One Size Doesn’t Fit All: Building U.S. Navy Hedges Against Rising threats

Sailors secure the rigid-hull inflatable boat on the midship of the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Curtis Wilbur (DDG 54) during small boat operations in the South China Sea, Sept. 4. 2025. *Photo credit: U.S. Navy | Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Mark Bergado*

The U.S. Navy faces challenges on multiple fronts. At sea, the fleet is stretched thin responding to China’s continued gray-zone aggression and defending shipping in the Middle East from drone or missile attacks. At home, new ship deliveries fall further behind, fleet readiness is slipping, and recruiters are playing catch up after years of missing goals.

More money and industry innovation could help the Navy mitigate its challenges. But they don’t tackle the root cause

of a shrinking, less-ready fleet – the Navy's force design, which emphasizes large, multi-mission crewed warships and aircraft over robotic and autonomous systems (RAS) or less-complex vessels.

The Navy's preference for large, crewed platforms is logical. Smaller ships lack the endurance for transoceanic deployments, RAS can't perform peacetime missions like search and rescue or counter-piracy, and the cost of long-endurance crewed ships or aircraft suggests each one should be multi-mission.

But the Navy cannot afford a fleet of highly survivable warships large enough to address the its global responsibilities. Rising costs and delays in maintaining aging guided missile destroyers (DDGs), amphibious ships, and nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) are already shrinking the operational fleet by forcing the Navy to retire ships early or sideline them for years.

Rather than continuing to field a shrinking force of exquisite ships and aircraft, the Navy should field a larger force of crewed and uncrewed platforms that gain an edge over opponents through their payloads and ability to combine in a diverse array of changing effects chains across domains. By shifting complexity from inside individual ships and aircraft to the kill chains between them, this fleet could gain decision-making advantages over adversaries and generate capacity or capability when and where it is needed.

Deterring without Dominance

After three decades of being the largest, most capable fleet on Earth, the U.S. Navy faces adversaries who are exploiting technology proliferation to field forces that can threaten U.S. military dominance. China is the most prominent example. With the world's largest rocket force and navy, the People's Liberation Army could keep Taiwan's allies at bay long enough to blockade Taiwan or attempt an invasion.

There are a small number of intense scenarios that would require a substantial portion of the fleet, or of key elements of the fleet. The U.S. Navy has traditionally designed the fleet to meet the demands of these scenarios. In its post-Cold War period of dominance, the Navy could build a force able to counter a Taiwan invasion and retain enough residual capability to handle any other situation, albeit much less efficiently than a purpose-built force.

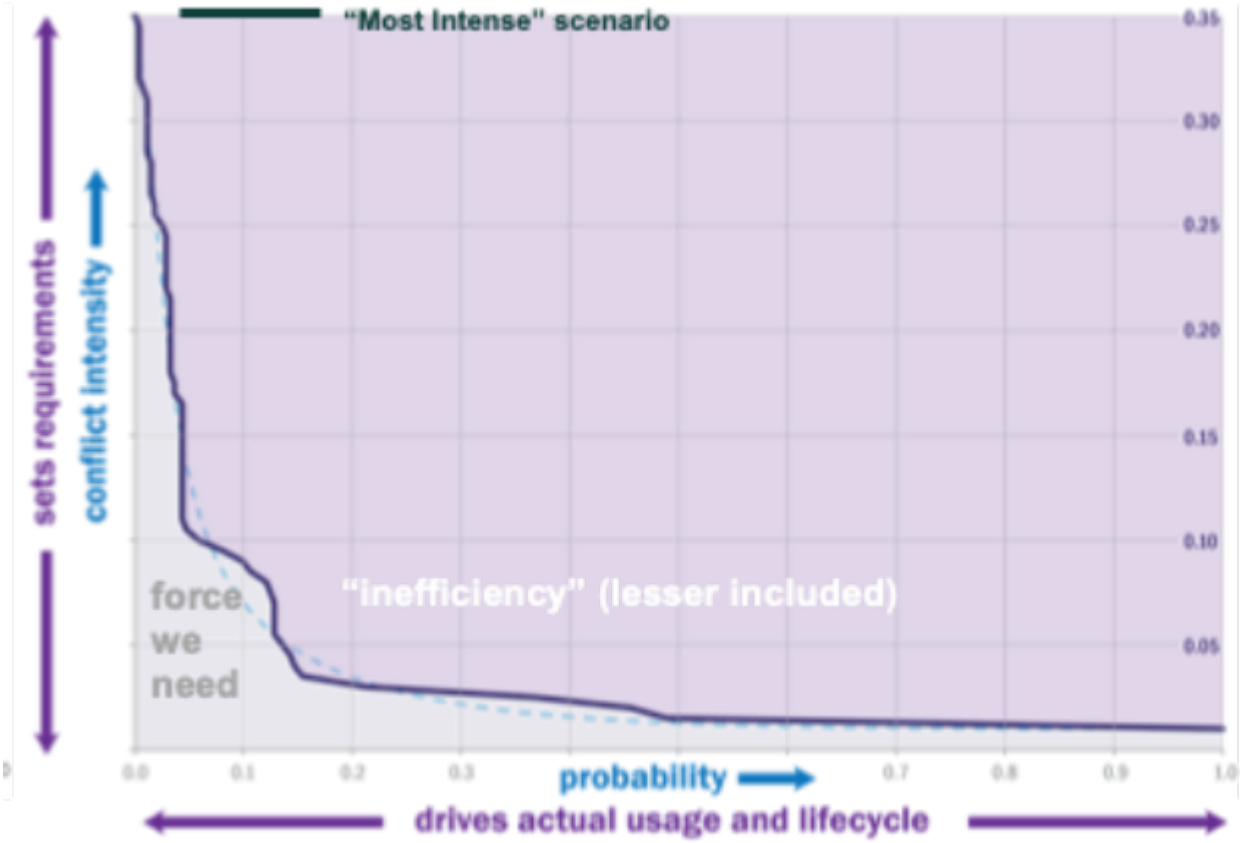

Figure 1

Figure 1 illustrates this approach. It shows U.S. combat deployments from 1943 to 2011 in terms of the probability a given portion of the force is deployed on any given day. (This chart is based primarily on U.S. Air Force data, which is the most comprehensive). The peak on the chart represents World War II, but the speed and scale of a Taiwan invasion would preclude significant mobilization. Navy leaders logically sized the active fleet for that scenario.

But the PRC's improving and growing military is driving up the capability and capacity needed to defend Taiwan. In the early

2020s, the Navy began to retire or slow production of ships and aircraft that were less relevant to a Taiwan invasion scenario. The one-size-fits all fleet started looking like a one-trick pony fit for one situation and ill-suited for many others.

Other stressing scenarios soon emerged as adversaries began exploiting military-relevant commercial technology and geography. Russia expanded its invasion of Ukraine beyond Crimea and is growing its submarine fleet, Iran's Houthi proxies attacked shipping across the Red Sea and Bab El Mandeb, and China intensified air and maritime incursions into Philippine and Japanese territory.

This expanding set of challenges leaves the Navy in a strategic cul-de-sac: It doesn't have enough forces with sufficient capability to be dominant in each region, but it cannot grow in its current form under any realistic budgets. In his opening speech during his assumption of office, new Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Daryl Caudle argued the Navy should use "hedge forces" to solve this force planning challenge.

Hedge forces are specialized groups of units designed to address high-consequence, low-probability situations like those on the left side of figure 1. These forces would provide the additional capability and capacity needed for a specific scenario but may not have broad utility in other regions or situations. Figure 2 depicts this force design paradigm using the data of Figure 1.

