Alternative Ships for the Future Fight: Commandant, Others Call for More and Different Classes of Ships for 'Great Power' Showdown

The expeditionary fast transport (EPF) USNS Millinocket navigates in front of the littoral combat ship USS Montgomery for an exercise in October. EPFs, operated by Military Sealift Command and crewed by civilian mariners, are among the top candidates to help form a nontraditional fleet of supply and troop transport ships. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Christopher A. Veloicaza

The growing military capabilities and escalating belligerence of China, Russia and Iran are increasing the possibility that the U.S. Navy's unarmed and thin-skinned support and supply ships – and even U.S. commercial cargo vessels – could face hostile action for the first time since World War II.

The potential that these ships and their crews of civilian mariners could be exposed to deadly weapons was strengthened when the Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps said he might need these and other unconventional vessels to augment or replace traditional amphibious warships to transport and sustain his Marines during expeditionary operations in heavily contested littoral waters.

Check out the digital edition of December's *Seapower* magazine here.

This emerging danger and the need for a broader concept of expeditionary vessels was bluntly stated by Gen. David H. Berger in his “Commandant’s Planning Guidance,” released July 17, in which he said:

“Our nation’s ability to project power and influence beyond its shores is increasingly challenged by long-range precision fires; expanding air, surface and subsurface threats; and the continued degradation of our amphibious and auxiliary ship readiness. The ability to project and maneuver from strategic distances will likely be detected and contested from the point of embarkation during a major contingency. Our naval expeditionary forces must possess a variety of deployment options, including L-class and E-class ships, but also increasingly look to other available options such as unmanned platforms, stern landing vessels, other ocean-going connectors, and smaller more lethal and more risk-worthy platforms. We must continue to seek the affordable and plentiful at the expense of the exquisite and few when conceiving of the future amphibious portion of our fleet.”

L-class ships are the traditional amphibious platforms, such as amphibious assault ships (LHA) and amphibious transport docks (LPD), which are built to military

standards and crewed by uniformed Sailors. E-class ships are newer types of auxiliary or support vessels, such as the expeditionary transport dock (ESD) ships and expeditionary fast transports (EPF), which are operated by the Military Sealift Command (MSC), are built to commercial classification and crewed mainly by civilian mariners.

Berger Suggests More 'Black-Bottom' Ships

In his guidance, Berger also suggests using "commercially available ships and craft that are smaller and less expensive" and "a wider array of smaller 'black-bottom' ships" that "might supplement the maritime preposition and amphibious fleets." Black-bottom ships usually refer to commercial vessels.

In March, Dakota Wood, a retired Marine officer and defense analyst at The Heritage Foundation, released the Marine Corps edition of the foundation's "Rebuilding America's Military" series. In that report, Wood said, "The supporting amphibious fleet is limited to a small number of ships and only a portion of those would be available for an operation in one part of the world." He recommended the naval services "redefine amphibious shipping and support capability requirements to account for combat operations in a contested littoral environment in support of a naval campaign." The Marines, Wood said, "must work with the Navy to develop

smaller, lower cost
ships that are better suited to the type of dispersed operational posture
implied by LOCE [Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment],” which is a
new Marine concept for expeditionary operations.

U.S. Marines assigned to a Fleet Anti-Terrorism Security Team approach the Arc Liberty, a Military Sealift Command chartered vessel, in the Persian Gulf to provide security during a Strait of Hormuz transit. It’s this type of mixture of U.S. and maritime forces that the commandant of the Marine Corps and others envision. U.S. Navy/Marine Corps Cpl. Tanner A. Gerst

Earlier this year, the Center of
Strategic and Budgetary Assessments released a detailed report focused on the
maritime logistic forces, calling them “inadequate to support” the national
defense strategy and “major military operations against China or Russia.” Echoing
Berger’s views, CSBA said the logistic fleet was too small and had the wrong
types of ships to transport and sustain U.S. forces in waters defended by enemy
missiles, submarines and aircraft. Failing to remedy those shortcomings, the
report said, “could cause the United States to lose a war and fail its allies
and partners in their hour of need.”

Fortunately,
MSC and other defense organizations have recognized this growing danger and are
taking steps to better prepare those ships and crews for possibly going into
harm’s way. And the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps have joined in

developing an Integrated Naval Force Structure Assessment for next year that could address Berger's need for a larger and more diverse expeditionary support fleet and the associated risk to the logistical and sealift ships if they have to operate in contested waters.

The threat to those support forces was recognized in 2017 by the MSC commander at the time, Rear Adm. Dee Mewbourne, who told *Seapower,* "The debate over whether we're in contested waters is over. We are sailing in contested waters," and the threat could get worse. With the "adversaries' rapid improvements" in military capabilities while his command has remained relatively static, "the capability of an adversary will exceed our capability. We need to bend the curve" and to change directions to be able "to operate in all the changing environments from peace to full combat."

