New Force Structure Assessment Will Address Needs of ‘Great Power Competition,’ Two Top Requirements Officers Say

ANNAPOLIS, Md. – U.S. Navy and Marine Corps requirements and capabilities leaders are working together to produce an Integrated Naval Force Structure Assessment, which will replace the Navy assessment that usually shapes the shipbuilding plan, the two top requirements officers said Oct. 22.

And the assessment will be driven by the capabilities needed to operate integrated naval forces in the highly contest environments expected in the emerging “great power competition,” said Vice Adm. James Kilby and Lt. Gen. Eric Smith.

“Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO) is the guiding principle for what we’re doing in the Navy,” and that “ties in very closely” with the Marine Corps’ Expeditionary Operations in a Contested Environment (LOCE) concept, said Kilby, who is deputy chief of naval operations for warfighting requirements and capabilities. DMO means “the ability to distribute your forces and to be able to concentrate effects at the right time,” he said.

DMO also reflects a shift to a focus on sea control, Kilby said. For the last 20 years, the naval forces have focused on power projection, he said. “It’s time to rethink that model” to “how do we support each other.”

“We will build one force optimized for the expeditionary force,” designed to ensure access for the fleet, said Smith, who is deputy commandant for combat development and integration. His directions come from Marine Commandant David Berger’s guidance that dictates “where the Marine Corps is going in support of the fleet,” he said.

DMO, “it’s our concept” and addresses “what the Marine Corps does to support the fleet in littoral operations in a contested environment.” The integrated assessment also will support the Marine’s concept of Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations, which envisions small, mobile Marine forces taking positions within the enemy’s area with which to support the fleet’s effort to gain sea control.

In developing the integrated assessment, Smith said, “we’re doing a tremendous amount of work together. What’s not helpful,” he continued, is that “once again we’re under a CR,” or continuing resolution, instead of normal funding. “That means no new starts, tread water,” he said. “I can’t tread water against a pacing threat.”

Addressing a two-day National Defense Industrial Association conference on the future of expeditionary operations, the two leaders said they

and their staffs are working tightly together to shape this new assessment.
They will submit their proposals to the naval services' leadership as an "interim" assessment, which will be refined for release early next year, they said.

The shipbuilding plan that emerges from this integrated assessment could be significantly different due to Berger's dramatic statements in his guidance that the traditional large amphibious warships may not be survivable in face of the area-denial weapons being deployed by China and his support for a large number of other ships, which would be smaller, cheaper and more expendable.

Kilby, however, said that in the amphibious forces, "the things that have existed in the past will exist in the future. We will need big-deck amphibs" and the LPD-17 amphibious transport dock ships, "which are more capable than in the past due to sensors." But he said they also will need connectors, not just to get Marines ashore but to sustain them. The assessment will look at whether they need faster connectors, or low-signature assets. He said there also was a need for intra-theater support ships.

Both officers said the new force assessment would call for more unmanned vessels.

Kilby noted that the Navy is looking at a range of unmanned vessels, ranging from small to large. He suggested the large unmanned ships could serve as magazines, with large number of

weapons, while smaller vessels would serve as sensors and to deceive an adversary as to where attacks were going.

Smith said the unmanned systems are “hugely important” to the commandant’s vision for future expeditionary operations. “If we can produce a truly autonomous vehicle that has a range of say 1,000 miles … that can carry the cargo I need to sustain an EABO,” Kilby said.