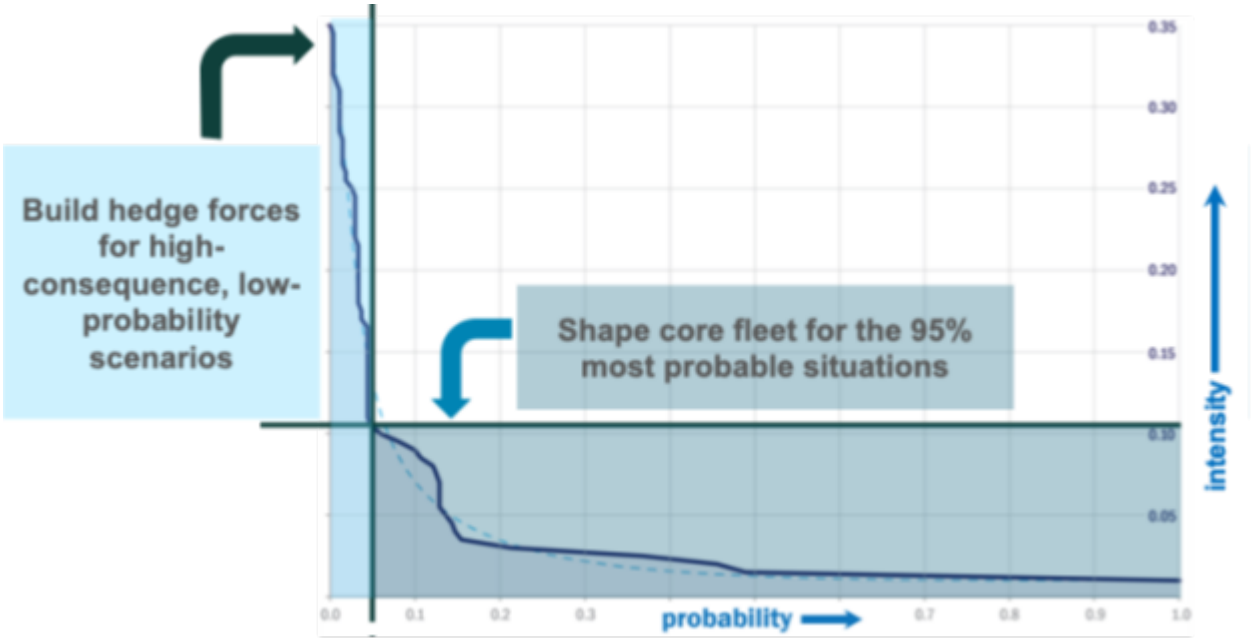

Figure 2

Under this paradigm, the Navy would size its core fleet – or the traditional Navy of today – for the bulk of scenarios that could emerge, including high-probability day-to-day conditions such as homeland defense or responding to gray-zone provocations. The core fleet should also be able to mount relatively large campaigns like Operations Desert Storm or Iraqi Freedom by surging additional deployments for the duration of operation. The Navy would build hedge forces to address the 5% of operational problems that would overstretch the core fleet.

The Navy should forward base hedge forces at allied facilities in their region of interest and organize them separately from the rotationally deployed core fleet. Because they are composed for a specific scenario, hedge forces will generally not be relevant to other theaters and scenarios, although some units may move in response to changing capability and capacity needs among hedge forces. Forward basing helps deter opponents by showing that hedge forces can quickly, potentially automatically, respond to aggression. And from a fiscal perspective, forward basing reduces the number of hedge force units needed compared to rotationally deploying them from U.S. territory.

The Navy's need for hedge forces to be specialized and forward based suggests they should be predominantly composed of RAS. Conflicts in Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh and the Middle East show that RAS can be relevant in high-end conflict. For example, after losing its navy to attack or capture, Ukraine's military restored access to vital shipping lanes by pushing the Russian Black Sea Fleet to the far side of Crimea using uncrewed attack boats and undersea vehicles.

RAS also offer dramatically lower costs of procurement and, most importantly, sustainment. By shifting some functions of traditional crewed platforms onto uncrewed systems, the Navy could gain scale at lower costs than it would take to achieve the same capacity through crewed ships or aircraft.

The Navy is pursuing RAS and associated operational concepts through an accelerating set of experiments. These initiatives – including Task Force 59 in the Middle East, 4th Fleet in Central and South America and the Integrated Battle Problems in the Indo-Pacific – are great examples of applying new technologies to thorny operational problems. But the Navy needs to go further and stop treating uncrewed systems as merely an additive to the crewed force.

The U.S. Department of Defense is experimenting with concepts like those used by Ukraine and Iran's proxies to create a "hellscape" for Chinese invaders in the Taiwan Strait. By attacking troop transports with drone boats, undersea vehicles and loitering munitions, a hedge force of RAS could slow or disrupt the invasion, giving U.S. and allied forces targeting information and time to destroy PLA ships with long-range missiles and torpedo fires.

But the hellscape cannot stop an invasion alone. It will need missile attacks from aircraft, submarines and surface combatants to defeat the invasion fleet and its escorts. However, surface forces will be hard-pressed to get close enough to deliver weapons and survive. The Navy could fill the

gap by instead relying on a distributed fires hedge force of Modular Attack Surface Craft and submarines in the early phases of the fight.

The MASC program includes three RAS vessels, the largest of which would carry 16 missiles. Hudson Institute's wargaming and modeling suggests distributed uncrewed missile launchers with between 16 and 32 weapons offer an effective balance between undermining adversary planning and creating risks to adversary objectives. RAS vessels with larger magazines are easier to detect, have difficulty efficiently using their weapons before coming under attack and are large enough to be worth multiple enemy missile salvos. RAS vessels with fewer weapons are often unable to successfully attack a defended target alone, creating a need for coordinated attacks that can be difficult if communications are degraded.

The Navy could benefit from building RAS-based hedge forces to address other stressing situations. For example, deployments by quiet Russian SSNs through the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (G-I-UK) gap could quickly overwhelm U.S. antisubmarine warfare (ASW) forces, especially if other operations in Europe demand attention from U.S. SSNs, P-8A maritime patrol aircraft and DDGs. And a renewed campaign of drone attacks by the Houthis in the Red Sea could once again stretch a Navy surface combatant fleet that is also defending U.S. carriers, territory and other sea lanes.

A Dramatically Different Surface Fleet

This new force design paradigm implies changes in the makeup of the core force. For example, if a largely uncrewed hedge force can slow and disrupt a Chinese invasion, the Navy may need a lower rate of fires from surface combatants, strike-fighters, and SSNs. As a result, the Navy could reduce the number of crewed platforms it buys or delay their next generation.

But the changing threat environment also matters. The fleet's successful air defense actions in the Middle East during the last two years showed that countering drone and missile attacks is getting harder. These operations already stress the capacity of today's DDGs. Hudson Institute's wargaming with U.S., Australian and Japanese officers during the last year suggest China could overwhelm U.S. DDGs and successfully engage U.S. carriers well into a conflict in the Western Pacific.

DDGs will soon have to focus on air and missile defense and forgo other missions like ASW or strike due to combat system and magazine limits. Despite their reach, Tomahawk missiles still require DDGs to approach adversaries like Iran, Russia and China within anti-ship missile range and each adversary would be willing to expend substantial numbers of $20 million ballistic missiles on a $3 billion DDG.

This suggests the surface force will need to both increase its magazine capacity and the range of its weapons to conduct offense and defense during tomorrow's conflicts. The Navy could realize those characteristics by renewing its pursuit of a CG(X) guided missile cruiser. A CG(X) could, like today's Ticonderoga CGs, carry 130-plus missiles in a vertical launch system magazine. Like the Navy's planned DDG(X), a CG(X) could also carry larger missiles like the Navy's planned hypersonic conventional prompt strike weapon that can reach targets more than 1,500 nautical miles away.

