

Ignoring China's Growing Sub Force

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Capt. Shen Zhongchang, a strategist from the Chinese Navy Research Institute, predicted in 1996 that the most powerful naval weapon in future warfare would be submarines. Shen wrote: "After the First World War, the dominant vessel was the battleship. In the Second World War, it was the aircraft carrier. If another global war breaks out, the most powerful weapon will be the submarine."

Since then, China has embarked on an aggressive buildup that will give it at least twice as many modern submarines as the United States by the next decade.

The Department of Defense is ignoring China's subsurface strategy. In fact, it is moving in the opposite direction with two policy recommendations: a large-scale reduction in the fast-attack submarine force and the closure of the New London submarine base in Groton, the Navy's center of excellence for undersea warfare since its inception.

The idea is to eliminate subs so that we don't need sub bases. The two are linked because the Navy cannot sustain an adequate submarine force without the piers and facilities in New London.

Delivered to Congress two months before the Pentagon announced its base closure recommendations, the plan would reduce the submarine fleet by 21 percent, from 54 boats today to 41 or less in 2025. The cut is a drastic departure from the last dozen studies, the vast majority of which called for a future sub force of at least 55. The new plan contradicts our top war fighters' best judgment. Last month, the commander of the U.S. submarine force testified to Congress that the Navy requires 54 vessels now and into the future.

Senior officers on the front line reject a smaller submarine force because the Navy is already unable to fulfill one-third of its missions - including those used to collect intelligence on terrorism and mass-destruction weapons. They understand that only a fraction of the submarine force can respond to crises at any time, and that foreign threats are growing exponentially.

China is buying modern submarines by the dozen, with no less than 18 under construction today, about half in Russian shipyards. The U.S. Navy now buys just one submarine a year, a track that will leave the force in the 30s by 2025.

The Defense Department's new submarine plan rests on an overly optimistic assessment - bad news because our intelligence community has consistently been surprised by China's military modernization program, most recently when Beijing launched an entire new class of submarines without our knowledge. The Navy office responsible for coordinating

submarine force planning disagrees with such optimistic assumptions, but has been overruled.

The Defense Department plan ignores the likelihood that future vessels will be cheaper as maturing technologies reduce the size and crews of attack submarines - critical points that defense leaders in Congress recently made to the BRAC Commission.

The "silent service" is trying to tell the country that the Navy needs the facilities in Groton to support the leanest submarine fleet necessary to meet our national security requirements. We hope the BRAC Commission will listen.

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