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Navy revises counting rules to add to ship numbers

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Matt Gould waits at the pier as the hospital ship USNS Comfort arrives at its new port at Norfolk Naval Station on Friday, March 1, 2013. (Thé N. Pham | The Virginian-Pilot)

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OLD VS. NEW ACCOUNTING

The Navy will begin counting two hospital ships and 10 small patrol craft deployed overseas when calculating its fleet size. The change helps offset - on paper - the loss of 10 frigates and other vessels. Under its new counting rules, the Navy figures it will have 283 ships this year, instead of 271. The Navy has more patrol craft than it will add to its count, but the names of the vessels to be reclassified were not released.

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By [Bill Bartel](#)
The Virginian-Pilot
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With a few strokes on a keyboard, the Navy's top brass avoids shrinking its 280-ship fleet next year by simply reclassifying a couple of hospital ships and its small patrol craft deployed overseas.

The changes, quietly noted in the Defense Department's 2015 budget proposal released last week, add the dozen vessels to the battle force and help make up for the planned retirement of 10 frigates, a submarine and other ships.

The Navy's proposed 2015 budget, part of a \$496 billion defense spending plan, also calls for adding eight new ships to the fleet. Under what it calls "revised counting rules," the Navy calculates, it will have 283 ships next year.

However, if the dozen existing ships aren't transferred to the battle force, the fleet drops to 271 ships.

The number of ships in the Navy's fleet can shift slightly from year to year as new vessels come on line and others are taken out of service. The number has long been used to gauge the Navy's effectiveness.

The size of the fleet is a particularly sensitive issue on Capitol Hill and in the Pentagon, where elected and military leaders are wrestling with tighter budgets and defense hawks warn that a smaller Navy endangers national security.

When asked about changes to the ship count, Navy Secretary Ray Mabus said in a statement Tuesday, "We periodically assess the rules of how we count ships, and these changes better reflect the demands of our combatant commanders and the current mission requirements of our Navy's battle force. These changes provide us with the flexibility we need to ensure we have the right ships, with the right capabilities, in the right location."

Todd Harrison, a defense analyst at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, said there's little doubt the Navy's actions are driven by worries about the overall size of the fleet.

"People should not put emphasis on the total ship count the way they do," Harrison said. "It doesn't make sense."

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To bolster a fleet that is losing larger ships, such as frigates, by adding patrol craft shows the "fallacy" of using ship counts to measure the Navy's strength, he said.

It gives a patrol craft, with a crew of 28, the same weight as an aircraft carrier, which has 3,000 sailors on board.

"A better way is looking at types of ships," he said.

The Navy's calculations for 2015 also keep in the fleet count the 11 guided missile cruisers that it would temporarily take out of service.

The intent is to free up money to modernize the aging warships before slowly reintroducing them in future years.

U.S. Rep. Randy Forbes, who leads the House Armed Services Committee's seapower and force projects subcommittee, disagrees with the Navy's approach.

The Chesapeake Republican has argued that, given the security threats worldwide, particularly in the Pacific, the Navy's fleet needs to grow to more than 300 ships.

He argued last year that the Navy has been "chronically underinvesting in its fleet for at least the last two decades."

"I am disappointed to see the Navy is now counting ships like patrol craft and hospital ships in its battle force fleet that only a year ago it chose not to count," Forbes said in a statement Tuesday. "As well, I do not believe that a ship put in a reduced status should be counted.

"With America's national security budget under severe pressure, it is imperative that the Congress and the American people be able to visualize just how radically sequestration is impacting American naval strength."

Bill Bartel, 757-446-2398, bill.bartel@pilotonline.com

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COUNTING SHIPS

Submitted by [jepster9](#) on Wed, 03/12/2014 at 5:17 am.