But with a cost of likely more than $5 billion per ship, the Navy will not be able to replace today's DDG-51s with new CG(X) or DDG(X) hulls on a one-for-one basis. While today's DDG-51s will be in the fleet for decades to come, the Navy will need to complement its new, larger surface combatants with smaller, less expensive vessels.

Unfortunately, the Constellation guided missile frigate cannot become that more affordable counterpart to the DDG-51.

Originally planned to cost less than $800 million per hull, the FFG-62 class has been plagued by production delays and cost overruns driven in large part by Navy design revisions. The Congressional Budget Office now estimates each FFG will cost at least $1.4 billion.

With a cost nearly twice that of its parent FREMM FFG design or the Navy's original estimates, the FFG-62 no longer has a role in the Navy fleet. Its 32-cell vertical launch system magazine lacks the capacity to defend another ship against even the Houthi threat. The FFG-62's very low frequency sonar will generate long detection ranges against quiet submarines but still would place the ship well within submarine-launched anti-ship missile range. And the FFG-62's cost and complexity prevent the Navy from automating the ship or buying it in sufficient numbers to be considered expendable or attritable.

Surface force leaders could use the Navy's budget constraints to reshape the fleet for deterrence in a post-dominance era. Instead of continuing the flawed and overpriced FFG-62 program, the Navy could pursue a smaller missile corvette like the Israeli Sa'ar-6 or Swedish Visby. A corvette would not be multimission capable like the FFG-62, but it could carry the same 32-cell VLS magazine for offensive weapons. With a reloadable Rolling Airframe Missile air defense system, it would be survivable against realistic missile salvos.

If the Navy used an existing design without significant modifications, it could purchase at least two corvettes for the cost of each planned FFG-62. This is not a novel approach. The Navy is beginning procurement this year of a new medium landing ship based on the Israeli logistics support vessel, which itself was derived from a U.S. Army landing ship.

Corvettes could conduct coastal defense around the United States and across the Western Hemisphere. But they could also lead and manage hedge forces overseas that are defending Taiwan, countering submarines at the G-I-UK gap, clearing

mines in the Strait of Hormuz or defeating air attacks in the red Sea. Although hedge forces will be predominantly composed of RAS, human operators will still need to maintain, command and protect them when not in use. Corvettes could help provide those functions while also providing maritime security and addressing other threats.

With their lower complexity and smaller size, the Navy could also automate corvettes enough for them to be remote missile launchers during wartime, as it did with the fast troop transport USNS Apalachicola. They could then join the distributed fires hedge force in defeating amphibious assaults or blockades.

The Navy's fleet design needs dramatic change to deter in a post-dominance era. Instead of relying on the broad overmatch of its one-size-fits-all fleet, the Navy should pivot to a smaller core fleet complemented by hedge forces to address its most challenging operational problems. Without a change like this, the Navy will lose relevance as opponents exploit proliferation and geography to threaten America's allies and interests. .

Bryan Clark is a Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute. This story originally appeared in the December issue of Seapower *magazine.*

Navy Selects Damen to Build New Medium Landing Ship

By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. — The U.S. Navy has selected Damen to build the new medium landing ship (LSM) for the service. The ship will be a version of Damen's LST 100 class.

Damen is a shipbuilder headquartered in The Netherlands. Its LST 100 class is in production for Australia and other customers.

The selection was announced on Dec. 5 on X in a video of Navy Secretary John C. Phelan, who said that the move was the second initiative is support of re-designing the U.S. fleet. The first was the truncation of the Constellation-class guided-missile frigate program to only the two ships currently under construction. The truncation, announced a week earlier,

was the result of delays in the program. Phelan announced that a new class of frigates will be designed to give the Navy the small surface combatants that it needs.

The Navy plans to build 35 LSMs to transport Marines and their equipment within theaters of war with an “organic, littoral mobility capability in the Indo-Pacific and around the world and provides with a critical intra-theater maneuver asset that is able to embark, transport, and land Marines, weapons supplies and equipment around the theater without requiring access to a pier,” said General Eric Smith, commandant of the Marine Corps, in the same X video. “The medium landing ships will enable our Marines to be more agile and flexible in austere where there are no ports … within the adversary’s engagement zone.”

The LST 100 resembles in concept the LSTs of World War II, equipped with bow doors and a ramp to discharge vehicles onto a beach. Damen’s design is an intra-theater transport that displaces approximately 4,000 tons. According to Damen’s website, the ship is 100 meters long and has a beam of 16 meters and a draft of 3.5 to 3.9 meters. The ship is designed with berthing for a landing force, cargo space of 1,020 square meters of roll-on/roll-off cargo space and to be operated by a crew of 18. The ship features a large crane and a helicopter landing pad. Phelan said the LSM would have a range of more than 3,400 nautical miles.

The selection of an “off-the-shelf” design came as the Navy determined that other proposals with new designs were too costly and would take too long to join the fleet. In the same video, Admiral Daryl Caudle, chief of naval operations, stressed producibility and maintainability after an era of shipbuilding in which the delivery of new ships took too long.

Future Attack Submarine Utah Christened at Electric Boat

By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. — The future Virginia-class nuclear-powered attack submarine Utah (SSN 801) was christened during ceremonies at the General Dynamics Electric Boat shipyard in Groton, Connecticut, on October 25, 2025.

According to a posting on X @GDElectricBoat "The Virginia-class assembly building at shipyard was all decked out on October 25 for the christening of PCU Utah (SSN 801). EB shipbuilders, the ship's crew, U.S. Navy personnel and government officials joined both live and virtually to

celebrate this significant milestone commemorated by a joint swing. Mrs. Sharon Lee (left) and Mrs. Mary Kaye Huntsman, co-sponsors of Utah, broke a bottle of sparkling cyser – a honey and apple cider wine from Utah – on the ship's hull to commemorate the christening."

When commissioned, the USS Utah will be the 10th and final Block 4 version of the Virginia-class submarines to be built by General Dynamics Electric Boat and HII's Newport News Shipbuilding.

Cancer to Capricorn: A Maritime Showdown for the Global South

Coast Guard personnel observe the cloud-covered ocean from the ramp of an HC-130J Super Hercules maritime patrol aircraft in

support of Operation Southern Shield 2023 in October 2023. The Coast Guard recently completed the first high-seas boardings and inspections off the coast of Peru under a newly adopted multi-lateral agreement to monitor fishing and transshipment operations within the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organization Convention Area. *Photo credit: U.S. Coast Guard | Ensign Geoffrey Wittenberg*

On Sept. 2, the United States really stepped up its decades-long war on drugs by sinking a boat in international waters filled with narcotics, killing 11 members of the Tren de Aragua gang. This attack, which the current administration has been hinting at for a while, opens a chance for a fresh look at how America approaches Latin America and Africa and rolling back China's dangerous march across the region.

Bounded by the two tropics, Cancer and Capricorn, is a region that faces similar threats and significant opportunity. In the same area, China has been waging a nearly 20-year campaign to win over the so-called "global south." For China, the global south is a fancy way of saying former colonies in the southern hemisphere, with all sorts of different histories, national interests and aspirations. By taking a maritime approach in a maritime corridor between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, the United States has a chance to beat China and unite the region around shared interests like security and trade.

Both African and Latin American countries are well aware of great power games and their not-so-distant colonial past. But unlike the wider global south, the nations of Latin America and Atlantic coastal Africa are connected by language, culture and shipping routes. That's why an offshore approach focusing on common maritime interests will work, providing real benefits for the people of this region and American citizens without triggering memories of the past.

