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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

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February 6, 2024

General Jacqueline D. Van Ovost
Commander, Transportation Command
U.S. Department of Defense
508 Scott Drive
Scott AFB, IL 62225

Ann C. Phillips
Administrator, Maritime Administration
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue SE
Washington, DC 20590

Dear General Van Ovost and Ms. Phillips,

In responding to a conflict in the Indo-Pacific, U.S. forces will depend on a fleet of sealift vessels to move equipment across the region. Almost 90 percent of all Army and Marine Corps equipment supporting large-scale overseas operations will be transported by ship.¹ However, while China has undertaken a historic buildup of both military and commercial ships, the United States' sealift fleet has continued to age and go underfunded, appearing woefully inadequate for the daunting task of providing logistical support to troops thousands of miles away from the homeland. As described by an unnamed senior official responsible for American sealift capability, the situation is a “screaming national security vulnerability.”²

Sealift has long been an essential element of our national security strategy. In October 1989, during the final months of the Cold War, the White House issued the National Security Directive on Sealift. The directive called sealift critical to “executing this country’s forward defense strategy” and explained the “national sealift objective” was to “ensure that sufficient military and civil maritime resources [would] be available to meet defense deployment, and essential economic requirements in support of our national security strategy.”³ Now, in the middle of a new Cold War, the United States finds itself with neither the sufficient military nor civil resources to meet our sealift objective.

¹ David B. Larter, *The US military ran the largest stress test of its sealift fleet in years. It's in big trouble.*, Defense News (Dec. 31, 2019) available at <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2019/12/31/the-us-military-ran-the-largest-stress-test-of-its-sealift-fleet-in-years-its-in-big-trouble>.

² Jeremy Greenwood and Emily Miletello, *To expand the Navy isn't enough. We need a bigger commercial fleet.*, Brookings Institution (Nov. 4, 2021) available at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/to-expand-the-navy-isnt-enough-we-need-a-bigger-commercial-fleet>.

³ National Security Directive 28, White House (Oct. 5, 1989) available at <https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/nsd/nsd28.pdf>.

The Pentagon’s sealift plan for conflict currently relies on the mobilization of 45 ships of the Ready Reserve Force (maintained by the Maritime Administration) and 15 ships of the Military Sealift Command (a component of Transportation Command) to transport equipment and sustain our forces.⁴ In other words, the core military sealift capability of the United States consists of a mere five dozen ships. While the Secretary of Defense would be able to call upon additional commercial merchant vessels participating in the Maritime Security Program to meet any remaining sustainment requirements, the number of ships participating in the program today stands at just 60.⁵ This latter number is an extension of the diminutive size of our overall commercial merchant fleet. As of May 2023, out of a global fleet of over 40,000 merchant ships, the U.S. merchant fleet consisted of a meager 177 vessels, down from more than 600 in 1990.⁶ By contrast, China boasts more than 5,500 merchant ships, approximately 30 times what we possess.⁷

A 2019 readiness exercise revealed an uncomfortable reality that the small and aging U.S. sealift fleet, crewed by a shrinking workforce of mariners, may not be ready to respond to a crisis in the Indo-Pacific.⁸ Unsurprisingly, you, the Commander of Transportation Command, General Jacqueline Van Ovost, stated, “My highest concerns lie in reductions in capacity and readiness in both sealift and air refueling.”⁹ The Navy also recently explained, in its Fiscal Year 2024 Budget Estimates, “Current theater logistics posture and capability to sustain the force are inadequate to support operations specifically in a contested environment.”¹⁰ Thus, even if the United States has the weapons and equipment to fight, it faces the alarming risk that it may lack the sealift capabilities to sustain the fight. The potential impact of such a logistical deficiency on our deterrence posture at this perilous moment cannot be understated.

Size and Age of Sealift Fleet

The United States’ fleet of military sealift ships – comprised of vessels from the Ready Reserve Force and the Military Sealift Command – currently has 60 ships. This is simply inadequate to sustain forces in a conflict in the Indo-Pacific. Then-Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Mike Gilday stated that the sealift fleet was too small and that the size was “grounded on

⁴ Ann C. Phillips, Testimony on Posture and Readiness of the Mobility Enterprise, House Armed Services Subcommittee on Readiness and Subcommittee on Seapower and Projection Forces Hearing (Mar. 28, 2023); Bradley Martin and Roland J. Yardley, *Approaches to Strategic Sealift Readiness*, Rand Corporation (2019) available at https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR3000/RR3049/RAND_RR3049.pdf.

