

Navy, Marine Corps Readiness Questioned in Heritage Foundation Assessment

Heritage Foundation.

Despite some improvements in combat readiness, the U.S. military has “marginal” overall capability to meet the increasing global security challenges it faces because all four of the armed services are too small and much of their major combat systems are too old, according to the latest of the annual assessment by the Heritage Foundation.

The Navy and the Marine Corps share that overall rating of “marginal,” with both assessed as “weak” in capacity, which translates into force size, and “marginal” in capability and readiness, even though both of the naval services have focused on improving readiness, the [2020 Index of U.S. Military Strength](#), released by Heritage on Oct. 30, said.

Although Army readiness is rated as “very strong” due to a major increase in the number of its brigade combat teams that are considered combat ready, it also gets an over score of “marginal” because its capacity is rated as “weak” and capability as “marginal.” The Air Force is rated as “marginal in all three of the categories and overall.

The ratings for the four services are little changed from last year’s index and come in the face of the index’s finding of an overall threat to U.S. vital interests of “high” from China, Russia, Iran, North Korea and global terrorism. Heritage rates the behavior of Russia and China as “aggressive” and their capability as “formidable.”

Because of the overall weakness of the services, Heritage said the military “is likely capable of meeting the demands of a single major regional conflict ... while also attending to

various presence and engagement activities, but that it would be very hard pressed to do more and certainly would be ill equipped to handle two nearly simultaneous major regional contingencies.”

As it has in the past, Heritage faults the four services, the Defense Department and Congress for the lack of funding and direction to substantially increased the size of the military and to modernize its equipment, which are the oldest on average since before World War II. Force size is a major criteria for Heritage in its ratings.

For example, it says the Navy needs a battle fleet of 400 ships, while the Navy’s current battle force is 290 ships and its long-term goal is 355. The key shortfalls Heritage cites, compared to its recommendations, are two aircraft carriers, 16 large surface combatants, 41 small surface combatants, 16 attack submarines, 13 amphibious warships and 25 combat logistics ships. It also finds naval air far short of the desired size.

For the Marine Corps, Heritage believes it needs 36 infantry battalions, while it has only 24. Both the previous and current Marine Corps commandants have said they need to reduce the infantry to add capabilities in information warfare and cyber.

Modly Doubts Future Budgets Will Allow for 355-Ship Fleet

The size of the current fleet, the high cost of new ships and the likely lack of growth in future budgets will make it difficult for the

Navy to reach the current goal of a 355-ship battle fleet, the Navy's number two civilian leader said.

And that problem would be made even more difficult by the continuing resolution, which prevents starting new programs that could reduce costs, such as the proposed frigate, Navy Undersecretary Thomas Modly said Oct. 25, addressing a conference hosted by military reporters and editors.

Modly also expressed concern about the impact on "the warriors and families" of nearly 19 years of constant war and the fact that the U.S. has allowed its potential adversaries – particularly China and Russia – to erode the military advantage and gain global influence.

"We have to operationalize what does it mean to be in great power competition," Modly said. And the U.S. will "have to take a page from our adversaries' play book" by learning how to conduct asymmetric operations, similar to Russia's seizure of Crimea without actual conflict, he said.

Modly went through the top 10 issues that keep him up at night, three of which dealt with the problem of buying and sustaining enough ships to get the size fleet the U.S. Navy will need for the possible future conflicts. The effort to get from the current 290-ship force to the 355 goal faces "a math problem," he said, because future defense budgets are not likely to grow enough to buy all those ships.

Modly conceded that Navy leaders were not sure that "355 is the right number" and would have a better view of that when the new force structure assessment is finished sometime next year. He also noted the high cost of overhauling ships, which frequently have more problems than expected.

Obtaining the needed fleet is made more difficult by the rising costs of ships and other programs, he said. "We have to figure out a way to drive down cost." But he continued, "it's going to be difficult to do that, particularly when the Navy is throwing so much of its assets into expensive platforms," citing the \$13 billion price tag on the new Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier.

