Virtual Event | Seapower and US Strategic Competition in the Indo-Pacific

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion...

- Congressman Joe Courtney, U.S. Representative, Connecticut’s 2nd District, Senior Member, House Armed Services Committee, Chairman, Seapower and Projection Forces Subcommittee, Co-Chair, Congressional AUKUS Working Group, and Co-Chair, Congressional Shipbuilding Caucus
- Congressman Rob Wittman, U.S. Representative, Virginia’s 1st District, Senior Member, House Armed Services Committee, Ranking Member, Seapower and Projection Forces Subcommittee, Co-Chair, Congressional AUKUS Working Group, and Co-Chair, Congressional Shipbuilding Caucus
- Patrick Cronin, Asia-Pacific Security Chair, Hudson Institute

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Patrick Cronin:

Well, welcome. I'm Patrick Cronin, Asia-Pacific security chair at the Hudson Institute, and today we're discussing U.S. Seapower and the strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region. I'm honored to be joined today by two senior members of the House Armed Services Committee, Representative Joe Courtney of Connecticut and Representative Rob Wittman of Virginia, chairman and ranking member respectively of the House Armed Services Committee Seapower and Projection Forces subcommittee, among many other accolades, and they're both more than 15 years in Congress spearheading efforts to shore up U.S. maritime power and U.S. prosperity and security. I want to begin with an assessment from each of them on the state of our fleet and the Indo-Pacific challenges they see, because despite Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China remains the pacing threat in the priority theater, the Indo-Pacific, and it's a maritime theater. So, Representative Courtney, if I can begin with you, and then Representative Wittman, please, a few initial comments. Thank you.

Rep. Joe Courtney:

Sure. I mean, look at. I would say regarding the state of the fleet that there is, I think, a lot of goodness that's happening out there in terms of Admiral Aquilino and all of his colleagues to really meet the mission as far as protection freedom of navigation, showing presence, and I think really nonstop planning and connecting with allies to really strengthen deterrents, which I do think China has really taken advantage of somewhat of an inattention that was happening over there. I mean, just yesterday the USS Sampson destroyer transited the straits of Taiwan. China was barking about it, but again, it's just the pace of operations and deployment, you got to tip your hat to them.

There's no question they are stretched thin. Obviously, some of the issues of operation that took place with some of those collisions, part of the problem was the heel-to-toe deployments that were happening there. There were obviously internal problems with the Navy's readiness and operation communication and decision making, which I think we worked hard on our subcommittee to address. But the bottom line is there still is a clear view in the future that I think most observers would agree, and certainly people on our subcommittee, is that we need to increase capacity, and we need to make sure that we have a fleet that can counter and meet the threat that's out there.

Again, our submarine fleet, which I still think is our still advantage there, is doing great work, but the trough that Rob and I have been talking about for years is still relentlessly in our front window view, and we I think hopefully are going to address some of that issue with not only new construction, but service life extension for Los Angeles-class subs because it does matter to have the numbers out there in terms of... The one platform that is not vulnerable to China's missile capability and can really operate freely in the first island chain area, which is obviously today a totally contested space. So, I'll stop there and let Rob chime in because I know we've got a tough schedule here, and I hope we've got a lot of questions.

Rep. Rob Wittman:

Yeah.

Patrick Cronin:

Congressman Wittman, your basic assessment?
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Rep. Rob Wittman:

Sure. Well, my assessment is basically this. The threats from China and the INDOPACOM continue to grow. China continues to build capability, continues to not only hold us at risk inside the first island chain, but areas beyond. That capability and capacity continues to grow. It’s very disturbing to me that the Navy sees the path forward to counter this growing capability and capacity, their counter to that is to reduce our capability and capacity. They look to go from 297 ships to 280 ships by 2027. The Department of Defense’s own China power report shows that China will be at 460 ships by 2030. Admiral [John] Aquilino and Admiral [Philip] Davidson, the previous INDOPACOM commander, have talked about the scope of the threat and that they do believe that China, looking at current conditions, will try to make the effort to take Taiwan before 2027. Essentially, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the same thing, and even Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General [Mark] Milley said emphatically that if we're going to counter China, we have to build more ships.