On the other hand, China's strategy has centered around massive infrastructure projects, elite capture through graft and lopsided trade deals. But this approach alienates the

local community, which too rarely benefits from Chinese presence, while local political leaders bow for short-term Chinese favors. As it stands, Africa has seen many such efforts fail, has suffered under debt diplomacy and seen its natural resources exploited. One notable example is Uganda's renegotiating the tough terms of a 2015 deal with China to expand and modernize its Entebbe Airport for $200 million.

Latin America is not far behind. In June 2025, China's state-owned COSCO started operations at Chancay Port in Peru, a $3 billion Chinese project to build a modern, highly automated shipping hub. Construction continues despite local concerns about labor and environmental impacts. These ports projects have long been suspected of being used for nefarious purposes. CSIS' Christopher Hernandez-Roy raises this concern in a September 2023 article titled, "Are Chinese Ports in Latin America Preferred by Organized Crime?"

China's influence in Africa goes beyond trade and big infrastructure projects. Their distant fishing fleets often poach in places like the Gulf of Guinea, around the Galapagos Islands and recently off Argentina's coast. In June, Argentine forces blocked about 300 Chinese fishing boats from entering their exclusive economic zone, where coastal states retain the right to all natural resources within it, including the seabed. This ongoing standoff has become a regular occurrence, leading to the sinking of a Chinese trawler in 2016 and warning shots fired again in 2019 by Argentine forces. Africa has also faced challenges from a predatory Chinese fishing fleet in its waters.

To address lawlessness at sea, Gulf of Guinea countries have been working together since 2011 in an annual maritime security exercise called Obangame Express. Led by the U.S., it usually involves over 32 participating nations. This exercise has helped improve regional maritime security against piracy, illegal fishing and other crimes. The investment in regional maritime awareness contributed to the capture of a Chinese

fishing vessel, Hai Lu Feng, in 2020. This uncovered some disturbing truths: Chinese fishing fleets used registration and location data for multiple ships to avoid paying licensing fees, duties and limits on fishing. This allowed them to overfish, harming local fishermen. The discovery of this activity was partly due to U.S. maritime capacity-building and skills practiced at Obangame Express. If these skills were applied on a transatlantic scale, they could potentially disrupt the activities of cartels as well – cartels that have been killing almost 100,000 Americans every year.

Africa and Latin America have also been hit hard by drug cartels, causing addiction and chaos. This point has repeatedly been made in United Nations World Drug Reports. The cartels make over $500 billion a year from illegal drugs trade. Cocaine is the cartels' fastest-growing product, which they sell in near equal volume to both North America and Europe. China helps the cartels by selling them precursor chemicals needed to make fentanyl. This makes the cartels more dangerous and weakens local governments in Latin America. In turn, the cartels and Chinese criminal gangs, like the Bang Group, take advantage of this. Venezuela is a good example, where under economic pressure the Maduro regime has increasingly turned to China, Russia and the cartels.

How to Stop It

We can stop this by attacking the cartels' business model. We can do this by making it harder for them to ship chemicals and traffic in people, while also cracking down on illegal fishing and smuggling by China. We can also create new trade relationships between the United States and Latin America and Africa.
To start, we should focus on a few countries that are already fighting the cartels and illegal fishing and are seeking to grow their economies.

The Tren de Aragua incident shows the war on the cartels is

starting, but America isn’t alone in this fight. To win, we need to destroy the business model the cartels rely on. This will mean working with other countries who are on the same page, such as El Salvador, which has been really aggressive in stopping smugglers at sea. They’ve been coordinating with the Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-South). Likewise, we can enforce maritime rights targeting illegal Chinese fishing with Guinea, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau.

Sailors aboard guided-missile frigate USS Simpson’s rigid hull inflatable boat drive along side a Chinese vessel fishing in Senegal’s Exclusive Economic Zone after dropping off a joint-boarding team of U.S. Coast Guard and Senegalese navy members and an inspector from Senegal’s Department of Fisheries to conduct a routine inspection in 2012. *Photo credit: U.S. Navy | Petty Officer 1st Class Daniel Mennuto*

Most pressing is fighting the cartels. To really hit the cartels’ bottom line, we need to stop both shipments of cocaine and the chemicals they use to make fentanyl. This is something many experts have been saying for a while now. In a December 2023 article for the National Interest, James DiPane

and I explained the cartels rely on several sea routes to move 90% of their drugs. The most important routes cross the Pacific to Mexico and into the U.S., ferrying precursor chemicals from China to Mexican cartel fentanyl production sites and cocaine from South America. They also rely on stops in other countries before moving into the United States or through Europe's most porous border, French Guiana. Smugglers are drawn to French Guiana because once they're inside, they can use local drug mules to fly directly to Europe with fewer customs and immigration checks. This reliance on international shipping or airfreight routes is a weakness for the cartels.

JIATF-S was established in 1989 and has had some success in stopping this illegal trade but haven't been able to end it completely. Right now, officials say they only stop about 10% of this trade because they don't have enough Coast Guard cutters and patrol aircraft. To make a real difference, we need to expand JIATF-S and change the law so they can focus on all of the cartels' illegal trade on the high seas. We also need to be more careful about China's fishing fleets, which are often suspected of smuggling things like counterfeit cigarettes and worse.

European countries such as the Netherlands, Italy France, and the United Kingdom are also affected by drug trafficking and human smuggling, but there's more to it than just a threat. There's also a chance for more economic growth and trade, especially when it comes to offshore energy exploration.

The war in Ukraine has shown that NATO, which is supposed to be a strong alliance, is actually pretty weak. And after three years of war in Ukraine, it's still relying on Russia for a lot of its energy, making it harder to get Russia to agree to a ceasefire. Erasing this dangerous reliance on Russian energy should lead Europe to look for alternate sources of energy, such as in Western Africa and Latin America. Italy is already looking to trade more energy with North African countries and are also trying to deal with the issue of illegal migration

and drug trafficking. Europe needs more deals like this to meet its energy needs.

New Opportunities

There’s a new hotspot for offshore energy reserves off the coast of Guyana, a country that’s still under threat from its neighbor Venezuela. Just last March, a Venezuelan patrol boat threatened vessels working for ExxonMobil in Guyanese waters. And after a years-long military build-up, the danger of war isn’t over with Venezuela claiming Guyana’s Essequibo region. This threat puts Guyana’s estimated 11 billion barrels of untapped offshore crude oil at risk. Guyana is already the third-largest non-OPEC oil producer in the world. According to the U.S. Energy Information Agency, these petroleum reserves offer an alternative to Russian energy.

There’s more to this story than just oil between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn. There are also opportunities to reduce our dependence on China, like finding new sources of rare earth minerals, expanding trade and developing new industries. For example, the U.S. helped Congo and Rwanda end a long and bloody war, and a minerals development deal brokered by the White House opens them to American investment in mining their mineral resources, especially copper and cobalt. Moreover, Latin America and Africa could be great alternatives to Chinese manufacturers. According to a July report by ISS Africa Futures, developing energy generation with American investment could unlock the potential of Africa’s vast mineral reserves. In Latin America, Argentina is now shaking off years of currency controls and economic volatility, and it’s booming at an estimated 5.5% GDP growth in 2025, according to the World Bank.

America already has an economic tool and framework that’s proven to work: Prosper Africa. Established by the Trump Administration in late 2018, it has facilitated more than 800 deals with 45 African countries worth a whopping $50 billion.

