

Wittman: DDGs Still Needed as Cruisers Retire; Go Slow on USVs



The guided-missile destroyer USS Forrest Sherman transits the Arabian Gulf. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Raymond Maddocks

WASHINGTON – The U.S. Navy still needs a large fleet of guided-missile destroyers (DDGs) to replace the guided-missile cruisers (CGs) being retired, a senior member of the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) said.

Speaking March 9 at the Hudson Institute, a Washington think tank, Rep. Rob Wittman (R-Va.), the ranking member of the Seapower and Projection Forces subcommittee of the HASC, expressed concern over the Navy's announcement that it would not extend the service life of the older Arleigh Burke-class (DDG 51) DDGs, some of which reach their maximum life in the mid-2020s.

"Our DDG 51s are incredibly important, and doing the upgrades, especially on the Flight IIs, are important," Wittman said. "There is still a lot of utility and life left in Flight I – there are some upgrades they can do ... and bring the Aegis baseline systems up, put some more capable radars on those ships – I think that those things need to stay on track."

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Noting the Navy's 2021 budget plan to slow the rate of production on the new Flight III DDGs, Wittman said the plan "doesn't get us to where we need to be, especially in light

of retiring four CGs. If you're going to take those cruisers out – remember, those cruisers are either part of the carrier strike group or the ballistic-missile defense mission – my counter to that is, what are you going to do to then replace them at some fairly fast pace with DDG 51s?"

Wittman noted that "going south" on upfitting older DDGs, retiring CGs and not building the Flight III DDGs at a quick enough pace, a 355-ship Navy gets more distant.

Asked by moderator Seth Cropsey about increasing the number of small combatants and unmanned surface vessels (USVs) instead of DDGs, Wittman said integration of USVs raises questions that have not yet been answered.

"The only way you know that is to implement that, put it in place, and figure out what does it do well, what doesn't it do well, and then you can ramp up production," he said. "My concern is that if you replace a DDG 51 Flight III – that we know is an extraordinarily capable ship, even a modernization of a Flight I or you replace that with a unmanned platform – you have no idea at this particular point how useful that is going to be integrating these missions into the fleet.

"Let's build a number of [USVs], let's integrate them in, let's figure out what works and what doesn't work, and then at some future date you can ramp up production and get a significant amount of capability and capacity," he said. "But don't do it too soon, where you waste resources and say, well these ships hadn't worked out so well and we're going to retire these. We see this with [littoral combat ships] and it really takes away from the effort necessary to build the fleet that we need for the future."