

Joint Chiefs Chairman Says Bigger Fleet Needed to Check China, But Budget Growth Unlikely



Army Gen. Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, speaks in a virtual meeting during a U.S. Naval War College Advanced Flag and Executive Course (AFLEX) at the Pentagon, Oct. 26, 2020. DOD / Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Carlos M. Vazquez II

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Navy will have to significantly increase the size of the fleet in coming decades to deter China from a risky escalation of the great power competition, the Defense Department’s top uniformed officer says.

“We’re maritime nation,” the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Army Gen. Mark Milley, told the U.S. Naval Institute’s Dec. 3 Defense Forum Washington webcast. “And the defense of the United States depends on air power and sea power, primarily.”

Milley said the international rule-based order that arose after World War II, and for seven decades was maintained by the U.S. Navy “perhaps more than any other element,” is under stress, from climate change and the economic distress caused by the coronavirus pandemic to the diffusion of power, from two Cold War super powers, to regional powers like Russia, Iran and North Korea. If that order falls apart, Milley warned, the great power competition could “turn into great power war.”

The transformation of China into the world’s second-largest economy, with an equally robust military, both in size and capability, poses a “longer term, almost existential

challenge," Milley said. "I'm not saying you're going to have a war with China. I'm saying we want to prevent a war with China."

However, it will take large investment in U.S. forces to prevent that from happening, he said.

"We're going to have to have a much larger fleet than we have today, if we're serious about great power competition and deterring great power war, and if we're serious about dominant capability over something like China or some other power that has significant capability," Milley said.

However, he expects funding to be tight.

"We need, roughly speaking, a consistent, predictable and timely budget that gives about 3 to 5 percent real growth," Milley said. But with the demand to address the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and the damage it's done to the U.S. economy, "I don't see that as a realistic thing in the coming year."

Acquiring a 500-plus-ship Navy in the next 25 years, as recommended in the Pentagon's Battle Force 2045 plan, is "an aim point, an aspiration" Miley said, but to stay ahead of China and other competitors may require at least 500 ships in the future. As many as 140 to 250 vessels will be unmanned, he noted.

"Sailorless ships, robots on the water and under the water. That's as big a change as going from sail to coal," Milley said.

The U.S. Navy will also need between 70 and 90 more submarines, he added.

In the changing battle environment, air, land and sea forces will need to be small, widely distributed and difficult to detect while remaining movable and highly lethal using long

range precision, directed fires, Milley said. Unlike the conflicts in the Middle East and Afghanistan, the environment in a great power battle will be contested, and "all forces are going to have to assume they are going to be cut off. So tactical data is essential," Milley added.