Twitter Thread by Bryan McGrath



Bryan McGrath
@ConsWahoo



1/ Long Navy force structure tweetstorm follows. After four solid years of talking a good game with respect to increasing the size of the Navy, the Trump Administration is poised to talk some more about it as they exit the scene.

2/ What follows is summary and analysis of a big day in Navy news that was and will be drowned out by the other aspects of the ongoing circus that is the Trump Administration.

3/ That is a shame, as there is a considerable amount of goodness in the plan, although its timing is obviously sub-optimal. So let's dive in.

4/ Yesterday, President Trump's Director of Office of Management and Budget and National Security Adviser (Messers @RussVought45 and @robertcobrien respectively) penned a @WSJ Op-Ed entitled "The Navy Stops Taking On Water" (paywall https://t.co/fxbgYdMog3) in which…

5/ …they announce a plan that will increase the size of the Navy from just under 300 today, to 355 within 10 years and almost 400 within 20. To pay for the increase, the soon-to-be-submitted FY22 Budget will add $6.7B in 2022 and then an additional $39B by 2026.

6/ The authors cite "drawdowns in the Middle East" as among the sources of additional funding, along with managing the size of military personnel and cutting Pentagon overhead.

7/ Roxanna Trion and Tony Capaccio @bgov were able to view details of the 30 Year-Shipbuilding plan https://t.co/VONeZGFeYo which spends a total of $167N on shipbuilding across the first five years of the plan.

8/ The redoubtable @DefenseOne team of @KatieBoWill and @MarcusReports file a story last night that offered a hint of the hornets nest of opposition this new emphasis on shipbuilding will bring https://t.co/R02tdKHWNL citing a cut in carrier force structure as one of…

9/ …the bill-payers in this plan, as well as what appear to be baked-in cuts to other aspects of the defense establishment previewed by Joint Chiefs Chairman General Milley https://t.co/ETTIjmpHJE last week. So--enough wind-up, let's get to the pitch.

10/ I really, really, really like this plan. And for the purposes of THIS portion of the tweetstorm, I am going to analyze it as one would in a book review--that is, I will evaluate the plan AS WRITTEN and not as I would have liked to see it.

11/ But fear not, I will do exactly that after I've cheered from the shore for a bit.

12/ First, the eventual mix of ships that @bgov reports in the 2045 fleet of 11 aircraft carriers, 9 big deck Amphibs, 57 other amphibious ships, 74 large surface ships, 66 smaller surface ships, 72 attack submarines and 12 ballistic missile submarines (in addition to 143…

13/ …unmanned vessels of various size and function) is a proper Navy for a global power with widely dispersed interests facing the rigors of great power competition once again.

14/ The folks at OMB, NSC, OSD, and Navy responsible for the plan (full disclosure: I consult to the Navy but have had nothing to do with this effort, likely a predictable result of my anti-administration posture) have applied a good deal of consideration to the problem and…

15/ …have made decisions with which I largely agree.

16/ To wit, and as compared to the last force structure assessment we have (late 2016), the number of attack submarines, small surface combatants, and amphibious ships all increase (not to mention the explosion in unmanned) while one fewer FORD Class carrier is built and the…

17/ …number of large surface combatants declines by nearly a third. Put another way, the larger Navy will likely be a slimmer Navy, with the per-ship tonnage of its manned combatants likely to decline.

18/ So--the overall architecture suggested by this force structure strikes me as excellent and appropriate to need.

19/ I am concerned by the cut in the carrier force structure, but for the time being I will believe what the administration is saying and look forward to the process of determining what the "Carrier-Next" will look like.

20/ The increase in the number of attack submarines is essential to efficient and effective war-fighting once the shooting starts, and the overall increase in the number of manned surface combatants and amphibious ships lends punch to the conventional deterrence effort.

21/ To summarize--looking SOLELY at the plan as it has been previewed, I am an unadulterated fan. But now, the rest of the story.

This plan is three years late.

22/ Had the Trump team come forward in the fall of 2017 with something like this plan, and then laid in the funding required to carry it out, over the next two years, the nation would be well on its way to achieving some of its benefit.

23/ Coming as it does, five weeks before a new administration takes office in the midst of a global pandemic whose emergency requirements are yet to be accounted for in long-term budgeting, this plan has the stench of "too-cute-by-a-half" political strategy about it.

