Alerts Sound on Maritime Logistics: Several Experts See Seriously Lacking Sealift Capability



The oiler USNS John Lenthall travels alongside the amphibious assault ship USS Kearsarge during a replenishment on June 25. Lenthall is among 21 tankers and fleet oilers, but a report this spring from the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment recommended that number be increased to 69 tankers and oilers. U.S. Navy/Petty Officer 1st Class Mike DiMestico

The U.S. Navy and Marine Corps are aggressively changing course and refocusing their resources and training to prepare the fleet and expeditionary forces for a “Great Power Competition” with China and Russia. But a growing number of Navy officers and defense analysts are warning that current and planned maritime logistics capabilities are seriously inadequate to sustain forward-deployed combat forces in an extended fight against such peer competitors.

This deficiency would be particularly severe in a high-intensity conflict against China, which is rapidly developing military capabilities specifically aimed at keeping U.S. forces far from their shores and able to threaten Pacific Ocean-based logistical support facilities, the critics warned.

A fight against a resurgent Russia could be a repeat of the 1940s “battle of the Atlantic” with a small Military Sealift Command (MSC) force and an American merchant marine fleet – a fraction of the size of the World War II armada – trying to evade scores of sophisticated Russian submarines in a desperate effort to reinforce and supply U.S. forces in Europe.

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>
> *Comprehensive report from the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment*

“Failing to remedy this situation, when adversaries have U.S. logistics networks in their crosshairs, could cause the United States to lose a war and fail its allies and partners in their hour of need. An unsupported force may quickly become a defeated one,” said a comprehensive report released this spring by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment (CSBA).

A similar warning was issued by retired Navy Capt. Pete Pagano, who wrote in the May edition of the journal Proceedings: “The combat logistics force must be able to sail in harm’s way and defend itself, with enough ships in inventory to absorb losses and still sustain Navy forces at sea. The Navy

will not possess
sufficient surface combatants to meet this demand signal, even if it reaches
its goal of 355 ships.”


The USS Ronald Reagan sails alongside the USNS Matthew Perry during a replenishment in the Coral Sea on July 15. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Kaila V. Peters
Last
October, the U.S. Maritime administrator, retired Rear Adm. Mark Buzby, said
the Navy told his agency that it would not be able to escort sealift and supply
ships during a major war. For those ships to survive, crews have been told to
“go fast and stay quiet,” with the latter referring to reduced electronic
signaling. But MSC ships, with sustained speeds of 15 to 20 knots, can’t go as fast
as 30-knot Navy warships.

Also, in
May, defense analyst Loren Thompson,wrote in Forbes that the well-trained and
equipped U.S. military is facing “a big operational challenge that few
policymakers or politicians are even aware of – its ability to get to the fight
is wasting away. So even with the most capable fighting force in history, the
United States might find itself unable to respond effectively to future
military contingencies. … Until recently, military planners could at least
assume the safety of commercial sea lanes outside war zones. But now even that
assumption is being called into question.”

‘Unchallenged Sea to Contested Waters’

MSC Commander Rear Adm. Dee L. Mewbourne in 2017 told *Seapower*, “The operating environment is changing,” going from “unchallenged sea to contest waters. … I would maintain that the debate over whether we’re sailing in contested waters is over.” Looking at the situation today, “there is a persistent threat to the ships that are going through those areas,” Mewbourne added, citing missile attacks on U.S. and other ships sailing near Yemen and China’s growing sea-denial capabilities.

“The question might be, ‘Will it be like it is, or could it get worse?’ I would suggest it’s the latter,” Mewbourne said, showing a graph depicting a rising curve of the threats from China and Russian and a nearly flat line of likely U.S. sealift capability to meet that threat. To adjust, Mewbourne said he is working on ways to harden his fleet of tankers and ammunition and cargo ships and to train his crews of primarily civilian mariners to survive in contested environments.

The Military Sealift Command dry cargo and ammunition ship USNS Robert E. Peary pulls into Naval Station Norfolk on July 27. Robert E. Peary was returning after providing logistical support for the Harry S. Truman Carrier Strike Group composite training unit exercise. U.S. Navy/Bill Mesta

The most comprehensive analysis of the threats to maritime logistics was the 124-page CSBA report, “Sustaining the Fight, Resilient Maritime Logistics for a New Era,” which Navy Secretary Richard V. Spencer praised, saying “this is a critical issue for the [Department

of the Navy]. We
have not funded it, and we
really have to get after it.

