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 unsupportable 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.