That is why the sea service is putting so much effort into lower-cost vessels, such as the littoral combat ships and the proposed guided missile frigate. But he said, the plan to award a contract on the frigate program could be "handicapped" because the continuing budget resolution prevents new starts. The CR "will have significant impact and not in a good way. I hope Congress will realize that it's their job," Modly said, to fund the government and will do it.

Modly was questioned about the strong criticism Navy Secretary Richard V. Spencer leveled this week on Huntington Ingalls for the problems with the Ford carrier. He said the Navy has no tactic of attacking industry, but "we're asking you guys to understand the frustration we have. We, the department, have a lot of responsibility for what went wrong with the Ford. What the secretary said was there has to be shared responsibility."

‘Great Power’ Fight Might Require Different Blend of Vessels, But Marines Won’t Shun Amphibious Operations, NDIA Speakers Say

ANNAPOLIS, Md. – Despite the commandant’s stark warning about the vulnerability of current amphibious warships, the Marines are not moving away from amphibious operations. But to operate in the future highly contested littoral waters, the amphibious force must be more numerous, adding a lot of smaller, cheaper and “risk worthy” vessels and unmanned systems, senior Marine and Navy officers and civilian analysts said Oct. 23.

Those officers and experts and other groups of uniformed and civilian officials also argued that providing logistical support for amphibious operations in waters threatened by the modern deadly weapons employed by peer competitors, such as China and Russia, will require starkly different systems and tactics.

And in an extensive series of panel presentations during the second day of the National Defense Industrial Association’s conference on expeditionary warfare in the era of great power competition,

the speakers
appealed to industry representatives in the audience to help
provide the new
technologies and platforms the naval forces will need to fight
and win in any
future conflict.

Much of the discussion was shaped by the Commandant's
Planning Guidance issued this summer by the new Marine leader,
Gen. David
Berger, which highlighted the threat to traditional large,
complex and
relatively expensive amphibious ships, if they have to operate
within the reach
of the long-range precision weapons and submarines fielded by
China and, to a
lesser extent, Russia and Iran.

"We are not walking away from amphibious operations," said
Brig. Gen. Benjamin Watson, commanding general of the Marine
Corps Warfighting
Laboratory. He noted that the new operational concepts
proposed by Berger –
Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations and Littoral Operations
in a Contested
Environment – require amphibious operations. "The commandant
is not calling for
a smaller amphibious fleet, but a larger one" with "smaller,
less expensive and
more risk-worthy ships" to complement the larger ships, Watson
said.

Maj. Gen. Tracey King, director of expeditionary warfare,
said he "hears a lot of talk inside [the Pentagon] that we'll
never do another
amphibious landing. We don't want to do another Iwo Jima ... but
we will do
amphibious operations again."

The new amphibious missions will involve “distributed operations,” a Navy-promoted concept that provides “the advantage of mass with distributed forces,” King said. That will require larger numbers of smaller units with “risk worthy platforms and connectors,” because “we’re absolutely going to take some body blows.”

Asked by an audience member how they measure “risk worthy,” Watson conceded “we don’t know” whether it is defined by lives or by the cost of the platforms, noting that the current amphibs “are these expensive platforms that we, as a nation, cannot afford to replace.”

Two panels addressed the challenges of providing logistical support to naval operations in the contested waters, with Lt. Gen. Charles Chiarotti, deputy commandant for installations and logistics, admitting that “Marine Corps logistics is not postured to sustain the future fight.” They will require “hybrid logistics,” that blends the legacy assets with what new systems they can acquire to provide Integrated, maneuverable logistics “in concert with the Navy.”

Other speakers from logistical support organizations and program managers cited the need for very different logistical platforms, including a variety of unmanned surface, subsurface and aerial systems, some of the existing smaller, cheaper vessels, such as the Expeditionary Fast Transport, Expeditionary Mobile Base and Littoral Combat Ships, and even Military Sealift Command and commercial cargo vessels.