I remember in the 1970's when it was discovered that the Soviets had more cruisers than we did, the navy "reclassified" all DLGs to Cruisers. All of a sudden (overnight) we had more than they did! It appears the Navy's top brass today hasn't gotten any better at determining what they need. Also,

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using a single number to determine effectiveness doesn't make sense. Could it be that they don't know the threat? It does appear to keep changing. But having a fleet that is designed to go fight the Soviets (yep, they're gone) isn't the answer. Surely we have folks in our great Navy who are smart enough to figure this out.

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TRADITIONAL THREAT REMAINS

Submitted by [blackeydp](#) on Wed, 03/12/2014 at 6:24 am.

The Chinese have no Soviet Navy, but they are the biggest naval threat we face. They are building. They are challenging their neighbors and us by extension for control of the seaways in the Western Pacific. There is no doubt we maintain a technological and skilled advantage, but if the fleet of true warships continues to dwindle, then the Chinese and North Korea and Russia will likely make a timely challenge we haven't seen in decades.

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CHINA, NORTH KOREA AND RUSSIA

Submitted by [Len Rothman](#) on Wed, 03/12/2014 at 5:45 pm.

Have very little in common.

China's interests lie in trade and that requires vibrant economies who are not at war who are capable of buying their exports.

Russia's economy is almost totally supported by natural gas and oil. They need to sell to those nations who are building, making, exporting goods and services that need fossil fuels. Putin is a bit of a loose cannon, but needs money to stay in power.

North Korea is still playing the same game they have for decades. Bluster, threaten and starve. But since the leadership is basking in luxury, they will not actually do anything to lose that comfort.

Pakistan is a real concern. Nukes and terrorists are not a good mix.

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COMMON ENEMIES MAKE STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

Submitted by [20 Year Navy VET](#) on Wed, 03/12/2014 at 9:26 pm.

What do Russia, China, and North Korea have in common. A quest for natural resources in disputed territories in the Far East with many of their smaller and long-time rivals, and a extreme dislike against role in the Far East. Chinese advancements/encroachments and aggressive territorial claims on disputed waters suspected to be rich in natural resources, and islands have been flaring up over the last several years. These includes aggressive and provactive claims such as the self-declared Air Defense Zone (think Libya and the line of death), aggressive maneuvers against Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, etc.. Any void or retreat in the willingness to enforce freedom of the seas or back-up or Allies will be immediately filled.

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THE CHINESE MILITARY BUDGET HAS GROWN BY DOUBLE DIGITS

Submitted by [20 Year Navy VET](#) on Wed, 03/12/2014 at 9:34 pm.

For the last 5-7 years. This year, the "official" budget, which is believed to be low, is 12%. This is projected to remain the case for the next several years.

What does this mean? Effectively the Chinese PLA official budget will have doubled in 5-6 years. Coupled with this is their aggressive efforts to steal research and development from the U.S. and Western Power, enabling China to rapidly modernize their military and undermine our technological superiority.

The technological superiority that has saved American lives and enabled us to keep the peace, is now threatened and for the first time since World War II, can no longer be taken for granted.

The increased risks that the SECDEF said the new budget carries, means lives in combat.

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THANKS FOR THIS

Submitted by [bentler](#) on Thu, 03/13/2014 at 4:58 am.

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AN OLD SAYING...

Submitted by [marcus white](#) on Wed, 03/12/2014 at 8:24 am.

figures lie and liers figure...

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IT'S A SHAME TO SEE WHAT A SHAM

Submitted by [mikem67778](#) on Wed, 03/12/2014 at 6:55 am.

our military has become with counting non-combatants and patrol boats as combat vessels. It's no wonder that the sinister powers in the world regard us as a paper tiger. The next move will be China as they move across the Formosa straits and occupy Taiwan. We will probably have a hissy-fit and then go play a round of golf (i.e. Obama's actions on the Crimea). It's embarrassing to have elected leaders who have no clue.

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MAKES ME WONDER ...

Submitted by [Robert F.](#) on Wed, 03/12/2014 at 3:04 pm.

