

## **STRATEGIC SEALIFT CAPABILITIES: THE SPECIAL CASE OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

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**Abstract:** *Along several millennia, sealift capabilities have played a significant role in shaping the political international arena, and the global strategic landscape. We cannot imagine, for example, a fully operational Roman Empire without a massive set of sealift capabilities, able to deploy large armies anywhere around the Mediterranean, and to bring huge amounts of Egyptian grain to Rome. The study is briefly exploring some pivotal moments in global history, when sealift has been massively present; and then it explores, with some details, the present situation of the US strategic sealift capabilities. As far as we know, the ability of the United States to use, in case of need, fully effective strategic sealift is clearly facing important problems and shortages, and this feature of the US national power might generate a lot of problems in many future scenarios, massively impacting strategic evolutions on the World Ocean, in Europe, and mainly in the Asia-Pacific.*

**Keywords:** *strategic sealift; strategic landscape; US strategic posture; great power competition; strategic forecasting; national power; global capabilities.*

### **Introduction**

Along the past few years, on several occasions, various serious open sources clearly indicated the US strategic sealift capabilities were facing *very* serious problems. And the problems we are talking about *might* be able to seriously jeopardize the general / global strategic capabilities of the United States, in case of major international crises (which are making deployment and use of massive military forces a clear must). In order to better understand such a topic, this study is going to present, first of all, a brief survey of some significant moments in world history when sealift capabilities have been massively important; and then, some data and opinions concerning the present status of the US strategic sealift capabilities, emphasizing the problems they are confronted with, and their consequences.

#### **1. Brief historical survey of strategic sealift and its role**

Since Antiquity, almost all great powers (and clearly all *world* powers) had to develop and operate significant *strategic* sealift capabilities, at least moderately successful. The more complex state interests are, and the larger the geographic region a world powers aims to control, the stronger the need for effective *strategic* sealift capabilities becomes. A careful exploration of a significant number of episodes in the world history is strongly illuminating a basic rule that can easily be identified when dealing with strategic sealift: on most occasions we know about, the total number of ships used by a state for missions we can legitimately call strategic sealift is significantly *larger* (and on some occasions *many* times larger) than the number of combat ships operated by the same state, on the same theatre(s) of naval operations. See, for example, the notorious case of the massive strategic offensive of the Persian Empire against Greece, which took place in 480 B.C., ten years after the battle at Marathon. As far as we know – and the text written by Herodotus offers us sufficient details – the enormous Persian military

expedition was logistically supported by a huge number of naval transport ships, while the total number of combat ships securing sea lanes, protecting sea transports and fighting against Greek naval squadrons was clearly smaller. Herodotus wrote that the total number of combat ships (almost 100 % triremes) in the Persian fleet was 1,207, while non-combat (or transport) ships, propelled by oars or sails, some of them specially built to transport horses for the cavalry units, was roughly 3,000 (Herodotus 1964, VII, LXXXIX-XCVII).

Some centuries later, in 204 B.C., at the end of the Second Punic War, “a Roman invasion force of 400 transports carrying 26,000 troops and 1,200 horses and protected by 40 warships crossed from Sicily and invaded North Africa” (Gabriel 2007) – a strategic move directly leading to the defeat of Hannibal at Zama. Later, for many centuries, Rome was the largest city in the entire world, “before London at the time of the Industrial Revolution”; and its total population, most probably more than one million people, “ate a great deal of grain, much of it as wheat” (Kessler and Temin, 2007). In such a situation, really *huge* amounts of grain had to be brought to Rome, mainly by ships, from other regions of the empire, most notably Egypt. And these transports clearly had a major *strategic* importance. It is easy to understand that their uninterrupted success was one of the significant factors explaining the lack of major social unrest, on most occasions, in the very core regions of the Empire. However, to transport, across the Mediterranean, wheat for 1,000,000 inhabitants, *very* many trade ships were needed. It is difficult to accurately estimate their total number, but we can presume that most of them had a quite modest displacement. An encyclopedia of ships, published a few years ago, mentioned that the *average* Roman trade ship might have had, at the zenith of the Empire (at about 300 AD), a total displacement of 80 to 90 tons (Gibbons 2001, 21). Most probably, more than 1,000 such ships could have been necessary to completely cover, uninterruptedly, the wheat consumption of Rome. Some other ships were clearly needed to bring to the harbors of Rome other products consumed by the vast population of the city: olive oil, mainly from North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula, wine, etc. In the era we are talking about, the combat-ready naval squadrons operated by Rome in the Mediterranean, even if very potent ones, clearly had fewer ships (for the general evolution of the Roman *imperial* navy, see Starr 1941) than the commercial ones, used by both the state and private entrepreneurs.