⁵ Maritime Administration, *Maritime Security Program*, Department of Transportation (May 31, 2023) available at <https://www.maritime.dot.gov/national-security/strategic-sealift/maritime-security-program-msp>.

⁶ Bureau of Transportation Statistics, *Number and Size of the U.S. Flag Merchant Fleet and Its Share of the World Fleet*, Department of Transportation available at <https://www.bts.gov/content/number-and-size-us-flag-merchant-fleet-and-its-share-world-fleet>.

⁷ Xiaoshan Xue, *As China Expands Its Fleets, US Analysts Call for Catch-up Efforts*, VOA News (Sept. 13, 2022) available at <https://www.voanews.com/a/as-china-expands-its-fleets-us-analysts-call-for-catch-up-efforts-/6746352.html>.

⁸ See Larter, *supra* note 1.

⁹ David Vergun, *General Expresses Concerns Over Readiness in Sealift, Air Refueling*, DOD News (Apr. 27, 2023) available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3376612/general-expresses-concerns-over-readiness-in-sealift-air-refueling>.

¹⁰ Department of the Navy, Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 Budget Estimates, Justification of Estimates (Mar. 2023) at p. 265.

analysis that was done decades ago.”¹¹ While civilian merchant ships may be called upon to augment our sealift capacity, the current size of the U.S. commercial fleet, of only about 180 ships, will limit the extent to which it can meaningfully provide additional logistical support. And with our current shipbuilding capacity, which is *200 times less* than China’s, we will not be able to build our way out of the problem, absent a historic and generational investment.¹²

While the United States could try to hire foreign merchant ships to transport U.S. military equipment, we face the risk that they may not be willing to do so in wartime.¹³ And although the Navy has put forward plans to acquire foreign commercial vessels to be incorporated into the military sealift fleet, there is little indication that such efforts are being pursued at the scale and pace that the moment requires.

The problem posed by the inadequate size of the sealift fleet is compounded by its age. The average age of the 45 ships of the Ready Reserve Force – which make up the bulk of the military sealift fleet – is 45 years old.¹⁴ Seventeen of the ships are 50 years or older.¹⁵ Sealift vessels under the Military Sealift Command face similar issues.¹⁶ You, General Van Ovost, aptly stated, “We are a generation late in recapitalizing our ready sealift fleet to meet our national objectives.”¹⁷

Mariners

The troubling state of our sealift capability starts with the fleet but does not end there. The former head of the Maritime Administration, Mark H. Buzby, stated that the lack of experienced merchant mariners to crew sealift vessels was a “clear and present danger to our national security.”¹⁸ He stated that the United States is lacking more than 1,800 mariners to “sustain sealift in a crisis beyond six months.”¹⁹ This means that we may be short nearly two thousand mariners to crew the meager number of sealift vessels available for logistical operations in the Indo-Pacific.

Recognizing this deficiency, you, Ann Phillips, the current head of the Maritime Administration, recently stated that you were “not at all confident” that the Ready Reserve Force

¹¹ Megan Eckstein, *Lack of funds hampers emergency naval fleet from growing faster*, Defense News (Apr. 6, 2023) available at <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2023/04/06/lack-of-funds-hampers-emergency-naval-fleet-from-growing-faster>.

¹² See Michael Lee, *Chinese shipbuilding capacity over 200 times greater than US, Navy intelligence says*, Fox News (Sept. 14, 2023) available at <https://www.foxnews.com/world/chinese-shipbuilding-capacity-over-200-times-greater-than-us-navy-intelligence-says>.

¹³ Loren Thompson, *Dwindling U.S. Merchant Fleet Is A Crisis Waiting To Happen*, Forbes (Oct. 8, 2021) available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lorenthompson/2021/10/08/dwindling-us-merchant-fleet-is-a-crisis-waiting-to-happen/?sh=6e5a63d82a8d>.

