Virtual Event | The Future of U.S. Seapower: A View from Congress

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion

- Representative Joe Courtney, U.S. Representative, Connecticut’s 2nd District and Chairman of the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Seapower and Projection Forces
- Representative Rob Wittman, U.S. Representative, Virginia’s 1st District and Ranking Member of the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Seapower and Projection Forces
- Seth Cropsey, Senior Fellow & Director, Center for American Seapower, Hudson Institute

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A video of the event is available: https://www.hudson.org/events/1920-virtual-event-the-future-of-u-s-seapower-a-view-from-congress22021

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Seth Cropsey:
I'd like to welcome everybody, certainly our guests, honored guests today, and the audience to this conversation on American sea power. I'm Seth Cropsey. I served as an officer in the Navy and as Deputy Undersecretary of the Navy, and have the pleasure of being the senior fellow at Hudson Institute and director of Hudson Center for American Sea Power. Good day, everybody. And we're very honored to have with us today the Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, the committee's subcommittee on sea power and projection forces, Representative Joe Courtney, who represents Connecticut's second district, and ranking member Rob Wittman who is also vice ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee and represents Virginia's first district. Congratulations to both of you gentlemen on your recent reelection and your increasing responsibilities as members of the House Armed Services Committee.

Rob Wittman:
Thank you.

Seth Cropsey:
I should point out are members of our two major political parties. And although you will see it for yourselves, I want to note in the beginning that their amicability serves the United States no less than their extensive knowledge of the US military. So, welcome, Representative Courtney, welcome Representative Wittman. And why don't we start off with some brief remarks from you both. Chairman Courtney, if you would begin, and then ranking member Wittman, if you would follow. And then I'll say a few words and then I have some questions I'd like to ask and we'll get into a discussion.

Joe Courtney:
Great. Well, thank you Seth. And again, first of all, we are from the House so we can't filibuster. I'm certainly, and I know Rob, same thing, we want to get into the questions. But very quickly, just wanted to reiterate how I actually really look forward to this session which has become kind of an annual affair. I think we did it actually live literally days before lockdown for COVID. And thank you for keeping it going even virtually today. And I would just say, obviously we've got a lot to talk about, but the experience that we just went through with the fiscal year '21 budget, in my opinion really was a validation of these types of events. When we talk about the sort of overarching strategic needs for sea power, which again, you are a total topnotch expert, that actually has, in my opinion, real impact in terms of the thought process on Capitol Hill, which as you know, Seth, and Rob certainly does because we've been on this committee for 14 years, going on 15, it's a battle sometimes. It's always a competitive environment there in terms of priorities, but sea power and maritime priorities definitely sort of dropped in terms of people's understanding and awareness.

And this past fiscal year, again, we were very much surprised right after our Hudson interview that we had a shipbuilding budget that came over with a $4 billion cut. It was done totally in the budget office. It was not with the support of the committee. And that was certainly good to know, but it was still a long climb to get out from under that hole. Because we were still operating under a budget cap where any sort of add-backs, you had to find some other way to pay for them. And that's not easy. But I think Rob will agree with me, A, we had a very successful outcome, our subcommittee led the way in terms of our colleagues on the full committee and certainly our colleagues on the appropriations committee and in the conference. But the one thing that is striking to me is just that the conversation regarding sea power and the fact that this is a real priority in terms of what's going on in the Indo-Pacific region, what's happening now in the North Atlantic, and still in the Middle East, that we were, I think, able, at the end
of the day, to have very strong bipartisan majorities, both in terms of the NDAA which was an override veto as well as the omnibus which funded the authorizing language that we put through.

And again, I just think that continuing that drumbeat in terms of making sure people understand that the world gets a vote, there’s things happening out there that have really reasserted the need for strong naval policy and strong naval priority. And with the new administration and a lot of new members in Congress, that’s a never ending task. And so I really, again, tip my hat to the Hudson Institute. It’s always a pleasure to be with my friend and colleague, Rob Wittman. Part of the reason why I think we are successful is that we sort of defy the narrative in Washington that people with different labels can’t work together. And again, I think he was formally the chair and now ranking member, in some ways it’s just the two of us kind of just doing a little musical chairs and we just keep focused on what’s important, which is not really about partisan advantage. So I’ll yield now to my colleague and look forward to your questions.

