

The state of the U.S. Navy amid a massive Chinese naval buildup
Norah O'Donnell - CBS News

The United States Navy helped secure victory in two world wars and the Cold War. Today the Navy remains a formidable fighting force, but even officers within the service have questioned its readiness.

While the U.S. spent 20 years fighting land wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Pentagon watched China, its greatest geopolitical rival of the 21st century, build the largest navy in the world. China has threatened to use that navy to invade Taiwan, an important American ally.

As tensions with China continue to rise, we wanted to know more about the current state of the U.S. Navy, and how it's trying to deter China, while preparing for the possibility of war.

Admiral Samuel Paparo: The Navy's always on alert. One third of the Navy is always deployed and operating at all times. The Navy's mustering right now about 300 ships, and there are about 100 ships at sea right now all around the globe.

Admiral Samuel Paparo commands the U.S. Pacific Fleet, whose 200 ships and 150,000 sailors and civilians make up 60% of the entire U.S. Navy. We met him last month on the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz deployed near the U.S. territory of Guam, southeast of Taiwan and the People's Republic of China, or PRC.



Admiral Samuel Paparo / Credit: 60 Minutes© Provided by CBS News

Norah O'Donnell: You've been operating as a naval officer for 40 years. How has operating in the Western Pacific changed?

Admiral Samuel Paparo: In the early 2000s the PRC Navy mustered about 37 vessels. Today, they're mustering 350 vessels

This month, China's new Foreign Minister Qin Gang delivered a stern warning to the U.S.

He said that if Washington does not change course in its stance towards China, "conflict and confrontation" is inevitable.

This past August, when then-Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi became the most senior U.S. political figure to [visit Taiwan](#) in 25 years, China called it a "blatant provocation."

The People's Liberation Army fired ballistic missiles into the sea around Taiwan and encircled the island with aircraft and warships.

Norah O'Donnell: So are Chinese warships now operating closer to Taiwan after Nancy Pelosi's visit?

Admiral Samuel Paparo: Yes.

The best guess anyone has about China's ultimate intentions for Taiwan comes from the CIA. According to its intelligence assessment, [China's President Xi Jinping](#) has ordered the People's Liberation Army to be prepared to take back the island by force by 2027.

Norah O'Donnell: And if China invades Taiwan, what will the U.S. Navy do?

Admiral Samuel Paparo: It's a decision of the president of the United States and a decision of the Congress. It's our duty to be ready for that. But the bulk of the United States Navy will be deployed rapidly to the Western Pacific to come to the aid of Taiwan if the order comes to aid Taiwan in thwarting that invasion.

Norah O'Donnell: Is the U.S. Navy ready?

Admiral Samuel Paparo: We're ready, yes. I'll never admit to being ready enough. President Biden has declared four times, including on 60 Minutes, that the [U.S. military would defend Taiwan](#), which is a democracy and the world's leading producer of advanced microchips.

To reach the USS Nimitz, we first traveled to America's westernmost territory, the island of Guam, in the middle of the Pacific.

Guam was taken by Imperial Japan two days after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. U.S. marines recaptured it two and a half years later, and the island, about the size of Chicago, became an indispensable strategic foothold in the Western Pacific, as it remains today.

From Guam, we boarded a Navy C-2 Greyhound. The Cold War-era transport plane takes people and supplies back and forth from land to the carrier. It was a short flight to the ship...

...and an even shorter landing

Before Admiral Paparo rose to lead the Pacific Fleet, he flew jets and graduated from the school known as "Top Gun."

Norah O'Donnell: When you talk about ships, what's the most powerful in the U.S. Navy?

Admiral Samuel Paparo: It's an aircraft carrier and its air wing is capable of 150 strike or air-to-air sorties per day, with at its surge levels, the ability to deliver 900 precision-guided munitions every day, and re-loadable every night

Norah O'Donnell: So even though China now has the largest Navy in the world, they don't have anything like this in terms of aircraft carriers.

Admiral Samuel Paparo: They do not. But they're working towards it. And they have-- they have two operational aircraft carriers right now. That's China's two diesel-fueled carriers, to the U.S.'s 11 nuclear-powered ones that can carry a total of about a thousand attack aircraft... more than the navies of every other nation on earth, combined.

Lt. Cmdr. David Ash: I'll tell you this: we are here to stay, right, in the South China Sea, and in this part of the world. And I think that's the message that we really want to convey to not only China, but the entire world. We will sail wherever international law allows.