And guess what? This initiative helped connect small and medium enterprises, which create seven out of 10 new jobs, according to the World Bank. This approach is a stark contrast to China's elite-focused approach and benefits the widest populations in both markets, American and African. We should definitely expand this to include Latin America as a viable alternative to China's debt diplomacy.

Between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, our people have a common interest in fighting the cartels, protecting our natural resources and making our economies more resilient. As such, it is time to forge a new transatlantic partnership to grow secure and resilient economies that stretch from the Galapagos Islands to the Gulf of Guinea.

China's debt diplomacy strategy of resource extraction, poaching resources where it can, enabled by elite capture, is inherently flawed. China has teamed with the cartels and unleashed their worst behavior on those too weak to resist, but without any viable alternative. That is, until the U.S. can energize resistance and collaboration for common good.

A maritime Cancer-to-Capricorn strategic economic and security framework can deliver results that viable alternative partners in Africa, Latin America and Europe can support. Success will create a more free and prosperous future for everyone, not just Americans. The first step is to work with our partners in the Cancer-to-Capricorn corridor. Together, we can finally and effectively challenge China's plan for the global south on terms that are fair and beneficial to everyone.

Brent Sadler is a 27-year Navy veteran with numerous operational tours on nuclear powered submarines, personal staffs of senior Defense Department leaders and as a military diplomat in Asia. As a senior research fellow at a leading D.C. think tank, Brent's focus is on maritime security and the technologies shaping our future maritime forces, especially the Navy. This article first appeared in the November issue of

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Navy Concludes Helicopter Aviator Training in TH-57 SeaRanger

PENSACOLA, Fla. (Feb. 23, 2017) Two U.S. Navy TH-57C Sea Ranger helicopters conduct a formation training flight over Pensacola Beach, Fla. (U.S. Navy photo by Ensign Antonio More)

By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. – The. U.S. Navy has retired the Bell TH-57 Sea Ranger helicopter from training naval aviators after 57 years of training Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and foreign naval

aviators to fly helicopters.

The last Sea Ranger in Training Air Wing Five, TH-57C Bureau Number 162668, side number E-106, based at Naval Air Station (NAS) Whiting Field, Florida, made its last flight on Sept. 19, 2025, and was delivered to the National Naval Aviation Museum at NAS Pensacola, Florida. The helicopter was presented that day to museum director Sterling Gillum by the pilot, Commander James Gelsinon.

Another of the wing's TH-57Cs was delivered to the USS Lexington Museum in Corpus Christi, Texas.

The TH-57 in its three versions – A, B, and C – provided flight training over the years to student rotary wing aviators by Training Air Wing Five's Helicopter Training Squadrons HT-8, HT-18, and HT-28. The Navy procured a total of 40 TH-57As, 51 TH-57Bs, and 89 TH-57Cs.

The TH-57 is not quite gone, however, being used at NAS Patuxent River, Maryland, by an air test and evaluation squadron, HX-21.

"HX-21 still flies TH-57 for readiness flights, not testing," said Connie Briggs, a spokeswoman for the Naval Air Systems Command. "Right now, there are no immediate plans to retire the aircraft."

The TH-57 has been succeeded by the TH-73A Thrasher for training naval helicopter pilots at Whiting Field. The Thrasher is built by AgustaWestland Philadelphia, a Leonardo company.

Sea Power: The Decisive Factor in the American Revolution

On Oct. 13, 1775, Congress authorized the outfitting of two warships and the recruiting of Sailors to create a fleet to pursue and capture British merchant vessels. The Naval Committee purchased the merchant ship Black Prince from John Barry and renamed it Alfred. The ship was placed in commission on Dec. 3, 1775. *Image credit: Naval History and Heritage Command | William Nowland Powell*

"The Continental Navy, with few exceptions, was a wasteful and humiliating fiasco." So wrote Ian Toll in his introductory chapter in "Six Frigates" in his effort to set the stage for the construction of the ships that would lay the foundation for our present navy. In contrast, Tim McGrath, author of "Give Me a Fast Ship," argues that beginning with five converted merchantmen, "America's Sailors became formidable warriors, matching their wits, skills, and courage against the best of the British fleet."

Whatever your assessment of the “Navy of the United States,” as John Paul Jones referred to it in his proposed regulations for officer uniforms, an aspect of the American Revolution that cannot be emphasized enough is the role sea power played as a determiner for the American colonies being unshackled from British rule. What started as a rebellion of the colonies against the Crown for a variety of factors, to include tariffs imposed on imported goods, grew into a global war that overtaxed the capabilities of the Royal Navy.

Ironically, sea power was one of the key factors leading to revolution. The decisive Royal Navy triumph over the French at Quiberon Bay near Saint-Nazaire on Nov. 20, 1759, during the Seven Years’ War, and British success with American colonial help in the French and Indian War (the North American component of the Seven Years’ War), which brought Canada under British rule, meant France and its allied Native American tribes no longer posed a threat that fostered colonial dependence on British armed forces. Of course, establishing Pax Britannica came at a cost, and the British sought colonial help in footing the bill.

“Taxation without representation” drove a wedge between the British Crown’s overseas subjects and the motherland, especially in New England as illustrated by the Boston Tea Party. The attempt to quell revolt by garrisoning troops in Boston would backfire in the spring of 1775 at Lexington and Concord, and soon the British found themselves in an uncomfortable situation as colonial militias formed to become an army under George Washington, who took command on July 3, 1775. Surveying the situation, Washington recognized he could change the British situation from uncomfortable to untenable by interdicting British supply ships.

The battle between Bonhomme Richard, center, commanded by Captain John Paul Jones, and HMS Serapis off Flamborough Head, England. *Image credit: Naval History and Heritage Command | Thomas Mitchell*

In his assessment, he likely was inspired by a failed early-June trading mission to Machias, located northeast of present-day Bar Harbor, Maine. Hoping to exchange food for lumber, the British commander, Midshipman James Moore, would have his two cargo ships Polly and Unity seized as local Sailors, led by Jeremiah O'Brien and inspired by events at Lexington and Concord, then captured Moore's schooner Margaretta and in doing so dispatched Moore and nine of his crew. O'Brien armed Unity with Margaretta's guns; renamed Machias Liberty, this first American warship would immediately capture two British vessels on a surveying mission without firing a shot.

To clear the British from Boston, Washington turned to John Glover, who commanded the 21st Massachusetts Regiment from Marblehead, which was composed mostly of Sailors. In his 2021 bestseller of the same name, Patrick K. O'Donnell would dub the Marblehead men "The Indispensables," members of whom would

crew Glover's schooner Hannah. On Sept. 7 the schooner, under the command of Nicholson Broughton, seized back an American merchantman that had been pressed into British service to deliver supplies to the British Army. Seeking to replicate Hannah's success, additional schooners quickly claimed some 55 prizes.

Birth of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps

The success bolstered efforts by John Adams in Philadelphia to authorize a national navy. An initial step had been taken over the summer to allow each colony to form their own fleet as they saw fit. Resistance had come from the South, which had yet to experience hostile actions from the Royal Navy. Attitudes changed as September turned to October as John Barry returned from a trip to England with newspaper accounts of the Royal Navy fitting out additional ships for duty in North America. Adams was joined in calling for the creation of a navy by Rhode Island delegate Stephen Hopkins, who learned of a bombardment conducted against Bristol. However, Samuel Chase of Maryland exclaimed, "It is the maddest idea in the world to think of building an American fleet." Reports of additional British reinforcements en route and fear of the potential of Royal Navy men-of-war roving along the Eastern seaboard, leveling towns and villages, led Congress to act on Oct. 13, 1775, to fit out two vessels to serve in a national navy.

