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Navy Guided Missile Battleship (BBG[X]) Program: Background and Issues for Congress

Introduction

On December 22, 2025, the Trump Administration announced a proposed program to build a new class of guided missile battleships (BBG[X]s) for the Navy. BBG(X)s would be the first battleships procured by the Navy since World War II, and would be larger and more heavily armed than any cruiser or destroyer procured by the Navy since World War II. The first BBG(X) would reportedly be procured in the early 2030s. An issue for Congress is whether to approve, reject, or modify the Trump administration's proposal for building BBG(X)s.

Background

Terminology

In the designation BBG(X), *BB* means battleship, *G* means guided missile ship (i.e., a ship with a medium- or long-range air defense system), and *(X)* means the design of the ship has not yet been fully developed. Battleships are generally larger than cruisers and destroyers, which in turn are generally larger than frigates and corvettes (aka light frigates), which in turn are generally larger than patrol craft. The term *surface combatant* generally refers to all these ship types, and is sometimes defined to include aircraft carriers as well.

Program Overview

The BBG(X) program would comprise two initial ships, with a potential eventual class total of 20 to 25 ships. BBG(X)s would be a centerpiece of the Golden Fleet plan, a forthcoming Navy ship force-structure plan that is to replace the Navy's current 381-ship force-structure plan. The Navy on December 22, 2025, posted notices of two intended contract awards for design work on the BBG(X). The contracts have estimated periods of performance of 72 months (i.e., six years), which appears consistent with procuring the first BBG(X) in the early 2030s. Since each BBG(X) would each require several years to build, the first BBG(X), if procured in the early 2030s, would likely enter service in the late 2030s or around 2040. The Trump Administration intends for the first BBG(X) to be named Defiant, and for the class to be called the Defiant class (following the Navy's class-naming convention) or the Trump class.

The Navy states that BBG(X)s (**Figure 1**) would have a length of 840 feet to 880 feet and a full load displacement of more than 35,000 tons. By comparison:

- The most recent battleships built for the Navy—the four Iowa (BB-61) class battleships, which were built in World War II and incorporated large amounts of very thick and heavy armor plating—had a length of 887 feet and a full load displacement of about 57,000 tons.

- The Navy currently operates a few Ticonderoga (CG-47) class cruisers (567 feet, 10,150 tons), several dozen Arleigh Burke (DDG-51) class destroyers (510 feet, 9,700 tons) and three Zumwalt (DDG-1000) class destroyers (610 feet, 16,000 tons). (For more on the DDG-51 and DDG-1000 programs, see CRS Report RL32109, *Navy DDG-51 and DDG-1000 Destroyer Programs: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke.)

- The Navy has a program to develop and acquire a class of next-generation destroyers called DDG(X)s as the successor to the DDG-51 destroyer. The DDG(X)'s estimated full load displacement is about 14,500 tons, and the first DDG(X) is to be procured in the early 2030s. (For more on the DDG(X) program, see CRS In Focus IF11679, *Navy DDG(X) Next-Generation Destroyer Program: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke.) Some press reports have stated that the Navy intends to replace the DDG(X) program with the BBG(X) program.

Figure 1. Rendering of BBG(X)

Source: Naval Sea Systems Command rendering posted at https://www.goldenfleet.navy.mil/.

BBG(X)s would be conventionally powered (i.e., "fossil-fueled") and armed with a combination of missiles, guns, lasers, and other weapons that would be greater in aggregate than the combination of weapons on the Navy's current cruisers and destroyers.

The Navy reportedly plans to issue competitive awards to one or more shipbuilders to build BBG(X)s. U.S. shipyards capable of building BBG(X) include but are not necessarily limited to General Dynamics Bath Iron Works (GD/BIW) of Bath, ME, and Huntington Ingalls Industries Ingalls

Shipbuilding (HII/Ingalls) of Pascagoula, MS—the two shipyards that have built all cruisers and destroyers procured for the Navy since FY1985—and Huntington Ingalls Industries Newport News Shipbuilding (HII/NNS) of Newport News, VA, which currently builds aircraft carriers and submarines, and in the past has built various types of surface ships for the Navy, including battleships.