¹⁴ Eckstein, *supra* note 11.

¹⁵ Vergun, *supra* note 9.

¹⁶ Thompson, *supra* note 13.

¹⁷ Vergun, *supra* note 9.

¹⁸ Mark H. Buzby, *Merchant Mariner Shortage Has Gotten Worse, but a Partial Solution Is Available*, Real Clear Defense (Nov. 19, 2022) available at https://www.realecleardefense.com/articles/2022/11/19/merchant_mariner_shortage_has_gotten_worse_but_a_partial_solution_is_available_865818.html.

¹⁹ *Id.*

ships could be crewed if called upon to respond to a crisis.²⁰ The dwindling size of our merchant fleet, which has stayed under 200 ships for over 10 years and is now just a fraction of what it was decades ago, has contributed to the aging and shrinking of the mariner workforce.²¹

Lack of Readiness

The combined effect of an underfunded and undersized fleet, crewed by an insufficient workforce of mariners, has led to a perfect storm in which the United States appears unprepared to carry out major sealift operations during a crisis. In 2019, the Defense Department conducted the largest exercise of its wartime sealift fleet. The exercise tested the then-61 ship fleet's ability to be activated and put to sea on short notice to support our forces in a crisis. The results were abysmal. Only 40 percent of the ships were ready for mobilization.²² A 40 percent success rate would not just increase risk for our servicemembers deployed overseas. It fundamentally calls into question the sealift fleet's ability to support major operations in the Indo-Pacific.

Shifting the balance of power back in our favor and strengthening our ability to deny a Chinese invasion of Taiwan require a comprehensive plan that not only increases our offensive capabilities and enhances our defensive posture but also bolsters our logistical assets, especially our sealift fleet. We are quickly running out of time to implement meaningful changes, many of which will take years to fully execute. We must prioritize our attention and resources to restoring our deterrence against China and ensuring that we can succeed in any future conflict.

To better understand the alarming state of our sealift capabilities and explore remedial solutions, we respectfully request that you provide written responses to the following questions no later than February 28, 2024:

1. Do you believe the current size of the sealift fleet is sufficient to meet sustainment requirements for a major operation in the Indo-Pacific?
 - a. If not, please explain your plans for creating a sealift fleet capable of providing full logistical support during a crisis, including the time and resources that would be required to put together such a fleet.
2. The average age of the ships in the Ready Reserve Force is 45 years. Please explain the ways in which the age of the vessels limits your capabilities and readiness to support operations in the Indo-Pacific.
3. What are your plans to acquire U.S. or foreign merchant ships to augment our sealift fleet?

²⁰ John Grady, *MARAD Head 'Not At All Confident' Ready Reserve Fleet Could be Crewed in a Crisis*, USNI News (Mar. 29, 2023) available at <https://news.usni.org/2023/03/29/marad-head-not-at-all-confident-ready-reserve-fleet-could-be-crewed-in-a-crisis>.

²¹ Larter, *supra* note 1.

²² *Id.*

- a. Please describe how much such purchases could increase our sealift capabilities.
 - b. Please describe the limitations to relying on new purchases, whether of U.S. or foreign vessels, them to strengthen our sealift fleet. Please also describe whether your plans involve acquiring merchant ships from China.
4. What are your plans to increase the number of mariners who will be available to crew our sealift vessels during a crisis?
- a. Will such plans fully remedy the current shortage of mariners?
5. How much will we need to rely on foreign-flag, foreign-crewed vessels to meet shortfalls in our sealift capability?
- a. What do you assess are the risks of doing so?
 - b. From which countries will such foreign-flag, foreign-crewed vessels come?

The House Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party has broad authority to “investigate and submit policy recommendations on the status of the Chinese Communist Party’s economic, technological, and security progress and its competition with the United States” under H. Res. 11.

To make arrangements to deliver a response, please contact Select Committee staff at (202) 226-9678.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter and prompt reply.

Sincerely,



Mike Gallagher
Chairman

Cc:

Rear Admiral Philip E. Sobeck, United States Navy, Commander, Military Sealift Command