Norah O'Donnell: Do you get briefed on China's growing military threat and the progress that their navy is making?

Lt. Cmdr. David Ash: Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely we do. And they are making great progress in a lot of key areas.

Norah O'Donnell: The Chinese?

Lt. Cmdr. David Ash: The Chinese are, from a military standpoint.

This video, from weapons systems officer Lt. Cmdr. Matthew Carlton, shows his F/A-18 strafing ground targets with a machine gun on a U.S. weapons range near Guam. The pilots on the Nimitz also conduct air-to-air combat or dog-fighting drills daily.



*USS Nimitz at sea / Credit: 60 Minutes© Provided by CBS News
Norah O'Donnell: How aggressive has China become in the air?*

Admiral Samuel Paparo: Aggressive. And-- just some examples include-- unsafe, unprofessional intercepts where they move within single digits of feet of other aircrafts, flashing the weapons that they have onboard to the air crew of the other aircraft, operating in international airspace. Maneuvering their aircraft in such a way that denies the ability to turn in one direction. If they're safe and professional, then there's no problem. Everybody has the right to fly and sail wherever international law dictates.

Norah O'Donnell: But the Chinese are pushing that.

Admiral Samuel Paparo: They are pushing it.

China's increasingly aggressive moves in the Western Pacific — encroaching on territory, illegal fishing and building bases in the middle of the South China Sea-- have pushed nations like Japan and the Philippines to forge closer military ties to the U.S.... and this past week, Britain, the U.S. and Australia signed a [landmark deal](#) to jointly develop nuclear-powered attack submarines to patrol the Pacific.

This is how China and Taiwan appear on most maps. This is how the Chinese Communist Party sees the Western Pacific, including the South and East China Seas from Beijing. Taiwan is the fulcrum in what China's leaders call "the first island chain," a constellation of U.S. allies that stretches across its entire coast. Control of Taiwan is the strategic key to unlocking direct access to the Pacific and the sea lanes where about 50% of the world's commerce gets transported.

Norah O'Donnell: China has accused the United States of trying to contain them. What do you say to China?

Admiral Samuel Paparo: I would say, "Do you need to be contained? Are you expanding? Are you an expansionist power?" To a very great extent, the United States was the champion for China's rise. And in no way are we seeking to contain China. But we are seeking for them to play by the rules.

China's navy, a branch of the People's Liberation Army, is now the world's largest. China is also using its 9,000 mile coastline to rewrite the rules of fighting at sea, as these images from Chinese state media show. Its military has invested heavily in long-range precision guided weapons, like the DF-21 and DF-26, that can be used to target ships.

China's People's Liberation Army rocket force calls them "carrier killers" and has practiced shooting them at mock-ups of American ships in the desert that look a lot like the Nimitz.

Norah O'Donnell: Since the United States has been operating in the Western Pacific, China's backyard, they've been developing missiles to attack our assets, haven't they? Specific missiles.

Admiral Samuel Paparo: Absolutely, yes. First I'll say the United States is also a Western Pacific nation. So it's not--

Norah O'Donnell: Guam--

Admiral Samuel Paparo: It's not China's backyard, it's-- you know, it is a free and open Indo-Pacific that encompasses numerous partners and treaty allies. And yes-- we have seen them greatly enhance their power projection capability.

Norah O'Donnell: How much do you worry about the PLA Rocket Force?

Admiral Samuel Paparo: I worry. You know, I-- I'd be a fool to not worry about it. Of course I worry about the PLA Rocket Force. And of course I work every single day to develop the tactics and the techniques and the procedures to counter it, and to continue to develop the systems that can also defend-- against them.

Norah O'Donnell: About how far are we from mainland China?

Admiral Samuel Paparo: Fifteen hundred nautical miles.

Norah O'Donnell: They can hit us.

Admiral Samuel Paparo: Yes they can. If they've got the targeting in place, they could hit this aircraft carrier. If I don't want to be hit, there's something I can do about it.

U.S. Navy planners aren't just plotting how to evade China's rocket force, but also how they could effectively fight back. From the vicinity of Guam, none of the aircraft on this ship has the range to approach Taiwan without refueling in the air.

Ships like the U.S. Destroyer Wayne E. Meyer, part of the Nimitz strike group, would need to sail much closer towards China to fire their missiles at any force invading Taiwan.

