

Navy's No. 2 Civilian Says Balanced Planning Needed to Confront Current and Future Threats



The Honorable James F. Geurts, performing the duties of Under Secretary of the Navy, center, speaks with a Naval Special Warfare (NSW) operator, right, about emerging NSW capabilities during a visit to various NSW commands in the San Diego region. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Sean Furey*

ARLINGTON, Va. – While Pentagon planners and lawmakers puzzle over which platforms to retire and which to keep in service in the coming decades, it's important to balance competing priorities of readiness to meet current threats as well as preparing for ones yet to be imagined, the second-highest ranking civilian in the U.S. Navy says.

It's a "false dilemma" to say the Navy Department has to choose between current readiness and future readiness," James "Hondo" Geurts said May 12 at the McAleese Associates FY2022 Defense Programs Conference webinars. "We have to do both of them. Balance is really important, particularly in today's operational environment," where thousands of Marines are forward deployed in the first island chain of the Pacific, and a third of the fleet is at sea.

Geurts, until Jan. 21 the assistant secretary of the Navy for research, development and acquisition, was designated as performing the duties of Under Secretary of the Navy in February by acting Navy Secretary Thomas Harker. In the new role of principal assistant to the Secretary, Geurts acts as chief operating officer and chief management officer for the department.

Navigating the great power competition, in what is expected to be an era of shrinking defense budgets, will require resilience in dealing with cyber, climate and competition challenges, Geurts said, as well as balancing “how we think about future readiness in things like remotely crewed or unmanned systems with today’s manned systems.”

Geurts said that question has weighed on him for the last two years, but he was encouraged by the Unmanned Campaign framework released by the Navy and Marine Corps March 16. He also said he was feeling positive “that we have started the right motions, people are thinking about it,” but he wants to see improvement in the “scale and speed” at which technology discoveries move from development to deployment with the fleet.

As for the issue of retiring older platforms like cruisers and amphibious warfare ships, to make way for new technologies, a hot topic on Capitol Hill, Geurts said he wouldn’t discuss specifics until the Biden administration’s first defense budget is released. However, “we’re looking at what’s that right balance of keeping things while they’re still useful, but not keeping things to the point where they’re not adding value to the missions we see going forward,” Geurts said, adding “we want to maximize the return on investments made and maybe in new and interesting ways.”

He noted that Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday has been [outspoken](#) about continuing to use Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) in the Western Pacific. “There is a place for it. We just need to be creative in how do we maximize that previous investment going forward,” Geurts said.