In Late Antiquity (or Early Middle Ages), when the early Byzantine Empire led by Justinian tried to unify again the former imperial provinces around the Mediterranean Sea, Belisarius' expedition to North Africa put in motion several hundred ships, most of them being *transport* ships, not strictly military vessels fit for combat. Dealing with this very episode, modern authors estimate the expedition in 533 A.D. involved roughly 500 sea transport ships, plus 92 combat ships (Paine 2015, 186; Hughes 2009, 76).

The same basic correlation – combat ships are normally fewer than transport ships – can be easily detected on other occasions as well. In *modern times*, for example, this is the situation in many confrontations, within the broader context of the Anglo-Dutch Wars. In February 1653, the Dutch admiral Marten Tromp fought a major battle, three days long, off Portland. He had roughly 70 combat ships, and was escorting a very large convoy, “of two hundred sail” (Mordal 1973, 73-74). Another episode of the same sort took place in June 1693, when the battle off Lagos was fought between a large British squadron, with 23 combat ships, trying to protect a huge convoy with almost 400 ships, and two combined French naval squadrons. One year later, the notorious French privateer Jean Bart, commanding 6 combat ships, attacked a larger English squadron, with 8 large combat ships, guarding a larger convoy of roughly 100 transports, recently captured (Mordal 1973, 112). The same is the situation if we refer to some smaller episodes: on May 11, 1707, “the Chevalier du Forbin sallied forth from Dunkirk at the head of 8 ships... Two days later he came upon a British convoy of 56 merchantmen... escorted by three warships... and a frigate. The French attack was swift and sure” (Mordal 1973, 121). At the

end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, on April 8, 1782, the French Admiral de Grasse started a bold attempt to attack and, if possible, conquer Jamaica: he sailed from Martinique “with 35 warships, 6 frigates, and 150 store ships” (Mordal 1973, 151). In the opening stages of the great Anglo-French wars fought after the start of the French Revolution, one of the most relevant episodes we must take into consideration is the set of naval decisions and actions leading to the battle called The Glorious First of June. The French tried to protect, at all costs, a large convoy of 117 transports, carrying badly needed grain from America. The mission was regarded as being *vital* for the national interest, simply because of a “disastrous harvest brought about by political troubles and civil war as much as by bad weather”: the convoy, with a clearly significant *strategic* cargo, was protected by 36 warships, 26 of them directly involved in the battle against a British fleet with 26 large combat ships (Mordal 1973, 158-160). A few years later, in the late 1790s, when General Bonaparte sailed to Egypt, his fleet had 33 combat ships (13 ships-of-the-line, 9 frigates, 11 corvettes or lighter ships), and 232 sea transport ships, carrying 32,300 men and 680 horses (Napoleon 1981, 254).

More recently, in the 1920s, the United States prepared several versions of the so-called *War Plan Orange*, a detailed contingency plan to be implemented in case of war against Japan. A detailed work published almost 30 years ago by the US Naval Institute gives us accurate numbers of ships to be used: in the November 1922 plan, built around the hypothesis of an American campaign via Marshalls and the Carolines to the so-called Western base, the total number of major (or large) surface combat ships was going to be 46, while the total number of troop transports, dry cargo and ammunition transport ships, and tankers and colliers was going to be 261 – almost 4.5 times more than that of the large combatants (Miller 1991, 128). The numbers are even more significant if we explore the details of the US Navy plan prepared in January 1925, aimed at establishing a major naval base of operations in the Philippines, which were, at that moment, a territory ruled by the US. This variant of the *War Plan Orange* involved 25 large surface combat ships, 39 troop transports (12 for the USMC, 27 for the army), 83 ships for transporting dry cargo and ammunition, plus 100 oil tankers and 20 colliers (Miller 1991, 128). Again, the sealift component of the plan is – in terms of number of ships – *significantly* larger than the naval *combat* component (25 large surface combat ships, but almost 10 times more sea transport ships: 242, to be more accurate).

