
Defense Report

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Sealift—A Landpower Essential

Much has been said, and large amounts of money have been appropriated by Congress recently to enable the U.S. Navy to rebuild its combat fleet in order to preserve the freedom of the seas which this nation has so zealously defended from its birth.

Much less has been said, and much less money has been appropriated to reinvigorate our merchant marine to support adequately U.S. worldwide trade or to provide the military and/or commercial sealift that will assure our ability to deploy and sustain our forces where they may be needed in defense of our vital national interests.

For a nation, which has always prided itself on its merchant marine and which has demonstrated an unmatched ability to lift and sustain forces overseas, to allow its merchant marine and military sealift resources to disintegrate as we have can only be a source of embarrassment, even shame. Worse, it is a critical threat to our national security and freedom.

Although the causes differ, they seem to reflect the same shortcoming—putting selfish interests ahead of the common good. In the former case, extremely high wages and costly working conditions priced U.S. flag ships off the high seas; in the latter, failure of the Navy to provide resources for a support function has left its sealift assets woefully short.

The Navy now has a strategic sealift program; but our NATO commitment—ten divisions in less time than we can now get them there—demands more sealift than we can count in that program. Moreover, the Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) requires sealift if our ability to deploy and sustain the RDF in militarily significant numbers is to be credible to friend and foe alike.

In short, the Navy's program not only fails to meet Army and Marine requirements, but even what it promises is found mostly in the "out years," that period of the five-year defense program which is notorious for including things that never progress to the building stage. It behoves the Navy to take another look at its priorities and identify and allocate those resources needed to assure that this nation's landpower forces—Army and Marine—can be deployed, supported and sustained, when and where needed.