Berger Plan to Build More Smaller and Cheaper Ships Could Greatly Expand Available Expeditionary Force, Analysts Tell NDIA Conference

ANNAPOLIS, Md. – Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David Berger’s proposal to build a lot of different, smaller and cheaper ships – including unmanned vessels – to substitute for or augment large amphibious warships is not yet clearly defined, but presents the possibility of greatly expanding the available force, two veteran naval analysts said Oct. 22.

And an alternative future shipbuilding plan is needed because the cost of building and sustaining the 355-ship fleet proposed in the latest 30-year plan might be unworkable given the high cost of such a force and the growing national budget deficit, they added.

Addressing the National Defense Industrial Association’s expeditionary warfare conference, Ronald O’Rourke, the senior naval analyst at the Congressional Budget Office, and Eric Labs, the Congressional Research Service’s naval analyst, called the force structure and operational changes proposed in Berger’s guidance the “most significant strategic document” since the From the Sea naval concept of the 1990s.

A dramatic element of Berger’s guidance was the recognition that the current large and expensive amphibs probably are too big and vulnerable to be sent into the waters heavily defended by China and are too few in number to support the distributed operations and other nontraditional expeditionary missions

that would be required. From that conclusion, Berger said the Corps would no longer use the long-cherished goal of a 38-amphib fleet as a force planning guide.

Labs said the Navy's plan that supposedly would produce the 355-ship fleet by 2034 would cost much more than the historic average shipbuilding budget, and the soaring cost of sustaining even the existing fleet of 290 ships might make that goal unreachable. O'Rourke quoted Navy Undersecretary Thomas Modly as saying the sustainment costs could hold the fleet's growth to 305 to 308 ships.

O'Rourke said Berger's proposal for a significantly different amphib fleet was driven by the threat from China's defenses but also could be enabled by the changing technology, including unmanned systems. The mix of alternative platforms Berger suggested has not been defined, he noted.

Labs agreed but offered the idea that if the Navy would seek new ships that would cost \$600 to \$700 million each – less than even the cheapest current gators – it could buy a fleet of 68 to 78 ships by 2034 for the same \$75 billion the Navy expects to pay for 28 ships.

Both said the savings on unmanned vessels might not be as much as some believe, because despite the name, such ships have to have people involved in their operations and maintenance. Because the unmanned vessels would not be repaired or maintained at sea, they would require a larger support infrastructure ashore, Labs said.

This story was corrected from an earlier version.

New Force Structure Assessment Will Address Needs of 'Great Power Competition,' Two Top Requirements Officers Say

ANNAPOLIS, Md. – U.S. Navy and Marine Corps requirements and capabilities leaders are working together to produce an Integrated Naval Force Structure Assessment, which will replace the Navy assessment that usually shapes the shipbuilding plan, the two top requirements officers said Oct. 22.

And the assessment will be driven by the capabilities needed to operate integrated naval forces in the highly contested environments expected in the emerging “great power competition,” said Vice Adm. James Kilby and Lt. Gen. Eric Smith.

“Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO) is the guiding principle for what we’re doing in the Navy,” and that “ties in very closely” with the Marine Corps’ Expeditionary Operations in a Contested Environment (LOCE) concept, said Kilby, who is deputy chief of naval operations for warfighting requirements and capabilities. DMO means “the ability to distribute your forces and to be able to concentrate effects at the right time,” he said.

DMO also reflects a shift to a focus on sea control, Kilby said. For the last 20 years, the naval forces have focused on power projection, he said. "It's time to rethink that model" to "how do we support each other."

"We will build one force optimized for the expeditionary force," designed to ensure access for the fleet, said Smith, who is deputy commandant for combat development and integration. His directions come from Marine Commandant David Berger's guidance that dictates "where the Marine Corps is going in support of the fleet," he said.

DMO, "it's our concept" and addresses "what the Marine Corps does to support the fleet in littoral operations in a contested environment."

The integrated assessment also will support the Marine's concept of Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations, which envisions small, mobile Marine forces taking positions within the enemy's area with which to support the fleet's effort to gain sea control.

