

Is the U.S. Navy Too Small?

Mark Cancian

It's become a common talking point with Republican presidential candidates and think tanks: the U.S. Navy is too small and needs to grow. Although the overall size of the military has been an issue, the size of the Navy has received particular attention. In the latest Republican presidential debate, Carly Fiorina twice stated that she would increase the size of the "Sixth Fleet." Senator Marco Rubio, Governor John Kasich, Governor Bobby Jindal, Governor (and now former-candidate) Scott Walker, and Dr. Ben Carson all criticized the current size of the Navy in various speeches and pledged to increase it. And it's not just Republican politicians. The 2014 National Defense Panel, a statutory, bipartisan panel of nongovernment experts, recommended increasing the Navy to between 323 and 346 ships, arguing that the strategy exceeds the forces provided and that it was better to err on the side of too much rather than too little. Studies from several think tanks, including some from CSIS,¹ have also made the argument.

It's worth considering, then, what the size of the Navy is, how its current size compares with historical experience and other navies, how the Navy's size drives, and is driven, by various national security strategies, and how this fits into the broader political and international context.

How Big Is the Navy Today?

272 ships as of September 23, 2015 (technically, "deployable battle force ships"). The Navy is built around its 10 aircraft carriers (soon to be 11, when the *USS Ford* finally delivers next year), each carrying up to 90 aircraft. The centrality of the aircraft carrier has been controversial because of its high cost: about \$12 billion per ship, and that excludes the cost of escorts and aircraft.

Whether this is the right way to structure the Navy is beyond the scope of this paper. The Navy has 100 surface combatants to escort the carriers and conduct independent operations, 54 attack submarines, 14 ballistic missile submarines for nuclear deterrence, 4 cruise missile submarines for land attack, 30 amphibious ships for deploying Marines, and about 60 other ships for support and logistics.

¹ For example: Maren Leed, *Amphibious Shipping Shortfalls: Risks and Opportunities to Bridge the Gap* (Washington, DC: CSIS, September 2014), http://csis.org/files/publication/140902_Leed_AmphibiousShipping_WEB.pdf; David J. Berteau, Michael J. Green, Gregory T. Kiley, and Nicholas F. Szechenyi, *U.S. Force Posture Strategy in the Asia Pacific Region: An Independent Assessment* (Washington, DC: CSIS, August 2012), http://csis.org/files/publication/120814_FINAL_PACOM_optimized.pdf; and Michael J. Green, Kathleen H. Hicks, and Mark Cancian, *Pacific Rebalance 2025: An Independent Review of U.S. Defense Strategy in the Asia Pacific Region* (Washington, DC: CSIS, forthcoming).

We can give a definite answer to how many ships are in the Navy because there is an agreed ship counting methodology, which was established in the 1980s between the secretary of defense's staff and the Navy. The agreement specified which kinds of ships would be included and which would be excluded. A Navy proposal last year to expand the types of ships counted was not accepted by the Congress.

A caution is in order, however. Because of the judgment involved in deciding what to include, counting ships in foreign navies and in the U.S. Navy historically is not always straightforward. The Navy historical ship counts used here are compiled by the Naval History and Heritage Command and therefore constitute an official count, but many ships counted historically would not be included by the current rules. Similarly, what's included in counts of foreign naval strength is not always comparable with the way U.S. ships are counted. For example, Coast Guard cutters are not included in the Navy ship count (since in the United States, the Coast Guard is a different service in a different government department), but similar vessels are often included in counts of foreign navies.

Is the Navy Small by U.S. Historical Standards?

The answer is yes and no. By the commonly used metric of number of ships, the Navy is at an historical low point. The Navy has not had this few ships since 1916, as Mitt Romney famously noted in the 2012 presidential debates. Today's count of 272 compares with 550+ during the Reagan administration and the 300s during the Clinton years when the Navy was coming down from Cold War levels.

Analysts point out that using ship numbers as a primary metric of naval strength leaves out a lot of important detail. Not all ships are alike. An aircraft carrier is far larger and more capable than a minesweeper, but both count as one ship. If one looks at tonnage—a surrogate for capability—the Navy is smaller than at points in its past but not as dramatically as the ship count might imply. Today the Navy has 273 ships weighing a total of 5.1 million tons. In 1975, the Navy had 559 ships weighing 5.7 million tons. So in 1975, the Navy had twice as many ships as today but only 10 percent more tonnage.

The reason for this numbers/tonnage disparity is that Navy ships have been getting larger over time. For example, today's Arleigh Burke-class destroyers (DDG-51s) weigh 9,000 tons; destroyers in the 1970s were half that size. In World War II, a 9,000-ton ship would have been a cruiser, the next larger class. Similarly, World War II fleet carriers weighed about 40,000 tons, whereas today's carriers weigh 90,000 tons. The Navy also tends to retire ships early in order to build more modern ships. Thus, ship counts tend to be lower, but capability (and often size) is greater.

Is the Navy Too Small for U.S. Needs?

It depends on the strategy that a president wants to implement. Classically, the Navy has been sized for two things: wartime combat operations and day-to-day forward deployments. Wartime combat operations entail surging large numbers of ships to a high-intensity conflict, for example

a war on the Korean peninsula. The number of ships needed depends on a wide variety of factors but particularly the expansiveness of U.S. goals. The Obama administration's goals are to defeat an adversary in one region and "deny the objectives of—or impose unacceptable risk on—a second aggressor in another region." In plain English, that means the United States will defeat one opponent decisively enough that we impose terms on them, even change their regime. In the second conflict the United States will aim for less, for example, restoring the status quo before the conflict. The Republican presidential candidates are likely looking at a more ambitious goal in the second conflict, defeating the enemy there also, and that requires more forces across the board, including the Navy.