The same is the situation if we are talking about most of the Allied convoys used by Western powers, in World War II, to send aid to the USSR, or by the US for transporting war materials to the UK, across the Atlantic. See, for example, the case of convoy *HX 112*, sailing from Halifax to the East, and consisting of 41 cargo ships, escorted by five destroyers and two corvettes (Mordal 1973, 347), or the case of the convoy *HG 76*, sailing from Gibraltar to the UK, in December 1941: 32 merchant ships, escorted by 12 warships - two sloops, two destroyers, seven corvettes, and one aircraft carrier, *HMS Audacity* (Mordal 1973, 348).

In early June 1944, on the occasion of the Allied landing operations on the French coast, in Normandy, a massive number of ships were used: roughly 4,000 transport and landing ships of all sorts, plus some 600 combat ships (Eisenhower 1975, 345). Again, total number of combat ships of all sorts was several times smaller than the total number of transport ships used.

We also strongly underline here that only on *very* few occasions we know about the total number of transport ships is significantly smaller, if compared with that of combat ships acting together with them. One of the earliest (but very clear) examples of this sort is that of the 256 B.C. Roman attempt to invade North Africa, in the context of the Punic Wars: the Roman fleet was made up of roughly 250 combat ships, while the strategic sealift effort (an army of 60,000 soldiers was transported) was made by 80 large sea transport ships (Gabriel, 2007).

## **2. US strategic sealift capabilities: major realities and trends in recent past**

### **and nowadays**

The *recent* history of the US *strategic* sealift capabilities is both very interesting and clearly significant, enabling us to better understand present day realities and trends.

In the opening stages of World War II, for example, even *before* the moment when the huge US shipbuilding program gained full momentum, naval traffic across the Atlantic was clearly impressive, illustrating the vast sealift potential of the US: “on average, there were 120 to 130 cargo vessels on passage every day”, in the New York harbor and off Cape Hatteras areas alone (Mordal 1973, 350). Also in World War II, the Western allies (the United States and the UK) sent to the Soviet Union almost 21 *million* tons of aid – weapons of all sorts, ammunition, some raw materials, clothing, industrial equipment, automobiles and several hundred thousand trucks for military use (Beckhusen 2021). Because of obvious geographic reasons, almost all this aid was transported from US and UK ports to Soviet Union (or to Iran, and from there on, on road or rail) by ship, across the Atlantic and the Indian oceans.

In World War II, the size of US naval capabilities of all sorts grew in a really massive way, and in 1952, before the moment when many combat and auxiliary ships got out of active service, the total number of US oceanic combat and auxiliary ships (including transport) that America could use was staggeringly high: 102 airplane carriers, 87 ships of the line and cruisers, 385 destroyers, 207 submarines, plus 530 amphibious ships and 850 other auxiliary ships (Pensel 1975, 316). Again, total number of transport ships of all sorts was clearly *larger* than the total number of oceanic combat ships.

Starting with World War II, along several decades, the role of US strategic sealift capabilities became more and more important, at *global* level. “In World War II, civilian-crewed US cargo ships controlled by the War Shipping Administration carried about 75 percent of shipments from the United States. The total cargo lifted between December 7, 1941, and the capitulation of Japan was approximately 300.5 million short tons. The US-flag merchant fleet also carried the great majority of military personnel and civilians moving overseas and returning to the United States during and after the war. Approximately 31.5 million measurement tons of supplies were shipped from the United States to the Far East during the Korean War, in the 50’s. About 95 percent of these supplies were shipped by sea, with 80 percent carried by privately owned US-flag merchant ships, and 15 percent by Military Sea Transportation Service ships – all crewed by civilian American citizen seafarers. Privately owned US-flag merchant ships delivered 65 percent of the dry cargo shipments to support American forces in Vietnam, and Government-owned ships carried the balance. The Maritime Administration activated 172 World War II era Victory ships from its National Defense Reserve Fleet. Some 15,000 US citizen merchant mariners crewed the vessels. Cargoes totaled more than 85 million measurement tons” (Pike 2000).