You can’t get there in this year's PB by building eight ships and retiring 24. Listen. I’m not a mathematician, but you can’t do addition by subtraction, and that is taking on additional risk. There’s no two ways about it. So, we have to be mindful of what's necessary to build a capability. I understand wanting to retire legacy ships and building new ships, but if you're going to create that deficit, I don't care how reduced the capability of older ships are, you can’t fight something with nothing. Not having a ship there is not an alternative to say, "We have an older ship, and somehow, because we have an older ship, we just need to get rid of it," and nothing to replace that within the five-year defense plan.

Patrick Cronin:

So, Congressman Wittman, if I can just follow up with you first in terms of how did we get into this position, when you think of something like a littoral combat ship, that was supposed to be the new innovative, low-cost shipbuilding program. We're trying to retire them now in order to get to some real heavy tonnage, perhaps, and more firepower, but does the Navy even have a 30-year ship plan? Has the Navy given you a clear roadmap for the long-term as well, not just this decade where we have this vulnerability, but the long-term? How did we get here, and do we have a clear vision for the long-term?

Rep. Rob Wittman:

Well, listen. The Navy shipbuilding plan that they've given to us is ‘multiple choice.’ It's like you can take 318 or 363, and the problem is when you say 318, what you're telling Congress, especially appropriators, is the lowest common denominator is, okay, that is acceptable. I would argue that it is not. If you'd look at the LCS, the LCS did not work out the way they had planned. The mission modules hadn't worked out the way they planned. They still have an obligation, though, I believe, to make LCS work. I understand the first four ships and the arguments there, but the subsequent ones that they want to retire, there's still, I think, capability that we need to look at within our own fleet. Those things need to be done. You can't retire four LSDs with 25 years of service life left on them. You can't retire one of the CEGs that has already gone through a comprehensive whole maintenance electrical and Baseline 9 Aegis upgrade.

You can't do that and have the fleet that we need going forward, regardless of what you see in the windshield from the Chinese fleet. So, there has to be a combination of, as Joe said, moving things like submarine production to the left. I think we need to go from building two to three submarines a year, and we can do that. The industry has to ramp us, and we have to help them do that. I think we have to
go to building three DDGs per year. I think those things are incredibly important. SPY-6 radars and the advanced systems on those ships are incredibly important, and you have to do that if you’re going to even consider retiring these other surface ships, and the planned retirements on the Los Angeles-class submarines, and Joe is right. You got to be able to take existing reactor plants and do service life extensions on some of the 688s. So, it has to be a combination of things, extending service life on existing platforms, and moving to the left construction schedules for things like DDG-51 Flight IIIIs, and for that matter, Block IV Virginia-class submarines.

Patrick Cronin:

Congressman Courtney, I'm hearing we have to have replacements in place if we’re going to be retiring ships, but we also need to go faster and build more. Is there potentially more money coming from Congress to plus up this current, maybe, budget, and how do assess the shipbuilding vision?

Rep. Joe Courtney:

Well, really, if you look at the last three years, four years, the fact is that Congress has in fact plussed up the shipbuilding account, regardless of republican or democratic administrations, and if I was a betting man, I would say that we’re probably going to do that again, this cycle, and the shipbuilding plan that came over, this has been an ongoing struggle to get the Navy and the Executive Branch to, number one, comply with the law, which requires a shipbuilding plan at the same time a budget is submitted, and we have not had one since 2019. So, one did come over, and as Rob said, it's a multiple choice after the first, I don't know, five or 10 years in the bar graph if you look at it. I think it has some value in terms of if nothing else, getting people's attention about the trajectory that we're on, and in some ways, I think that helps us make the argument that we have to take a really hard look at some of the retirements.

