

US Pacific Fleet shrinks while China grows aggressive

By AUDREY MCAVOY
Associated Press

PEARL HARBOR, Hawaii — When the U.S. wanted to show the world it didn't recognize what it called China's "excessive" territorial claims in disputed waters of the South China Sea this fall, it sent a warship near one of Beijing's newly built artificial reefs.

The move came amid a debate about whether the U.S. has enough ships to meet challenges posed by a fast-growing, increasingly assertive Chinese navy that is unsettling some of its neighbors. In its latest move, China announced last week that it would build its second aircraft carrier, this one with domestic technology.

The Navy and its regional component, the U.S. Pacific Fleet, both have fewer ships now than in the mid-1990s. Navy officials say vastly improved technology on those vessels outweighs any disadvantage from a drop in numbers.

Questions about whether the Pacific Fleet has enough resources are more of a reflection of regional anxieties than the Navy's actual capability, said its commander, Adm. Scott Swift.

Even if the entire fleet was in the South China Sea, he said, he'd still get asked whether the U.S. was bringing more forces.

"It's this sense of angst that I hear from those in the region, driven by the uncertainty and the rhetoric and, you know, the challenges that the region is facing right now," Swift said. "But I'm very comfortable with the resources I have."

An expert at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute think tank said the issue in peacetime is whether there are enough American vessels to reassure friends and allies and demonstrate U.S. capacity to use power when it needs to.

In wartime, it comes down to whether enough platforms survive missile strikes to carry on their work, Peter Jennings said.

"I think this is emerging as a serious long-term problem," he said.

The Pacific Fleet currently has 182 vessels, including combat ships like aircraft carriers as well as auxiliary and logistics vessels, said spokesman Cmdr. Clay Doss. That compares to 192 nearly two decades ago.

Around the world, the Navy has 272 ships usable in combat or to support ships in combat, nearly 20 percent less than 1998. The current total includes 10 aircraft carriers.

Swift said he would rather have the Navy he has today — and its advanced technology — than the Navy of two decades ago.

He pointed to the USS Benfold, a guided missile destroyer upgraded with new ballistic missile defenses, as well as three new stealth destroyers, the DDG-1000, in the pipeline, as examples.

One consequence of a smaller fleet has been more time at sea. Retired Adm. Zap Zlatoper, who commanded Pacific Fleet in the 1990s, said



Eugene Hoshiko/AP Photo

Family members of sailors wave as the U.S. Navy aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan arrives at a U.S. Navy base in Yokosuka, Japan south of Tokyo, Oct. 1. The U.S. Pacific Fleet is smaller than it was in the 1990s, helping fuel a debate about whether the U.S. has enough ships to meet challenges posed by fast-growing and increasingly assertive Chinese naval forces.



Caleb Jones/AP Photo

The U.S. Navy amphibious assault ship USS Essex off the coast of Bellows Air Force Station, Hawaii during amphibious exercises in May.

six-month deployments used to be "sacrosanct" as anything longer made it harder for the Navy to retain sailors.

Ships now deploy for an average of seven to nine months, though the Navy plans to lower this to seven.

Ship conditions have also suffered. The USS Essex left an exercise with Australia early in 2011 and skipped another with Thailand the following year because it developed mechanical problems after delaying maintenance to stay at sea.

Bryan Clark, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, a Washington think tank, said

these are signs the status quo is unsustainable.

In a November report, Clark outlined alternatives: build more ships, though this would require money Congress may not give the Navy or deploy less, though the Pentagon has been reluctant to accept less of an overseas presence.

The other choices: keep more ships at overseas bases where they would be closer to where they operate or mix up how ships deploy, for example by sending fewer escorts with an aircraft carrier which would free some ships to operate separately.

China's People's Liberation Army Navy has more than 300

surface ships, submarines, amphibious ships and patrol craft, according to the Pentagon's Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy report released in August.

China's coast guard and other maritime law enforcement fleet, meanwhile, has upward of 200 ships — more than the combined fleets of neighbors with competing claims to tiny islands in the East and South China Seas.

The U.S. Coast Guard has about 280 cutters, or vessels at least 65 feet in length, though they primarily operate stateside.

China has also grown more aggressive in asserting



Arun Sankar K./AP Photo

A U.S. Navy helicopter approaches to land on the deck of the U.S. Navy aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt as the USS Normandy sails nearby during Exercise Malabar 2015 about 150 miles off Chennai, India, Oct. 17.

its claims to disputed territory. Since December 2013, it's built what the U.S. estimates to be 3,000 acres of artificial islands in the South China Sea using sand dredged from the ocean floor.

China has said the islands are meant to help ships, fishermen and disaster relief.

The U.S. says the islands will enable China to expand its maritime law enforcement and naval presence further south. It worries China could use them to disrupt sea traffic in the South China Sea, a thoroughfare for 30 percent of global maritime trade.

Some of China's ships are rudimentary, like its existing

aircraft carrier.

But Narushige Michishita, Japan scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, said the lay person doesn't know this so the vessels have the same psychological effect on the public as more advanced ones.

Further, he said U.S. forces are spread around the world while China is focused on its own neighborhood.

"So even if the United States spends much more than China, it doesn't mean the local balance stays the same. The local balance in Asia is rapidly changing," Michishita said.

Deputy: Hillard is expected to make a full recovery

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After a couple of more weeks of recovery at Oregon Health & Science University Hospital in Portland, he returned home last Tuesday.

"They were very close to saying, 'You are done,'" Hillard said. "I feel very fortunate."

Best Christmas present ever

Shortly after returning home, Hillard and his wife visited his co-workers at the Clatsop County Courthouse and Sheriff's Office. He said people were surprised to see him.

"They welcomed me with open arms, laughter, hugs and tears," he said. "It's been kind of surreal."

Ben Bradshaw, the victim services coordinator in the District Attorney's Office, echoes many people who know Hillard when he describes the past month as unreal. Others have simply called it a miracle.

"Dave Hillard is one of those guys that you look up to. He is a good father, good husband, good friend and good co-worker. He is the best kind of people there are," Bradshaw said. "I have lost very good people in my life, but this is the only one I got back. It is unreal. Absolutely unreal."

Hillard's wife and seven children are thankful for all of the support and outreach from the community, including all of the well-wishes posted to Facebook. People around the world, in places such as Thailand, Africa and South Korea were all praying for Hillard's recovery.

Michelle Hillard joked that her husband will have a hard time topping this year's Christmas present of waking up in time for the holiday.

"We are getting a very full season of Christmas this year!" she wrote on Facebook. "God has been so good and merciful to us this year. Everyone of

you have been so good to us. I can still (barely) believe David is alive and doing so well. Best Christmas present, ever!"

Road to recovery

Hillard is expected to make a full recovery.

He will meet with a cardiologist next week, and will continue speech and physical therapy sessions since his muscles atrophied while in the hospital. He lost 23 pounds.

The threat of heart attacks run deep in Hillard's family. His father died at 66 from a massive heart attack about four years ago. Heart attacks also claimed Hillard's uncle, grandfather and great uncle.

After Hillard's episode, he said, his brothers are planning to get their hearts checked.

Hillard has no memory of the heart attack. He does not recall being flown to Portland and placed in an extracorporeal membrane oxygenation machine that helped support



Submitted Photo

Dave Hillard, shown with his family, nearly died in December after a heart attack.

his heart and lungs.

The whole experience has helped him remember what is important in life.

"I need to focus on my family and focus on my health," he said.

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