
9. David B. Larter, "Can the Biden Administration Break the Cycle of Marathon Naval Deployments to the Mideast?," *Defense News*, February 15, 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2021/02/15/can-the-biden-administration-break-the-cycle-of-marathon-naval-deployments-to-the-mideast/> (accessed June 3, 2021).
10. Government Accountability Office, Navy Readiness: Additional Efforts Are Needed to Manage Fatigue, Reduce Crewing Shortfalls, and Implement Training, GAO-21-366, May 27, 2021, pp. 3-5, 10-12, and 17-19, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-21-366.pdf> (accessed May 31, 2021).
11. GAO, Navy and Marine Corps: Services Continue Efforts to Rebuild Readiness, but Recovery Will Take Years and Sustained Management Attention, GAO-21-225T, December 2, 2020, p. 6-7, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-21-225t.pdf> (accessed June 3, 2021).
12. Frederico Bartels, "Cumbersome Defense Reprogramming Process Hampers National Defense and Should Be Streamlined," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 3543, October 13, 2020, <https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/BG3543.pdf> (accessed June 29, 2021).
13. Brendan W. McGarry, "Defense Primer: DOD Transfer and Reprogramming Authorities," Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, updated January 22, 2021, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11243> (accessed June 3, 2021).
14. Diana Stancy Correll, "Nimitz, Reagan Carrier Strike Groups Pick Up Dual-Carrier Exercises in South China Sea Again," *Navy Times*, July 17, 2020, <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2020/07/17/nimitz-reagan-carrier-strike-groups-pick-up-dual-carrier-exercises-in-south-china-sea-again/> (accessed August 4, 2020).
15. U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Seas," July 13, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/> (accessed August 12, 2020).
16. Radio Free Asia, "Indonesian Navy Conducts Major Exercise Amid South China Sea Tensions," July 22, 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/indonesia-southchinasea-07222020212724.html> (accessed August 25, 2020).
17. Republic of the Philippines, Department of Foreign Affairs, "Statement of Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teodoro L. Locsin, Jr. on the 4th Anniversary of the Issuance of the Award in the South China Sea Arbitration," July 12, 2020, <https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/statements-and-advisoriesupdate/27140-statement-of-secretary-of-foreign-affairs-teodoro-l-locsin-jr-on-the-4th-anniversary-of-the-issuance-of-the-award-in-the-south-china-sea-arbitration> (accessed August 25, 2020).
18. Mission of Malaysia to the United Nations, Note Verbale, July 29, 2020, https://www.un.org/Depts/los/clcs_new/submissions_files/mys_12_12_2019/2020_07_29_MYS_NV_UN_002_OLA-2020-00373.pdf (accessed August 25, 2020).
19. Jim Gomez, "ASEAN Takes Position vs China's Vast Historical Sea Claims," *AP News*, June 27, 2020, <https://apnews.com/094a46218f808f6943e326200e6452a7> (accessed August 25, 2020).
20. Brent D. Sadler, "Decisive Theaters: Navy Must Pick the Right Fights in Great-Power Competition," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 3539, October 8, 2020, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/decisive-theaters-navy-must-pick-the-right-fights-great-power-competition>.
21. Stephen Dycus et al., *National Security Law* (New York: Aspen Publishers, 2007), pp. 111-114 and 235-238.