‘Let Foreign Yards Build U.S. Navy Auxiliary and Service Ships Now’



Military Sealift Command's newest fleet replenishment oiler, USNS Lucy Stone (T-AO 209), slides down the rails, and into the San Diego Bay, following its christening at the General Dynamics NASSCO shipyard in San Diego in 2024. *Photo credit: Military Sealift Command Pacific | Sarah Cannon*

There is much current discussion about having foreign shipyards build U.S. Navy warships as a way to increase production and fleet numbers. That sounds good on paper, but if the target is combatant ships, then there will be significant challenges.

First, U.S. Code (10 USC 8679 of 1993 states, "no vessel to be constructed for any of the armed forces, and no major component of the hull or superstructure of any such vessel, may be constructed in a foreign shipyard," unless a presidential waiver in the interest of national security is granted. Even with such a waiver in hand, every nation builds ships to their own standards and reaching commonality, even among close allies, has been historically difficult. The recent Constellation-class frigate debacle exemplifies some of the difficulties that foreign shipbuilders have faced in getting a ship to the U.S. Navy standard, even when such ships are being constructed in the United States. And few if any recent foreign built surface combatants have been actually tested in combat.

Fortunately, there is a U.S. market where foreign shipbuilders can immediately have impact, and that is the long list of badly needed auxiliary and service vessels that the U.S. Navy has also neglected building over the last 40 years; to include tenders, repair ships, hospital vessels, icebreakers and command ships. Building these units will allow foreign shipbuilders to develop the necessary experience to later compete for other U.S. Navy designs but the challenges with combatant warships will persist.

National standards for warship construction vary, and even relatively close allies such as those in NATO have experienced

challenges in creating common warship designs. Several attempts have been made over the last 60 years to create a common frigate design which all NATO nations might embrace.

The first of these began with a 1968 working group to build a common antisubmarine warfare frigate for the alliance. There were numerous arguments, however, over what systems the NATO frigate would incorporate, and which nations would provide them. The proposed "Type 70" NATO frigate became eight different national designs, with Belgium, the United Kingdom, France, West Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Italy, and the United States all pursuing different specifications. The 1990s saw another attempt to create a common NATO frigate, which also foundered on differing weapons outfitting and missions. Begun in January 1988, eight nations (U.S., U.K., Spain, France, Italy, Canada, Germany, and the Netherlands,) again tried to combine their national frigate requirements. The United States dropped out early in the process, with the U.S. Surface Combatant Force Requirement Study stating there was no need for a new U.S. frigate design, leaving the FFG-7 Oliver Hazard Perry class to soldier on into the 2010s. The British, French and Italians formed the "Horizon" program that ultimately produced air defense destroyers rather than low-end frigates, with the British breaking off of the group to produce what ultimately became the Type 45 destroyer.

Learning Priorities and Concepts

Getting navies to agree on common components is hard, and even when one navy buys another navy's ship, with a supposedly agreed design, the results can still be mixed. In the early 1990s the U.S. purchased the Italian navy's Lerici-class coastal mine hunter design, which became the Osprey class in U.S. service. While there is anecdotal evidence the ship's Voith Schneider propeller system, a major change from the Italian parent design, was not well received by U.S. Navy Sailors and officers, the ships were built and commission as planned and served well until retired (with less than 10

years’ service in some cases) in the mid-2000s to make way for the planned mine warfare capabilities of the littoral combat ship.

The problems of the Constellation-class frigate, and its alleged 85% deviation from its Italian/French FREMM design, are well known and need not be belabored. The FREMM has been a very successful design for the Italian, French, Tunisian and Algerian navies, but the vast number of changes imposed on the design by the U.S. Navy hints at the very different idea of what elements of ship design characterize a U.S. frigate. U.S. Naval Sea Systems Command (NAVSEA) representatives would need to monitor every step of design and construction as they do for ships built in the United States. It would take time for each side (foreign shipbuilder and NAVSEA) to learn the other’s priorities and operating concepts. The practicalities of that level of oversight are likely to make current standards impossible to guarantee.

Classification would be another issue even with a presidential waiver to build overseas in hand. Will large numbers of foreign shipbuilders need U.S. background checks and/or security classification to work with a U.S. surface combatant build? If no, would large numbers of U.S. workers need to move to foreign yards, probably with appropriate language expertise to work within an unfamiliar foreign shipyard environment? Such special considerations would need advanced coordination before any shipbuilding takes place and are likely to involve increased costs. Overlay the complexities of Union acquiescence and the difficulties fall into sharper focus.

The habitual relationships developed during associations between U.S. shipbuilders and the U.S. Navy contribute to generally a smooth building organization, notably in mature U.S.-design aircraft carrier, submarine, destroyer and amphibious vessel building programs. Regardless of other shipbuilding challenges with the littoral combat ship and the Constellation-class frigate, U.S. warships have performed to

design in naval combat in the Red Sea and other parts of the globe.

While there has not been sustained, high end naval warfare since 1945, few navies other than the United States Navy have engaged in anything approaching World War II combat. U.S.-built ships such as the Perry-class frigates Stark and Samuel B. Roberts, and the Arleigh Burke-class destroyers Cole, Fitzgerald and John S. McCain, all suffered significant battle or collision damage and survived to be repaired and rejoin the active fleet. Expert U.S. Navy damage control provided by well-trained, brave, and resolute U.S. Navy Sailors contributed to the saving of all these ships, but so too did their robust construction and durability in operations. Any foreign-built, U.S. Navy combatants would need to equal these high standards. Could they?

Hybrid Methods

This is not to suggest foreign yards could not make contributions to U.S. warships. There are some hybrid methods through which vessels can be partially built in foreign shipyards and then moved incomplete to a U.S. naval or civilian shipyard for final outfitting of government-furnished equipment. Australia's Landing Ship, Helicopter Dock (LHD) Canberra class of two ships (Canberra and Adelaide) were built as a joint project between Navantia shipbuilding (Spain) and then-Tenix Defence (now part of BAE Systems) from 2007-2015. Navantia produced the hull of the ship and associated machinery up to the flight deck, while BAE systems completed what was termed the "Australianization" of the ships and its supply chain systems after the hulls were moved from Spain to Australia via heavy-lift vessel.

Sweden similarly had its new intelligence gathering ship HSwMS Artemis partially built in the Polish Nauta shipyard, but the vessel was delivered earlier than planned due to business issues within the Polish yard and finished by Sweden's only

naval yard operated by Saab Kockums, with assistance from Polish shipworkers working at the Swedish yard. While this was not the intended plan to complete the vessel, it is an example of primary construction by a foreign yard that was finished in the vessel's own flag state.

These examples illustrate the challenges of building combatant ships of any navy in a foreign shipyard. It's not "mission impossible," but there are enormous challenges to overcome before such construction can take place. In the meantime, the United States Navy has significant requirements for its long-neglected service fleet and combat logistics force that can be met by foreign shipyards. The U.S. has purchased logistics vessels from other nations in the past, and much of the construction of tenders, repair ships, hospital vessels, and command ships could, like the Australian LHD vessels, be built largely in foreign yards and then outfitted as U.S. or Military Sealift Command ships in U.S. shipyards. Those ship types are good starting points for foreign yards seeking U.S. navy – specifically Military Sealift Command – business.