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Bad Idea: Reactivating the U.S. Navy's Oliver Hazard Perry-Class Frigates

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In December 2016, the United States Navy released its Force Structure Assessment (FSA), the first since 2014, which recommended growing the Navy to a 355-ship surface and sub-surface fleet as part of the fiscal year 2018 30-year shipbuilding plan. The proposed fleet size in this FSA represents an increase of 47 ships as compared to the previous assessment, and with this larger fleet comes a growth in the acquisition and operational funding necessary to support it. While ambitious and not limited by the restrictions of the 2011 Budget Control Act funding levels, senior Navy leaders expressed confidence in the most recent report, stating “if funded, this plan is executable, as each ship class called for in the FSA has an active shipbuilding line already up and running.”¹ The release of the FSA prompted criticism from skeptics of the plan, particularly over the costs associated with a 355-ship Navy. In written response to a request from Chairman and Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Seapower and Projection Forces of the House Committee on Armed Services, the Congressional Budget Office estimated the cost to build out the fleet in the 2016 FSA at an average of \$26.6 billion annually over the course of the next 30 years, compared to an average of \$21.2 billion annually for the 2014 plan.²

With such a high price tag over such a long period, numerous ideas were offered to help mitigate both the costs and near-term gaps in the number of ships in service over the 30-year timeline of the Navy's plan. One plan of note came in the summer of 2016, when the Navy began to publicly discuss the possibility of putting ships that had been decommissioned from the fleet back into service. Mentioned specifically and most routinely as a target for reactivation were the Oliver Hazard Perry-class frigates (“FFGs”). The FFG class was

¹ The Office of the Secretary of the Navy, “Secretary of the Navy Announces Need for 355-ship Navy,” December 16, 2017, http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=98160.

² Labs, Eric J. “Costs of Building a 355-Ship Navy,” Congressional Budget Office, Testimony, July 25, 2017, <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/115th-congress-2017-2018/reports/52911-testimony355shipnavy.pdf>.

fully deactivated in 2015 due to the end of the frigates' service life and to make room in the fleet for new LCS-class vessels.

Reactivation continues to be discussed today as a feasible option for increasing the size of the fleet. But the bottom line is that bringing back deactivated FFGs into operational service is a bad idea. Concerns over this plan center on three issues: maintenance, personnel, and capability.

Precise maintenance and refurbishment costs to return FFGs to a fully-operational capability are unknown. While there are historical records and current research to estimate a rough order of magnitude of the costs to reactivate the ships, what is likely not well known is how much equipment has been removed. Often, sailors will strip decommissioned ships of parts and critical gear as a cost and time-saving measure to use on ships of the same class still in operation. The extent to which the deactivated FFGs have been cannibalized, especially for the FFGs not scheduled for foreign military sales, is not well documented. Moreover, as these ships were destined for decommissioning, their parts support was reduced and then eliminated. As vendors may no longer make replacement parts for legacy systems, new vendors will need to be found to manufacture the necessary parts, causing increased costs and extensive lead times. For example, for some commissioned ships, it is not uncommon to have a lead time for a replacement part that is well over a year. Imagine how that is amplified when vendors must start from scratch in developing and then manufacturing parts. Modernization of the decommissioned FFGs would need to be planned prior to going back into service because many of the systems on the FFGs are already obsolete.

In addition to concerns over outfitting frigates with the necessary and most-advanced equipment, there are also concerns over the maintenance FFGs would have to undergo to return to a seaworthy status. The Planned Maintenance System (PMS) was developed as a scheduling tool to conduct preventative maintenance on Navy shipboard systems to ensure maximum equipment operational readiness. This system schedules maintenance for equipment on a periodic basis to limit the need for unscheduled corrective maintenance. Similar to changing the oil in a car every three to five thousand miles, PMS provides quality maintenance procedures to ensure optimal performance of equipment. As FFGs have been in an inactive status, this maintenance has not been performed. Although the systems onboard the frigates have not been used, the equipment is still subject to deterioration and corrosion. As systems exposed to salt water sit at

rest, the corrosive effects weaken metal and potentially cause it to fall apart. Until full assessments can be made of all systems, including tanks, cooling systems, piping systems, and engineering machinery, the Navy cannot accurately estimate the costs associated with bringing an FFG “back to life.”

Additionally, it can be expected that each FFG will require repair time in a drydock to fix hull issues. Drydock space is a commodity in extremely high demand and is limited in many shipyards. Allocating precious drydock time to FFGs will reduce or delay the drydock time available to other ships, subsequently reducing their readiness and postponing their maintenance availabilities.

Separate and often lost in the discussion of costs and time to build out a fleet are the sailors who will bring the FFGs back to life and then sustain them for the next few years. Prior to considering the reactivation of FFGs, the Navy needs to determine if there are enough fully-trained sailors and support personnel to crew and maintain the ships. While it can be assumed there are many FFG sailors in the Navy who would jump at the chance to sail on FFGs again, it is doubtful the number of personnel ready to do so is great enough to crew up to ten ships and keep them at a readiness level where their effectiveness would outweigh the costs. As such, training of all FFG sailors would be needed, and due to this requirement the previous FFG training infrastructure would need to be restarted and modernized to match the updated electronics and machinery on the reactivated ships. If this is even feasible, it would only be for a short duration before the ships are decommissioned again, and not worth sacrificing precious dollars that could be used more effectively for acquisition and sustainment of more modern surface combatants.

Another key question that needs to be addressed is what strategic need would these reactivated FFGs serve? The determined mission need will ultimately drive the capability for these ships. Since FFGs were used in their twilight years as deployment platforms for law enforcement detachments in counterdrug missions (not a Navy priority), it is likely they would be revitalized for this need – a Coast Guard and U.S. Southern Command need - not as a legitimate gap filler for other surface combatants with broader missions.

Instead of fumbling through the frustration of reactivating ten frigates just to add to the force structure, the Navy is better off staying on course with their acquisitions plan. Staying the course shows a true commitment to Congress of the need for modernization and newer assets capable of fighting emerging threats. The service

life extension program plans for the Navy cruisers and destroyers are already laid, so it is prudent to continue with those efforts without additional distraction. Furthermore, it is recommended the Navy continue with foreign military sales of FFGs, as costs to transfer ships to other countries are minimal in the big picture, and combat systems do not need to be significantly upgraded for foreign maritime partner use.

Today's sailors deserve the best possible assets. Anyone who has ever owned an old vehicle that was not taken care of properly in its later years knows that it often spends time in the driveway or auto shop broken and unable to be driven. Absent a serious overhaul or the purchase of a new vehicle, the owner will inevitably part ways with their cherished vehicle or put it up on blocks in the driveway to become a neighborhood eyesore as it becomes too expensive to drive. For the Navy's deactivated frigates, their sentimental value is not worth the costs it would take to put them back to sea. They served proudly, and their final sunset has passed.

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