

***Published in the Washington Times on February 10, 2012***

The Navy is the primary mechanism for projecting American military power around the world. For the better part of the past century, no corner of the globe has been off-limits, demonstrating that the global reach and readiness of the Navy is second to none.

Under President Obama's new defense strategy, which redirects focus to the Pacific, the United States will be leaning on the Navy even more to protect regional spheres of influence while keeping a watchful eye on countries such as China, North Korea and Russia. The new strategy is tailor-made for the Navy, but there is one major problem ahead that is being exacerbated by hundreds of billions of dollars in defense budget cuts and the threat of even more on the horizon. The problem: The Navy, with a current fleet size of 285 vessels, does not have enough ships.

Even when the Navy's last shipbuilding plan called for a fleet of 301 ships, a 2010 report from the bipartisan Quadrennial Defense Review Independent Panel called for increasing the Navy to 346 ships in order to safely confront emerging threats in the Pacific.

Almost two years have passed since the panel made its recommendation. Now the Navy is staring at ship reductions and project delays under the president's fiscal 2012 budget proposal instead of turning its attention to effectively building and maintaining an adequately sized naval fleet.

In a preview of the defense budget, Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta said the Navy will retire seven Ticonderoga-class cruisers and two amphibious ships earlier than planned. Other cancellations and construction delays are also in the works. Meanwhile, the chief of naval operations has recalculated the Navy's shipbuilding and acquisition plan, saying the Navy fleet will hold relatively steady at 285 ships, a 16-ship reduction from the previous 301-ship plan.

Even at 285 ships, which is the best-case scenario, the Navy is still 61 ships below the recommendation of the defense review panel. In the coming years, it's a sure bet that the Navy

will fall well below 285 ships, constituting what the secretary of defense said when warning against the long-term effects of the Budget Control Act is certain to be the smallest naval fleet since World War I.

Aside from the glaring shortfall in fleet size, the existing inventory of ships, which is expected to carry the Navy into the future, is running into a series of recurring structural and operational problems. In just the past two years, more than one-fifth of Navy ships failed to meet readiness standards, with the USS Essex a 20-year-old flagship of Expeditionary Strike Group 7 as one of the latest examples. Twice in seven months, the Essex has been unable to fulfill its mission because of equipment failures.

But it is not just older ships experiencing problems. The Littoral Combat Ship, a new class of warship, is an acquisition disaster at a cost of \$537 million a vessel. Each of the two active ships in the LCS fleet has encountered serious problems. One of the vessels, the Freedom, has experienced significant mechanical and structural failures on four occasions.

Just this month, the Freedom suffered a failure of the port shaft mechanical seal while undergoing sea trials. In February 2011, a 6.5-inch crack was discovered in its hull. In May 2010, there were problems with a water jet that required repair. In September 2010, one of the vessel's gas turbines broke down. To a certain extent, problems in the testing phase are routine, but these issues are the product of a rushed acquisition process on the part of the Navy--a process that clearly needs fixing.

The Littoral Combat Ship was put on a fast track without any real thought about what type of mission it would fulfill. Speed was the most attractive element, even though its 40-knot cruise speed has no place in littoral (close to shore) waters or in the Navy mission set. Fuel consumption for this rate of speed adds another complication, demonstrating why it is the wrong ship at the wrong time.

Clearly, the Navy is facing a series of challenges that won't be made any easier by large budget cuts in the near term and the threat of even deeper cuts over time. All the while, the Navy will be stepping up to facilitate a shift in global defense strategy, something it will have to do with fewer ships and fewer sailors.

The \$450 billion in budget cuts already planned is bad enough, but anything more, now possible under sequestration, undoubtedly will hamstring the Navy and put American force projection at serious risk. This cannot happen, and it is the obligation of Congress and the president to ensure that the Navy and the rest of the U.S. military is adequately sized and equipped to meet any threat.

When the president's budget proposal is submitted to Congress in the coming days, one area of particular focus will be the Navy's budget and how it conforms to the proposed change in defense strategy. This is one of many budget areas that will require careful examination by Congress throughout the regular budget process.

It is not necessarily the president's strategic plans that are the subject of criticism. However, if the president is going to fundamentally alter U.S. military strategy and limit the Navy in the process, then he must be honest and realistic about what it will take to protect our national security interests in the Pacific and elsewhere.