It makes me wonder what the real purpose is in inflating the number of ships by including obvious non-combatants is? Will they also eventually include Old Ironsides in that number? Unlike the Hospital Ships, USS Constitution IS a commissioned vessel after all.

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ACTUALLY THE USS

Submitted by [TonyL](#) on Thu, 03/13/2014 at 9:46 am.

Actually the USS Constitution and the USS Pueblo are still commissioned ships in the USN. Which are still counted against the 247 commissioned ships in the USN

This figure doesn't include MSC ships

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IT'S NOT ABOUT THE NUMBERS

Submitted by [AC1201](#) on Wed, 03/12/2014 at 7:17 am.

I would almost call counting ships "silly". I dislike that word as it presents no argument.

It's about the firepower, self-defense capability and survivability of the ship.

A CG or DDG can put more HE on target than any fleet in history and without putting pilots in harm's way. The precision is almost beyond belief. Counting ships is, to a point, pointless. Obviously, 100 is too few, but what number is enough? That depends on what roles we intend to support.

As to China and what they spend, I wish the discussion would be on what China can produce with the money they spend. Some ridicule what China is spending vs. what the US is spending, but given labor rates and production capability/\$, judging China's capability by \$ spent misleads.

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HARRISON IS RIGHT; FORBES IS WRONG

Submitted by [Truthiness](#) on Wed, 03/12/2014 at 11:00 am.

I agree that ship counts are a nearly meaningless statistic that the sea-power zealots like Forbes are inexplicably wedded to. Forbes and the shipbuilders lining his pockets will use whatever simple-minded argument they can explain to Joe Six-pack to try and funnel more defense dollars into our little slice of the military-industrial-political complex. It is harder to take a lawmaker seriously when they are primarily a shill for one special interest in their district. How about telling us what capability we lack to meet our strategy along with the risks, then develop a shipbuilding plan for a navy to meet that strategy?

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THE BOTTOMLINE - THE US REQUIRES A 314 SHIP NAVYSubmitted by **20 Year Navy VET** on Wed, 03/12/2014 at 9:40 pm.

To maintain our ability to protect the sea lanes that our nation and economy are dependent on. The numbers are easy to figure out. The rule of thumb is for every ship and crew out at sea, you need two more (total of three to conduct the mission). This account for the one deployed, one preparing to deploy, and one having just completed their deployment. On top of this, you need additional ships of the same class or capability that are out of this cycle to support long-term maintenance upgrades / shipyard periods. These periods, can be 6-18 months long, in for nuclear powered ships such as aircraft carriers, can be 3-5 years long. During this period, the ships are effectively useless due to being in a non-operational state.

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2  or  0**NICE TRY, NAVY, BUT CONGRESS WON'T BUY IT.**Submitted by **jpjones** on Wed, 03/12/2014 at 7:49 am.

As the old saying goes, "You can't BS the BSers."

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6  or  0**COMBAT CAPABLE SHIPS**Submitted by **BB61gunner** on Wed, 03/12/2014 at 8:54 am.

The Patrol Coastals, PC's, have been in service since the 90's. They have been used for vessel screenings entering our ports, Special Warfare, coastal patrols on both coasts, and have been assigned for patrol in the Gulf of oil rig platforms, etc since 9/11. While only having a 28 person crew, they pack a punch and are a capable platform in the current theater of operations. Based off of the Coast Guards 110 cutters, they have been a key asset in protecting our ports on the east and west coasts. Can they take the beating of a Frigate or Destroyer? No, not even close, but they are more maneuverable than any ship out there and with a competent crew can hold their own if required.

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1  or  1**PCS ARE NOT DESIGNED TO BE COMBATANTS**Submitted by **20 Year Navy VET** on Wed, 03/12/2014 at 9:51 pm.

They are not manned for wartime operations, nor capable of taking the fight to the our enemies. They are too big to be stealthy, draw too much draft to get in-close to shore to support Special Warfare units and DO NOT have a punch.