The fears were justified. Five days after the birth of the navy, a British squadron bombarded and then landed a raiding party to torch Falmouth in present-day Maine. That action spurred Congress to approve the acquisition of additional ships. Of course, to crew the ships, officers and enlisted Sailors, stores and supporting infrastructure were needed. Esek Hopkins, the younger brother of the Rhode Island delegate, was appointed to command America's first naval squadron. With the Navy established, Stephen Hopkins saw the need for two battalions of Marines. Formed on Nov. 10, 1775, the Marines' first commissioned officer would be a Quaker,

Samuel Nicholas. The ship Alfred would be the first converted merchantman to be commissioned on Dec. 3, 1775. Four days later John Paul Jones received his officer commission. On Dec. 13, Congress would authorize the construction of 13 frigates to build on the number of converted merchantmen coming into service.

"It is the maddest idea in the world to think of building an American fleet." – Samuel Chase, delegate, Continental Congress

In March 1776 the warring parties displayed aspects of sea power that factored into the course of the war. For the British, the arrival of transports meant General William Howe could extract his troops to fight another day. Meanwhile, the American squadron under Esek Hopkins headed south to the Bahamas to pull off a raid to extract arms and gunpowder. Returning from the Bahamas, the squadron experienced its first engagement with the Royal Navy in coming upon HMS Glasgow off Block Island. After Hopkins failed to exploit his numerical superiority, the British 20-gun warship was able to escape to Newport.

In the coming months, sea power would prove nearly decisive for the British. As Congress met in Philadelphia to draft the Declaration of Independence, a massive armada arrived off New York in what David Hackett Fischer declared "was the largest projection of seaborne power ever attempted by a European State." Some 70 warships, half the order of battle for the Royal Navy, oversaw the offloading of 23,000 Redcoats and 10,000 Hessians onto Staten Island. The Royal Navy and ground forces worked in tandem to defeat Washington's forces on Long Island.

John Paul Jones served as lieutenant on the first American Navy ship, Alfred, in 1775 and soon became captain of Providence in 1776. While operating in British territorial waters with his flagship Bonhomme Richard in 1779, Jones fought HMS Serapis and won one of the bloodiest naval battles of the American Revolution. *Image credit: Naval History and Heritage Command | Arthur S. Conrad*

Small craft proved to be Washington's salvation as the

Marblehead Sailors were able to extract him and some 9,000 troops from Brooklyn under cover of fog. In an attempt at asymmetric warfare, Washington approved the use of David Bushnell's submersible Turtle, which failed early on Sept. 8, 1776, to attach an explosive to the hull of the British flagship Eagle. Dodging that bullet, a week later, the Royal Navy supported the army's landings on Manhattan. Washington's troops would repeatedly fail in battle, and by December they were hunkered down at Valley Forge in Pennsylvania. As documented by Fischer in "Washington's Crossing," it was those "Indispensable" Marblehead Sailors who crewed the boats that delivered Washington's force across the Delaware for a successful raid on Trenton.

Sea power proved consequential during the pivotal year of 1777. Though Benedict Arnold's gunboats were soundly defeated at the Battle of Valcour Island on Lake Champlain in October 1776, the action delayed British efforts to drive south from Canada to reach the Hudson River Valley until the following year. Eventually, British General John Burgoyne's army would be defeated at Saratoga in October 1777. This blow came in part due to General Howe's decision not to head north to link up with Burgoyne but rather to use sea power to transport a portion of his army up the Chesapeake Bay to offload regiments near present-day Elkton, Maryland.

Following the American defeat at Brandywine, British troops seized Philadelphia. Perhaps a motivating factor for Howe in seizing the revolutionary seat of government was not to cause the Congress to flee to York but rather to shut down a part of the infrastructure needed to sustain an American Navy. As British forces worked their way up the Delaware to open the waterway to support the new garrison in Philadelphia, they met resistance from vessels of the Continental and Pennsylvania state navies. One of the 13 authorized frigates, Delaware, would run aground and be captured. To prevent their capture, Washington ordered the scuttling of two of the other frigates

trapped further upriver, Effingham and Washington. In a bombardment that would be replicated at Fort McHenry during the War of 1812, Royal Navy warships fired broadsides at Fort Mifflin. The fort would be pummeled but at a cost: The British lost HMS Augusta, a 64-gun ship-of-the-line. Credit the Army, not the Navy, for the greatest loss ever inflicted against His Majesty's navy.

Privateers and Irregular Warfare

There is a reason Ian Toll wrote about six frigates instead of 13, as the fate of the other congressionally authorized frigates mirrored that of the three mentioned above. But elements of sea power began to work to support the newly declared United States' effort to free itself from British rule. Privateers became the ultimate force multiplier. Congress and the individual states provided some 2,000 letters of marque to enterprising merchantmen to interdict British commerce. Motivated by prize money obtained through the sale of captured vessels and their cargoes, the privateers prowled the Atlantic in search of British merchants. Rising insurance premiums would influence British attitudes about the cost of sustaining the effort to quell the rebellion. In addition to having to divert assets to protect its merchant fleet, the Royal Navy had an even bigger challenge with the French decision to support the rebellion.

With France and eventually Spain joining the American cause, the British saw not only their other overseas possessions at risk – especially in the Caribbean, but also the homeland itself. French entry in the war and the threat of French sea power caused the British government to direct the abandonment of Philadelphia to redistribute troops to New York, Canada and the Caribbean. The veiled maritime threat had accomplished what Washington's troops could not: the liberation of the new nation's capital. Unfortunately, French naval deployments would not contribute toward an immediate change in the direction of the war. A potential game-changing showdown off

Rhode Island on Aug. 11, 1778, between a superior French force commanded by Vice Admiral Charles-Henri d'Estaing and a British force led by Admiral William Howe was thwarted by a storm causing the two fleets to scurry to the safety of American-held Boston and British-occupied New York. However, the British would not be able to prevent the landing of French troops or block the steady stream of arms arriving from Europe.

Before the Franco-American alliance, French authorities tended to look the other way when American naval vessels fit out and operated from French ports, an arrangement that led to Lambert Wickes in Reprisal and Gustavus Conyngham in Revenge having very successful commerce-raiding deployments off the British Isles early in the conflict. With the alliance, France became an operating base for several American skippers, with the best-known being John Paul Jones – a master of what historian B.J. Armstrong has dubbed "irregular warfare" – a component of sea power that can be seen today with Navy SEALs. Having commanded Ranger in operations against his native land that included a raid on Whitehaven, Jones turned Ranger over to his First Lieutenant to take command of Duc de Duras, a merchantman of considerable size that Jones armed and transformed into the Bonhomme Richard.

The French fleet (left), commanded by Vice Admiral the Comte de Grasse, engaging the British fleet under Rear Admiral Sir Thomas Graves off the mouth of Chesapeake Bay. *Image credit: Naval History and Heritage Command | V. Zveg*

Sailing out as part of a Franco-American raiding squadron, Bonhomme Richard engaged HMS Serapis off the Yorkshire coast of England on Sept. 23, 1779. With the rigging of the two ships becoming entangled and Jones losing the use of several of his guns, the American commander refused to surrender. Having “not yet begun to fight,” Bonhomme Richard’s crew boarded and seized Serapis, an outcome that would be tops on the Continental Navy’s rather limited highlight reel for the American Revolution. In contrast, a month earlier, a good portion of that navy chose to scuttle itself in the Penobscot River to avoid capture from a superior British naval force, a tragic conclusion of what may have been the young nation’s mightiest attempt to flex its sea power muscle in assembling an armada of 19 warships including the frigate Warren and 25 support ships to sail north from Boston to eliminate British footholds along the coast of present-day Maine. The disastrous Penobscot Expedition illustrated how sea power could prove

decisive – unfortunately, in this case, on behalf of the British.

