

House Committee Levels Broadside at Navy's 2021 Shipbuilding Budget



Gen. Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper visit Capitol Hill on Feb. 26 for a House Armed Service Committee hearing on the Pentagon's fiscal 2021 budget. U.S. Army/Sgt. 1st Class Chuck Burden

WASHINGTON – The U.S. Navy's plan to procure only eight battle force ships in the 2021 budget came under expected fire from lawmakers during a Feb. 26 hearing on Capitol Hill.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper and Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Mark Milley testified at the hearing of the House Armed Services Committee to defend the Defense Department's proposed fiscal 2021 budget.

Rep. Joe Courtney (D-Conn.), in whose district the Electric Boat submarine construction yard is located, addressing the plan to procure only eight ships – including just one Virginia-class attack submarine – attacked the 2021 plan as deficient for several reasons.

He noted that a Congressional Research Service report confirmed that one of the eight ships in the 2021 budget – LPD 31, a San Antonio-class amphibious transport dock ship – was authorized and partially paid for via the 2020 defense bill and as such is being double-counted. He said that the real ship procurement proposed for 2021 is only seven ships.

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"Two of those seven are tugboats – they're salvage ships," Courtney said in his remarks. "We are not getting briefings in this committee about Russian tugboats or Chinese tugboats. We, in fact, then are left with really five combatant ships."

Courtney also criticized the decision to request only one Virginia-class attack submarine versus the two planned, a decision that he said will exacerbate the Navy's shortage of attack subs.

"Just for the record, we are at 52 attack submarines today," Courtney said to Esper. "With the retirement of Los Angeles-class submarines, which is going to accelerate over the next four or five years, that fleet is going to shrink to 44 subs. Your budget keeps us in that trough into the 2030s. It defies any analysis in terms of something that comports with the National Defense Strategy."

Courtney also pointed out to Esper that a 30-year shipbuilding plan – required by law – was not submitted with the 2021 budget submission. Esper said he hadn't seen the 30-year plan but would send it to Congress after he reviewed it.

"At the appropriate point I will share with you what I believe our future force structure should look like," Esper said. "I am a big believer in attack submarines. ... My gut tells me we need more than we planned for."

"But there are two competing pressures we have right now: a topline budget which actually gives us 2% less buying power," he said. "But the second thing – and importantly – is I support what the Navy did in terms of moving \$4 billion from shipbuilding to maintenance. A concern that the [chief of

naval operations] has, that the acting secretary has, and I have is that we have a hollow Navy.”

Esper cited a December Government Accountability Office report, which said that over the last five years, 75% of U.S. surface ships left maintenance late.

“Half of those ships took over three months to get to sea,” he said. “What that equates to is that 19 in 2019 unavailable to go to sea. We cannot have a hollow Navy. I agree we need to build a 355-plus-ship Navy, but we cannot have a hollow Navy at the same time.”

Rep. Rob Wittman (R-Va.) pointed out that the budget plan to decommission four littoral combat ships, four cruisers and three dock landing ships seemed like math that “doesn’t add up to me to get to 355. In fact, we’re heading south on that.”

Courtney also characterized the shipbuilding request as a “gut punch” to the welders, electricians and carpenters who build ships and to the supply chain that provides the materiel and components.

“Lastly, it’s a punch in the gut to the combatant commanders,” he added.

“In the last few days, we’ve had [Gen. Tod Wolters, commander, U.S. European Command] talk about a 50% increase in Russian submarine patrol operations. We’ve had [Adm. Woody Lewis, commander, U.S. 2nd Fleet] talking about the ever-increasing number of submarines [and Adm. Phil Davidson, commander, Indo-Pacific Command] saying that his ‘day-to-day submarine requirement is met by slightly only 50% of what I’ve asked for.’”