One naval scholar we spoke to likened it to a boxing match in which a fighter—in this case China-- has much longer arms than their potential opponent, the U.S.

Admiral Samuel Paparo: I'll give you a lot of examples where a shorter fighter was able to prevail-- over a long-arm fighter by-- being on their toes, by maneuvering, And we can also stick and move-- while we're developing those-- those longer-range weapons.

There is another area of modern naval warfare where the U.S. had a head start and retains a deep advantage over China.

Norah O'Donnell: I just noticed out of the corner of my eye.

Admiral Samuel Paparo: This is a 688 class, a Los Angeles-class attack submarine. This is the most capable submarine on the planet. You know, with the exception of the Virginia class, our newer class of submarines. The exact number is classified - but our best estimate is that there are about a dozen nuclear-powered fast attack submarines patrolling the Pacific at any time. They are difficult to detect and track...something China is trying to solve.

Norah O'Donnell: How much more advanced is U.S. submarine technology than Chinese capability?

Admiral Samuel Paparo: A generation.

Norah O'Donnell: A generation.

Admiral Samuel Paparo: And-- by generation, think 10 or 20 years. But broadly, I don't really talk in depth about submarine capabilities. It's the silent service.

Since Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, China's military leaders have themselves been mostly silent and ignored efforts by the U.S. military to keep the lines of communication open – even when a [Chinese spy balloon](#) breached American airspace and was shot down by the U.S.

Norah O'Donnell: If the U.S. and Chinese militaries can't communicate over a Chinese spy balloon, then what's gonna happen when there's a real crisis in the South China Sea or with Taiwan?

Admiral Samuel Paparo: We'll hope that they'll answer the phone. Else, we'll do our very best assessment, based on the things that they say in open source, and based on their behavior to divine their intentions. And we'll act accordingly.

Norah O'Donnell: Doesn't that make the situation even more dangerous if U.S. and Chinese militaries are not talking?

Admiral Samuel Paparo: Yes.

Several sources within the Pentagon tell 60 Minutes that if China invaded Taiwan, it could very well kick off in outer space, with both sides targeting the other's satellites that enable precision-guided weaponry. Cyber attacks on American cities and the sabotage of ports on the West Coast of the U.S. mainland could follow.

Norah O'Donnell: One recent-- non-classified war game had the U.S. prevailing but losing 20 ships, including two carriers. Does that sound about right?

Admiral Samuel Paparo: That is a plausible outcome. I can imagine a more pessimistic outcome. And I can imagine a more optimistic outcome. We should be clear-eyed about the costs that we're potentially incurring.

There are about 5,000 Americans on board the Nimitz. The ship is nearly half a century old. Given the Navy's current needs in the Pacific and because there's fuel left in its nuclear reactors, the carrier's life at sea is going to be extended.

Norah O'Donnell: Is it your hope that the power of the U.S. Navy, the force posture of the U.S. Navy, will deter a Chinese invasion of Taiwan?

Admiral Samuel Paparo: It's not my hope. It's my duty. In conjunction with allies and partners to deliver intolerable costs to anybody that would upend the order in violation of the nation's security or in violation of the nation's interests.

Admiral Samuel Paparo: The saying, which is, "Si Pacem, Para Bellum," which is, "If you want peace, prepare for war."

60 Minutes has spent months talking to current and former naval officers, military strategists and politicians about the state of the U.S. Navy. One common thread in our reporting is unease, both about the size of the U.S. fleet and its readiness to fight.

The Navy's ships are being retired faster than they're getting replaced, while the navy of the People's Republic of China or PRC, grows larger and more lethal by the year. We asked the commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, Admiral Samuel Paparo, about this on our visit to the USS Nimitz, the oldest aircraft carrier in the Navy.

Admiral Samuel Paparo: We call it the Decade of Concern. We've seen a tenfold increase in the size of the PRC Navy.

Norah O'Donnell: Technically speaking, the Chinese now have the largest navy in the world, in terms of number of ships, correct?

Admiral Samuel Paparo: Yes. Yes.

Norah O'Donnell: Do the numbers matter?

Admiral Samuel Paparo: Yes. As the saying goes, "Quantity has a quality all its own."

Norah O'Donnell: At some point, are they gonna reach numbers that we can't prevail over?

Admiral Samuel Paparo: I'm not comfortable with the trajectory.

Rep. Mike Gallagher: If you look at a map of the Indo-Pacific, one thing becomes clear. There's a lot of water on that map. And so ours has to be a maritime strategy.