“It is key that we focus on this now,” Spencer said at
the report’s rollout. “Over the past two decades, our naval logistic
enterprises have performed admirably, in an environment of truly expanded
responsibility and resources that were constrained. But the world has changed. …
And we have to start addressing this in earnest” and not as “business as usual.”

Spencer noted that the National Defense Strategy recognized the logistical problem,
“and we have to stay ahead of it.” He saw the report as “a forcing function.”

‘Brittle’ Maritime Logistics Forces

The CSBA report said that although the defense strategy listed “resilient and agile logistics” as one of the eight capabilities that had to be strengthened for the great power competition, the Navy’s latest 30-year shipbuilding plan reduced the funding for maritime logistical forces and “further reduces the logistical forces as a proportion of the fleet.” It also noted that “decades of downsizing and consolidation” have left U.S. maritime logistics forces “brittle” and contributed to the decline of the U.S. shipbuilding industry and the Merchant Marine, which is expected to carry the bulk of military material and equipment for an overseas contingency.

To create a logistical force able to prevail in a major conflict with a peer competitor, CSBA recommended increasing that force from the current 299 ships to at least 364 by 2048. Most of those ships are not included in the Navy’s target of a

355-ship battle fleet.

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The largest increases CSBA proposed would go to refueling capabilities, from the current 21 tankers and fleet oilers to 69; the towing and salvage fleets, from five to 25; and maintenance and repair, from two tenders to 17.

The report also recommended growing cargo and munitions support from 12 ships to 25 and creating a combat search and rescue (CSR) and increasing medical care capability from the current two large and aging hospital ships to seven. That would include platforms for CSR helicopters and MV-22 tilt-rotor aircraft and small “expeditionary medical ships,” based on the expeditionary fast transports currently being built.

This larger logistical support force would include several new ship types – including a variety of tankers and smaller oilers able to refuel combatants and commercial tankers to move fuel forward to replenish fleet refuelers. The CSBA report also urged that munitions ships be able to reload vertical launching system (VLS)

tubes at sea and that new tenders be able to repair surface combatants and even unmanned surface vessels.

The greater numbers and new types of support ships are needed, the report argues, to allow logistical support to continue despite the high attrition expected in a great power conflict, to provide support in contested waters, and to make up for the likely damage to forward support facilities such as Guam, the Marianas and Diego Garcia.

Still in Need of an 'Expeditionary Navy'

Much of the CSBA recommendations were supported in a July 24 opinion article in Real Clear Defense by surface warfare Capt. Anthony Cowden, who wrote: "A navy that cannot rearm itself at sea, that cannot conduct ship systems repairs organically" without use of a friendly port "is not an 'expeditionary' navy. … The United States needs an expeditionary navy, and that's not what it has."

The CSBA report echoed the call from the congressional sea power subcommittees to expand and modernize the sealift fleet, much of which is old and still powered by ancient, inefficient steam power plants. The report endorsed the congressional plan to have U.S. shipyards build a variety of new ships using a common hull under the Common Hull Auxiliary Multi-Mission Platform concept and buy used cargo vessels off the international market.

Spencer supported that two-track plan, but said, “I can’t afford a lot of $400 million new ships,” when he could buy a lot of surplus ships for much less. He said he has been “up on the Hill asking for some money” to update the sealift fleet.

CSBA estimated the cost of buying the additional ships and different capabilities at $47.8 billion over 30 years, which the report said would be $1.6 billion a year above what the Navy plans to spend on its maritime logistics capabilities.

The need for that spending was illustrated by the CSBA report’s co-author, Harrison Schramm, who said the Chinese are focusing on counter-logistics in their campaign plans because “they know that forward-deployed naval forces are limited by magazine size.” Once the onboard munitions are expended, the U.S. fleet’s capabilities are drastically diminished, Schramm said. That problem is aggravated, he added, by the Navy’s inability to reload VLS tubes without use of a functioning port.

The report also stressed a point that Buzby also made: The U.S. flagged merchant marine has shrunk to a degree that it would be of limited help in providing logistical support in a major conflict. And, CSBA noted, leasing cargo ships or tankers from larger international fleets is complicated by the fact that China owns or controls a substantial portion of those ships. And Buzby also warned that if the U.S. tried to expand its civilian merchant marine for a crisis, it would have trouble manning those ships – because of an estimated shortage of more than 1,000 qualified mariners.