We also need to look at surface life extensions that make sense in terms of hull life and the expenditure of government dollars. We have seven nuclear cores that can be used in the 688s. I mean, those really are literally on the shelf, so I think depending on the hull situation of LA-class subs, we're going to extend some of those subs. I do think that in terms of the budget that came over, the good news is it's a $28 billion shipbuilding account that's larger than last year's enacted level. That's the first time that's happened in five years. I mean, we're not starting in a hole in terms of this year, but there's clearly, I think, already lots of signals that myself and Rob and many others have been sending out about the termination, literally, of the LPD program and the reduction of that fleet.

If I was a betting man, again, I would not tell people that that's likely to happen, and that's our role. I mean, it's Article 1, Section 8, Clause 13, the Congress shall provide and maintain a Navy, and I think we've got the pieces that fit the 30-year plan, the budget, and I think people are going to really get to work now in terms of what I think will be a larger shipbuilding account and a better baseline moving forward for next year's shipbuilding plan.

Patrick Cronin:

Terrific. Sticking with you, Representative Courtney, let's go into the Taiwan scenario. You mentioned the Sampson transiting the Taiwan Strait. Four days after Russia invaded Ukraine, we had another transit from a destroyer to reassure Taiwan, and yet a poll out of Taiwan this week says that only 40% or 39% of Taiwanese think we're actually going to be committed to their defense. So, a two-part question
for both of you gentlemen. One of them is, do you think the American political commitment is stronger than the Taiwanese public opinion thinks right now, but secondly, more specifically, what can we do to try to close down the potential for miscalculation on the part of Xi Jinping, that Davidson window that Representative Wittman essentially alluded to? I'll get to him in just a minute.

Rep. Joe Courtney:

So, look at. I think the war in Ukraine, which is a horrible, painful event to witness, but there I think are some instructive takeaways from that and for Taiwan. We had meetings with the vice chief of the Army today about the fact that Taiwan right now has a lot of room to grow in terms of its own indigenous land-based ability to do what Ukraine is doing, which is to really effectively, maybe even with asymmetric at times, but nonetheless, the ability to push back in terms of a similar type of move, and that I think is something that's been missing in terms of strengthening Taiwan's military force.

I do think that we've had visible signs of administration presence in Taiwan, which I'll be honest with you, kind of surprised me, but President Biden sent Chris Dodd, his special representative over there, which infuriated the Chinese. We've had members of Congress going there. I frankly think we need to do more of that to change that perception that you described, Patrick, because Ukraine has shown that morale and commitment by the country itself I think has a value that you almost can't put a price tag on, and that poll in Taiwan shows that we've got to turn that around and do it with presence and real assistance, tangible assistance, and helping them strengthen their own indigenous defense.

Patrick Cronin:

Great. Congressman Wittman, for deterring China over Taiwan and reassuring the Taiwanese, what would you emphasize?

Rep. Rob Wittman:

Well, listen. I think the country is and has to be committed to defending Taiwan against any aggression by China. I think the ways that we can do that in learning what's happened with Ukraine is making sure that we provide the tools for the Taiwanese to defend themselves. We saw what happened in 2014 after the first Russian attack on Ukraine. We sent US advisors and military in to train Ukrainian forces. I would argue the resolve and capability that we see today is a result of what they learned from US forces there. I think that we ought to be doing much of the same in Taiwan. I know it will infuriate the Chinese, but it will make the Chinese take a step back. I think that's incredibly important.

I also think too, continuing to build relationships, strong relationships, economic and strategic with partners in the INDOPACOM, is incredibly important. We saw just yesterday the security agreement that the Solomon Islands signed with China. There's more of that to come. I just talked with the secretary of the Navy who went to Papua New Guinea for the first time to talk to the New Guineans about relationships with the United States and formalizing those relationships. So, it has to be twofold, making sure we unequivocally state that we will be with Taiwan, making sure we provide them the tactical and strategic support and economic support going forward, and making sure that we build strong relationships with countries across the INDOPACOM, especially countries like Vietnam, especially countries like the Philippines. I think there's tremendous potential there for us to do those things. Those
provide us a very strategic capability in the region that will make China think twice before they do something similar to what Russia did to Ukraine.

