

House Panel Questions Navy Shipbuilding, Systems, Acquisition, Unmanned Submarine



The Virginia-class fast-attack submarine USS Washington returns to Naval Station Norfolk on Feb. 11 after its maiden deployment. Lawmakers continue to criticize the Navy's plan to fund just one Virginia-class sub – not two – in fiscal year 2021. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Alfred A. Coffield

WASHINGTON –

Lawmakers challenged U.S. Navy leaders at a fiscal year 2021 budget hearing on how long it will take to acquire a 355-ship fleet, how many vessels will be unmanned and why more ships of the fleet aren't submarines.

Acting Navy

Secretary Thomas B. Modly, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Michael Gilday and Commandant

of the Marine Corps Gen. David Berger acknowledged the Navy Department's

relatively flat budget request of \$207.1 billion – \$161 billion for the Navy

and \$46 billion for the Marines – had forced hard choices in procurement and end strength.

The budget

request slows the trajectory toward a fleet of 355 or more ships, but “it does

not arrest” that goal, Modly told the House Armed Services Committee on Feb.

27, offering his personal assurance that the Navy is “deeply committed” to building a larger, more capable, more distributed force within a time frame of no more than 10 years.

Both the committee chairman, Rep. Adam Smith (D-Wash.), and the ranking member, Rep. Mac Thornberry (R-Texas), said they are more interested in ships’ capabilities than numbers. “The 355 number kind of offends me,” Smith added. “You know, you can have 355 rowboats, theoretically, and you would have 355 ships.” Rep. Robert Wittman (R-Va.) called getting to 355 ships by 2030 “an impossible task based on the current pace.”

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Modly disagreed, but he said two things are required for the goal to become reality: a reasonable plan and the political will. Modly’s plan starts with finding ways to wring between \$5 billion and \$8 billion per year out of the existing Navy budget, and he’s conducting a 45-day stem-to-stern review to find outdated or unnecessary expenses for elimination. He said he would do what he could to stir political will.

Several

lawmakers were concerned about the size and numbers planned for air, surface and underwater unmanned vehicles.

“We have to really accelerate our investment in unmanned platforms,” Modly said, explaining why the Navy is seeking funding for the serial production of a large unmanned surface vessel before prototyping and testing are complete. It would be hard to experiment with concepts to understand how the technology will work with others without an existing platform, he said.

Regarding lethal unmanned aircraft, Berger said he didn’t yet know how they would operate in cooperation with manned aircraft. He did know “we have got to move faster than we have in the past three or four years,” he said. “We can cover a lot more ground if it is a mix of manned and unmanned. It is also more survivable,” by complicating targeting for enemy air defense systems, Berger said.

Rep. Joe Courtney (D-Conn.), chairman of the House Seapower and Projection Forces subcommittee, complained about the Defense Department’s last-minute reduction in shipbuilding accounts that led to the elimination of one of two planned Virginia-class attack submarines from the proposed 2021 budget.

Courtney noted that Gilday’s predecessor as CNO, Adm. John Richardson,

said there was no greater need in warfighting requirement and current inventory than the attack submarine. With older subs scheduled to retire in coming years, the Navy will be down to 42 attack boats by 2028. Modly said he wasn't part of the discussion about shifting shipbuilding money, but the elimination wasn't helpful "because it takes a ship out of a plan that we are driving toward."

Gilday said his first objective is to fully fund the new Columbia-class ballistic missile sub. Noting the Ohio-class subs, "the nuclear seaborne deterrent that this nation depends upon" is aging out. "We need to deliver Columbia on time for its first patrol in 2031," he said.