24/ I have read chatter from the naval Trumpenproletariat that this is no different than the Obama Administration releasing its 355 ship Navy Force structure in its waning days (fall 2016)--and look what that did--it changed the entire debate about Navy size and resulted in…

25/ …this new baseline! This is of course, wrong. The Fall 2016 effort was an opportunistic seizing on candidate Trump's 350 ship Navy goal, which provided the Navy with some breathing room to dream out loud.

26/ Of course, neither the White House or OSD had much to do with that plan, and neither embraced it. So the suggestion that the Obama team either boxed in or influenced the Trump Administration is far-fetched.

27/ The Navy essentially pushed on an open door, the only problem being, that behind the door was an adolescent mob-boss with the attention span of a gnat who at NO POINT in his administration was capable of or interested in the hard work of making the argument necessary to…

28/ …allocate additional money to the Navy.

29/ That this shipbuilding plan will accompany a 2022 budget submission represents yet another oddity of timing, in that presidential transitions have in the past featured a budget prepared by the outgoing administration LEFT behind for the incoming to shape as it sees fit…

30/ …(usually with an additional budget amendment submitted to account for the execution year).

31/ The Trump Show has decided instead that there is political hay to be made by submitting budgetary fantasy to the Hill in service to its dedicated unpatriotic, scorched-earth policy of trying to make things as difficult on the next administration as possible.

32/ Submitting this plan now is a Junior Varsity move made by a corrupt President who has managed (by releasing a good plan, late and cynically) to likely tarnish it, perhaps beyond repair.

33/ Moving to my next objection: number of ships is a proxy--imperfect as it is--for the size of the Department of the Navy.

34/ Last year, $207B bought us (and by that I mean provided money for shipbuilding, personnel, maintenance, modernization, weapons, sensors, fuel, beans, butter, and buildings) a roughly 300-ship Navy. I realize it is history major math, but work with me.

35/ Using these proportions, a 355 ship Navy would cost $245B and a 400 ship Navy would cost $276B. This is what it costs to "own" a Navy--not just build ships.

36/ If the Army is bitching now about paying bills for the Navy, it hasn't seen anything yet, because the total ownership cost of the Navy considered in the Trump plan is tens of billions of dollars a year more than the Navy currently gets each year.

37/ Put another way, building a Navy is great fun; planning to build a great Navy when you're out of office is even more fun. Paying for ALL of the costs of this larger Navy will not be great fun, even if the economy weren't pressured by a pandemic.

38/ Given the predictable costs of shoring the nation up after COVID, the suggestion that the Department of the Navy would get the additional $40-70B a year it would cost to buy, build, maintain, modernize, man, train, equip, and operate this Navy is lunacy.

39/ Which brings me to my final objection to this plan, or at least its unveiling. Where is the Department of Defense in all of this? If this weren't just a political gambit, wouldn't we expect the news of this fleet to come from within DoD?

40/ If there were really a dedicated level of institutional support for this plan, would it not have come from the Navy?

41/ I appreciate the hard work that NSC/OMB have done to push this process along, but the failure to lay in budget considerations for the long-term ownership costs of this fleet doom the plan to either discredit and disposal (most likely) or if it were even attempted, a…

42/ …strategically inept hollowing out of the force (unlikely).

43/ So, given that we are where we are, what is it that the incoming Biden Administration can do with the work that went into the plan and with the rather obvious growing consensus that the fleet architecture needs to change?

44/ 1) Appoint competent civilian leadership in the Department of the Navy and direct them to do a holistic assessment of the costs of implementing this plan, in no small measure to determine the accuracy of my history major math.

45/ 2) Assess the efficacy of this plan against the backdrop of the industrial base. I haven't seen details, but I suspect that the building pace that is suggested by the plan is out of alignment with current capacity and workforce.

46/ And while I agree with the goals of the plan, I fear the industrial base simply cannot achieve it without additional time and up front investment--investment that is only going to come from an administration that is dedicated to the task and led by a President who puts his…

47/ …personal energy into the game. 3) In the meantime, invest in better weapons, sensors, and networks. Create the interstices of the fleet architecture onto which additional ships will fall when the industrial base is capable of building them.

48/ Prioritize lasers and hypersonic weapons. 4) Recognize that ANY tangible increase in funding for the Navy is going to require a good story to support it, a strategic basis to underpin it, and dedicated leadership applied to it.

49/ To conclude: I am sorry that this generally excellent plan is being released as part of a cynical political ploy. I truly believe the seeds of rebuilding our Navy are contained within it. That the conversation has turned toward Seapower strikes

me as strategic and useful.

50/ The country needs a team in place who can shape the debate and make things happen. Fin.