

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

March 15, 2021

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin III
Secretary of Defense
Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301

The Honorable Kathleen H. Hicks
Deputy Secretary of Defense
Department of Defense
1010 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301

Dear Secretary Austin and Deputy Secretary Hicks:

Congratulations to you both for your recent confirmations to assume the leadership of the Department of Defense (DOD). We write to express our strong support for a robust Navy shipbuilding budget, including funding for the continued procurement of Large Surface Combatants, and urge you to endorse unambiguously the long-standing and congressionally mandated requirement for a larger Navy fleet.

While we recognize that the new Administration will likely review the nation's National Defense Strategy and budgetary priorities, the requirement for a larger Navy has been both established in law and confirmed by numerous Navy and independent studies. In 2017, the national policy of achieving a 355-ship Navy was enacted into law, adopting the fleet size called for in the Navy's December 2016 Force Structure Assessment. Three other congressionally mandated, independent studies similarly called for a Navy much larger than the current 298 deployable battle force ships in the fleet today. In December 2020, the Department released an updated 30-year shipbuilding plan that called for 405 manned ships by the year 2051.

China, which each of you identified during your recent Senate nomination hearings as the foremost national security challenge facing our nation, currently has the largest Navy in the world, including approximately 350 ships. DOD has identified China as "the top ship-producing nation in the world by tonnage" and notes that China "is increasing its shipbuilding capacity and capability for all naval classes."¹ In the era of great-power competition, a stronger U.S. Navy capable of projecting power around the world is necessary to ensure America's national and economic security during peacetime as well as to defeat our adversaries should deterrence fail.

We are concerned that the DOD and the Navy are not keeping pace with China on shipbuilding. Due to the long lead times necessary to properly procure and resource a larger fleet, attention must be paid to this critical issue immediately.

¹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2020 Annual Report to Congress*, available at: <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>.

The appropriate composition of a growing fleet is also a significant consideration. The Navy's Large Surface Combatants (LSC) are a vital component of the surface fleet and must be an important focus of future shipbuilding plans and efforts. DDG-51s are the true workhorses of the Navy, conducting freedom of navigation missions in the South China Sea, leading maritime security patrols in the North Atlantic, and deterring Iranian aggression in the Persian Gulf. The newest Flight III ships, to be delivered to the fleet in the coming years, will significantly improve the anti-air and ballistic missile defense capabilities of the Navy. For example, the new AN/SPY-6 radar will be 35 times more sensitive than current systems and will allow our destroyers and other defended ships to operate in higher threat areas. In addition to the Flight III capabilities that will soon reach the fleet, the planned future DDG(X) will bring enhanced capabilities that ensure we remain ahead of our evolving adversaries.

Ultimately, Congress is responsible for annual DOD and Navy authorizations and appropriations. As members of our respective chambers' Appropriations and Armed Services Committees, we will continue to support expanding the fleet in order to protect our national security and safeguard our prosperity in an increasingly contested international security environment. Accordingly, the FY 2021 defense appropriations bill provided \$23.27 billion for ten battle force Navy ships. This included funding to procure two new DDG-51 Flight III destroyers, as well as an additional \$130 million in long lead materials that may *only* be used to support procurement of an additional DDG-51 in FY 2022. The FY 2021 National Defense Authorization Act likewise also authorized this funding.

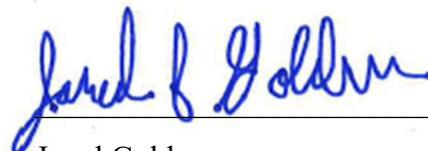
Furthermore, a strong shipbuilding industrial base is a prerequisite for ensuring the Navy's maritime superiority. As the Navy correctly identified in its December 2020 shipbuilding plan, "[o]ur shipbuilding and supporting vendor base constitute a national security imperative that must be steadily supported, and grown, to maintain a skilled workforce." Accordingly, the Navy should ensure stability and predictability in the LSC industrial base by supporting a follow-on DDG-51 Flight III multi-year procurement contract of at least fifteen ships to extend beyond FY22, the expiration year of the current contract. As noted in the House and Senate reports to the defense bill, a follow-on DDG-51 Flight III multi-year procurement contract will help ensure that the Flight III DDG's critical and unique capabilities are made available to the Navy, and will provide support and stability to a crucial component of the defense industrial base.

As you continue to review and update the Department's strategy and budget plans, we urge you to clearly commit to a larger and more capable Navy. Thank you for your consideration of this important issue, and we look forward to your response.

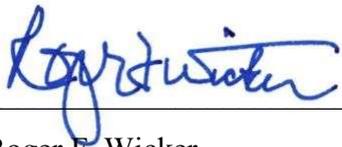
Sincerely,



Susan M. Collins
United States Senator



Jared Golden
Member of Congress



Roger F. Wicker
United States Senator



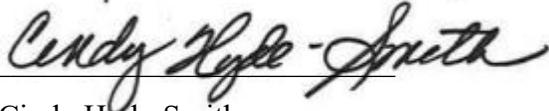
Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress



Angus S. King
United States Senator



Trent Kelly
Member of Congress



Cindy Hyde-Smith
United States Senator



Steven M. Palazzo
Member of Congress

CC: The Honorable Thomas W. Harker
Secretary of the Navy (acting)

The Honorable James F. Geurts
Under Secretary of the Navy (Performing the Duties of)