A few months later the British used their superior naval forces to good advantage by loading 90 transports, crewed by 5,000 Sailors, at the end of December in New York with some 8,700 troops and 396 horses to sail south past Cape Hatteras to seize Charleston. Although few horses survived the stormy journey, the troops did and were skillfully deployed by General Henry Clinton to entrap the defending American garrison. In addition to surrendering some 6,700 men, the Americans lost two more of its 13 frigates authorized by Congress.

Though the British were exploiting sea power to good effect in 1779–1780, in the end it would work to their disadvantage. Through attrition, the British did succeed in whittling the Continental Navy to just a handful of ships, with the 36-gun frigate Alliance being the most powerful warship to survive the war. A 74-gun ship-of-the-line America, completed after the battle at Yorktown, would be offered to the French as a gift for their support of American effort to achieve independence. That effort culminated with the arrival of a French fleet under the command of Vice Admiral Comte de Grasse off the mouth of Chesapeake Bay. In the Battle of the Capes, fought Sept. 5, 1781, de Grasse defeated an inferior British squadron commanded by Rear Admiral Thomas Graves, sealing the fate of General Charles Cornwallis's troops at Yorktown.

Faced with debt, Congress would not continue to fund a navy, and with the auctioning of Alliance in August 1785, the navy that Congress created a decade earlier was no more. However, the new nation's political leaders would quickly appreciate the consequences of their folly. In a new constitution that replaced the Articles of Confederation, in Article 1, Section 8, Congress was authorized "To raise and support armies, but no appropriation of money to that use shall be for a longer term than two years." In contrast, the founders enshrined the

need “To provide and maintain a navy.”

Dr. Winkler has been nominated to be the next Historian General of the Naval Order of the United States. This article originally appeared in the October issue of Seapower *magazine*.

Navy Determines Planned Ship Inactivations for Fiscal 2026

Henry J. Kaiser-class underway replenishment oiler USNS Pecos (T-AO-197) sails during the at-sea phase of Exercise Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) 2024. (U.S. Navy photo by MC2 Terrin Hartman)

By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Navy plans to inactivate or transfer eight ships during fiscal 2026, including two warships and six auxiliary ships, the service said in a Sept. 12 internal message to the force.

The navy plans to inactivate two Los Angeles-class attack submarines, USS Newport News (SSN 750) on Jan. 31, 2026, and USS Alexandria (SSN 757) on Aug. 4, 2026. The two submarines will be scrapped in Puget Sound Naval Shipyard, Washington.

Two Henry J. Kaiser-class fleet replenishment oilers will be withdrawn from service with Military Sealift Command by July 31, 2026. USNS John Ericsson (T-AO 194) will be retired but retained as a logistics support asset as a parts source for remaining ships of its class. USS Pecos (T-AO 197 will be transferred to the Maritime Administration (MARAD).

Three Watson-class large, medium-speed roll-on/roll off ships will be transferred from the Military Sealift Command's Prepositioning Force: USNS Pomeroy (T-AKR 316) by Apr. 1, 2026; USNS Watkins (T-AKR 315) by July 1, 2026; and USNS Red Cloud (T-AKR-313) by Sept. 30, 2026.

Also being transferred to MARAD on July 1, 2026, is the USNS VADM K.R. Wheeler (T-AG 5001), a ship which uses an offshore petroleum distribution system to pump fuel ashore from a distance of eight miles to U.S. forces ashore.

Navy Determines Planned Ship Inactivations for Fiscal

2026

Henry J. Kaiser-class underway replenishment oiler USNS Pecos (T-AO-197) sails during the at-sea phase of Exercise Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) 2024. (U.S. Navy photo by MC2 Terrin Hartman)

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Naval Aviation at Highest Readiness in Years, 'Air Boss' Said

The world’s largest aircraft carrier, USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78), transits the North Sea, Aug. 23, 2025. (U.S. Navy photo by MC2 Tajh Payne)

By Richard R. Burgess, Senior Editor

ARLINGTON, Virginia – U.S. naval aviation is at its highest readiness in years, a senior naval aviation admiral said to an audience in Washington and online.

Speaking Aug. 26 in an event of the U.S. Naval Institute and the Center for Strategic and International Studies sponsored by HII, Vice Admiral Daniel L. Cheever, commander Naval Air Forces and commander, Naval Air Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet – the Navy’s Air Boss’ – said the Naval Air Forces are “sustaining the readiness increases that we enjoyed” and “we’re at the “highest state of readiness we’ve had in at least 10 to 15 years back. And so, both carriers and the air wings with the carriers and our expeditionary forces are all at that heightened readiness.”

Cheever said that small pockets of challenges to readiness

remained, particularly with the management of the supply chain and sustainment,

“We have a good playbook,” he said. “When there is a challenge, we get after it, and we have a perform-to-plan that re-energizes and gets us back to where we should be for readiness, and that’s across the board. And it’s pretty exciting to be part of that. It’s a lot of hard work but it is totally worth it. The return on investment from all of that parts supply is in the readiness of the force.”

Cheever praised the F-35 Lightning II strike fighter as “a game changer, a difference maker in the fleet,” while noting that there are some supply-chain challenges that are being addressed.

He said that a mixture of 4th-, 5th-, and 6th-generation mix of carrier-based strike fighters with manned-unmanned teaming is the “right blend.”

The 6th-generation strike fighter is being designed to replace the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet strike fighter and the EA-18G Growler electronic attack aircraft.

Cheever offered no details of the concept for the 6th-generation strike fighter but said that “I see a maritime version of the aircraft that starts at the carrier, is made for the carrier, and is a complete carrier version … I’m looking forward to the down-select… because that 6th generation means air superiority in that timeframe in the future, which means sea control.”

He affirmed that aircraft carriers will be central to air superiority in the future for the Navy and America as a maritime nation.

He noted that the MQ-25 Stingray unmanned refueling aircraft will fly this year and be integrated with the aircraft carrier next year.

The air boss praised the design of the USS Gerald R. Ford, lead ship of the Navy’s newest class of aircraft carriers. The position of the island superstructure is farther aft than on the Nimitz class produces less of an air burble for approaching aircraft. The increase of aircraft parking space forward of the island eases aircraft handling and enables an aircraft to park directly over a weapons elevator for weapons download.

He also noted that, unlike the Nimitz class carriers, the Gerald R. Ford is completely air conditioned.

Coast Guard District is Economic Nerve Center with Complex Northern Border Challenge

The crew of Coast Guard Cutter Bristol Bay, homeported in Detroit, assists the vessel James R. Barker at Rock Cut in the St. Marys River April 2, 2018. Bristol Bay worked the river to keep the waterway open. *Photo credit: U.S. Coast Guard | Chief Petty Officer Nick Gould*

Editor's Note: Since this article first appeared in the July/August issue of Seapower*, the 9th District has been renamed the Great Lakes District.*

The 9th Coast Guard District, or D9 as it is known to the 5,000 people stationed at more than 78 units across five sectors, encompasses eight U.S. states and the five Great Lakes, including three of the world's largest by surface area – Lake Superior, Lake Michigan and Lake Huron.

With 6,700 miles of shoreline and a 1,600-nautical-mile international border with Canada, the 9th District ensures safe passage each year for 80 million tons of bulk cargo – iron ore, taconite pellets, grain, salt, concrete and fertilizer – along a handful of vital shipping corridors. In D9, these waterways are essentially narrow passages; in the

event of a marine casualty situation, bypasses are scarce. What's more, 90% of the nation's iron ore (taconite) comes from open-pit mines in Minnesota and Wisconsin on Lake Superior, where its shipping relies entirely on the Soo Locks, a complex of locks on the St. Marys River without which Lake Superior would be isolated from the rest of the Great Lakes.

