

# U.S. Naval Power: Myths and Misconceptions

## THE ISSUE

As the nation recovers from COVID-19 and a new Administration settles in, it is important to address several misconceptions and myths influencing thinking about the future of the Navy. Left unaddressed, they will have a caustic effect on the years-long effort to rebuild Navy readiness and capacities.

## MYTH: THE NATION CANNOT AFFORD A LARGER FLEET OF SHIPS

**Response:** U.S. prosperity and security are tied to Naval power, and the country cannot forego its constitutional obligations to provide and maintain a navy. The issue is not one of affordability, but of setting priorities to safeguard the nation's long-term interests while enhancing America's sustained prosperity.

**Additional information:** In 2019, the U.S. spent 3.2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense, compared to 6.12 percent in 1985 at the height of Cold War and a 600-ship Naval build-up. Despite increased military spending, economic growth from 1980 to 1990 averaged 3 percent, peaking at 7.24 percent in 1984, while defense spending averaged 6.11 percent of GDP. From 1991 to 2018, average GDP growth was 2.5 percent, while defense spending averaged 3.72 percent of GDP. The GDP for 2020 is expected to be \$20.9 trillion; if the Department of Defense was funded at Cold War rates, with the Navy receiving its historical portion (30 percent), its budget would be \$376.2 billion, not the \$209 billion it received for fiscal year (FY) 2021.

## MISCONCEPTION: THE NAVY CAN FIND 10 PERCENT WORTH OF EFFICIENCIES IN ITS BUDGET THAT CAN GO TOWARD NON-DEFENSE PRIORITIES

**Response:** Over-emphasizing *efficiency* while not addressing mission requirements propagates downward pressures on the capacity and day-to-day safety of the Navy. The result has been a Navy unable to build, man, or operate a fleet meeting congressionally mandated numbers since 2000. The *2001 Quadrennial Defense Review* set a goal of 310 ships, the 2016 Force Structure Assessment recommended 355 ships, yet in 2021, the Navy still only as 297 ships.

**Additional information:** So-called cost efficiencies determined by Defense Secretaries are not savings. For example, in FY 2021 the Defense Department found \$5.7 billion in cost-efficiency savings that would seem to be monies free for allocation elsewhere. But a 2019 mid-year review found \$3 billion in unexpected costs to the Navy, \$1 billion of which was for ship maintenance that, if deferred, would delay ships returning to operations. Efficiency studies often come with reduced capacity and resilience that engenders increased risks to the Defense Department's combat mission. A recent study by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments found that a 10 percent cut to defense spending would make the 2018 National Defense Strategy unexcitable, degrading U.S. deterrence to the point that attacks on the U.S., its allies, and its interests become more likely.

## MYTH: CHINA'S AND RUSSIA'S UNDERMINING OF THE MARITIME RULES-BASED ORDER DOES NOT AFFECT THE U.S.

**Response:** China and Russia have waged a campaign to diminish U.S. alliances by undermining the maritime rules-based order. Left unaddressed, acts such as China's establishment of a self-declared East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ),

fortification of the South China Sea bases, and Russia's increasingly belligerent maritime activities will multiply.

**Additional information:** China's 2013 East China Sea ADIZ does not conform to international law and has had impact on air traffic in East Asia. China's fortifications and increased naval presence in the South China Sea threaten shipping lanes that are critical to U.S. allies, and undermines regional diplomacy. Russia uses environmental protections granted for ice-covered areas under article 234 of UNCLOS to enforce de facto coastal state control of the lucrative Northern Sea Route, requiring 45 days advance notice, use of embarked Russian pilots, and provision of ship manifests for any transits.

#### MISCONCEPTION: CHINESE AND RUSSIAN MARITIME BEHAVIOR DOES NOT REQUIRE A RESPONSE FROM THE NAVY

**Response:** China and Russia are making incremental changes to established maritime norms—such as Russia's Sea of Azov coercion of transiting maritime traffic to Ukraine, and China's unilateral regulation of and interference in maritime economic activity—without triggering any military responses from the U.S. that have lasting strategic impact. However, events centered on oil exploration by Malaysia in its economic exclusive zone—activities that typically draw Chinese resistance—this past summer in the South China Sea indicate that a sustained forward U.S. Naval presence there can be effective.

**Additional information:** China's subdued response to the U.S. Naval presence over the summer of 2020 in the vicinity of Malaysia's

chartered survey ship *West Capella* indicates that sustained operations supporting the rules-based order can succeed. Since its 2014 annexation of Crimea, Russia has built a bridge over the Kerch Strait, enabling it to impede maritime traffic to Ukrainian ports on the Sea of Azov—a frontline of the ongoing dispute with the renegade Donbas region; notable was Russia's 2018 seizure of three Ukrainian naval vessels. A September 2017 report by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence raised awareness of the threat posed by Russia and China to undersea cables that could bring the U.S. economy to a halt; undersea cables convey more than 95 percent of U.S. international communications and trillions of dollars in daily transactions of which satellite communications could only handle 7 percent of this traffic.

#### MYTH: THE U.S. COULD SURGE WARSHIP PRODUCTION DURING A WAR

**Response:** Delays in routine maintenance and emergent repairs are symptoms of a deficit in Naval infrastructure and production capacities. Maintaining today's fleet of 297 ships, or growing to upwards of 355 ships, is impossible without investment.

**Additional information:** The Defense Department's *Fiscal Year 2020 Industrial Capabilities Report to Congress*, and its 2020 annual report on China's military and security developments, make clear that the United States' shipbuilding capacity is inadequate. In August 2020, the Navy acknowledged that the decision to scrap the *USS Bonhomme Richard* after a fire instead of repairing it was based on limited shipyard capacity.