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Budget Cuts Could Harm Navy

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Under the current Administration, domestic entitlement programs and interest on the national debt remain firmly entrenched as the fastest growing portions of the federal budget; only discretionary programs are at risk for budget cuts. Accounting for 60 percent of discretionary funds, national security is the most at-risk slice of federal spending. Within the national security budget, spending for the Navy (including Marine Corps funding) is the most likely to suffer major cuts—even though it comprises only 25 percent of the overall Department of Defense (DOD) budget.

Although Article I, Section 8, of the United States Constitution outlines that Congress is required to “provide and maintain a Navy,” current funding levels do not reflect this mission.

Myth versus Fact. Underlying recent calls for DOD budget cuts is the belief that the U.S. Navy is sufficiently large because the forces are larger than the next 13 navies combined, most of which belong to U.S. allies. This rationale is, however, based on four fallacious assumptions.

Myth #1: The U.S. Navy has excess capacity and can afford not to build as many ships, submarines, and aircraft.

Fact: In order be able to project decisive power anywhere in the world at any moment, the U.S. Navy must maintain a global presence.

The recent reemergence of piracy as a threat to legitimate (and even dangerously illegitimate) commerce has demonstrated that even minor threats cannot be contained, much less resolved, without

sufficient platforms. The Navy is currently at 285 ships, less than half of the near-600-ship Navy of 20 years ago and still not close to the 313-ship floor to which the DOD is committed. Despite hopeful prognostications by shipbuilding advocates, the reality is that U.S. Navy platforms will continue to decrease in number unless budget priorities realign with national security interests.

A reduction in force will place additional burdens on an already-strained force, thereby increasing operations and maintenance costs. Furthermore, overmatch, in which U.S. military forces far exceed those of any other state force, deters potential competitors from building their own forces. If the U.S. refrains from overmatch, other nations will be incentivized to challenge U.S. naval supremacy, potentially producing destabilizing environments.

Myth #2: Friendly navies will complement the U.S. force.

Fact: The U.S. Navy enjoys partnerships with many nations. However, it is unrealistic to sustain extensive, long-term U.S. interests abroad through such partnerships.

Such a strategy relies on the expectation that allied navies' platform numbers will remain stable; yet in recent years, even America's staunchest allies

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have shrunk their naval forces. Even if these numbers were to remain stable, outstanding interoperability challenges remain resolved. Because of budget cuts and significant reductions in platforms, Britain's Royal Navy now admits that it would be incapable of an operation on the scale of the Falklands War and is incapable of blockading a small nation like North Korea. Meanwhile, potentially hostile peer competitors are emerging in the Pacific Ocean.

Myth #3: The U.S. and its partners will have shared strategic and operational interests on the global commons.

Fact: Reliance on allied and partnered navies for multilateral naval operations is also predicated on the fact that the U.S. and its allies will always share the same interests.

Policy decisions are not made at sea but in capitals throughout the world and are therefore vulnerable to political winds. For example, although counter-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia have led to a modicum of cooperation, when an issue of real importance arises—such as maritime interception of Iranian nuclear shipments—partnerships may be less than reliable.

Myth #4: Tonnage is an accurate comparative tool for naval power.

Fact: Tonnage is an antiquated yardstick for naval capability.

The oft-repeated metric for comparing navies is fleet tonnage. During the age of sail and through the mid-20th century, referring to a warship's tonnage was a way to measure combat power, because it reflected the size of the ship's armament and thickness of its armor. With the advent of the torpedo, however, battleships became vulnerable to asymmetric attack, making tonnage an antiquated yardstick for naval capability. Today, small missile boats carry powerful anti-ship cruise missiles that threaten warships 20 times their size.

Furthermore, if this calculation is to be used, in the case of the U.S. Navy, the advantage in tonnage rests overwhelmingly with its aircraft carriers. The 11 U.S. carriers account for approximately 1 million tons, which equals the weight of nearly all other U.S. surface combatants, including cruisers,

destroyers, and frigates. Consequently, a decrease of only one or two carriers will not only dramatically reduce U.S. fleet tonnage; it also suggests that too much tonnage is tied to too few ships.

More accurate comparisons of naval power might be articulated through other criteria such as launch tubes, proficiency (through training), and technological advances.

Providing and Maintaining a Navy. No nation can afford to fund defense with a blank check. While it is important to remain ever vigilant about cost overruns and the efficacy of at-risk technologies, programs, and platforms, arguing for naval reform based on these assumptions will do nothing to increase U.S. national security.

Rather, the most effective way of securing U.S. national interests throughout the world is to reinvigorate the U.S. Navy with a larger fleet of modern warships, submarines, and aircraft. Such a fleet would be to maintain naval dominance and provide a secure, stable maritime environment. Liberalized free trade, the maintenance of stability in the global commons, and secure links to U.S. allies in Europe and Asia for collective defense are all dependent upon a U.S. Navy that is larger and more powerful than those of America's enemies and allies alike.

Ensuring America maintains its strength on the maritime commons can begin with three steps:

1. *Make a real commitment to a 313-ship Navy.* At present, the U.S. Navy is well short of that previously stated goal. The U.S. cannot keep its strategic and operational commitments around the world without the tools to accomplish them; in this case, it means a 313-ship fleet. If the U.S. government has not fulfilled its commitment to a 313-ship Navy, then it is simply a matter of time before the size of the Navy falls to a dangerously low level.
2. *Invest more heavily in Service Life Extension Programs (SLEPs).* While not a long-term solution given ever-changing technologies and the realities of continued stress on platforms, SLEPs should be an integral component of ensuring that the U.S. has sufficient numbers and capabilities in the short- and mid-terms to meet its global requirements.

3. *Modernize the fleet through a reinvigoration of investment in much-needed air, surface, and submarine platforms.* Budget cuts to major new and continuing acquisition programs are not effective in managing current and future global risk. Decisive firepower and capabilities are as vital to national security in the 21st century as they have been in the past. Withdrawing America's investments in platforms and capabilities will result in potentially belligerent states recognizing that such technological and numerical gaps make the U.S. more vulnerable. This deterioration in comparative power will encourage peer- and non-peer competitors alike to invest in their own programs, close these gaps, and test their own maritime influence—all at the expense of American power and security.

Separating Fact from Fiction. International numerical rank is an imprecise method of assessing

suggested cuts to U.S. naval forces. Instead, U.S. naval capabilities should be evaluated by a number of factors, including the numbers of platforms and the ability to project power at multiple crisis areas throughout the world. Discussions about potential cuts cannot be made on the assumption that international forces will remain relatively stable in force levels or consistent with future U.S. policy or operations.

Congress should be very wary of suggested naval force structure cuts in the coming years and should separate fact from fiction when determining the right defense budget priorities for the U.S. military.

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