In developing the integrated assessment, Smith said, "we're doing a tremendous amount of work together. What's not helpful," he continued, is that "once again we're under a CR," or continuing resolution, instead of normal funding. "That means no new starts, tread water," he said. "I can't tread water against a pacing threat."

Addressing a two-day National Defense Industrial Association conference on the future of expeditionary operations, the two leaders said they

and their staffs are working tightly together to shape this new assessment.

They will submit their proposals to the naval services' leadership as an "interim" assessment, which will be refined for release early next year, they said.

The shipbuilding plan that emerges from this integrated assessment could be significantly different due to Berger's dramatic statements in his guidance that the traditional large amphibious warships may not be survivable in face of the area-denial weapons being deployed by China and his support for a large number of other ships, which would be smaller, cheaper and more expendable.

Kilby, however, said that in the amphibious forces, "the things that have existed in the past will exist in the future. We will need big-deck amphibs" and the LPD-17 amphibious transport dock ships, "which are more capable than in the past due to sensors." But he said they also will need connectors, not just to get Marines ashore but to sustain them. The assessment will look at whether they need faster connectors, or low-signature assets. He said there also was a need for intra-theater support ships.

Both officers said the new force assessment would call for more unmanned vessels.

Kilby noted that the Navy is looking at a range of unmanned vessels, ranging from small to large. He suggested the large unmanned ships could serve as magazines, with large number of

weapons, while smaller vessels would serve as sensors and to deceive an adversary as to where attacks were going.

Smith said the unmanned systems are “hugely important” to the commandant’s vision for future expeditionary operations. “If we can produce a truly autonomous vehicle that has a range of say 1,000 miles ... that can carry the cargo I need to sustain an EABO,” Kilby said.

Five Transport Vessels Survive, Thrive in Hostile Water Simulation, Tactical Adviser Says

Aware that in the increasingly tense global security environment the U.S. Navy’s sealift and logistical support fleet may have to sail through seas contested by a near peer adversary, U.S. Transportation Command recently sent five unarmed transport vessels through simulated hostile waters in a convoy similar to those used during World War II’s dangerous “battle for the Atlantic.”

The five ships, crewed by civilian mariners, “executed tactical formation maneuvers” to counter the threat of hostile submarines or sea mines, TRANSCOM said in a release. The civilians were assisted by experienced Navy Reserve officers under a new program created

in recognition of the possibility of attacks against the sealift and supply ships, which would be crucial in any major overseas conflict.

The convoy exercise was conducted during an unprecedented “turbo activation” in late September in which 33 vessels from the Military Sealift Command (MSC) and the Maritime Administration (MARAD) fleets were mobilized on short notice to test whether the ships – most of which are considered aged – were mechanically ready to sail and that enough qualified mariners would be available to crew them during a national security crisis.

“The turbo activation was an exercise to prove that the material readiness and crews’ skill level of our surge sealift ships make it possible to respond to world events on short notice,” said Cmdr. Vincent D’Eusanio, the tactical adviser (TACAD) who sailed aboard one of the ships in the exercise.

“We had to know if our ships would be capable of delivering supplies and equipment to our deployed troops serving overseas when required,” said D’Eusanio, who also is MSC’s TACAD program manager.

The TACAD program was initiated in 2017 “based off of years of experience and past lessons learned,” D’Eusanio said in the TRANSCOM release.

“During World War II, we lost lots of merchant ships and mariners. Some of this was a result of not knowing how to sail a merchant ship in a hostile

environment. When the Navy began to train mariners to counter threats, like the German U-boats, our losses dwindled.”

Most of the TACADs are Navy reservists who sail as mariners in their civilian careers. D'Eusanio is a licensed chief engineer with the Staten Island Ferry when not on Navy duty.

The TACADs are assigned to educate the civilian crews “about how to sail in a contested environment ... provide tactical advice and facilitate communications with the combatant fleet to allow our mariners to successfully operate in unfriendly waters,” D-Eusanio said.