**Rob Wittman:**

Well, thanks, Joe. And want to thank Seth Cropsey too and the Hudson Institute for all that they do to make these opportunities available for folks. And Joe, I want to thank you so much for your leadership there on the subcommittee. Just as you pointed out, it really is a pleasure to work with you. I consider you not only a colleague, but a friend. And all the things that are done are always on this subcommittee done jointly. I tell you, there is not a micron’s difference between Joe and myself when it comes to what’s right for this nation when it comes to sea power. And we have great discussions about how things happen. That same willingness to work together transcends to the staff too. I want to give a shout out to Phil MacNaughton and Dave Sienicki. They are superstars too. Especially Dave and Phil make a dummy like me look like sometimes I know what I’m talking about. So that’s always great, but the staff does a super job.

And just as Joe pointed out, listen, we live in a very challenging world today, and we see the extraordinary efforts that our adversaries are taking to strategically and economically dominate the United States. And if there are three words that I think express what we need to be looking at when it comes to naval power, it’s Chinese Communist Party. We see the things that they are doing, we see the threats that are being posed, not only to us, but to others in the Indo-Pacific. And we know the threat is there. It’s interesting, too, that it’s not just Joe and myself that are pointing these threats out. We hear these words from others. We have heard from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

In fact, on December 3rd, he said we’re going to have to have a much larger fleet than we have today if we’re serious about great power competition and deterring a great power of war. And I emphasize deterring, I think that’s a critical part and many times what doesn’t get mentioned is the deterrence factor. And he concluded by saying if we’re serious about dominant capability over something like China or some other power that has significant capability, then we have to be making the investment in sea, air, and space-centric platforms. And he actually said he would advocate in bias going forward a heavy investment in those areas. Admiral Richard, as Joe has pointed out many times, has said China is the existential threat.

So across the spectrum, we see what the threats are. We understand, too, where the threats exist. We understand the Indo-Pacific is a big region. We have to have significant increase in naval power in order to deter, and I emphasize that, in addition to having partnerships with our allies in those regions and building those partnerships with countries like India, continued relationships with Japan, Australia, South Korea. That’s what it’s going to take to deter the Chinese. Because today as we speak, they have a larger navy than ours. And it used to be we could look at their ships and say, "Well, their ships lack a little bit in capability." Let me tell you, their ships today are every bit as capable as ours.
So going forward, I think it’s critically important that we clearly communicate where we need to go. And I want to make sure that we are putting all of these things in perspective. Because Joe and I remember back to trying to get the 355 ship Navy into the vernacular of folks. And Secretary Mabus was able to put that forward. We put it in the form of legislation, and we kind of marked that as the point where we need to be. And the Navy’s put together Battle Force 2045 and a 30 year shipbuilding plan. But I think that they need to very clearly communicate what the objective is in that plan. So when you talk about now 500 ships, sometimes some members of Congress kind of get turned off by that. I think we need to be talking clearly about the plan of 405 manned ships and what does that do for us to counter the Chinese. So the communication needs to be simple and straightforward if we’re going to be doing the things that we have to do going forward.

Another element that’s incredibly important is you can build all those ships, but you have to make sure that you have highly trained and skilled crews on board, so the issue of manning becomes front and center with that, so we have to make sure that that is there. And then, too, I know that Joe and I are anxious to see what comes over in this budgeting process. Because just as the chairman pointed out, it is extraordinarily difficult to add things to the President’s budget, and that’s why it clear that those things need to be in the budget. So we’re hopeful that the budget that comes over will have those elements in the budget. We know the incredible importance of attack submarines. In fact, the previous Secretary of Defense said, "Hey, if there's one thing that we should fund, it should be building at least three Virginia class submarines per year in order to catch up, and that would include extending the service life of some Los Angeles class submarines."

So, I think the path has been pretty clearly laid out. And even if they just go back to when Vice President Biden was in that role in the Obama administration and what came forward from Secretary Mabus, and that is 355 ship Navy, that should inform, I think, where we are today. And 355 at the time was certainly applicable, but 405 is even more applicable today in the face of this Chinese threat. So we’re hopeful that that budget comes out now under President Biden and Secretary Austin to make sure that we are doing all the things necessary going forward. And I’m right in line with what Joe is talking about in saying that this has to come over in the President's budget. If it doesn't, there's only so much that we can do. As Joe pointed out, the $4 billion delta we had to deal with this year was incredibly difficult. But Joe and I know of what we left on the floor in the cycle before that in trying to add another submarine back in. And it was not good. It was almost hand to hand in trying to get the appropriators to move in our direction. And we just were not successful with that. So it has to be in the President's budget, I think, going forward.

