

**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**  
**Washington, DC 20515-1902**

January 10, 2020

The Honorable Mark Esper  
Secretary of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, D.C. 20301

Dear Secretary Esper:

We write to express our serious concerns regarding recent reports of proposed reductions in planned naval shipbuilding as part of the Trump Administration's Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 defense budget request. Such reductions in naval procurement would endanger our national security and would cause substantial, long-term harm to the health and readiness of the shipbuilding defense industrial base.

The Navy has determined that a 355-ship fleet is necessary in order to "address the ever-evolving and increasingly complex threats the Navy is required to counter in the global maritime commons."<sup>1</sup> This Administration adopted the Navy's objective of a 355-ship force-level goal, and Congress made a 355-ship force national policy in the FY 2018 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA).<sup>2</sup> We strongly support the goal of a 355 ship-fleet as necessary to address an international security environment increasingly characterized by great power competition and geopolitical instability.

Although a Defense Department budget request for reductions in U.S. naval ship procurement would be harmful to our national defense and contrary to the policy of a 355-ship fleet set by Congress and supported by the Administration, of particular concern are reports regarding reductions in planned Flight III Arleigh Burke (DDG-51) class destroyer procurement. DDG-51 guided missile destroyers are the backbone of our nation's frontline surface combatants. As potential adversaries continue to develop military capabilities that pose serious threats to the survivability of our naval assets, the newest Flight III DDG-51 destroyers will provide the multi-role functionality necessary to ensure our naval forces can deter aggression, operate in contested areas, and if necessary survive in combat.

These vessels, for example, will feature the AN/SPY-6 radar system, which has 30-times more detection capability than previous naval sensors. With this revolutionary system, Flight III DDG-51 ships will be able to detect and defend our naval forces against diverse threats ranging from drones to enemy aircraft and ballistic missiles. Flight III DDG-51 ships will also feature

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Navy, *Executive Summary, 2016 Navy Force Structure Assessment (FSA)*, December 15, 2016, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> P.L. 115-91.

significantly improved power generation capabilities that can enable future fielding of novel platforms, such as directed energy systems, to improve defenses against wider range of air and missile threats. In an era in which great power competition and rapid technological innovation threaten America's ability to project power in an increasing number of environments, Flight III DDG-51s represent an irreplaceable component of our current and future surface fleet.

We are also deeply concerned about the potential impact of any cuts to planned Navy procurement on the shipbuilding defense industrial base. Shipbuilder selection and training requires long-term strategic planning and meaningful, sustained congressional oversight to build the naval vessels required for our national defense. As the Navy declared to Congress in a recent report concerning the long-range plan for construction of naval vessels, "[A] healthy and efficient industrial base continues to be the fundamental driver for achieving and sustaining the Navy's baseline acquisition profiles ... [the shipbuilding base] constitute a national security imperative that is unique and must be protected."<sup>3</sup>

The reported cuts to planned naval acquisitions represent an existential threat to this unique national security asset. Shipbuilding is not a skill that can be taught to new workers quickly. It is estimated that a new shipbuilder requires five to seven years of apprenticeship training to achieve occupational proficiency. Disruptions in planned shipbuilding procurement substantially impedes this learning process. Previous "boom and bust" shipbuilding cycles have contributed to a shipbuilding demographic profile consisting of senior shipbuilders nearing retirement and new shipbuilders in need of apprenticeship. Cuts to planned naval procurement threaten not only economic development but would also result in a loss of irreplaceable institutional knowledge and shipbuilding skills. Consistent, sustained naval procurement is necessary to train the next generation of Navy shipbuilders.

We ask that you join the President and affirm support for the Congressionally mandated goal of a 355-ship Navy in order to promote our national security and to preserve the shipbuilding defense industrial base. Thank you for your attention in this matter, and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Jared Golden  
Member of Congress



Chellie Pingree  
Member of Congress

cc: The Honorable Joe Courtney, Chairman, House Armed Services Subcommittee on Seapower and Projection Forces  
The Honorable Robert J. Wittman, Ranking Member, House Armed Services Subcommittee on Seapower and Projection Forces

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Navy, *Report to Congress on the Annual Long-Range Plan for Construction of Naval Vessels for Fiscal Year 2020*, March 2019, p.8.