After sailing from their East Coast ports, the five MSC ships rendezvoused in the North Atlantic, formed into a convoy and performed tactical maneuvers while sailing through the simulated contested waters. The crews were trained to reduce their electromagnetic signature to avoid being detected and targeted by enemy missiles or aircraft, said Capt. Hans Lynch, MSC's Atlantic commodore who led the East Coast mobilization.

They also were instructed how to darken the ships at night to reduce the chances of being spotted by the enemy. Lynch said the activation was not only a good test of the materiel condition of the ships and the availability of trained mariners but also the ability of the U.S. Coast Guard and the American Bureau of Shipping to provide technicians to determine if the ships were ready to sail.

“Everyone did really well,” he said. “None of the ships had major issues due to not being able to be inspected or getting people required to the vessels.”

MDA Director Advocates Missile Defense Integration at Forum

The emergence of more capable missile threats – more precise and maneuverable ballistic, hypersonic and cruise missiles – requires more capable sensors in space and total integration of all missile defense systems and sensors in space, on land and at sea, the Missile Defense Agency’s (MDA) director said.

That systems integration is particularly important to the national defense network because “we are running out of islands” in the Pacific and “there is a lot of space to cover,” Vice Adm. Jon Hill said Oct. 7 at a Center for Strategic and International Studies forum.

Looking at the Pacific theater, Hill said MDA has been testing integration of the U.S. Army’s land-based THAAD and Patriot missile defense systems. “If you tie in the ships that are off the coast, you can defend against all sorts of threats,” he told the forum.

Hill noted that in the original MDA charter, “we’ve always been focused on the North Korean threat, focused on the growing Iranian threat. Now we’re moving to these other threats and different adversaries,” he said, an

apparent reference to Russia and China.

“What we’re finding as we move into the future, our adversaries are taking a different path” in missile capabilities, with more precision guidance, hypersonic and cruise missile, he said. “Then you get into the unpredictability of maneuverability. It’s very challenging. It challenges your architecture, your fire control, challenges the methods by which you engage.”

“I do believe we are at an inflection point, for our forward-deployed forces and our friends and allies.

We have to think differently,” Hill said.

Hill showed graphics and explained the latest test of the Ground-Based, Mid-Course system, which is the main national missile defense capability with sensors in space, radars on the west coast and in the Pacific and interceptors in Alaska and California. The March 25 test involved a simulated ballistic missile with decoys. The simulated warhead and a decoy were destroyed by two interceptors, guided by a TPY-2 radar on Wake Island, the sea-based X-band radar and an Aegis-equipped U.S. Navy ship in the Pacific.

The interceptors in that test used the old kill vehicle. Hill said MDA is still working on detailed requirements before issuing a request for proposals to industry for the next-generation kill vehicle, after cancelling the previous attempt at a new interceptor.

He described a recent visit to the Aegis Ashore site in Romania, where construction is completed and is manned by U.S. Sailors and Romanian personnel but is not yet operational. When completed, it will join the Poland-based Aegis-Ashore site and the four Aegis-equipped Arleigh Burke-class destroyers based in Rota, Spain, as part of the missile defense of NATO allies.

Recently retired Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John M. Richardson advocated getting the Navy out of the dedicated BMD mission, to free the four destroyers for broader missions.

Hill said MDA recently made the final production decision for the new SAM-3 Block IIA missile.

He declined to answer questions about the recent North Korean launch of what may be a submarine-capable missile and the new missile systems displayed in China's 70th anniversary parade, referring those issues to intelligence agencies.

Commandant Stresses Marine Corps Must Change to Meet Peer Threats

The return to an era of 'great power competition' and the emergence of peer military threats "demands in no uncertain terms that the

services need to change to meet the challenges of the new world.” For the Marine Corps, that change means redesigning the Corps into a naval integrated force, the commandant of the Marine Corps said Oct. 3.