Republican Mike Gallagher and Democrat Elaine Luria served together on the House Armed Services Committee in the last Congress.



Democrat Elaine Luria and Republican Mike Gallagher / Credit: 60 Minutes© Provided by CBS News

Norah O'Donnell: What is it about the U.S. Navy that has allowed the two of you to find common cause?

Rep. Mike Gallagher: I think we-- share a sense of the urgency of the moment. We see increasing threats from China in particular in the Indo-Pacific. We feel like we're not moving fast enough to build a bigger Navy.

Congressman Gallagher is a Marine veteran who represents Green Bay, Wisconsin. He chairs the new [House Committee on China](#). He's concerned that under the Navy's current plan, the fleet will shrink to 280 ships by 2027, the same year the CIA says China has set for having the capability to take Taiwan by force.

Rep. Mike Gallagher: So we will be weakest when our enemy is potentially strongest.

Rep. Elaine Luria: China's increased rhetoric and potential aggression against Taiwan, you know, we're gonna have to be ready to respond today with the forces we have today.

Former Congresswoman Elaine Luria represented Virginia Beach until this past January. An Annapolis graduate, Luria had a 20-year naval career before being elected to Congress.

Norah O'Donnell: What would you say the state of the U.S. Navy is today?

Rep. Elaine Luria: I think the Navy has not received the attention and resources that it needs over two decades. I mean, I served on six different ships. Every single one of those ships was either built during or a product of the fleet that was built-- in the Cold War.

Both Mike Gallagher and Elaine Luria have lobbied for government money for the shipyards in or near their districts, but they say this is less about jobs and more about national security.

Rep. Elaine Luria: If we don't get this right, all of these other things we're doing in Congress ultimately-- might not matter.

Rep. Mike Gallagher: If you think about what a coherent grand strategy vis-a-vis China would be, the hard power would be the most important part of that. And the Navy would be the most important component of your hard power investments. Over the last two decades, the Navy spent \$55 billion on two investments that did not pan out. The first was a class of Destroyers known as the [Zumwalt](#). The futuristic fighting ships were supposed to revolutionize naval warfare. Thirty-two were ordered, but only three were ever launched. The cost of each ship, by one estimate, was upwards of \$8 billion, making them the three most expensive Destroyers ever put to sea.

*Another example is the Littoral Combat Ship or LCS, designed to be a fast all-purpose warship for shallow waters. Thirty billion dollars later the program ran aground after structural defects and engine trouble. Within the Navy, the LCS earned the unfortunate nickname, little cr**py ship.*

Norah O'Donnell: The Navy's last few decades have been described as a lost generation of shipbuilding. Is that overly dramatic?

Rep. Mike Gallagher: I don't think so. We're still struggling to build ships on time-- on budget. And that's something we absolutely need to fix going forward.

This past week, we spoke with Admiral Mike Gilday at the Pentagon. He is the chief of Naval Operations and is responsible for building, maintaining, and equipping the entire U.S. Navy.

Norah O'Donnell: Is the Navy in crisis?

Admiral Mike Gilday: No, the Navy's not in crisis. The Navy is out on point every single day.

Norah O'Donnell: Is it being outpaced by China?

Admiral Mike Gilday: No. Our Navy's still in a position to prevail. But that's not blind confidence. We are concerned with the trajectory that China's on, with China's behavior. But we are in a good position right now-- if we did ever get into a fight against them.

Norah O'Donnell: How would you describe what China has been able to do militarily over the last 20 years?

Admiral Mike Gilday: The most alarming thing is the growth of not only their conventional forces but also their strategic nuclear forces, their cyber capability, their space capability, and how they are using that to force other nations'-- navies out of certain areas in the South China Sea-- instead of-- recognizing international law, they want to control where those goods flow and how.

Norah O'Donnell: What lessons did the U.S. Navy learn from some of the shipbuilding mistakes of the last 20 years?

Admiral Mike Gilday: I think one of the things that we learned-- was that we need to-- have a design well in place before we begin bending metal. And so we are going back-- to the past, to what we did in the '80s and the '90s, the Navy has the lead.

Toshi Yoshihara: There is a tendency among the great powers to look at each other's naval build ups with deep suspicion.

Toshi Yoshihara of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments may know more than any scholar in the west about China's navy.

Toshi Yoshihara: China will have about 440 ships by 2030. And that's according to the Pentagon.