**Patrick Cronin:**

Great answers. Congressman Courtney, going to the question of AUKUS, for instance, the Australia, UK, U.S. defense partnership, undersea warfare, that's an instance where you've got allies at the high end coming together on undersea warfare and advanced capabilities. How do you see this playing out, and do you see any particularly big hurdles in the way of making this reinforce security and deterrent?

**Rep. Joe Courtney:**

So, I think it's one of the most significant security measures that the U.S. has taken in many years in terms of formalizing the three countries’ agreement to provide, again, a deterrence that the centerpiece of which is, of course, the submarine program, but there are many other aspects, which was announced a couple weeks ago in terms of other capabilities that the three countries are going to share, and I think in the short term that's probably going to be a lot of the visible, tangible benefits that are happening there, but in terms of the undersea side, Australia's already announced that they are going to build a submarine base on the east coast of the country, probably Brisbane, it looks like, and I think there's also, I think, strong movement towards setting up some infrastructure to help with some submarine maintenance, submarine tenders to be situated there.

I personally feel that over time, we can hopefully develop that even further to really shorten some of the repair and maintenance stays that our subs experience. I'm not sure they're going to have full-blown dry docks and that sort of thing, but again, that I think is a very feasible, manageable piece of implementing this agreement. Rob and I have been talking about joint training that we can start instituting in the nuclear capability for their sailors and officers as a way of, again, starting to help them develop their submarine workforce. The big question in terms of allocation of work, this is a country with no nuclear sector. They have about 30 million people, and that's a huge jump to take on that industrial base from really almost below zero.

So, I think that that work is going to take a little time to figure out the allocation of work, but there's huge commitment, 60%-plus approval rating in Australia in the public, again, strong commitment from the UK and the U.S. leadership, and we're forming our own legislative group, the Australia Working Group, a bipartisan group to help, again, promote it, because there frankly is a legislative piece to this beyond what I just described that we're going to have to enact to help enable this process, which I think is, again, one of the really strongest efforts that our country is undertaking, and it was a bad day on September 15th in China when that alliance was announced, and that's a good thing.

**Rep. Rob Wittman:**

Yeah.

**Patrick Cronin:**

Their Wolf Warrior diplomacy got into high gear over the AUKUS issue, and that means it's a serious program. Congressman Wittman, when you think about Australia and you think about the advanced
technology capability as part of that relationship, missiles is a big part of it, but we're also obviously working together with them on fielding our fifth-generation fighters. Are there other high-priority areas that you think will really buttress our strength and firepower to be a power to be reckoned with in terms of sea power in the coming decades?

**Rep. Rob Wittman:**

Absolutely. The UK and Australia are very much aligned with the United States' view about what we need to do around the world. Much of what they do and how they operate their military is right in line with the framework that we use for our military, so there's just a very good fit with how those countries operate. The next natural step is this agreement, which as Joe said, and I agree, is the most consequential military agreement of any nations around the world that's happened in the last 50 years. The question now becomes, how do we make sure we get that operationalized? There's tremendous amounts of opportunities with a number of different platforms, whether it's ships, whether it's missile platforms, whether it's other tactical platforms out there, whether it's things like the software side of things.

A lot of that gets forgotten, what we can use with machine learning, with AI, with sensors. All those things are incredibly important, and in the Indo-Pacific, I argue that being able to develop that suite of capability is as important as the platforms themselves. I think too that making sure that we push the timeframes on this, especially with Australia, because as Joe said, they are starting at ground zero, they are not going to be able to have the full capability to go into submarine production anytime soon, so getting their sailors here to the United States to go through nuke school, to be jointly deployed on U.S. submarines, to get their shipbuilding industry here in the United States, working at the yards with folks in Groton and in Newport News, and building these submarines, to see what this is all about, to have that learning curve, because there's nothing like the learning curve that happens in person.