Inside the 9th District is the 2,340-mile St. Lawrence Seaway. The primary access route to North America's heartland, the seaway connects the Atlantic Ocean to the head of the Great Lakes. The route is the only navigable link for oceangoing vessels, including cruise ships, to reach the major inland ports of the Great Lakes, among them Ontario's Port of Thunder Bay and the Port of Duluth-Superior.

D9 also has oversight of 5.5 million registered boaters with some of the busiest recreational boating activity in the world. Driving home the economic value of D9's area of responsibility is the fact that America's five great lakes contain 20% of the Earth's fresh surface water, and 40 million Americans rely on the lakes for safe drinking water.

But there's more: a "Hall-of-Fame" stat one might not expect, according to Rear Admiral Jon P. Hickey, the 9th District commander and senior Coast Guard commander for the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Seaway.
"If you took the Great Lakes region, the eight states, the two Canadian provinces, the five lakes, and called that a nation, it would be the third-largest GDP in the world [after] the United States and China," Hickey told Seapower. "The impact that this sector has, it's real, it's tangible. In the 9th District, we're all about safety and security of these maritime regions, these lakes. It is a lifeblood of the U.S. economy."

D9 is a thriving ecosystem in which all the moving parts – the multitude of lakes and waterways, the valuable cargo, the skilled workforce and the robust, if overworked, fleet –

function seamlessly, usually without disruption and therefore, out of the public eye. None of the work is effortless, much less easy. Hickey described the “challenging” narrow passage along the St. Marys River, considered critical infrastructure by the Department of Homeland Security.

“That’s why we have the vessel traffic system. It is absolutely critical what these folks do to manage vessel traffic safely and securely in those waterways,” Hickey said. “You’ve got these … thousand footers [ships] going through there … carrying a product that’s essential to our economy, our security, and if anything were to go wrong, it’s likely [to] block the waterway. These are the things that keep me up at night. The idea of a marine casualty in the St. Marys River, the Detroit River, the St. Clair River because those are the single points of failure in the MTS,” or maritime transportation system.

The regulatory and security landscape surrounding maritime operations on the Great Lakes is nothing if not complex. With 1,600 nautical miles of maritime international border, Hickey said the long-standing cooperation with Canadian maritime authorities is crucial.

“We have an incredible partnership with [our Canadian partners],” Hickey said. “We call it ‘Shiprider,’ where they come on board our vessels, and we go on their vessels. So, it’s a seamless enforcement of Canadian and U.S. laws across that border. We’re ensuring the safety and security of our maritime transportation system, which on the Great Lakes is tantamount to our border. If you were to navigate from the Sioux Locks to Duluth, you would cross the Canadian and U.S. border, staying inside the channel, over 20 times.”

Unique to the 9th District is the Canadian and U.S. Laker fleet, which operates solely within the bounds of the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence Seaway up to around Montreal, Hickey said. Made of Canadian and U.S. commercial cargo

vessels designed for the transport of bulk commodities within the Great Lakes system, the Laker fleet is “not really considered international” and not subject to the same international regulations, such as SOLAS (International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea), given they only operate within the internal waters of Canada and the U.S.

Meanwhile, the seasonal foreign trade routes through the St. Lawrence Seaway bring foreign flag vessels into the Great Lakes from mid-March to January every year. These vessels are subject to international regulations and must abide by SOLAS requirements because they are in U.S. and Canadian internal waters.

“We have to be very vigilant about … what’s coming in,” Hickey said. “Are they threats to our critical infrastructure, our safety, security? If they meet the threshold for a high-interest vessel, we are going to board them as soon as – or before – they get into the lakes. In the U.S. waters and in the seaway, we’re going to make sure we keep our American public safe and secure.”

Since January, D9 has allocated available operational capacity toward securing and defending the northern border, Hickey said. He said D9 is “leaning into” northern border concerns and intelligence, using resources on hand in anticipation of how border events elsewhere in the country play out.

“We’re also asking the questions of: ‘What would we need if we wanted to do more in the event that … illicit activity increases on the northern border as we continue to lock down the southern border?,’ that balloon effect,” he said. “We have really doubled down on our interagency coordination. [We are] making sure that illegal cross-border activity like drug trafficking and people trafficking is not happening, and we are as committed to that as we are to our search and rescue mission.”

U.S. Coast Guard units coordinated with local partners in a response to a capsized vessel with five persons and a dog in the water off Mackinac Island, Michigan. (U.S. , in August 2024. Photo credit: U.S. Coast Guard Station St. Ignace

The 9th District does the second-most search and rescue cases after the 7th Coast Guard District in the Southeastern U.S. and Caribbean. In the past year, the people of D9 executed more than 2,000 SAR cases across the Great Lakes, Hickey said.

“We saved 873 lives,” he said. “I tell my people, if you save one life, you’ve impacted and changed the lives of everybody in their circle of trust, circle of love, friends, family and loved ones, for the rest of their lives. Search and rescue goes beyond just a mission. It is our special trust with the American public.”

Whether on behalf of recreational boating safety, icebreaking or the uneventful movement of critical bulk cargo, the D9’s Vessel Traffic Service teams rely on a healthy fleet of

multimission cutters, response and patrol boats, and, by extension, U.S. Laker cargo vessels. This is not as easy as it sounds, according to Hickey, who said overdue maintenance and slow to no vessel recapitalization are ongoing challenges for VTS operations and overall readiness.

“Those VTS folks are like air traffic controllers. They maintain situational awareness,” Hickey said. “Our U.S. Laker fleet and the Canadian Laker fleet is old, and what we’re witnessing is an increase in our maritime casualties. I am concerned about the health of the fleet. We are in a downward readiness spiral … and it’s due to the perennial underinvestment in our Coast Guard. We have backlogs and maintenance across the board, whether it’s our cutter fleet, our boats, our aircraft or our shore infrastructure.”

In April 2025, DHS issued the Force Design 2028 report, which outlines plans for implementing transformational changes within the Coast Guard, including an overhaul of the agency’s acquisition and contracting system to expedite much-needed new ships. Shortly after the report’s release, Admiral Kevin Lunday, the acting commandant of the Coast Guard, told members of the House Armed Services Committee that efforts were underway and that production milestones outlined in Force Design 2028 are being met.

Hickey said the plans in Force Design 2028 can’t come soon enough. Citing last winter’s above-average ice season in the Great Lakes, he said it was the first time in a while the 9th District had been “stress-tested” with respect to the icebreaking mission. But, thanks to some excellent advanced planning by D9 district staff for maintenance and to complete aids to navigation, or ATONs, in the summer months, they were well prepared.

“We were able to cover down very, very well on the ice season. But, from my perspective, this plan to renew our fleet, our Coast Guard writ large, can’t come soon enough,” Hickey said.

“When we talk about Force Design 2028 and recapitalizing the Coast Guard, the VTS system is part of that. We need to recapitalize that system. I am very grateful for the leadership of the administration to get after recapitalization and renewal of the Coast Guard, because it’s not sustainable.”

Daisy Khalifa is a journalist and publicist. With more than 25 years of professional, public affairs and writing experience in Washington, D.C., she recently relocated to the Minneapolis area. Khalifa has consulted and worked full-time in the federal government, for associations and for Fortune 500 companies, among them the Smithsonian Institution, MCI and Nextel Corp.