

Nation's Sealift Struggling, but Gaining Attention



Panelists at the Strategic Sealift discussion on May 7 at Sea-Air-Space 2019 talk about maintaining capability overseas. Charles Fazio

NATIONAL HARBOR,

Md. – The nation's strategic sealift has languished for too many years, a panel

of experts told an audience May 7 at Sea-Air-Space 2019. And the panel,

representing the military and civilian sea services, told the morning program attendees

that the time for revitalizing sealift is now.

Countering the

somewhat bleak picture they drew, they all expressed optimism with the fact

that the issue is finally garnering the attention it deserves.

"We are facing one

of the greatest maritime challenges in U.S. history," said Kevin Toharsky, the

associate administrator of the U.S. Maritime Administration, who moderated the

panel. "The good news is the sea power we need ... is back on the radar screen."

Toharsky outlined

the significant decline in the number of U.S.-flagged merchant ships, which

meant the loss of jobs for mariners. The commercial fleet is essential to the

nation's commerce and national security, he said. Commercial cargo of fuel and

goods rely on it, as does the military. In contrast, potential adversaries like China are bolstering their maritime industries – and their world presence in the process, he said.

“I’m encouraged by the greater awareness ... and the conversation about the problem,” said Coast Guard Rear Adm. John Nadeau, who is assistant commandant for prevention policy.

Resolution, however, “won’t be easy,” Nadeau said. “The material condition [of the merchant fleet] didn’t happen overnight and won’t be corrected overnight.”

Ensuring that the parties involved – including military and commercial stakeholders – are striking the right partnerships, engaging in transparency and carrying out open and frank dialogues, will set the nation on the right track, Nadeau said.

“We need industry support,” said Erica Plath, the Navy’s director of strategic mobility, as she described the Navy’s plans to modernize its fleet of deep-sea transports through the acquisition of both new and refurbished older vessels.

Chris Thayer, director of ship management at Military Sealift Command, alluded to a downward trend in available sealift capacity during the past two years.

The command is

implementing a “robust effort” to restore readiness that would require a holistic approach to address aging ships and construction and refurbishment efforts as well as crew-training requirements.

Capt. Christian Spain, vice president of government relations for the American Maritime Officers Union, said revitalization is essential if the nation intends to address the current shortage of 1,800 merchant seamen.

“It doesn’t affect sealift at the initial [point],” Spain said. “But at four to six months, it does.”

Similar to submarines, merchant ships require two crews that rotate sea tours, Spain said. The crew shortage figure has been steady since 2013, he said, but would increase to 2,000 within the next two to three years if not addressed.

“The time is now,” Spain said.