



## Carrier Debate Still Unresolved Ahead of Budget Roll Out

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Questions about whether the Navy should continue to maintain 11 aircraft carriers or drop to 10 for budget reasons are still lingering as the Pentagon gets ready to unveil its 2015 budget proposal.

“The majority of the budget decisions have been made but there may be some items about which there are still ongoing deliberations,” a Pentagon official said.

The heart of the issue centers on available budget dollars and whether the Navy can maintain an 11-carrier fleet or whether it can still meet its requirements with a 10-carrier fleet.

Many analysts and decision-makers are wrestling with a few basic questions: If a carrier is retired, where will the extra funds go? If funding for an eleventh carrier is preserved, are there other areas of the Navy budget that will need to be scaled back?

“There will be a large bill associated with keeping that carrier. If the Navy has to foot that entire bill, it will impact a lot of programs in small cuts or some big cuts in a few programs,” said a source familiar with the Navy budgeting process.

One plan under review has been to suggest retiring the USS George Washington, a Nimitz-class aircraft carrier slated to go through mid-life refueling and overhaul over the next several years. While carriers typically serve for as long as 50 years, with 25 of them after the mid-life refueling – there has been discussion about whether the George Washington will retire at its half-way point, thus lowering the total number in the fleet to 10.

According to a report in the Wall Street Journal, the White House has made it clear that the Navy will have an 11-carrier fleet. However there is still concern at the Pentagon and in Congress about whether there will be enough money to support this.

As recently as last week, it was unclear whether roughly \$3 to \$4 billion in budget dollars needed to refuel the George Washington and preserve its service were present in the soon-to-be released 2015 budget proposal, according to Pentagon sources.

The upcoming budget drop will include five-year spending projections for a wide range of programs. This year, such an effort is complicated by the fact that the current Congressionally-passed budget deal only covers 2014 and 2015, allowing sequestration to return in 2016. Unless there is a new deal similar to the current one for 2016 and beyond, sequestration will remain in effect.

One analyst said decreasing to 10-carriers could free up funds in the Navy budget for other high-priority programs.

“Cuts to the carriers would be a way of equaling out the cuts across services. Within the Navy, this can amount to finding room for other sorts of ships and function as a way to ensure the budget has more room for destroyers, LCS and submarines,” said Ben Friedman, a research fellow with the Cato Institute, a Washington D.C.-based think tank. “There will be some tradeoffs you will need to make.”

Friedman also said the Navy could likely get by with fewer carriers.

“The idea would be to have more of a surge Navy and do less port calls and less military to military exercises. If we did that we would not have any problems with a lower number of aircraft carriers,” he said. “If you look at the last couple of wars and the most air intensive portions, we have had carriers to spare.”

He also made the point that funding for carriers will also need to be matched with operational and sustainment dollars for the ships as well.

Many other analysts and lawmakers have been vocal in their support for an 11-carrier Navy, citing mission requirements, a need for forward presence, and consistent demand for carriers around the globe.

Many proponents of an 11 carrier fleet point to the fact that in the 1980s the nation had 15 aircraft carriers. Up until 2011 Congress required by law that there be 15 aircraft carriers in the Navy, a number that was changed to 11 in 2011.

A group of lawmakers recently authored a letter to Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, urging the Pentagon to fund 11-carriers for the Navy.

The man leading the effort to build the new Ford-class carriers, Navy Admiral Tom Moore, Program Executive Officer, Carriers, emphasized the fiscal pressures of today’s budget environment.

“Carriers are expensive and there is no doubt about that but I think it’s pretty clear that they provide a lot to the nation,” Moore said. “The best thing we can do is drive affordability into the platforms.”

Moore said carriers can complete a full-range of missions for the U.S. military, ranging from disaster relief missions like those in Haiti to full-scale combat support such as operations in Afghanistan.