> *"When our ships are sailing in a contested environment, the threats they could face are evolving all the time."*
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> *Navy Capt. Hans Lynch*

Mewbourne said what worried him was the Navy's slow response to the German submarine threat during the World War II cost America at least 600 merchant ships and more than 1,000 mariners. And in the Pacific, the Navy had to

fight for sea control to be able to support the campaign against Japan. Now he sees growing threats from China's rapidly improving military capabilities, a resurgent Russia and even from violent extremists in the Middle East, indicated by missile attacks on unarmed ships.

In response, Mewbourne said, MSC established a training division "to prepare our mariners to sail in contested water," to ensure they are aware that the decades of uncontested seas are gone, and they know how to avoid enemy detection and to survive if attacked. He is now deputy commander of the U.S. Transportation Command (TRANSCOM), which oversees MSC and the other logistical ships operated by the Maritime Administration (MARAD), led by retired Rear Adm. Mark Buzby, who strongly endorsed CSBA's findings.

TACAD
Trains Mariners to Operate in Contested Waters

In 2017, MSC also created the Tactical Advisor (TACAD) program, which uses Navy Reserve officers, who are licensed mariners in their civilian jobs, to provide training and guidance to the officers of MSC vessels on how to operate in a hostile environment. That new capability was tested during a short-notice "turbo activation" of 33 MSC and MARAD ships in September, in which five sealift

vessels conducted convoy operations against simulated enemy threats, with the support of TACAD officers.

“When our ships are sailing in a contested environment, the threats they could face are evolving all the time,” said Navy Capt. Hans Lynch, MSC’s Atlantic Commodore and who directed the East Coast activation. “The biggest threats we face include hostile submarines and mines, and these are the threats we were training for during the turbo activation.” They trained the crews to “sail their ships as quietly as possible” to prevent detection of their electromagnetic signatures “because our ships also could face anti-ship ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, fighter aircraft and enemy bombers,” Lynch said in a TRANSCOM release.

Each of those MSC ships sailed with a TACAD, who in addition to providing training served as liaison between the Navy and the civilian crews. “The TACAD program is a relatively new concept but is based on years of experience and past lessons learned,” said Cmdr. Vincent D’Eusanio, the TACAD on one of the convoy ships and MSC’s TACAD program manager. “During World War II, we lost lots of merchant ships and mariners. Some of this was a result of not knowing how to sail a merchant ship in a hostile environment. When the Navy

began to train mariners to counter threats, like the German U-boats, our losses dwindled."

"We really need to continue to apply energy to the TACAD program," Lynch said. "I think we need to expand what they are being exposed to" beyond the MSC sealift fleet "to other platforms and the combatant ships and aircraft to better understand what they bring to the table and broaden their experience."

The Navy announced Oct. 31 that Marines and Sailors from the Fleet Anti-Terrorist Security Team Central Command embarked on the MSC chartered commercial vessel Arc Liberty from Oct. 21 to Oct. 24 during a transit of the Strait of Hormuz, where Iran has seized two commercial ships and shot down a Navy RQ-4 Triton unmanned aircraft.

Rear Adm. Michael A. Wettlaufer, the current MSC commander, said he did not think the threat to his ships was anything new. "It was always a possibility that our ships could go into harm's way." What may be new "is the expanded acknowledgement of 'Great Power Competition' – sort of noncombat at this time but potentially some level of conflict," Wettlaufer said in an interview with *Seapower*.

"What

are we doing? We're training like crazy, because that's what we do. We're the military," he said.

Because most of the military's maritime logistics and support ships are leased or on contract with commercial firms or are in MARAD's reserve fleet, and MSC does not get access to them until they are activated, Wettlaufer said, "We rely on some of that training to occur at the [mariners] union level." MSC provides an unclassified basic operation course and has started an advanced course for senior mariners.

"At the MSC level, our own sealift folks have the same process. And, with the MSC force that is operating all the time … in a continuing contested environment – physical, kinetic, information and cyber – our folks are training all the time," he said.

Turbo Activation 'Great for the Mariners'

Wettlaufer said the convoy operation during the turbo activation was "great for the mariners because they don't often get a change to steam in formation. … Those are skill sets that need to be mastered." The TACADs assigned to those ships brought Navy communications equipment on board, which is necessary because "you can't do anything if you can't communicate as the Navy and the

joint force
needs us to do.”

For
the activation, the admiral said he deployed the MSC commodores for the
Atlantic and Pacific, who are active Navy captains on his staff. And his flag
aide at Norfolk headquarters is a strategic sealift officer (SSO), a licensed
mariner who helps him understand how the commercial fleets work. MSC has more
than 2,000 TACADs and SSOs it can deploy to advise and assist civilian mariners
during missions. They are mainly Navy Reserve officers and in some cases are graduates
of one of the federally supported maritime academies who have a reserve
commitment, which they fulfill when activated as TACADs.

Wettlaufer noted that after the Cold War ended “the maritime academies stopped teaching some of the military things that we used to teach … and that created a hole in knowledge. That’s one of the reasons the TACAD program is there, to try to bridge that gap on what the Navy might need and how we operate between a master and the captain of a Navy ship.

“We are looking at a holistic approach to the problem. But the real point here is warfighting effectiveness. That is our job. We support the warfighter. We support the joint force, and if we can’t do that, then we’re not contributing to warfighting and effectiveness.”