In this age, aircraft and anti-ship and guided missiles are the threat to ships. Please ID what means of self-defense PCs have? None.

Our Coast Guard cutters are designed and manned for Law Enforcement Operations, their crews are not trained or equipped for combat operations against capable maritime threats.

I have a deep mutual respect for my Coast Guardsman brethren. They are the best at Maritime Interdiction, boarding operations and training like naval units. However there are not combatants.

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2  or  0**ANOTHER CLASSIC**Submitted by **Speechless** on Wed, 03/12/2014 at 9:15 am.

from the Navy brain trust. Did they reclassify the hospital ships as surface combatants or are they really ballistic submarines with a clever disguise?

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7  or  0**ALL WRONG**Submitted by **George1259** on Wed, 03/12/2014 at 9:52 am.

I don't know why we can't have a few forward thinkers out there. We need to treat the military, especially the Navy as a business. Everyone knows things are cheaper when outsourced to China, so why don't we just outsource our shipbuilding to China. They could probably build our ships for a fraction of the cost. The we should man our ships with illegal immigrants with the promise of citizenship at the end of their tour. We could have a 4 or 5 hundred ship navy for what ours costs now.

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3  or  3**BARRY SAID WE DON'T NEED NO STINKING NAVY**Submitted by [Harrison Smock](#) on Wed, 03/12/2014 at 12:33 pm.

He will just roll his sleeves up, fire off a drone, and hit the golf course.

I hope we get a real president in 2016. We have been a failure during Barry's tenure.

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5  or  2**NAVY BATTLESHIPS**Submitted by [tedj37797](#) on Wed, 03/12/2014 at 1:17 pm.

I would like to know if the Department of Defense has thought about bringing the USS Wisconsin and USS Iowa battleships out of Museum status since the US Navy is facing a shipbuilding crisis as well as lacking the offshore firepower to support our US Marines?...

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1  or  2**YOU MIGHT AS WELL ASK IF**Submitted by [Robert F.](#) on Wed, 03/12/2014 at 3:11 pm.

You might as well ask if they've thought about bringing all 4 lowas back along with Alabama, Massachussets and North Carolina. The same answer would apply ... ain't gonna happen. By this point it would be cheaper and quicker to build 7 brand new Arleigh Burke class destroyers.

I didn't forget about the old dreadnought Texas, she's in such bad material condition that she's in danger of sinking in her berth.

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3  or  0**WAIT A MINUTE**Submitted by [oldsarge3111](#) on Wed, 03/12/2014 at 10:34 pm.

Obama saw the movie "Battleship" those old guy's got the Mighty Mo up and running in 15 minutes, and fired the 16" guns with total accuracy. Maybe thats in his plan.

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0  or  0**JUST ANOTHER CASE OF**Submitted by [BeachPundit](#) on Wed, 03/12/2014 at 4:53 pm.

Just another case of congress trying to tell the Navy how to do its job. Navy brass has been trying in vain to cut the fat out of the fleet for decades, only to be rebuffed by a congress that can't ever get enough pork.

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1  or  1**MAYBE**Submitted by [oldsarge3111](#) on Wed, 03/12/2014 at 4:58 pm.

they can paint the rubber ducky haze gray, at the museum and put some hull numbers on it and have an 284 fleet. Makes as much sense as this.

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4  or  0**SHIP COUNTS DON'T MEAN ANYTHING**Submitted by [markk33831](#) on Wed, 03/12/2014 at 6:25 pm.

Ship counts are a poor way to measure the power of any fleet. By count alone, with all the coastal patrol vessels China has, its fleet should be rated as being much more powerful than ours. By that way of counting, even the greatly diminished Russian fleet should be rated as one of the most powerful in the world when it is barely a coastal defense force.

On the other hand, what the defense department is doing is a shell game by adding ships that weren't rated previously. Hospital ships can't be counted as combat ships by any means. I'm surprised the PCs weren't counted before.

I don't doubt this is just more political interference in how our military is operated.


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