The US Navy’s Accumulating Challenges

BY SETH CROPSEY
Senior Fellow & Director, Center for American Seapower

October 2020

The Look Ahead Series is a collection of policy memos examining the challenges that political, military, and business leaders must contend with today to ensure a secure, free, and prosperous world tomorrow.

The American news cycle moves so quickly that only the most jarring events break through into popular consciousness. Notwithstanding, the United States faces complex social and political problems that require long-term solutions.

But certain events encapsulate the broader policy difficulties the nation faces. Indeed, the USS *Bonhomme Richard* fire and its aftermath is one such event. It demonstrates the specific stresses the US Navy faces, both externally and internally, and highlights the perils to US national security from poor funding and unclear strategy.

A massive fire began on the *Bonhomme Richard* in mid-July, continuously burning for five days. The Navy has yet to release a formal damage assessment for the ship, but there is a broad consensus that parts of it must be “re-fabricated”—military-speak for wholly replaced. Considering the location and duration of the fire, this may entail rebuilding nearly all of the ship’s operational flight and hangar deck, with a cost of around $1.5 billion. This, of course, assumes that the “Bonnie Dick” experienced no structural hull damage. If it did, the ship may be unsalvageable.

The Bonnie Dick, a Wasp-class amphibious assault ship, plays a critical role in US maritime strategy. Aircraft carriers and submarines provide the fleet with most of its combat power, while large surface combatants—the Navy’s modern destroyer and cruiser force—defend the carrier from aerial and subsurface attack with their suite of anti-air missiles and anti-submarine sensors. But amphibious assault ships like those in the Wasp class have a small flight deck and a well deck, making them capable of deploying helicopters, various aircraft, and amphibious forces.

Historically, platforms like the Bonnie Dick have spearheaded the Navy’s amphibious assault forces, a role they will likely continue to play. But while the combination of a well deck and a flight deck provides less combat capability...
than does a supercarrier, it offers much greater all-around capability. This makes LHA- and LHD-style amphibious ships ideal testing platforms for force-multiplying capabilities like unmanned undersea vehicles (UUVs) deployed from a well deck or swarming unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) launched from an LHA-deployed V-22 Osprey.

Warfare is a complex, non-linear phenomenon. Removing a small number of capabilities can undermine the combat power of an entire force if those capabilities are critical facilitators. Moreover, combat technology develops equally erratically. The value of testing platforms of capable diverse new tools cannot be overstated.

This is particularly relevant for the sea services in the context of “strategic competition with China.” The term itself is slightly misleading. While China is the latest great-power threat to US interests, it simply fills a role filled by multiple challengers in the past. The core US foreign policy objective is to deny hegemony in Eurasia to any power or coalition. Eurasia contains the majority of the world’s population and natural resources, giving its hegemon the ability to restrict access to the most lucrative markets, and in the extreme case, to leverage these resources and subjugate the American “world island.”

Preventing this requires an engaged, forward presence and a strategy based on it. Without them, discussion of what kind of force to build is vacuous. Napoleon first demonstrated that retroactive reaction to a shifting balance of power can lead to disaster. European statesmen forgot this lesson when facing Hitlerite tyranny and paid the price in blood. Nuclear weapons compound the issue, generating the prospect of mutual annihilation, or at minimum severe casualties, in any confrontation. The only way to secure US interests, therefore, is to create a military capable of deterring and winning conventional war so decisively as to forestall nuclear escalation.

This military force must be deployed forward. Practically speaking, it takes time to shift forces from the contiguous United States to a conflict zone in Asia or Europe—days to weeks, or even months, depending on when and where a conflict occurs. And deterrence, particularly conventional deterrence, is impossible without a forward presence. To convince an adversary that he will lose a fight tomorrow requires that those forces be on-station, ready to fight today.

The natural geography of the United States, bounded as it is by the world’s two great oceans, makes naval forces central to this strategy. Only a forward-deployed Navy with enough platforms to ensure at least parity in every theater can deter America’s enemies, and defeat them at sea if necessary. Without this force, the rest of US combat power will remain trapped within the United States, unable to be brought to bear against America’s enemies.