Although the details of what the future Marine Corps must become will be developed through a period of experimentation, wargaming and testing, “in broader terms, it is an integrated naval force. To be competitive in the Indo-Pacific region and in the Mediterranean and elsewhere around the world requires a truly integrated naval force,” Gen. David H. Berger said at a Heritage Foundation forum.

“We have not focused on that aspect for 20 years. We have to get creative” and examine “what can the Marine Corps ... do to help a naval commander fight his fleet. How does that contribute to a joint fight?”

Berger described Marines seizing land within the enemy’s “weapons engagement zone” and using long-range precision fires – or putting Marine weapons on Navy ships – to help the naval commander fight for sea control.

Redesigning the Corps is his primary focus, Berger said, and the process will be to look at the threat in 2030 and plan back from there to determine how the Corps must change.

“The strategic realities will cause us to think differently. The realities of the world cause us to throw out old assumptions and start

afresh. We cannot assume that today's equipment, the way that we're organized, how we train, how we select leaders, all of our warfighting concepts, we cannot assume they will remain relevant in the future. My assumption is they will not," the commandant said.

Commandant of US Marine Corps @Heritage "We have to operate inside the enemies threat envelope". "We have to be there to reassure friends and allies." pic.twitter.com/3MGB2xmfNB

– James Jay Carafano (@JJCarafano) [October 3, 2019](#)

Based on his observation and that of others, Berger said the current Marine Corps "is not optimized for great power competition. It is not optimized to support a naval campaign. It is not optimized to support the fleet through missions like sea denial. And it is not optimized to deter a pacing threat."

Because the fiscal 2021 defense budget has been submitted to the White House, any major changes will not show up until the following year or later, he said. And his assumption is that those future budgets "will be flat or declining, not rising."

In his sweepingly provocative planning guidance released shortly after he took over as commandant, Berger said he was willing, if needed, to cut the size of the Corps to have money for the modernization of equipment that will be needed to counter a peer threat.

In his speech and answers to questions, he repeated his focus on shifting from reliance on the few, large, relatively expensive amphibious warships, which he said would be vulnerable to interdiction by Chinese long-range precision weapons, to a large number of smaller, less expensive manned ships and a wide range of unmanned surface, subsurface and aerial systems.

“Mass will have a quality all its own. ... And low cost doesn’t mean cheap,” Berger said.

Most Sealift Vessels Measured Up in 32-Ship ‘Pressure Test,’ Army General Says

Most of the ships mobilized in a severe “stress test” of the Maritime Administration’s and Military Sealift Command’s ability to get their aged fleets under way in a crisis did “pretty well,” but the commander of the U.S. Transportation Command wants to accelerate the programs to modernize that crucial force.

“If it were up to me, we’d be doing it faster,” and he discussed that objective with Navy Secretary Richard V. Spencer, Army Gen. Stephen R. Lyons, commander of U.S. Transportation Command, said Oct. 2.

“We’re in the process of working with the Navy.”

In late September with little advance notice, MARAD and MSC mobilized 32 of their transport and support ships from both the forces normally on alert status and those in the Ready Reserve, which take more time and effort to get under way.

The exercise was a test of the capability of ships that are considered ancient by commercial standards and the availability of civilian mariners qualified to operate such ships, which include some of the last steam-powered vessels in the world. Independent analysts and some Navy officers have warned that the aged vessels and the declining numbers of qualified mariners could hobble the Navy’s ability to transport and sustain forces committed to an overseas conflict.

Of the 32 ships activated, “I would say most of them did pretty well. We’re waiting for final results. But in terms of sea trials, initial reporting, it was in the 80% to 85% range” of activating ships to task, Lyons told a Defense Writers breakfast. “Of those 32 ships, the average is 43 years old. In commercial industry it’s about 15.”

He added: “It was a great pressure test. We’ll look at the numbers, also get the quality assessment” in a detailed report that could be available by the end of October.

Asked if he was making any progress on the three-tiered program Congress has approved to modernize the sealift and

prepositioning

fleets – by upgrading the newest ships, building some new ones and buying a lot of used commercial ships – Lyons said “yes,” but he wants to accelerate the effort.

