

Lawmakers Leery of Navy's Still-Vague Mission Plans for New Unmanned Systems



The Seahawk medium displacement unmanned surface vessel launches for the U.S. Pacific Fleet's Unmanned Systems Integrated Battle Problem 21 (UxS IBP 21), April 20. UxS IBP 21 integrates manned and unmanned capabilities into operational scenarios to generate warfighting advantages. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Thomas Gooley*
ARLINGTON, Va. – Two senior House Armed Services Committee members, who strongly support U.S. Navy plans to acquire a wide range of unmanned air and maritime systems to enhance the size of the fleet, say they still have concerns about how undefined the mission remains.

Appearing at a virtual unmanned defense systems conference sponsored by the Association for Unmanned Vehicle Systems International (AUVSI) on July 27, both Reps. Joe Courtney (D-Connecticut), and Jim Langevin (D-Rhode Island), agreed that unmanned surface and undersea vessels will have a key role confronting the pacing threat of China across the vast distances of the Indo-Pacific region.

“These systems will be the key to a distributed force that moves away from exquisite, expensive platforms – which are high value targets – and towards a more modular and nimble fleet that can, hopefully, plan to overwhelm the adversary,” said Langevin, who chairs the HASC's Intelligence, Emerging Threats and Capabilities subcommittee.

Having unmanned platforms ranging in size from small to extra-large vessels that reduce the risk to Sailors in a contested environment, and handle jobs that don't require human presence, “is just a really smart investment moving forward,”

said Courtney, chairman of the HASC Seapower and Projection Forces subcommittee.

However, “we’ve been wrestling with the issue of what is the future fleet size for the Navy and what’s the fleet architecture look like,” Courtney said, adding that the Biden administration’s first Navy budget had no FYDP [future years defense plan] and the shipbuilding plan had only ranges of vessels, not specific numbers. He acknowledged the White House will have more time and experience by next year’s budget, adding that will be the one to watch.

“We really do need some clarity about just where are we going,” Courtney said, recalling the HASC’s “traumatic experiences” in the past with unique new platforms that were funded in a hurry, like the littoral combat ship, but “didn’t pan out as well as the Navy or Congress hoped.”

Langevin, whose subcommittee Courtney described as “the tip of the spear for a lot of these questions,” said he was concerned the Navy and other services could become over-reliant on unmanned systems.

“They can be a great component, but I’m still very cautious – recognizing that our enemies and adversaries understand where we’re going with new technologies. They’re going to invest in and try to create asymmetric systems that will interfere with those capabilities and take them out,” with less compunction than they might for a manned vessel in a non-war situation, he said.

“The other thing that we have to ensure is, as we get more and more into the 21st century and make use of machine learning and artificial intelligence, we absolutely have to ensure the integrity of the data decisions are based on and also, that there’s always a human in the loop,” Langevin said, adding, “We have to make sure that we understand the decision-making process by making sure that when it comes to carrying out

kinetic effects, we don't delegate too much in terms of AI decision-making."