

Erosion of Sealift Capability Will Prevent Sustainment of Overseas Forces, Senate Told

The erosion of U.S. shipping and the American mariner pool has damaged U.S. sealift capability and will prevent sustainment of a prolonged military operation overseas, the head of the U.S. Transportation Command told a Senate Committee this week. USTRANSCOM is responsible for the global, joint movement of combat units and sustainment cargo.

TRANSCOM Commander General Darren McDew informed the Senate Armed Services Committee that the U.S. can initially marshal the organic military resources to deploy sufficient forces and the requisite equipment into a war zone. However, he said we face critical challenges after the first 30 days regarding resupply efforts that would expose vulnerabilities in our depleted stockpile of suitable ships and aircraft along with the workforce to sustain surge operations.

"We do not have the capability I wish we had," the General told the Committee. "The initial force can be brought by organic fleets, and then we would have to see what we can do after that." Sen. John McCain, who chairs the Committee, noted that the General's answer was "not comforting" to his committee.



Neglect for the nation's Merchant Marine comes with a price. The U.S. would not be able to sustain an overseas military action for more than 30 days.

General McDew understands the military is dependent on the American Merchant Marine to help project U.S. power overseas. However, he pointed out the aging and loss of capacity has threatened the nation's strategic sealift capability putting future operations at risk. "While the U.S. flagged commercial fleet remains the most effective means for us to obtain the necessary sealift capability to meet national defense needs,"

he said, "we are considering a range of options to ensure that we retain the ability to deploy a decisive combat force at the time and place of our choosing. Those options may include new approaches to preserving essential capabilities in the Ready Reserve Force, which among other options, may include non-US built vessels."

The General is a strong supporter of the Maritime Security Program and Jones Act and has called the U.S. Merchant Marine “the backbone of our overseas deployment.” But he has also said that if the nation chooses not to encourage a strong U.S.-flag fleet then we, as a country, will be forced “to rely on other countries to deploy our combat power.”