Starting with the 1980s, strategic sealift capabilities of the United States grew smaller, step by step, but quite quickly. However, at the zenith of the Cold War, strategic sealift capabilities of the US were *still* very large. A text published by FAS / *Federation of American Scientists* mentioned that “following World War II the primary strategic sealift mission was to rapidly move men and equipment to Europe to defend against a Soviet/Warsaw Pact attack.... sealift would be provided by over 600 NATO merchant vessels and an active U.S. merchant fleet that still numbered 578 major ships as of 1978. Those 578 ships dwindled to 367 over the next 12 years” (Pike, 2000).

The *global* context the US *strategic* sealift capabilities are *now* confronted with is not at all a serene one. On the contrary, neo-imperial and revisionist policies and actions of *both* Russia and China, and the very volatile situation in the Greater Middle East have clear consequences: the United States might be forced to cope, using severely limited sealift

capabilities, with the tremendously difficult task of *concomitantly* operating *both* in the Atlantic-Mediterranean *and* in the Indo-Pacific. In such a situation, at least two problems can be easily identified.

First of all, we are dealing with the *extreme length of potential transportation sea routes*. Even if the Atlantic is not the widest ocean of the planet, distances are significant. There are 2,000 nautical miles between New York and the Panama Canal; and 3,750 miles from New York to the southern tip of Norway; and 3,150 nautical miles between New York and Gibraltar (Chaliand and Rageau 1985, 57). In the Indo-Pacific basin, distances are even more massive: for example, total distance between Los Angeles and Sydney is 6,450 nautical miles (Chaliand and Rageau, 68).

A second problem we are to cope with is the fact that *the ability of even the most important regional allies and other strategic partners of the United States to significantly augment US strategic sealift capabilities is very limited (small, in perfectly blunt terms)*. In the Indo-Pacific, for example, *Australia*, a traditional strategic partner of the United States (to better understand this, see Australian military contribution in the Korean War, in Vietnam, and more recently in Afghanistan) has to rely, according to official data, on less than half a dozen logistic ships: a governmental White Paper made public a few years ago was listing only one logistics support ship, HMAS *Choules*, plus two *Canberra* Class amphibious ships, and “two new replenishment vessels that will begin service by 2026”, plus “a third replenishment vessel or additional logistics support ship” to “be acquired [in] the late 2020s” (\*\*\* 2016). A few years ago, according to a piece of analysis published by the Atlantic Council, the strategic sealift capabilities of Japan was very limited as well: it consisted “primarily of three *Osumi*-class amphibious landing ships, each of which can carry 330 troops and 1,400 tons of equipment”; the text we are quoting here from is also offering data enabling the reader to better understand the limits of the Japanese sealift capabilities: “a US heavy brigade combat team (HBCT) consists of about 3,800 soldiers and 20,000 tons of equipment. It would take approximately fifteen days for the SDF’s organic sealift assets to transport a US HBCT from Japan to the Korean peninsula, or approximately thirty days to transport a comparable Ground Self-Defense Forces unit to the southern end of the Ryukyu Island chain” (Cliff 2015, 28-29).

The situation is *now* a *very* difficult one, if we are speaking about *allied* capabilities, in the Atlantic *as well*: the US sealift capabilities might be augmented by those operated by the European NATO member states. Now, 11 of these powers in Europe (in strictly alphabetical order: Croatia, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Turkey and the United Kingdom) are operating, together, the so-called *Sealift Consortium*, which “finances the charter of up to 15 special “roll-on/roll-off” ships”, usually called “Ro/Ro, ... because equipment can be driven on and off the ships via special doors and ramps into the hold” (\*\*\*, May 2021). But put together, these 15 ships do have a sealift “total capacity of about 33,700 lane meters ...: three Ro/Ro ships on assured access; residual capacity of five Danish/German ARK Ro/Ro ships on full-time charter; residual capacity of two French Ro/Ro ships; residual capacity of four UK Ro/Ro ships; and one Norwegian Ro/Ro ship on dormant contract” (\*\*\*, May 2021). At a first glance, almost 34 lane kilometers might be regarded as a very impressive figure, but if we take into consideration the basic fact that just one Stryker brigade has “over 300 Stryker armored vehicles, over 1,200 trucks, utility vehicles, and support equipment” (GAO 2003, 6), we suddenly can more clearly understand one such unit, alone, has to use almost 10 lane kilometers (1,500 vehicles, combat and transport, multiplied by roughly 6 meters each, means at least 9,000 lane meters). So that, the entire sealift capability of the European part of NATO might suffice for transporting less than 4 brigades (which means *less* than two complete divisions). And anyone can easily understand that, *if* Russia is to ever use massive military forces to reshape the balance of power in Western Eurasia, it might easily use significantly *more* airborne, armored, and mechanized units).