So far as China is concerned, numbers are critical. An Asia conflict demands that the US fight at the end of a trans-Pacific supply line, relying upon only a few critical bases and the extant defense infrastructure of its allies. By contrast, China can bring to bear nearly all its combat power, considering that Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Philippines are hundreds, rather than thousands, of miles from the Chinese coastline. To assess the military balance, therefore, the vast majority of Chinese military forces—armed as they have been with various anti-air and anti-ship missiles—should be compared only to the forces that the US and its allies have on hand in theater during a hypothetical week-long confrontation. Unless the fleet has enough ships fielding distributed offensive capabilities that are able to survive initial saturation strikes, the US will be placed at a severe operational and strategic disadvantage. Unless sound articulated strategy governs the goal of the fleet, its numbers do not register. The Navy has articulated no such strategy today. What is the Navy’s idea of victory or how it is to be achieved? How do different concepts of a future fleet’s composition connect with a plan to defeat an adversary, in this
case, China? These questions precede all others in creating effective strategy. The questions have barely been asked, much less answered.

Secretary of Defense Mark Esper’s announced plan to create a fleet of over 355 ships, primarily by relying upon unmanned platforms to mitigate costs and increase flexibility and lethality, is to be commended. But the choices made in the 1990s that shrank the US industrial base make rapid construction extremely difficult—and, one should note in a maritime context, so does the US government’s inability to support a domestic merchant marine. The US will therefore be forced to rely upon so-called legacy platforms to fill out its fleet, perhaps even into the 2050s, as the projected advanced unmanned and stealth systems come online.

Once again, therefore, we return to ships like the Bonhomme Richard. Removing even one Wasp-class LHD from the current fleet cuts the Navy’s amphibious force down to nine ships, only seven of which have an amphibious well deck and a flight deck. The Navy can authorize the purchase of another America-class LHA, the Flight 1 variants of which have a well deck. But that carries a nearly $4 billion price tag. The Navy’s shipbuilding account is already squeezed between competing priorities, specifically the Columbia-class ballistic missile submarine, the already-authorized Flight 1 America-class LHAs, and the future supercarrier USS Enterprise. Without Congressional assistance, the Navy can only increase its America-class buy if it cuts funding from other areas.

Alternatively, as noted above, the Navy can repair the Bonnie Dick. But even assuming repairs cost no more than $1.5 billion, it is unclear if the maritime industrial base has the capacity, both human and physical, to commit to a long-term repair job alongside current building contracts. Particularly if the Bonnie Dick is sent to the Ingalls yard in Pascagoula, Mississippi—which seems likely, as Ingalls constructed the ship in the first place—then this would occupy a major manufacturer’s only dry dock.

By contrast, West Coast repair would tie up one of only seven yards for over a year. A final option could be re-activating a retired Tarawa-class amphibious assault ship and using it as a stopgap until enough America-class ships have been built to replace it. However, the two candidates for this approach, the Peleliu and Tarawa, have been in the Navy’s fleet reserve for five and ten years, respectively. Reactivating either ship will strain the Navy’s personnel system. Indeed, the Navy has not conducted a major warship reactivation since the mid-1980s.

The dilemma raised by the Bonhomme Richard’s fire and the ability to repair it transcends the size of the US combat fleet. The possible loss of a single ship raises the question of what kind of fleet is needed and the far more important question—as yet, unanswered—of what US maritime strategy will be as peer competition grows.
About Hudson Institute

Hudson Institute is a research organization promoting American leadership and global engagement for a secure, free, and prosperous future.

Founded in 1961 by strategist Herman Kahn, Hudson Institute challenges conventional thinking and helps manage strategic transitions to the future through interdisciplinary studies in defense, international relations, economics, health care, technology, culture, and law.

Hudson seeks to guide public policy makers and global leaders in government and business through a vigorous program of publications, conferences, policy briefings and recommendations.

Visit www.hudson.org for more information.

Hudson Institute
1201 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Fourth Floor
Washington, D.C. 20004

+1.202.974.2400
info@hudson.org
www.hudson.org

© 2020 Hudson Institute, Inc. All rights reserved.

About the Author

Seth Cropsey

Senior Fellow & Director, Center for American Seapower

Seth Cropsey began his career in government at the Defense Department as Assistant to the Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and subsequently served as Deputy Undersecretary of the Navy in the Reagan and Bush administrations. In the Bush administration, Cropsey moved to the Office of the Secretary of Defense to become acting assistant secretary, and then principal deputy assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict. Cropsey served as a naval officer from 1985-2004. From 1982 to 1984, Cropsey directed the editorial policy of the Voice of America. Returning to public diplomacy in 2002 as director of the US government’s International Broadcasting Bureau, Cropsey supervised the agency as successful efforts were undertaken to increase radio and television broadcasting to the Muslim world. Cropsey’s work in the private sector includes reporting for Fortune magazine and as a visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, and as director of the Heritage Foundation’s Asia Studies Center from 1991 to 1994.