

Our U.S. Navy: What if the world's first responder couldn't respond?

By USN-NC Capt. Faye Pyles (ret.)

News of a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier gap in the Persian Gulf has raised concerns about our nation's ability to respond to crises in the region and elsewhere. But this concern is not just about responding to armed conflict.

For millions of disaster victims around the world — from the tsunami in Japan to the earthquake in Haiti — U.S. Navy aircraft carriers and ships, and their sailors and Marines, have meant the difference between life and death. They have also represented — in very real ways — the generosity of the American people.

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Whenever the American people are moved to help others on distant shores, it is the U.S. Navy that delivers aid and does it with a quick and significant response that also helps bolster America's standing in the world. The United States is a global leader not just because of our power, but because of the visibility of, and goodwill created by, our Navy in humanitarian operations.

The importance of this role was underscored following the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. As the U.S. Navy delivered vital food, tents and medical care, approval ratings for the U.S. in predominantly Muslim Indonesia climbed nearly 25 percent.

But the ability to continue providing this help is now at risk. Over the past several years, our Navy has been called to respond to ever more military and humanitarian crises around the globe without receiving the necessary investment in support — and the strain is starting to show.

In just the past 18 months, sailors and Marines have delivered earthquake relief in Nepal, protected container ships from harassment and seizure by Iran, conducted around-the-clock combat operations against ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and rescued 65 people stranded at sea near Indonesia — all in addition to their regular duties, of course.

A lack of steady, predictable funding for the fleet has already caused crippling delays in maintenance and modernization. As the maintenance backlog grows, the strain on sailors and Marines and the shortage of mission-ready ships, equipment and aircraft become more acute.

Caught in a vicious cycle of fewer ships and more duties, the Navy has no choice but to lengthen deployments, putting further wear and tear on equipment and personnel. The aircraft carrier USS *Carl Vinson* recently returned from a marathon deployment lasting 10 months at sea, the longest scheduled deployment since the Vietnam War. USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* and its accompanying warships just completed two back-to-back eight-month missions with only a two-month break in between. We are asking too much of the ships and the personnel.

This erosion of capabilities cannot continue.

As both a Navy officer and a civilian with Project HOPE, I have witnessed firsthand how our Navy-Marine Corps team answers the call for help as no other organization can. Since 2004, our Navy has strengthened our ties to more than 40 countries, caring for more than 827,000 patients, providing nearly two million health and medical procedures and performing almost 11,000 surgeries.

Constantly on patrol around the world and with capabilities to deliver crucial supplies and medical assistance via air, land and sea, the Navy-Marine Corps team is the nation's first responder in times of disaster.

But how long will they be able to do so?

Without a significant investment by Congress and the administration in the Navy's future, we risk our ability to help the victims of the next disaster. They will suffer as a consequence — and so will America's reputation.

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