

Esper's Preview of Future Fleet Advocates More Attack Submarines



Defense Secretary Dr. Mark T. Esper delivers remarks at RAND Santa Monica, Calif., Sept. 16, 2020. DoD / Lisa Ferdinando
WASHINGTON – Defense Secretary Mark Esper said the U.S. Navy needs a fleet of more than 500 manned and unmanned ships, including more attack submarines.

“ We need to build more attack submarines,” Esper said, speaking Oct. 6 at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Analysis, a Washington think tank, announcing that the Defense Department is in the process of releasing the Future Naval Force Study for Battle Force 2045 and the 30-year shipbuilding plan.

Battle Force 2045 is a plan to build an affordable, lethal, aware fleet of more than 500 manned and unmanned ships, able to maintain maritime superiority over the growing naval power of near-peer competitors China and Russia.

He said the Navy is on a path to reach its previous goal of 355 ships by 2035 in an anticipated era of budget austerity.

Esper said Battle Force 2045 would feature:

- A larger, more capable force of 70 to 80 submarines, which would be increased up by building three attack submarines (SSNs) annually; pursuing the next-generation SSN; and refueling seven Los Angeles-class SSNs. The Columbia-class ballistic missile submarine program would proceed as planned.
- A force of 8 to 11 aircraft carriers for the high-end fight – equipped with the carrier air wing of the

future. The Navy will study the possibility of building up to six light carriers – equipped with short takeoff/vertical landing strike aircraft – to free up the super carriers for the high-end fight.

- A force of 140 to 240 unmanned or optionally manned surface and subsurface vessels, for missions such as missile strikes and mining.
- A force of more and smaller future surface combatants, about 60 to 70, including the new guided-missile frigate, able to “deliver long-range precision fires in volume.”
- A combat logistic force of 70 to 90 ships to sustain fleet.
- Sufficient sealift ships to transport ground forces to theaters of conflict.
- Ship-based unmanned aircraft of all types.
- An amphibious warfare force of 50 to 60 ships, including the types needed to support the Future Force vision of Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David H. Berger.

Esper said Battle Force 2045 would require additional shipbuilding funds, for which Congressional support would be needed, that would rival the Reagan build-up of the fleet in the 1980s. He also said he would request statutory authority to divert unexpended funds from the Navy at the end of each fiscal year to invest into shipbuilding. He also stressed the need to divest some legacy systems to free up funds for modernization.

He also said the Navy would need increased shipyard capacity – in the Navy’s four shipyards and in the shipbuilding industry’s yards – to build and maintain the 500+ ships of Battle Force 2045.