They're operating that submarine or building that submarine. Those things are irreplaceable, and that's the way to be able to really progress the timeframes the way we need to do it so that we can see the efforts in the AUKUS agreement actually manifest themselves. Listen. The Australians have the highest level of desire I think that you can humanly achieve. The key is, how do you operationalize that? So, desire's one thing, but building that capability, and then making sure too that we understand from the Australian standpoint that this can't be all a U.S. effort. The Australians need to see this and say, "Hey, some of the submarine parts and efforts are being done in Australia."

So, we have to be mindful of what they're dealing with there, and I think we can achieve both. I think we can achieve fast progress in this. I think the United States Navy, the shipbuilding industry here in the United States can be intimately involved with the Australians with this. I think we can do a lot, not just here in the United States, but in Australia, but it has to be done at what I call a sprinter's pace, and if we do that, and we can do that, then good things will happen.

**Patrick Cronin:**

Well, important comments. Segueing from nuclear propulsion to nuclear deterrents, and sticking with you, Congressman Wittman, I wanted to ask you about the SLCM, the nuclear-based sea-launched cruise missile that's been zeroed out of the budget. It's been seen as potentially one of those areas that could really bolster extended deterrents for allies and partners. There's even talk about nuclear sharing, for
instance, by having submarines with these kind of capabilities based back in Korea or Japan. On the other hand, even North Korea is talking about tactical nuclear uses, maybe borrowing a page out of Vladimir Putin's threats. This could be all bluff. It could be dangerous. How do you view the SLCM question right now?

**Rep. Rob Wittman:**

Well, submarine-launched cruise missiles are going to be incredibly important, especially those that have a tactical nuke deployed with that launch platform. I think it's incredibly important because what it does is it gives us the ability to provide a high level of uncertainty for both the Chinese and the Russians. That's incredibly important, and we have to have that suite of opportunities to deter China if we're going to be realistic about what they would do. Listen. They have tactical nukes, and in contradiction to SALT II, the Russians also have tactical nukes. They tested them. In fact, we asked the previous administration to say, "Listen. Stop the, or at least object to the Russians doing that."

If we don't have something that is on par with what potentially could be used by the Chinese or the Russians, that's equal to what they could use, then the deterrent effect goes out the window, and why? Because we know that it's a very difficult decision to respond to the use of a tactical nuclear weapon by China or by Russia with a high-yield nuclear weapon. I mean, those are all different orders of magnitude, so we have to have something there that we can deter. I would argue submarine-launched tactical nuclear weapons are an incredibly effective deterrent. If we don't have that in our set of opportunities to deter, then what we are doing is reducing the ability of the United States in areas that will not be in our best interest and will not be in our allies' best interest.

**Patrick Cronin:**

Congressman Courtney, what's been keeping the peace maybe with great powers in the nuclear age has been especially our sea-based nuclear leg of the triad because it's the most secure. China's now ramping up its nuclear forces in a way that we haven't seen ever, really. Are we going to be on track to deploy the Columbia SSBN as the Ohio-based ballistic missile submarine program runs into its end of its life? You're muted, sir.

**Rep. Rob Wittman:**

Joe, you're on mute.

**Rep. Joe Courtney:**

I've been getting those vote buzzers. I wanted to make sure it didn't interrupt Rob and his flow. So, this program, which has been painstakingly planned, designed, land tested over, really, the last 12 years, so far is really staying on schedule. The first launch is scheduled for 2028, and I think the first deployment will be 2030. Right now, based on what's already starting to happen in Newport News and Quonset Point, Rhode Island, and we're now putting the, hopefully, relatively finishing touches on the final assembly facility in Groton. Admiral [inaudible 00:26:34] is feeling positive about not having any setback in terms of schedule. There can't be any because the whole life of the Ohio-class subs, which got extended to 40-plus years, are really just not safe to continuing operating at that point.
I would note that right now the nuclear posture review does allow low-yield weapons in addition to high-yield to be carried by the Columbia, or actually, they're carried by Ohio's. So, that tool in the toolbox does actually exist right now, but there's going to be... From a budget standpoint, the Columbia and the recapitalization program, SSBN, is going to be a very heavy weight for the Navy to have to carry single-handed. Rob and I have been pushing since 2015 to spread that class throughout the department as a true strategic asset through a nuclear-based deterrent separate fund outside of the shipbuilding account. It's the law.

