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August 19, 2026

The Honorable Pete Hegseth
Secretary
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301

The Honorable Hung Cao
Acting Secretary of the Navy
U.S. Department of Defense
1000 Navy Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20350

Secretary Hegseth and Acting Secretary Cao,

I write with serious concerns about the growing strain on the Navy's aircraft carrier force and request information regarding the Department's long-term plan to sustain carrier readiness amid increasingly prolonged and unpredictable deployments. Recent reports of deteriorating conditions aboard multiple aircraft carriers are troubling signs of a larger problem: a carrier force increasingly strained by extended deployments, maintenance delays, and persistent operational demands.

The USS *Abraham Lincoln* has now spent more than nine months deployed and more than 250 consecutive days without a port call. The Navy is responding by redirecting the USS *George Washington* from the western Pacific to the Middle East to relieve the Lincoln. But the Washington is not beginning this mission with a clean slate. It has already been underway for approximately three months, and reports of deteriorating conditions aboard the carrier raise concerns that, without better planning for logistics, supplies, maintenance, and crew support, the problems experienced aboard the Lincoln could simply be repeated aboard its replacement. The Washington's departure also leaves the western Pacific temporarily without a U.S. aircraft carrier, raising an equally important question about what carrier will replace it in that critical theater, and when.

The strain is not limited to the Lincoln and Washington. The USS *George H.W. Bush* has also been operating in support of military operations against Iran since arriving in the region in April, and reports of supply shortages have emerged aboard that carrier as well. With no clear end in sight to the conflict and the Department now asserting that the naval blockade of Iran can be maintained indefinitely, these problems raise an urgent question about how long the Navy can sustain this level of carrier presence without simply transferring the burden from one ship and crew to the next.

The Navy has only 11 aircraft carriers to meet demands around the world. Keeping carriers at sea beyond planned schedules not only strains sailors and equipment, but can increase maintenance requirements and delay the training and deployment schedules of the ships needed to replace them.

The Navy created the Optimized Fleet Response Plan (OFRP) in 2014 in part to break this cycle and restore predictability to carrier operations. OFRP was structured around a 36-month cycle of maintenance, training, deployment, and sustained readiness, with deployments planned for approximately seven months. The goal was not simply predictability for sailors and their families, but a sustainable system that allowed the Navy to maintain and train its ships while preserving ready forces for unexpected crises. Today, however, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Daryl Caudle has acknowledged that the 36-month cycle routinely stretches to 42 to 44 months, driven largely by maintenance and modernization delays.

Extended deployments further strain that already challenged system. Months of continuous operations increase wear on ships and aircraft and allow repairs that cannot be completed at sea to accumulate, adding to the maintenance burden when a carrier returns home. They also take a significant toll on sailors, who work long shifts in confined spaces with limited opportunities for rest, communication with their families, or time away from the ship. These are not simply quality-of-life concerns. The readiness of the carrier depends on the readiness of the sailors who operate and maintain it.

The war with Iran has made sustaining these deployments even more difficult. Bahrain, home to U.S. Fifth Fleet and normally a critical logistics hub for naval forces in the region, has faced Iranian attacks and heightened security concerns, complicating the regular port access that supports maintenance, replenishment, and crew rest. If the Department intends to maintain substantial carrier forces in the region for an indefinite period, it must have a logistics and sustainment plan capable of supporting those forces even when normal port access is unavailable or unsafe.

The question before the Department is therefore not simply whether a carrier strike group can endure an exceptionally long deployment. It is whether the Navy has a sustainable force-generation model that can maintain carrier readiness, material condition, and crew welfare when operational requirements repeatedly exceed planned deployment cycles. The Navy cannot solve

persistent demand for carriers simply by extending one ship and then sending another to relieve it. Doing so risks borrowing readiness from tomorrow to meet today's demands.

I request that the Department provide answers to the following questions by August 25th, 2026:

1. What is the Department's long-term plan for aircraft carrier presence in the Middle East and Indo-Pacific? Given the President's statement that the Navy can maintain the blockade of Iran "indefinitely," what level of carrier presence does the Department anticipate will be required over the next 12 to 24 months, and how will those requirements affect planned deployments, maintenance schedules, and carrier availability in the Indo-Pacific and elsewhere? As the USS *George Washington* leaves the western Pacific to relieve the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, what carrier or other forces will replace the Washington in the Indo-Pacific, and when?

2. The Optimized Fleet Response Plan was designed around a 36-month force-generation cycle and approximately seven-month deployments, yet the Navy has acknowledged that the cycle now routinely takes 42 to 44 months. How frequently have carrier strike groups met OFRP deployment and maintenance benchmarks over the past ten years, what are the principal causes of these deviations, and what actions is the Navy taking to restore predictable deployment and maintenance schedules?

3. How has the conflict with Iran affected the Navy's ability to use Bahrain and other regional ports for replenishment, maintenance, and crew rest? What changes to logistics, basing, and sustainment planning are necessary to support carrier operations when normal port access is unavailable or unsafe?

4. What is the Navy's assessment of the cumulative effects of extended deployments and prolonged periods without port calls on sailor fatigue, mental health, retention, and readiness? What standards or limits does the Navy use to determine when deployment length or consecutive days at sea begin to pose unacceptable risks to crew and operational readiness?

5. Does the Department assess that current global demand for aircraft carriers can be sustainably met by the existing carrier force without routinely extending deployments, disrupting maintenance, or creating gaps in other theaters? If not, which missions currently assigned to carrier strike groups could be performed by other naval or joint forces, and what steps is the Department taking to ensure carriers are reserved for missions that actually require their unique capabilities?

The United States must be able to deploy aircraft carriers when our national security requires them. But maintaining an effective carrier force requires more than keeping ships at sea. It requires sufficient time for maintenance, replenishment, training, recovery, and the care of the men and women who operate these extraordinary vessels. I urge the Department to provide a

comprehensive assessment of these issues and its plan to address them before short-term operational requirements become catastrophic readiness problems.

Sincerely,



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

CC: Admiral Daryl L. Caudle, Chief of Naval Operations