

Thoughts on the global 1,000-ship Navy

A 'new naval era' begins as Navy grapples with shipbuilding plans

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Posted : Monday Feb 5, 2007 5:29:51 EST

SAN DIEGO — The success of a global “1,000-ship navy” will hinge on a broader partnership with U.S. allies and trading partners and a commitment to building the Navy’s future fleet to support maritime security missions, lofty goals that may fall short in funding, several military experts said during a defense conference here.

As envisioned, the global maritime force would patrol the high seas and secure ports and waterways. The concept, developed in 2005 by Vice Adm. John G. Morgan Jr. and Rear Adm. Charles Martoglio, is getting serious review by the top brass. But its fate faces threats from tight defense budgets and ongoing debates over the Navy’s shipbuilding plans.

“America enjoys a global reach. We enjoy global influence. We enjoy global access,” Morgan, deputy chief of naval operations for information, plans and strategy told a lunchtime audience Jan. 31 at the “West 2007” conference sponsored by the Armed Forces Communications and Electronics Association and the U.S. Naval Institute. “A new naval era is coming.”

This naval network is seen as a trans-national force that would expand on existing naval relationships with U.S. allies and through regional security pacts. As envisioned, it would battle piracy and smuggling of illegal drugs and people, as well as terrorists and other threats that cross national boundaries.

“It really is about a global maritime network, and it goes beyond country relationships,” Morgan said. Some 90 percent of the world’s commerce flows across the ocean, “but it’s an environment and it’s a domain that is almost wholly unregulated,” he added.

While cooperation exists in areas such as the northern Arabian Sea, which sees constant flows of oil tanker and cargo ships, other places are lacking naval cooperation and in the sharing of information.

The global navy network will have to rely on technology that links all the players and enables the flow of information, intelligence and communications for the concept to work, said Dov Zakheim, a former Pentagon comptroller and chief financial officer who led a discussion about the future fleet with Morgan and Rear Adm. Michael Bachmann, director of the Space and Naval Warfare Command in San Diego.

The Navy’s integrated network known as ForceNET and managed by SpaWar “is the key, in many ways, to the 1,000-ship Navy. It’s the key to our Navy,” Zakheim said. But “what do you do when you don’t have enough money?”

“That’s always a challenge,” Bachmann replied, but “I see great work being done in battle-space networking.”

Zakheim expressed concern about the Navy’s future cost, especially with pressures to keep presence in some of the world’s hot spots, including Korea, China and Venezuela. “The demands facing the Navy — the big stuff — seem to be growing. And yet the fleet is clearly not growing,” he said.

“It is a major challenge for us,” Morgan said, adding “the proactive cost of defense is far more affordable than the reactive cost.”

“I don’t think Americans will have to pay for it,” he added.

If the fleet steadies out at a 313-ship force by 2020, as suggested by Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Mullen, or grows larger, it’s not clear yet what will be part of this global navy or whether the fleet could support that force. Cuts in shipbuilding plans and other funding constraints have sunken naval budgets to new lows.

Although the Navy has averaged \$11 billion annually in recent years for shipbuilding, projected growths for the Army and Marine Corps might make sustaining that level less certain.

Eric J. Labs, a Congressional Budget Office analyst, said a 313-ship fleet can’t be sustained in 20 years, and by 2037 would fall to 290 ships, about where it is today. That target “is going to crash into fiscal, political and budgetary reality,” Labs told a Feb. 1 panel on ship procurement. His 2037 prediction: A fleet of 200 to 240 ships, depending on its composition.

Frank Hoffman, a retired Marine and research fellow with the Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities, said a minimum of \$15 billion a year is needed for new ships, “not be based upon today’s or yesterday’s platforms.”

Hoffman said the Navy must look differently at its amphibious ships that carry Marines to combat.

“Tomorrow’s ‘gators’ are not the bastard stepchildren of the Navy,” he said, noting that they “are going to be the keystone to the future fleet” and an important component of the 1,000-ship concept.

Adm. James G. Stavridis, who leads the U.S. Southern Command, called the concept of the 1,000-ship navy a “coalition innovation” that will help bolster the relationships with other nations.

“We must work with our partners, our allies,” Stavridis told a lunchtime audience Feb. 1.

Morgan said many questions remain about maritime strategy and force structure.

“What is the incentive to join this global maritime network?” he said. “The world is beginning to ask this very important question about this 1,000-ship navy, and it’s a very legitimate question — what’s in it for me?”

Incentives might include the benefits from the rapid flow of commerce moving quickly through safe sea lanes and ports, saving time and money while commerce is protected from piracy.

Smaller navies with small ships might be able to play important roles in their areas, protecting their shore or offshore platforms, Zakheim agreed. “What our Navy is telling them is: You can do it, you can do it in coordination with us and you can do it without breaking your bank,” he said.