

KEY CHOICES CONFRONTING NAVAL SHIPBUILDING (I)

Loren B. Thompson, Ph.D.

Aside from aging aircraft, shipbuilding is the biggest question mark in the new administration's military investment plans. The 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review recommended a naval force structure of about 300 surface ships and submarines, supposedly the number needed to meet global commitments. However, as the chart below shows, current shipbuilding plans do not sustain such a posture over **the long run**.

The present plan envisions construction of 64 naval vessels between 2001-2010. If you assume an average service life of 30 years per vessel, that adds up to a Navy of 200 ships, not 300. The Congressional Budget Office estimates the "Ship Construction, Navy" budget is short about \$1.4 billion per year through 2020. Deputy Chief of Naval Operations VADM Edmund Giambastiani recently seemed to suggest an annual shortfall of over \$4 billion. Someone is going to have to make some hard choices.

Among the three major categories of warships, **submarines** are the only platform with assured survivability over the long run. Because they are stealthy, subs can gather intelligence, launch surprise attacks against land targets and accomplish other missions beyond the capability of surface vessels. The Joint Chiefs say they need 68 nuclear-powered attack subs in 2015, 20% more than today's 56. But at one or two ships per year, sub construction won't be able to keep up with retirements in the next decade. This is the last area where cuts should occur.

Nobody seriously expects the Navy to operate fewer than 12 **aircraft carriers**, or build less than one new carrier every five years. By the end of the decade, a single carrier air wing will be able to launch over 200 strike sorties per day, day or night and in any weather, precisely targeting over a thousand aimpoints every 24 hours. With access to foreign air bases declining, naval aviation could become the leading edge of U.S. air power in the years ahead. Since threats to U.S. carriers remain mostly in the hypothetical category, there's no good reason to make cuts here.

That leaves surface combatants -- **destroyers** and cruisers -- as the wild card. The key decision point comes this year, when the Navy has to decide whether to keep its new DD-21 land-attack destroyer on course for initial production in 2005. Next time, a look at the political and operational implications of delaying.

Navy Ship Construction Plan

	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10
CV-77 carrier	1	•	•	•	•	1	•	•	•	•
SSN-774 sub	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	-3
DDG-51*	3	2	2	2	•	•	•	•	•	•
DD/SC-21*	-	-	-	-	1	-	3	3	3	3
LPD-17 amphib	1	-	2	2	2	1	-	-	-	-
LHD-1 amphib	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-
T-AKE cargo	1	1	1	1	2	3	2	1	-	-
JCC command	-	-	-	1	1	1	1	-	-	-
Total	7	4	6	7	8	7	8	6	5	6

* DDG-51 is the **Arleigh Burke-class** destroyer; DD-21 is the next generation "land-attack" destroyer.