
Defense Report

AUSA



Eight High-Speed Cargo Ships — A Partial Answer to a Big Military Problem

The recent rejection by the House Armed Services Committee of a long-term development program for a new strategic cargo aircraft serves to reemphasize the problems the United States faces in protecting its vital interests overseas. Whatever weaknesses the development program may have had, its rejection ignores the question of how we could move substantial numbers of troops and their equipment to a trouble spot somewhere in the world and keep them supplied after they got there.

And of course airlift is not the only answer. By their very nature, airplanes are limited in the size and weight of the cargo they can carry and the bigger they get the greater becomes the requirement for long, heavy-duty runways at both ends of their routes. Using the seas, rather than the airways, to move the heavy equipment and supplies is far more efficient. For example, if we planned to move a mechanized division from the United States to an area where there is no prepositioned equipment (that means anywhere but Europe) we would have to move the division's 16,000 soldiers plus 50,000 tons of cargo. To do this by air would require 400 trips by the giant C-5A transports (the Air Force has just 70 of them when they are all in flying condition) and 1,200 trips by C-141s (There are 234 of them in the full-strength fleet). By contrast, the equipment for the whole division could move on just three large, properly equipped cargo ships.

The United States merchant fleet has about one-third as many ships today as it had at the outset of World War II and most of today's cargo ships are so dependent on shoreside loading and unloading equipment that they would be of little value in a troop deployment anywhere except to a highly developed port. The Navy's Military Sealift Command has few ships that could be taken off their normal supply runs to aid in a troop deployment. The scarcity of defense funds over the past ten years has obviated the possibility of increasing the Navy's cargo-carrying capacity without letting the combatant fleet fall further behind the expanding Soviet Navy.

In the past few months, though, some unique assistance on the sealift front has become available in the form of eight of the fastest cargo ships afloat. Originally built for Sea-Land Services, Inc., a major containership operator, the eight SL-7s, as they are called, can operate at 33-knot speeds. The skyrocketing cost of fuel has made them impractical for day-to-day cargo carrying, but they are well-suited for use in a military emergency. Their speed would enable a small group of them to put a division of troops, complete with equipment, ashore in Europe in four days and in the Mideast in 11 days. The Navy will acquire the ships through the Maritime Administration and will make extensive modifications to permit vehicles to drive onto the ships and off again at the destination.

This action makes good sense because the cost of procuring the ships is relatively low and, even allowing for time to make the modifications, they will be available in the near term, not at some vague point in the future. They will provide a capability we need now!

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