In the United States, at this very moment, the most important part of the sealift capabilities (*an important part* of them of a clear *strategic* nature) of the US Navy are provided mainly by the *US Navy's Military Sealift Command (MSC)*. According to its official webpage, MCS's mission is that of providing "on-time logistics, *strategic sealift* (author's emphasis), as well as specialized missions anywhere in the world, under any condition, 24/7, 365 days a year". The very idea that *strategic* sealift is one of the main jobs this Navy's command is supposed to accomplish in *any* conditions is also underlined by a statement telling us "MSC safely operates, supplies, and maintains the ships that provide logistics support, conduct special missions, move military equipment, supply combat forces, provide humanitarian relief, and *strategically* (author's emphasis) position combat cargo around the world". The same open source already used here indicates the *MSC* is "operating approximately 125 ships daily around the globe" (for all text fragments quoted in this paragraph, see \*\*\*, *MSC Mission*).

To better understand the *really major* role of the *US Navy's MSC* in the context of major international conflicts and / or crises, we think it is useful to offer the reader just a few relevant data, concerning the past few decades: "Between 1965 and 1969, MSC transported nearly 54 million tons of combat equipment and supplies and nearly 8 million tons of fuel to Vietnam. MSC ships also transported troops to Vietnam". Later, "during the first Persian Gulf War's Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, MSC distinguished itself as the largest source of defense transportation of any nation involved. MSC ships delivered more than 12 million tons of wheeled and tracked vehicles, helicopters, ammunition, dry cargo, fuel and other supplies and equipment during the war. At the height of the war, MSC managed more than 230 government-owned and chartered ships". More recently, the same *MSC* went on playing "a vital and continuing role in contingency operations around the world": "As of January 2013, MSC ships delivered more than 25.7 billion gallons of fuel and moved 126.2 million square feet of combat equipment and supplies to U.S. and coalition forces engaged in operations supporting Iraq and Afghanistan" (for all text fragments quoted in this paragraph, see \*\*\*, *History and Heritage*).

*MSC* is now using 15 large oil tankers "that provide a variety of fuels for ship propulsion, aircraft operations and power generation"; they "are the largest subset of the Navy's Combat Logistics Force (CLF) and also routinely shuttle food and other dry cargo as fleet freight for transfer to customers as their fuel is delivered", and they "provide fuel enabling the fleet to remain at sea and combat ready for extended periods of time" (\*\*\*, *Fleet Oiler (PM1)*). *MSC* is also using some 20 ships that are elements of the so-called *Special Mission (PM2)* program; these ships "provide operating platforms and services for a wide variety of US military and other US government missions", including "Oceanographic and hydrographic surveys, underwater surveillance, missile tracking, acoustic surveys, and submarine and special warfare support" (\*\*\*, *Special Mission (PM2)*). Among these ships there are: one cable laying/repair ship; two missile range instrumentation ships; one navigation test support ship; five ocean surveillance ships; six oceanographic survey ships; one sea-based X-band radar; and four submarine and special warfare support ships (\*\*\*, *Special Mission (PM2)*). We strongly underline that most of the ships belonging to the *Special Mission (PM2)* program *do not* have a direct and / or significant sealift capability (with the notable exception of the four submarine and special warfare support ships, and these have a total displacement which is not made public by the *MSC*). A third important component of the *MSC* is *Prepositioning Force (PM3)*, with several really large ships, some of them with a total displacement of more than 62,000 tons – see, for example, *USNS Seay*, *USNS Ptilaau*, and two other ships, each of them 950 feet long, able to reach a speed of 24 knots and with a displacement of 62,444 tons (\*\*\*, *Maritime Prepositioning Force*).

