

State of the Navy 2023

Has the fleet settled on a consensus shipbuilding plan just in time to be disrupted by the unmanned revolution?

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When U.S. Navy leaders unveiled their [fourth](#) long-term shipbuilding plan in as many years last April, lawmakers were a bit surprised to see it take the form of a menu.

“The 30-year plan—this year’s edition of the annual update required by Congress—offers definite quantities of various ship types only out to 2027,” [wrote](#) *Defense One*’s Caitlin Kenney. “To cover the rest of the years through 2052, the [28-page document](#) offers three sets of numbers—albeit with a common plan for ship retirements.” Each option calls for shrinking the fleet now to free up funds to enlarge it later.

Navy officials said this unusual offering reflected the rising difficulty of looking forward more than about a decade. But after several years of rip-it-up-and-start-over, the fiscal-2023 plan may also be a somewhat desperate attempt to chart a course that the Navy and its contractors can follow for at least a few budget cycles.

The planning turmoil of the past few years has not helped solve the central conundrum: to [keep up with China](#), the U.S. Navy needs far more ships than its recent budgets will support.

In November, the Congressional Budget Office [calculated](#) that the three alternatives in the Navy’s new plan “would require average annual shipbuilding appropriations that were 23 percent to 35 percent more than the average over the past five years.”

Over the next three decades, total shipbuilding costs would average about \$30 billion to \$33 billion in today’s dollars, by CBO’s estimate—which, by the way, is “14 percent to 18 percent more than the Navy estimates.”

So how did this go over on Capitol Hill? [Not great](#). Lawmakers [threw in](#) more money for ships, adding five to the Navy’s original request for eight. But they also rejected entreaties to allow the retirement of various ships that Navy leaders say soak up money better put toward newer vessels.

In particular, lawmakers and Navy leaders have diverged over plans for the amphibious fleet, the warships that haul and support a [fast-evolving](#) Marine Corps. Both houses of Congress approved a floor of 31 amphibs and [added funding](#) for a seventeenth LPD-17 amphibious transport dock after hearing impassioned [testimony](#) from a Marine general, moves that drew a White House [complaint](#) on behalf of the Navy.

Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday and Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David Berger have since tried to [paint themselves](#) as on the same page, but the future makeup of the amphibious fleet remains under active debate. The Navy’s latest stance is not even public; the amphib study it sent to Congress on Dec. 28 [remains classified](#).

What is known is that the Navy has brought its orders of new amphibs to a “[strategic pause](#)” while it studies further how many ships it wants and what they should do.

Part of the gray area concerns a proposed new warship dubbed “[Light Amphibious Warship](#)” by the Navy and “[Landing Ship Medium](#)” by the Marines. While emerging Marine doctrine and [operating concepts](#) talk about holding and fighting

from small forward outposts during a conflict, it's still [unclear](#) whether the Corps expects Navy ships to resupply such outposts under fire. The answer will deeply shape the new ship's size, armament, and capabilities.

In the meantime, the Navy is trying to stay nimble enough to take advantage of developments in the field of drones and autonomous weapons. The service has long [wrestled](#) with how to count unmanned vessels in its long-term fleet plans, and has [struggled](#) to convince Congress that it has a solid vision for harnessing them. But a year after the Bahrain-based [Task Force 59](#) began vigorous real-world experiments with drones above, on, and under the surface of Mideast waters, the Navy appears to be learning quickly and is determined to apply the lessons that emerge.

Still, existential conflict can drive innovation even faster than the most determined peacetime experimenters. The war in Ukraine is pioneering [drone strikes](#) of unprecedented range and destructiveness. The new capabilities demonstrated by cheap(ish) commercial drones and [satcom terminals](#)—combined with the growing realization that America cannot produce enough missiles to fight China anytime soon—has led to arguments that the Navy needs to think even more differently, even more quickly.

“The defense establishment must not pretend that simply opening the money spigots will provide the missiles that will enable the U.S. military to fight the way it wants to against the People’s Liberation Army. Instead, U.S. forces must adopt new concepts and tactics that can win with the weapons and systems they can field this year and next,” the Hudson Institute’s Bryan Clark [wrote](#) in *Defense One*.

The rise of unmanned systems will not arrive soon enough to relieve the Navy’s manning problems. The good news is that more sailors are [choosing to stay Navy](#); the bad news is that not enough civilians are joining them. After hitting its recruiting goal in 2022, the Navy upped its target for 2023 by [nearly 10 percent](#) into the teeth of a hot labor market. “When unemployment is as low as it is, it’s historically always been difficult to recruit into our armed service,” Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro said last month at the National Press Club.

The shortfall is causing ships to deploy shorthanded. Last October, the service reported some 9,000 empty at-sea billets—up from just 792 in 2016, though down from more than 14,000 in 2012, *USNI News* [wrote](#).

Del Toro is also keeping an eye on workforce gaps at the nation’s public and private naval shipyards. “We need to increase legal immigration,” he said. “When you have unemployment of less than 4 percent, it makes it hard to find workers, whether for a restaurant or a shipyard.” He called on Congress to work with the Biden administration on immigration reforms.

In the meantime, the Navy secretary said, service leaders have continued to refine their long-term shipbuilding plan for inclusion in the 2024 budget request, now just weeks away. Lawmakers will be waiting.