
Defense Report

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The Army Moves Best by Ship — And There Are Not Enough of the Right Kind

The U.S. Army does not expect to fight in Nebraska or New Jersey but hopes to extend the front line of the nation's defenses as far away from our shores as possible. Together with our other armed services, the Army represents our best effort to deter war totally and, should that deterrence fail, to keep any resulting warfare away from our soil. Quite obviously, this means that we must be prepared to move the Army and its necessary support to any corner of the world. Our ability to do that quickly is very much in doubt.

To be sure, the Army has an entire airborne division and a number of smaller units that can be rapidly deployed by air and introduced to combat in a matter of hours. But because these units are lightly equipped to make them airmobile they lack some of the firepower, ground mobility and sustaining capability they would need to fight an enemy with substantially superior numbers or with armor-heavy forces. To bring the full weight of the Army's combat power to bear we must be ready to move armored, mechanized and infantry divisions fast enough to reinforce the airborne troopers before they exhaust their limited staying power.

It is technically feasible to move any of these other divisions by air, but the effort to airlift the tanks, armored personnel carriers, artillery and other heavy equipment of a mechanized division would require the all-out effort of the entire airlift fleet over a period of two weeks. During that time no other materiel could be moved overseas by air. Quite obviously, the way to go is by sea, but the Navy lacks a readily available capacity to move large forces. It cannot even move more than one of the three Marine Corps divisions for an amphibious landing, and even then it would take a month or more to gather all the ships.

Last year, however, with the enthusiastic support of the Army, the Navy acquired eight almost-new high speed container ships from a commercial shipping line and is preparing to convert them to roll-on-roll-off configuration. Five of these ships could move an entire Army mechanized division to a Middle East trouble spot in just 11 days at their operating speed of 33 knots.

This is exactly the kind of capability the Navy needs to play its role as the sealift manager for all the services. By having the full fleet of eight high-speed ships available for the rapid deployment of the first wave of Army divisions, along with their support and supplies, the Navy could buy enough time to mobilize ships in the reserve fleet and to begin gathering the commercial shipping that would become available in an emergency.

Conversion of these ships to their more desirable roll-on-roll-off form should progress as rapidly as possible. They are a very practical investment in improving the credibility of our deterrence.