“What I’d like to do in the authorization to acquire used vessels is to accelerate that. ... I know there is work now at the [Navy] Department to fund the seven,” which include two new and five used. “I’m pushing to accelerate. The Navy program now needs to be plussed up. ... But the secretary and others are in favor of finding the money.”

Lyons also expressed concern with the progress on efforts to solve a far different problem that has drawn widespread criticism from Congress and service families – the perpetual failure of commercial movers hired by the services to get household goods from one home to another in a reasonable time and in good condition.

The command issued a request for proposals two weeks ago and has gotten a lot of interest from firms willing to take on what would be a nationwide contract to provide the tens of thousands of household moves every year, Lyons said. The major failure in the existing program was the inability to hold contractors accountable and to lack of a national system with common standards and the ability to inform managers in different regions of a poor performing contractor elsewhere.

“Inside the Department, we don’t have clear lines to hold them accountable for delivering the service. ... And most of all, we have to have a consistent pattern of quality of delivery,” he said.

McRaven Implores Sides to 'Calm Down a Bit' After Saudi Oil Facility Attack

The former commander of Special Operations Command and the Navy SEAL leader who directed the raid that killed al Qaeda leader Osama bin

Laden said he is "not overly concerned" about the current crisis with Iran, but

he is worried that the attack on Saudi oil facilities "may ramp this up a bit."

Retired Adm. William McRaven added: "Everyone needs to calm down a bit. We need to think through this," try diplomacy and, "If that doesn't work, there's always the sense of proportionality."

"We don't need to be involved. But if we feel something more forceful is needed, we better make sure it's proportional so we don't get a

spin up and escalate the situation. If the Saudis escalate, it could lead to

war. We don't want that," McRaven said Sept 18 as he addressed a forum on

special operations forces (SOF) at the New America think tank. "We've been

dealing with the Iranians for decades. We know how to deal with the Iranians."

He noted that a U.S. cruiser shot down an Iranian airliner and "killed 298 innocent folks" in 1979 during the Iran-Iraq war, but it did

not lead to a U.S.-Iranian war. "Strange as it may sound, I think people in the [Persian Gulf] are rational actors. Nobody wants to go to war. ... We have to figure out how to work it out."

In response to a question during the forum, McRaven said he "absolutely" was concerned about the lack of experienced officials on President Trump's national security team, because it diminishes the traditional process by which the layers of experts and advisers develop options for the president.

"When you don't have that process, or the process doesn't work effectively, or you don't have the depth of experience you need at different levels, then the president doesn't have the best options. The president is never going to be the subject matter expert," McRaven said.

He also said he "never thought negotiations with the Taliban were a good way to go" and predicted that if an agreement led to the withdrawal of all U.S. troops, in "six months or a year, all the blood and treasure we have put into Afghanistan would have been reversed" and all the progress made in educating girls and giving women more opportunities would be lost.

Earlier in the day, Roya Rahmani, Afghanistan's ambassador, said Afghans had been concerned about the U.S. led negotiations because Afghan officials were not involved, and she was "relieved" when Trump ended the talks.

Asked about the rash of scandals involving special operations personnel, particularly SEALs, McRaven suggested the 18 years of war in which SOF has borne a disproportionate burden must have had some effect. But he said Army Gen. Richard Clark, the current SOCOM commander, "did the right thing" by firing three senior SEAL leaders, which sent the right message to the force.

In other session during the day-long forum, House Armed Services Chairman Adam Smith (D-Wash.) and a Republican member of the committee agreed that Congress needs to ensure that SOF gets the resources it needs to conduct its vital missions and worried that the growing focus on "great power competition" with Russia and China would result in cutting SOF funding to pay for big war weapons, such as the Air Force's B-21 strategic bomber.

Other panels of active or former SOF personnel and civilian officials suggested that SOF needed to seek greater ethnic and cultural diversity in the ranks to deal with the evolving global security situation, which would include a continuing threat of global extremists and terrorists.