Day-to-day forward deployment of naval (and ground and air) forces, the other driver of force size, serves several purposes: to engage partners and allies, to deter potential conflicts, and if a crisis arises, to respond quickly. The crisis could be anything from relieving humanitarian disasters, to supporting coalition operations against countries like Libya, to rescuing American citizens caught in civil wars. Historically, the United States has maintained forward-deployed forces in three theaters: the Pacific, the Mediterranean and Europe, and the Indian Ocean/Middle East. To maintain a carrier battle group (a carrier and its escorts) forward deployed in each of those three regions continuously would require 14 to 15 carriers, given today's laydown of naval installations. In addition, there are a variety of other demands on naval forces. For example, submarines conduct nuclear deterrence and intelligence missions, and there are operations in other theaters such as South America and Africa. Meeting the demands of all these requirements together would require a Navy larger than its current size.

The Obama administration has decided not to maintain continuous carrier coverage in all three theaters but to gap the coverage particularly in the Mediterranean and Europe. As a result, it can execute its strategy with a smaller Navy, though with some risk.

On the other hand, unexpected real-world events like Russian aggression and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) battlefield victories sometimes intrude. As a result, the Navy has sent more ships to Europe and the Middle East than it had planned. Like its sister services, it has struggled to meet the demands of the geographic combatant commanders. The Navy notes that half of its ships are typically at sea at any time, either forward deployed globally or training locally, and there's no spare capacity left. Admiral Jonathan Greenert, chief of naval operations until recently, noted that the Navy has in recent years been able to meet "about 45% of the global Geographic Combatant Commander (GCC) requests."² He continued, "Sourcing all GCC requests would require about 450 combatant ships with requisite supporting structure and readiness." Combatant commanders do not need to take supply into account when making force requests, so it is unsurprising that the Navy cannot fully meet all requests. Still, leaving 55 percent of demand unmet is concerning.

² Statement of Admiral Jonathan Greenert before the House Subcommittee on Defense, Committee on Appropriations, on the FY 2016 Department of the Navy Posture, February 26, 2015, <http://appropriations.house.gov/calendar/eventsingle.aspx?EventID=393993>.

The Navy hopes to meet this demand by growing in size. Its force structure objective is 308 ships, 36 more than are currently in the fleet. The Navy plans to reach that level in 2019 and maintain that fleet size for the next 20 years. However, this requires additional shipbuilding funds that may not be available. In particular, this expansion depends on the financing of the replacement for the Ohio-class ballistic missile submarines, which perform the national mission of nuclear deterrence but are extremely expensive. The Navy wants outside help in paying for this program.

However, the Obama administration has been constrained by the budget caps of the Budget Control Act (BCA) of 2011. The BCA cut \$487 billion out of defense over 10 years (and a similar amount out of domestic spending). Subsequent ad hoc budget agreements have made further cuts. No administration could expand the Navy with these constraints. If future budgets are held to the sequestration caps in the BCA, then there will be further cuts.

Is the US Navy Larger Than the Next Seven or So Other Navies? Isn't that Excessive?

Yes and no. Yes, the U.S. Navy is larger than the next seven or so other navies (depending on how one counts), and most of these are our allies. In particular, our aircraft carriers are the largest in the world and more numerous than those of the rest of the world combined. The United States operates 10, soon to be 11, 90,000-ton aircraft carriers (in addition to 10 40,000-ton amphibious assault carriers). China, by contrast, has one 60,000-ton carrier (*Liaoning*, ex-Soviet *Riga*, and technically a training ship), and the Russian Federation operates *Liaoning's* half-sister *Admiral Kuznetsov*.

No, that's not necessarily excessive because the U.S. Navy has global responsibilities that other navies do not. The U.S. Navy is expected to operate in the Mediterranean, in the Middle East, and in the Pacific and to have forces forward deployed at all times so that when crises erupt the United States can respond quickly. That takes a large navy. The U.S. Navy will also operate in the home waters of opponents. Opponents can bring their entire naval strength to bear while the United States can only use a portion of its strength because of ongoing global responsibilities. If there were conflict with China, for example, the Chinese could employ their entire naval force while the United States would have to leave at least some forces in the Atlantic and Middle East.

Isn't the Navy Much More Capable Now Than in the Past?

Yes, much more. The F-35 now entering the fleet is stealthier than the previous generation of aircraft. Today's submarines are quieter. The cruiser and destroyer weapons are longer range and more accurate.

But our enemies are also more capable. We are in a situation that has been called the "Red Queen effect" in evolutionary dynamics. That is, we must run as fast as we can just to stand still. Because our potential enemies are also improving their capabilities, we are not gaining on them. In fact, the Chinese have greatly increased their fleet capabilities over the last 20 years, and the

Russians are trying to reverse their post–Cold War decay. Thus, we can’t assume that greater quality will offset declining quantity. Further, ships can only be in one place at a time no matter how capable. As Stalin is said to have observed, quantity has a quality all its own.

Mark Cancian is a senior adviser with the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C.

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