Along the past few years, *open sources have clearly indicated the US strategic sealift capabilities are confronted with a set of major problems and weaknesses, significantly eroding the effectiveness of any potential effort of deploying, in case of need, large amounts of manpower and war materiel.* In early October 2018, for example, a very interesting piece of military journalism was stating “with Russia’s reemergence as a menace in Europe, the US Army has been laying the foundations to fight once again on the continent it defended through most of the 20th century”, but “the US sealift capacity – the ships that would ultimately be used to transport Army equipment from the states to Europe or Asia – is orders of magnitude smaller than it was during World War II. Combine that with the fact that the commercial shipbuilding industry in the US is all but gone, and the US can’t launch the kind of massive buildup of logistics ships it undertook during wartime decades ago”. According to the author of the text we are here quoting from, in 2018, the US sealift capabilities “available for a large-scale contingency” (major international crises or more or less massive military operations involving deploying and / or supporting major units of the Army to / on other continents) were very limited: no more than “46 ships in the Ready Reserve Force, 15 ships in the Military Sealift Command surge force, and roughly 60 US-flagged commercial ships in the Maritime Security Program available to the military in a crisis”. The same text was listing other problems which badly jeopardized the strategic sealift capabilities of the United States: first of all, 24 of the ships belonging to the ready reserve force and to the Military Sealift Command, were steam operated, and “steam is largely obsolete in the commercial world that the US relies upon to keep its emergency stock of trained mariners employed and in seagoing careers”; secondly, most of the senior steam engineers, vital for operating the steam ships, “are in their 50s”, and “they’re all going to be retiring soon”; and thirdly, the total number of well qualified US citizen mariners “available and willing to sail when required” is low; it might be enough for a very brief major military effort, but “we are about 1,800 mariners short for any kind of long-term sustainment effort”, was openly stating Read Admiral (retired) Mark Buzby, a very senior maritime administrator of the US sealift capabilities. (for all fragments quoted in this paragraph, see Larter 2018).

Some months later, in January 2019, *DefenseNews.com.* published a text directly dealing with the worrying general situation of the US sealift capabilities. The text was openly stating the United States sealift fleet “is facing the prospect of an imminent collapse in capacity due to the ships either reaching or exceeding their hull life, according to the US Army”; it was also stating “the most urgent need in the surge sealift fleet is the Ready Reserve Force, a fleet of ships run by the Maritime Administration that are in reduced operating status and spend most of their time in port waiting to be activated in case of a national emergency”. According to the data present in the text, new ships are to be needed as early as 2023-2026, and Captain Scot Searles, at that very moment the strategic and theater sealift program manager said, while delivering a brief at the annual US Surface Navy Association’s national symposium, “developing the new ships will take anywhere from three to five years”, and “in the meantime, the Navy plans to buy used ships off the open market and modify them for use by the Defense Department”. The 2019 text we are now dealing with also quoted some fragments from a letter sent, one year before, by the US Army to the US Congress. The letter was a really worrying warning signal, warning the Congress that, “without proactive recapitalization of the Organic Surge Sealift Fleet, the Army will face unacceptable risk in force projection capability beginning in 2024”; it also stated “by 2034, 70% of the organic [sealift] fleet will be over 60 years old - well past its economic useful life; further degrading the Army’s ability to deploy forces”, and “shortfalls in sealift capacity undermine the effectiveness of US conventional deterrence as even a fully-resourced and trained force has limited deterrent value if an adversary believes they can achieve their strategic objective in the window of opportunity before

American land forces arrive” (for all data and fragments quoted in this paragraph see Larter January 2019).

Several months later, in September 2019, the *US Transportation Command (TRANSCOM)* has “ordered the largest stress test of its wartime sealift fleet in the command’s history, with 33 out of 61 government-owned ships being activated simultaneously”, and “the results were bad, according to a new report”, *DefenseNews* was reporting on December 31, 2019. The text we are quoting here from explains “in a crisis, nearly 90 percent of all Army and Marine Corps equipment would be carried by ship”, but at that moment of the stress test we are speaking about, an astonishing low – and really worrying – percentage of the ships involved were really fit for their role: “overall, 40.7 percent of the 61 ships operated by Military Sealift Command and the Maritime Administration were fully ready to support a major sealift operation”. More than this, 22 of the 61 ships which were directly involved in the 2019 wartime sealift stress test were not at all fit for the job to be done; a naval specialist said “you had 22 out of the 61 ships in either C-5 or C-4 condition... C-5 means that you can’t even leave the dock; C-4 means you can leave the dock but you are not in any condition to sail any real distance. In my ballpark, that’s non-mission capable”. The same specialist, now a university professor at Campbell University, has also stated that 9 of the 33 ships specially and temporarily activated for the 2019 sealift stress test “had issues”, and “three of them were C-4 level” (for all fragments quoted in this paragraph, Larter December 2019).

