

Columbia SSBN Not a Factor in 2021 Budget Cut to One Virginia-Class Sub, Geurts Says



A 34-foot Dauntless-class patrol boat transfers supplies to the Virginia-class fast-attack sub USS Texas in the Gulf of Tadjoura. The Virginia class has been at the center of a budget tussle between the Navy and Congress since the fiscal 2021 budget was introduced weeks ago. U.S. Navy/Hospital Corpsman 1st Class Kenji Shiroma

WASHINGTON – The U.S. Navy’s controversial decision to propose one Virginia-class attack submarine (SSN) instead of two in the fiscal year 2021 budget was a matter of budget priorities – not a concern over shipyard or program capacity to start construction of the Columbia ballistic-missile sub, the Navy’s top acquisition official told Congress.

“I had less confidence six to nine months ago where we were seeing some of the Block IV [Virginia SSN] deliveries starting to move to the right, and the concern was can we maintain the cadence to not add risk to Columbia,” James F. Geurts, Navy assistant secretary for research, development and acquisition, said March 4 during testimony before Seapower and Projection Forces, a subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee.

Geurts repeated his previous assertion that “the No. 1 way to reduce risk to Columbia is a stable, well-performing Virginia program.”

The Navy worked closely with the submarine builders, Electric Boat and Newport News Shipyard, to stabilize the transition from Block III to Block IV.

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James F. Geurts

“I am happy to report that over the last six months that has stabilized,” he said. “My concerns are not, now, ‘Can they execute?’ he said. “They just need to continue to execute.”

Geurts said that at the time a “relief valve” was created by making the 10th Virginia-class SSN an option in the recent multiyear Block V procurement. The second 2021 Virginia SSN became “more of an affordability issue, not an execution issue,” he said. “I’m confident [the shipyards] can execute [building] the ship.”

The second Virginia SSN is atop the Navy’s list of 2021 unfunded priorities.

“We need to add that ship in this year, or we’ll just have to work on that at the start of Block VI,” Geurts said. “I don’t think there is a way to execute three [submarines] in a Columbia year with a high degree of success.”

“Submarine construction is very sensitive to cadence ... and dips in workload, so there is some work we’re going to do at the end of 2023 with the shipbuilder,” he added. “The last thing we want to do is lay off folks [only] to climb this giant Columbia wall.

“If we cut short and have a large gap at the end of Block V [production] before having Block VI move in and Columbia start up, that will be a risk to execution not only in Virginia but to Columbia.”