The BBG(X)'s potential procurement cost is uncertain. For ships of a given type (such as surface combatants), procurement cost can be roughly proportional to ship displacement. On that basis, a BBG(X) might have a procurement cost more than 3.6 times that of a DDG-51. DDG-51s currently cost about $2.7 billion each when they are procured at a rate of two per year, and something more than that when they are procured at a rate of one per year. This suggests a recurring unit procurement cost for the BBG(X) design of roughly $10 billion. The first BBG(X) might cost closer to $15 billion, because its procurement cost (following Navy budgeting practices) would incorporate detailed design costs for the class that could amount to a few billion additional dollars.

Large Navy Surface Combatants Since World War II

Navy battleships, cruisers, and similar ships with full load displacements of more than 15,000 tons that have been operated or proposed since World War II include the following:

- One Iowa-class battleships remained in service until 1955. The other three were removed from service in 1948-1949, returned to service in 1950-1951 for the Korean War, and remained in service until 1957-1958. One was returned to service in 1968-1969 for the Vietnam War. All four were modernized and returned to service in 1982-1988 and remained in service until 1990-1992.

- One nuclear-powered cruiser (CGN)—the 721-foot, 17,500-ton *Long Beach* (CGN-9)—was procured in FY1956, and served from 1961 to 1995. The Navy subsequently procured eight smaller CGNs (the CGN-25, CGN-35, CGN-36, and CGN-38 classes) with full load displacements of about 8,600 tons to about 11,000 tons.

- In the 1970s, the Navy considered three design options for its planned Aegis cruiser program: a 666-foot, 17,000-ton nuclear-powered strike cruiser (CSGN), a 588-foot, 12,000-ton variant of the CGN-38 design, and a variant of the conventionally powered 563-foot, 8,000-ton Spruance (DD-963) class destroyer design. For affordability reasons, the Navy selected the third option, resulting in the 567-foot, 10,150-ton CG-47 design.

- In March 1996, the Navy and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) initiated a program to develop and procure about six large and relatively low-cost Navy surface ships called arsenal ships or Maritime Fire Support Demonstrators (MFSDs), each of which would be armed with about 500 missiles. In October 1997, the Navy announced that it had decided to terminate the program. The ship's design was not fully refined prior to the program's cancellation, but conceptual designs had full load displacements ranging from about 20,000 tons to about 40,000 tons. (The arsenal ship/MFSD program was covered in now-archived CRS reports 97-455 F of April 18, 1997 and 97-1044 F of December 10, 1997.)

- As noted earlier, the Navy operates three Zumwalt (DDG-1000) class destroyers (610 feet, 16,000 tons). The ships were procured in FY2007-FY2009.

Issues for Congress

In considering whether to approve, reject, or modify the Trump administration's proposal for building BBG(X)s through authorization and appropriations legislation, bill report language, or other oversight activities, Congress may consider several potential issues, including the following:

- Why has the Trump Administration decided to propose the acquisition of a new class of battleships? What sort of analysis—such as an Analysis of Alternatives (AOA)—informed that decision? Would developing and procuring a 35,000-ton BBG(X) design to complement other existing and planned Navy ships be the most cost-effective course of action? What steps in the DOD acquisition process, if any, were set aside to enable the initiation of the BBG(X) program in December 2025?

- How would BBG(X)s fit into the Navy's forthcoming Golden Fleet plan? Would BBG(X)s be consistent with the Navy's Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO) concept, which calls for spreading the Navy's sensors and weapons across a wider array of ships and aircraft, so as to avoid "putting too many eggs into one basket"? (For more on DMO, see CRS In Focus IF12599, *Defense Primer: Navy Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO) Concept*, by Ronald O'Rourke.)

- What are the Navy's—and the Congressional Budget Office's—estimated procurement costs, including detailed design costs, for the first BBG(X), and for subsequent BBG(X)s? What impact would designing and procuring BBG(X)s have on available funding for other Navy program priorities?

- Does the Navy intend to replace the DDG(X) program with the BBG(X) program? What would be the net impact on future Navy capabilities and funding requirements of developing and acquiring BBG(X)s instead of DDG(X)s?

- Will new technologies that the Navy states are to be incorporated into the BBG(X) design, and which require further development—including an electromagnetic railgun and higher-power lasers—be mature enough by the early 2030s to be incorporated into BBG(X)s?

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