One year later, in 2020, two senior officials in the Pentagon have delivered an even more somber evaluation of the problems the US strategic sealift capabilities might be confronted with, in case of a major international crisis. In March 2020, Army General Steve Lyons, at that moment the acting commander of the US Transcom (Transportation Command) testified at a joint hearing of both the House Armed Services Committee’s Subcommittees for Seapower and Projection Forces, and Readiness. He stated, on that very occasion, “today, I am confident in our ability to successfully execute our mission, but the risk is increasing”, and the official media text we are quoting here from explains the General was openly “referring to the insufficient quantity and aging fleets of sealift vessels and aerial refueling tankers”. On the same occasion, Mark H. Buzby, at that time the acting maritime administrator at the *US Maritime Administration (MARAD)*, a structure operating the naval vessels that are a part of the *US TRANSCOM* (Transportation Command), has said “this is an efficient and effective force for moving cargoes worldwide during peacetime... [but] I’m concerned about its ability to reliably project and sustain power globally in a contested environment. To address this, we must strengthen our sealift capability and reverse declines in the US-flagged commercial fleet and US shipbuilding and repair industry” (for all the fragments quoted in this paragraph, Vergun 2020).

In July 2021, *The Maritime Executive* has published a piece of news presenting the most recent data used in this text, enabling us to understand how serious the problems of the US sealift capabilities can be. According to the article, “neglect over the last decades has seen this pillar of US military strength begin to crack”, and Army General Stephen R. Lyons, “our sealift fleet is able to generate only 65 percent of our required capacity, and is rapidly approaching the end of [its] useful life”. More than this, Rear admiral Buzby, a former senior official of *MARAD* (Maritime Administration), was stating “the Merchant Marine is at least 1,800 officers short of what would be necessary in wartime” (for all text fragments quoted in this paragraph, see Brown 2021).

Another *massively significant* problem US strategic sealift capabilities are confronted with are the increased risks generated by the more and more robust presence, in the Atlantic, of the nuclear-propelled Russian submarines. In September 2021, *Military Times* published two interesting texts directly dealing with this problem. One of them underlines “Navy leaders have



cautioned about increased Russian undersea activity in the Atlantic Ocean”, a reality leading to the resurrection of the US 2<sup>nd</sup> fleet, in direct “response to greater levels of Russian activity in the North Atlantic and Arctic, including undersea” (Stancy Correll 2021). The other one is openly stating “the Navy is organizing East Coast destroyers to better protect the homeland from Russian threats – specifically those undersea – as part of a new initiative called Task Group Greyhound” – at this very moment two large destroyers are directly belonging to an ad-hoc task group, and this naval group “will grow to include The Sullivans, which will replace Donald Cook when that DDG goes into maintenance, as well as Cole and Gravelly next year to create a four-ship force that can have two ships ready for a mission on short notice” (Stancy Correll and Eckstein 2021). A supplementary discussion on the way in which two (or even four) destroyers might be regarded as a fully adequate force for patrolling (and defending) the entire North Atlantic might be very useful, but it clearly goes beyond the already listed goals of the present study.

### **Brief conclusions**

Along the past few decades, the US strategic sealift capabilities grew smaller and smaller (if we are speaking about the total number of available ships). Nevertheless, the general context on the international arena is more and more volatile, and more and more dangerous. In such a situation, the basic conclusion of this study is that using fewer and fewer material resources (some of them overaged and / or almost obsolete), and not fully adequate manpower resources, the US *strategic* sealift capabilities might face *huge* problems in different situations – *mainly* if confronted with the perfectly possible task of having to cope, for example, with two (or more) *concomitant* major international crises. Most probably, the most optimistic future scenario we might design is one in which, quite soon, the US strategic sealift capabilities are going to be massively augmented (new ships, new training programs, new massive budgetary allocations). However, according to what we know at this very moment, from all sorts of reliable open sources, real chances for such an outcome are really, really *very* slim.

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