

KEY CHALLENGES CONFRONTING NAVAL SHIPBUILDING (II)

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The Navy's shipbuilding budget is underfunded. As a result, the service is only building enough vessels to sustain a 200-ship fleet over the long run, rather than the 300 ships called for in the 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review. SecDef Rumsfeld will 'want to fix the problem by increasing spending, but what if the White House says no?

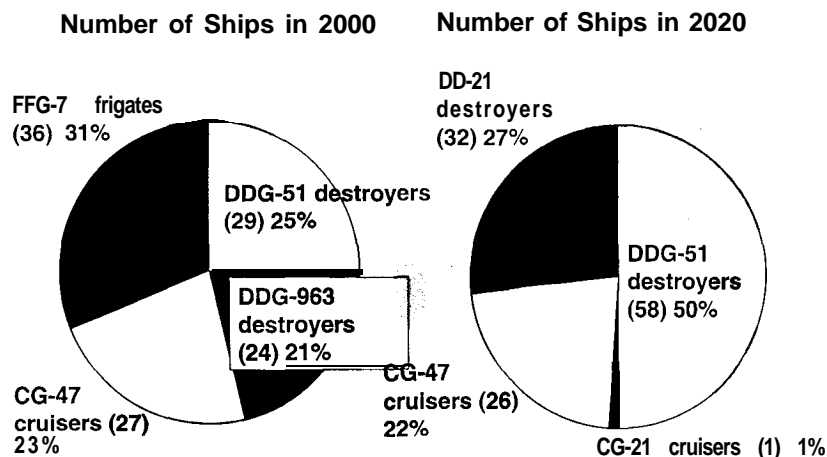
The service can't slow submarine construction, because it has already cut the undersea fleet 40% and production is at the minimal level of one boat per year. The stealthiness of subs may make them the capital ships of the 21st century, the only warships assured of survival in an age of continuous satellite surveillance. It can't cut aircraft carriers because the 12 carriers deliver more firepower than all the Navy's other ships combined. Carriers are the only way of sustaining air campaigns in the absence of overseas bases, and they look survivable until mid-century.

That leaves surface combatants, amphibious vessels and support ships as the potential targets of any cuts. The Chief of Naval Operations would prefer to cut amphibibs, but Marine-Corps modernization is so besieged that may be politically impossible. Skipping support ships saves little money. Surface combatants (destroyers and cruisers) thus become the likely focus of any efforts to revise the shipbuilding plan.

The problem is that any delay in building the next generation of combatants -- the DD-21 land-attack destroyer -- could quickly push two of the nation's surviving shipyards to the verge of extinction. The big six shipyards derive 90% of their revenues from the Navy, so any gap in naval construction plans endangers them. The skills resident at these sites are so specialized that once lost, rebuilding them would be astronomically expensive.

The Navy could keep building the current DDG-51 destroyer, which is supposed to cease production in 2004. But that ship was designed for combat at sea, rather than littoral warfare. Episodes like the October attack on the U.S.S. Cole raise doubts about the ship's survivability. If surface combatants have a future in littoral warfare, that probably requires a new design like the D.D.-21. Next time: What D.D.-21 contributes to future warfighting.

U.S. Navy Surface Combatants



Source: **Eric J. Labs**/Congressional Budget Office