Norah O'Donnell: Why is China able to build more warships more quickly than the U.S.?

Toshi Yoshihara: China has clearly invested in this defense industrial infrastructure to produce these ships, which allows them to produce multiple ships simultaneously, essentially outbuilding many of the western navies combined.

China's navy piggybacks on a booming commercial shipbuilding industry kept afloat by generous state subsidies, inexpensive materials and cheap labor.

In the United States, it's a different story.

After the Cold War ended, the shipbuilding industry consolidated and many of the yards where ships were both built and maintained closed down.

Norah O'Donnell: What do you see when you see China's shipbuilding program?

Admiral Mike Gilday: It's very robust.

Norah O'Donnell: Do we have enough shipyards?

Admiral Mike Gilday: No. I wish that we had more commercial shipyards. And-- over my career, we've gone from more than 30 shipyards, down to about seven that we rely upon on a day-to-day basis to build ships.

One of those yards is run by Huntington Ingalls Industries, which built the state-of-the-art new [Ford-class aircraft carrier](#). After controlled explosions in 2021, to prove it could withstand combat, the Ford got closer to deployment, six years late and billions of dollars over budget.



Ford-class aircraft carrier / Credit: 60 Minutes© Provided by CBS News

The Navy is not just struggling to build new ships on time. According to the Government Accountability Office, or GAO, there's a multi-year backlog repairing the ships in the fleet.

Admiral Mike Gilday: Our maintenance backlog is one of the primary things that I'm working on to correct. So just three years ago, we had 7,700 delay days. That is, extra days in a shipyard by ships when they weren't operational. We have cut that down to 3,000. We are not satisfied.

Norah O'Donnell: Maintenance delays mean sailors can't come home 'cause the ship that's supposed to replace them is not ready. It means longer deployments. It means away from your family more. That's a big strain on the workforce.

Admiral Mike Gilday: The more ships that we can have available to send at sea, alleviates many of those problems that you pointed out. Sailors join the Navy to see the world. And so it's my job to make sure that those maintenance delays go to zero and we can get those ships to sea as quickly as possible.

Norah O'Donnell: In the last year alone, at least 10 sailors assigned to ships undergoing maintenance or working at maintenance facilities have [died by suicide](#).

Admiral Mike Gilday: It is a problem that we're taking very, very seriously. And down to every leader in our Navy, everybody has a responsibility to look out for each other, take care of each other, There is no wrong door to knock on when you need help.

Admiral Gilday says the U.S. Navy's main advantage over China is America's sailors. His goal is to modernize the U.S. fleet and have those sailors serving alongside hundreds of unmanned vessels by 2045.

Admiral Mike Gilday: I think unmanned is the future. And so I think that-- some 40% of our fleet in the future, I believe, is gonna be unmanned.

Norah O'Donnell: Are these, like, underwater drones?

Admiral Mike Gilday: Some of them are. Highly capable-- capable of delivering mines, and perhaps other types of weapons.

Admiral Gilday is talking about the ORCA - an extra-large unmanned undersea vehicle.

Norah O'Donnell: Can you say what it will do, or is that classified?

Admiral Mike Gilday: Well-- at a minimum, it'll have a clandestine mine laying capability. So it'd be done-- in a way that-- is very secretive-- but very effective.

Norah O'Donnell: But the GAO reports that it's already a quarter of a billion dollars over budget and three years behind schedule.

Admiral Mike Gilday: Uh, that particular platform is behind schedule. It's the first of a kind. When it delivers, I see a very high return on investment-- from that particular platform.

Norah O'Donnell: Because?

Admiral Mike Gilday: Because-- it will be among the most lethal and stealthy platforms-- in the arsenal of the U.S. military.

The Navy's total budget request for fiscal year 2024 is over a quarter of a trillion dollars, an \$11 billion increase from last year. The focus is on China.

Norah O'Donnell: The U.S. defense posture is viewed as aggressive by the Chinese. The foreign minister just said, "Look, stop the containment. This may lead to conflict."

Admiral Mike Gilday: Perhaps the Chinese minister doesn't like the fact that the U.S. Navy is operating in collaboration with dozens of navies around the world to ensure that the maritime commons remains free and open for all nations. The Chinese wanna dictate those terms. And so they don't like our presence. But our presence is not intended to be provocative. It's intended to assure and to assure-- to reassure allies and partners around the world that those sea lanes do remain open. The global economy literally floats on seawater.