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SOS: Congress Must Save the Aircraft Carrier Fleet

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Recently, U.S. Navy leadership sent a proposal to Congress requesting waiver authority to temporarily reduce its current fleet of 11 aircraft carriers to 10 from 2012 through 2015. Congress already approved, after much deliberation, the Navy's request to reduce the fleet from 12 to 11, which resulted in the decommissioning of the John F. Kennedy (CV-67) in 2007.

Congress should reject the Navy's latest request. Today's record-low carrier force level is already a substantial reduction from the level achieved by the Reagan Administration's military buildup in the 1980s, when the Navy had set the minimum number of carriers needed to secure the high seas at 15. Congress should continue its robust support of shipbuilding and seek again to increase the shipbuilding account in this year's defense bills.

"Quantity Has a Quality All Its Own." In 2006, Navy leaders presented a report to Congress that proposed a fleet of 313 ships, which included 11 aircraft carriers, 48 attack submarines, 88 cruisers and destroyers, 55 littoral combat ships, 31 amphibious ships, and a Maritime Prepositioning Force squadron with 12 new-construction amphibious and sealift-type ships.¹ Rebuilding a fleet that has shrunk by more than 50 percent over the past 15 years to 280 deployable ships today must remain a high priority of Navy leaders.

Unfortunately, the Navy finds itself in a not-unexpected predicament because of a 33-month gap between the decommissioning of the USS *Enterprise* (CVN-65) in November 2012 and the September 2015 commissioning of the Big E's replacement,

the USS *Gerald R. Ford* (CVN-78). After a stellar 51-year career, the *Enterprise's* nuclear reactors will be spent dry in November 2012. Ironically, the Navy has been aware of this coming train wreck (and did nothing to mitigate it throughout this past decade) ever since leaders briefed Congress at the beginning of the millennium on future carrier force levels.

All but absent in the discussion about the Navy's inventory of aircraft carriers is the fact that over the course of the past decade—and for several more decades to follow—one *Nimitz*-class aircraft carrier will be undergoing a lengthy Refueling and Complex Overhaul (RCOH) at all times. A carrier undergoing an overhaul of this complexity is, for all practical purposes, not efficiently or quickly deployable. In essence, the Navy is already at a backdoor level of 10 aircraft carriers and would trend downward to nine if the Navy gets its way with Congress.

Congress must ask whether nine aircraft carriers spread thin between the global areas of responsibility of five different regional Combatant Commanders is an acceptable level of risk. The question must acknowledge that the next engagement of naval forces could involve a nation-state or a non-state actor. Congress should carefully examine whether the Navy currently has enough carriers to meet the

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service's global commitments. If the Navy has any difficulty meeting combatant commander requirements today, it is inevitable that a trade-off would have to occur in the event that not enough carriers are available upon request during unforeseen circumstances. The question then becomes: How can the nation *not* afford to maintain a minimum fleet of 11 aircraft carriers?

Margin of Risk Is Too High. The United States is a maritime nation, and the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard are the primary guardians of this global status. The Navy's core competencies are to maintain maritime superiority on, below, and above the high seas against all powers, including nation-states and non-state actors. If the Navy is to continue to secure the high seas around the globe long into the 21st century, it needs a robust fleet, both in the quantity of ships and in the quality of its capabilities and technologies.

Congress should reject the Navy's waiver request and instead force the Navy to come up with a plan to eliminate the carrier shortfall in 2012. If Congress is serious about the United States Navy maintaining the capability to project firepower for freedom around the globe and not following the path of the Royal Navy, it should not approve this inherently risky gamble. One option for Congress to consider is to accelerate delivery of the USS *Gerald R. Ford* by increasing the Navy's shipbuilding account in order to place the construction of the *Ford* on a wartime footing. For example, extra workers could be hired to work three shifts a day, not to mention weekends and holidays.

Congress must hold Navy leaders' feet to the fire in order to ensure that the goal of a 12-carrier fleet is achieved by 2019 (or sooner if possible). Given the Navy's tendencies and zeal to retire ships early—ships like *Ticonderoga*-class cruisers and *Los Angeles*-class attack submarines—Congress should enact into law an additional requirement that all *Nimitz*-class carriers be refueled. This requirement would

preempt officials at the Office of Management and Budget from eyeing the elimination of RCOHs for purposes of imaginary budgetary savings. Furthermore, the Navy must resist cannibalizing shipbuilding funds for other more urgent priorities if the 313-ship fleet is ever to become a reality.

Overall, preserving the shipbuilding program will likely require Congress to continue to increase the Navy's procurement budget as it has loyally done so many times over the last several years. There is little as powerful in the military inventory as 4.5 acres of sovereign U.S. territory that is used to counter and deter threats. In addition to the traditional carrier strike missions, CVNs could be used for expeditionary sea-based platforms for soldiers and marines.

Conclusion. Congress should not "go wobbly" on the Navy's request for a waiver from the requirement in 10 USC §5062 that it maintain an aircraft carrier force of at least 11 operational ships. Financing the future Navy fleet is a common-sense necessity for a maritime power.

A robust shipbuilding budget for the next 10 to 20 years is necessary in order to reverse the decline in the number of ships in the Navy's inventory. Failure in this regard will only embolden U.S. adversaries. The carrier shortfall is another perilous reminder that the defense budget topline is too low for the U.S. military to simultaneously field trained and ready forces, support ongoing operations, and modernize. Congress should commit now to spending 4 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on national defense in part to meet the military's immediate modernization needs, including its carrier fleet.

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1. Ronald O'Rourke, "Navy Force Structure and Shipbuilding Plans: Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service *Report for Congress*, updated June 12, 2007, p. 5.