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Get Ready, Russia and China: The U.S. Navy Could Get More Aircraft Carriers

David Axe
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The U.S. Navy wants to add a carrier battle group to its force structure. And it might actually succeed in doing so, despite the eye-watering high cost.

That's because, for the first time in more than a decade, the hawkish, free-spending Republican Party will have unified control of the U.S. presidency and Congress. That unified control will last

at least two years starting in January 2017. The ruling party traditionally loses seats in midterm elections.

Two years. Two defense budgets. With more money and strong political support, the Navy's "big sticks"—its centerpiece fleet of powerful aircraft carriers and carrier-like assault ships—might get more numerous in coming years.

Today the Navy operates 10 Nimitz-class nuclear-powered aircraft carriers. An 11th flattop, the first-in-class USS Gerald R. Ford, is scheduled to join the fleet in 2017. Each carrier can support an air wing of 60 or more aircraft, including more than 40 strike fighters.

There are nine big-deck amphibious assault ships in the fleet. While their main mission is supporting amphibious assaults alongside 25 other amphibs including landing docks and landing platforms, the assault ships can also pull double duty as light carriers embarking AV-8B or F-35B jump jets.

The Navy claimed in its latest force-structure assessment, published in December 2016, that this combined force of 19 carriers and assault ships is no longer adequate. "Since the last full FSA was conducted in 2012, and updated in 2014, the global security environment changed significantly, with our potential adversaries developing capabilities that undermine our traditional military strengths and erode our technological advantage."

"Within this new security environment, defense planning guidance directed that the capacity and capability of the joint force must be sufficient to defeat one adversary while denying the objectives of a second adversary."

Achieving this goal requires 12 full-size carriers and four more amphibious ships of all classes. It's not clear how many of the four additional amphibs are assault ships, but it's likely that the Navy intends to add an entire Amphibious Ready Group to its force structure. Each ARG includes a carrier-style assault ship.

The Navy's new force-structure assessment calls for an overall increase in warship numbers, from today's 282 hulls to an eventual total of 355. The assessment does not say how fast the Navy could achieve this new force goal, although it's worth noting that the Navy generally plans its shipbuilding over a 30-year span.

Perhaps not coincidentally, the administration of new president Donald Trump has also called for a bigger navy of at least 350 ships, although Trump has not said which mix of ships he wants.

The administration of ex-president Barack Obama also had plans to grow the fleet—albeit more modestly. Obama's fleet would have peaked at around 308 vessels in the year 2021. What Trump and the Navy are proposing could stretch the U.S. government's finances, especially in the context of Trump's overarching economic plans.

A new warship costs U.S. taxpayers nearly \$2 billion on average, according to the Congressional Research Service. Growing the fleet by 73 ships could cost \$150 billion—and that doesn't

include the cost of crewing, fueling, arming and repairing the new vessels. An aircraft carrier costs at least \$500 million per year to operate.

\$100 billion for ship-construction isn't necessarily an extraordinary expense, especially stretched across years or even decades. The U.S. Defense Department's annual budget usually exceeds \$600 billion.

But Trump will have to find potentially tens of billions of dollars a year for new ships amid falling federal revenues. While Trump and his Republican allies in Congress agree on the need for more ships, they're also determined to deeply cut taxes—especially for the wealthy.

In December 2015, the nonprofit Tax Policy Center estimated [6] that Trump's tax "reforms" would reduce federal revenues by at least \$9.5 trillion over the first decade. Tax cuts and sustained high levels of federal spending could nearly double the national debt, the Tax Policy Center warned.

A bigger navy could be a huge driver of this new, enormous national debt under President Trump. The stars are aligned for the U.S. Navy—in particular, its big-stick force of carriers and assault ships—to grow in coming years. But at great cost to America's overall fiscal health.