AEI: Navy Needs Rebuilding to Reach 355-Ship Fleet

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Navy faces serious challenges in reaching its goal of 355 ships and the capabilities they need, a Washington think tank said, recommending a series of steps that will help the service to increase its warfighting strength.

In a new study from the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) – Rough Seas: An AEI Study in Crisis Response for Tomorrow's Navy and an Improved Navy for the Future – scholars John W. Miller, Thomas Donnelly and Gary J. Schmitt considered four table-top scenarios to model the future fleet to come up with recommendations.

The authors identified four key challenges. The Navy:

■ "Lacks sufficient funding to meet the stated requirement of a 355-ship fleet;

■ Is not large enough to carry out its primary missions of peacetime engagement, crisis response, and combat operations;

■ Has a maintenance system that cannot respond effectively to unexpected contingencies;

■ Lacks the global presence and capabilities to deal decisively with the new great-power competitors, Russia and China."

The authors made several specific recommendations for the Navy to:

■ Expand forward presence in the North Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and the Pacific.

■ Fully fund Navy operations and maintenance accounts.

■ Adopt “best maintenance” plans and practices from the private sector.

■ Install vertical launch systems (VLSs). The Navy should install 16-cell VLS systems on at least six amphibious ships and six cargo ships by 2022.

■ Install integrated fire control and counter-air systems.

■ Install Harpoon anti-ship missiles. The Navy should equip all expeditionary fast transport ships with Harpoon anti-ship missiles.

■ Install heavyweight torpedoes. The Navy should equip all Ticonderoga-class cruisers with heavyweight torpedoes.

■ Keep all 22 Ticonderoga-class cruisers.

■ Accelerate production and fielding of the amphibious assault ship Bougainville.

■ Buy more F-35 joint strike fighters.

The study said “the proposed short-term investments can ameliorate future strategic vulnerabilities and increase future strategic opportunities. But these proposed investments are not a substitute for the larger, overdue and essential rebuilding that the Navy needs.

“In short, the 355-ship Navy will take decades and billions of dollars not only to build but also to maintain,” the study said. “Neither the Obama administration nor the Trump administration has proposed defense budgets commensurate with reaching or sustaining this significantly expanded fleet.”

The authors recommended that the Navy buy in bulk – as is done through block buys and multiyear procurements – because it has shown that it “improved shipyard performance and saved money. To expand significantly in size, it is imperative the Navy do so as smoothly as possible.”

The authors concluded that “while these improvements can help close a window of maritime vulnerability and assist in stabilizing critical regions, deterring increasingly aggressive adversaries and reassuring increasingly skittish allies, they are not a substitute for the larger, overdue and essential rebuilding that the Navy needs. Today’s Navy is too small, insufficiently lethal, not well enough maintained and, at its bases on the East and West Coasts of the United States, positioned too far away from crises and conflicts that might threaten American interests.”