

The Navy's New Flat-Earth Strategy

The U.S. unveils a collaborative plan for policing the seas

By [Robert D. Kaplan](#) [October 2007 Issue](#)

Over the decades our Navy has been slowly disappearing on us. At the end of World War II we had 6,700 ships. Throughout the Cold War we had around 600 ships. In the 1990s we had more than 350. Now we are down to fewer than 280. This decline is occurring while China is in the midst of a shipbuilding and acquisition craze that will result in the People's Liberation Army Navy having more ships than the United States Navy sometime in the next decade. Qualitatively, the United States will still very much have the edge, but China is catching up. And China is merely one of many challenges—terrorism, piracy, port security, and humanitarian disaster assistance are others—that the Navy now faces.

The Navy has plans to increase the number of ships from below 280 to more than 310. But according to the Congressional Budget Office and the Congressional Research Service, cost overruns of 34 percent, plus other

factors, mean that these plans may be overly optimistic. In fact, over the next decade and beyond, if the Navy builds only seven ships per year with a fleet whose life expectancy is 30 years, the total number of its ships may dwindle to the low 200s. And yet we live in a world where 75 percent of the Earth's population is within 200 miles of the sea, and in an era when 90 percent of commerce travels by sea, including two-thirds of petroleum exports.

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