

Former Pacific Fleet Intel Director Warns of Widening Gap Between Chinese, U.S. Fleet Buildup



Chinese navy ships steam in formation as part of a replenishment-at-sea approach exercise during Rim of the Pacific. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Jason Noble

The Chinese navy already is larger than the U.S. Navy and is building ships four times as fast, with a firm goal of achieving sea control by 2030 and naval superiority by 2039, a former Pacific Fleet director of intelligence warns.

“The biggest challenge for U.S. national security leaders for the next 30 years is the speed and sustainability of the [People’s Republic of China] national effort to deploy a global navy,” retired Navy Capt. James Fanell said.

By 2220, the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) will have more than 450 surface warships and a submarine force approaching 110, Fanell told a May 14 Hudson Institute forum. And in its rapid move from a force of small ships mainly engaged in coastal operations into a large fleet capable of extended blue-water operations, the PLAN now exceeds the U.S. Navy not just in numbers but in tonnage, Fanell

said.

The U.S. Navy has 289 ships in the active battle fleet, including 80 submarines and counting the 14 ballistic-missile subs and four guided-missile boats. Navy leaders have set a goal of a 355-ship battle force, but the fleet would not reach that strength until the 2030s at projected building rates.

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In the last decade, China has launched more ships than any other country in the world, outbuilding the U.S. Navy four to one, Fanell said, displaying a slide showing the United States building 22 ships to the PLAN’s 85 warships from 2015 to 2018. “I expect the [PLAN] will continue to surpass the U.S. Navy in new ships in the next decade.”

And the Chinese have an even greater advantage in ship-based anti-ship missiles, Fanell added, with more weapons and missiles that have longer range and are faster than what the U.S. Navy fields. He noted that a new class of PLAN guided-missile destroyers has 132 vertical-launch missile tubes.

Over the last decade, the PLAN has gained valuable experience with task force deployments not only in its regional waters but in the Eastern Pacific, the Indian Ocean and recently into the Atlantic Ocean, Fanell said. He predicted there would be even more operations closer to U.S. coastlines.

<https://youtu.be/BUZhxUABWpo>

A career intelligence officer who served most of his time in the Pacific with aviation units, carrier strike groups and then with the Pacific Fleet staff, Fanell said that, for most of his time in uniform, U.S. national security officials have refused to acknowledge the growing threat from China and its determination to supplant the United States as the dominate power in the western Pacific. He said that changed with the new National Security and National Defense Strategies released last year, which recognized China – and Russia – as strategic rivals and acknowledged the return to “Great Power Competition.”

The rapidly growing PLAN “will increasingly challenge us,” and given its ship production projections and its experience of operating farther from China, “we can assess that the PLA Navy is on track to gain sea control by 2030 and superiority by 2039,” Fanell said. The only way to prevent that is by acknowledging the threat

and conducting a whole-of-government campaign to counter its power, which he said the Trump administration has shown the willingness to do.