It's shown great value in terms of enabling multiyear acquisition, which has helped keep the cost down, but the Navy still has not and the Department of Defense still has not bought into the full execution of that law by really recognizing that the Navy is going to really struggle in terms of trying to get the fleet that we've been discussing here if they have to carry the cost of that leg of the triad by itself. Again, 70% of our strategic deterrents are carried by those subs, so that's a pretty disproportion share for the Navy to have to carry by itself.

Patron Cronin:

Congressman, I think I can see a picture of where the Columbia class is being built. That building is being finished. That's good news. That's a material proof that we're making progress and it's on time. We only have a minute left for both of you to just wrap up, and I just wonder if I can ask you a question based on a great new book by historian Paul Kennedy, who looks at naval victory at sea from World War II and how it transformed the world, because between 1941 the United States leapt above UK as the biggest navy, and our naval tonnage grew to nearly 12 million tons, far surpassing all other countries. It's been declining since then, but we're still ahead of the Chinese in terms of tonnage. But are you convinced that the American people understand that we are a maritime power, that we need sea power for our security and prosperity in the decades to come, Congressman Courtney, and then Congressman Wittman for final word.

Rep. Joe Courtney:

Sure. I mean, real quick, your colleague Seth Cropsey once described it as sea blindness. I think that's a really apt term in terms of where we are today, in terms of public awareness of the fact that we still are a maritime country, and the maritime domain is still an incredibly important part of keeping the peace, and to the extent that you've got countries like China that are trying to exercise sea control, and to some degree, Putin as well, that really raises the risk level for serious global conflict that we hoped was a thing of the past after the end of World War II, and it behooves us to help try and educate and help people understand the fact that we can't rest on our laurels in terms of the success of keeping the commons of the sea peaceful for 70s year. It doesn't happen by itself, and security comes with a cost, and we have to really be relentless in terms of convincing people that that's a cost worth bearing.

Rep. Rob Wittman:

Yeah.

Patrick Cronin:

Indeed. Congressman Wittman, final word.
Rep. Rob Wittman:

Sure. Listen. I do think that people are aware tangentially of the importance of being a maritime nation, and how is that manifested today? Supply chain. They hear stories of ships anchored up in Long Beach waiting long periods of time, containers taking long periods of time to come here, the cost of getting those containers here. So, more and more people are aware of it, and they're aware of it primarily if you're in business, but secondarily, if you're a customer or if you are out figuring out why the shelf's empty, and then you find out through researching it what's happening. So, I think people are aware of that. What we have to do, that is we, members of Congress have to do is to make sure that they understand how the elements of having a strong United States Navy are intimately tied to us being a strong maritime nation, and that these issues that they see with interruption to supply chain can be massively more impactful if we don't have a Navy that keeps these sealanes open, if we have further interruptions that instead of going on for weeks, go on for months or years.

So, we've got a great opportunity now, I think, to educate folks as to the importance of our naval fleet, of a strong commercial shipbuilding sector, of a strong logistics fleet, of making sure we have a strong tanker fleet, all the things that we've taken for granted through the years, and we've let those atrophy, but that atrophy puts our nation at a strategic and economic risk. We have a great opportunity now because people are living with the results of what's happened in these interruptions on a maritime side to really reiterate why it's important for us to be the preeminent maritime nation.

Patrick Cronin:

I want to thank both of you, Congressmen, and I hope in some humble, small way, this program helps Americans better understand the importance of American sea power and listen to what you have to say, because it's very important. Thank you both.

Rep. Rob Wittman:

Thank you, Patrick.

Rep. Joe Courtney:

Thank you, Patrick. Take care.

Patrick Cronin:

Thank you.

Rep. Rob Wittman:

Thank you so much. Thank you.