So those are, I think, the baselines of what we’re looking at going forward. But listen, I'll say this, I think the glass is half full. I think there’s a broader realization of the threats that we face and the things that we need to do. And the good news is people from top to bottom are acknowledging that a strong naval presence and building capacity and capability there is going to be the key going forward. So with that, Seth, I'll yield the floor back and look forward to the questions.
Seth Cropsey:
I want to note something that is stated and implied in both your remarks, and that is the increasing power of China’s navy. And that is a reference to its growing size, its modernization, its far-flung deployments, and intimidation of neighbors from Taiwan to Vietnam and beyond, its challenge to the peaceful order that the United States has maintained in the Pacific since the end of World War II. And at the very same time, our Navy is facing problems with readiness, with acquisition, with resources, as you just mentioned, with lengthy and often demoralizing deployments, with the design of a future fleet, and then the broad question of what maritime strategy should govern US efforts to deter, or if necessary, to defeat China. If you don't have in place a strategy, it's very difficult to make decisions about fleet size, fleet design, particular ships that you build, and so on and so forth.

No decent person wants a conflict between the United States and China. But the US began thinking about planning for a war with Japan years before the attack on Pearl Harbor. It had a strategy when the attack came. We have no equivalent today for China. And as in 1941, a war in the Pacific would mean a naval conflict. The Navy and Marine Corps would bear the brunt of any Pacific conflict that involves the US. Still, I think there are welcome and helpful developments. China's naval modernization began in earnest 20 years ago. At the same time, the US was still cutting the size of its fleet. Subsequent efforts to look at the size and character of the US combat fleet and the growing challenges it faced produced no national debate and virtually no reaction outside of Washington. That's different now. And that is a welcome development. By 2008, the question of American sea power was at least mentioned in the presidential debates. Today, unmanned naval platforms, the size and character of the US fleet, the role of the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard, and money itself have become national questions. They should be. The US's future as not only the great Pacific power, but as the world's leading power, depends on, in large measure, American sea power.

So, Chairman Courtney, do your elected colleagues understand that a strategic competition exists between the United States and China? And could you give our audience today and assessment of the military challenges that China presents to the US? And the second part of my question, and when I get asked questions in two parts, I usually say, "What's the second part?" If you ask what's the second part, I'll ask it again. But the second part of my question is does Congress grasp the importance of maintaining a Navy, Marine Corps team that could prevent China from going to war with us or our allies? And if they do understand this, what demonstrates their understanding? Chairman Courtney.

Joe Courtney:
Sure. Well, thank you, those are great questions. They're almost the question of the day, really, in terms of the outset of the new Congress, the 117th Congress and a new administration. And I would say the shift that you described starting in small steps starting in 2008, I think has been steady. And I think that the great power competition, Secretary Mattis' national defense strategy, I think was something that was accepted on a bipartisan basis, certainly on the defense committees, which was really by and large all about the Indo-Pacific region as well. As I said, the success that we had in terms of restoring that attack sub, which was the biggest part of the cut that came over to us, was driven largely because of, I think, strategic threat that people understand is happening in the Indo-Pacific region. And if you look at a platform that is able to be survivable with the new missile technology that China clearly has almost shocked the world in terms of how vast and lethal it is, it's clearly a submarine fleet. Just like in World War II after Pearl Harbor, as Nimitz said, the subs kind of held the line there, at least for that first six months or year before the industrial base kind of caught up with the need out there.

And again, I mentioned it's because I think a lot of the think tanks and groups like Hudson have really done a good job in terms of trying to educate people. My conversations with the new administration, and I've had some with the new Secretary of State, Tony Blinken, who with no prompting volunteered
that he believes that the Indo-Pacific region is the number one sort of foreign policy challenge for the US right now. Obviously, he's in the diplomatic side of things, but his point of view, I think, was very strong in the Biden campaign. He headed up the national security sort of team that was advising the President. And both Rob and I have talked to the new Deputy Secretary, Kath Hicks, who was confirmed by unanimous vote about a week or so ago, very strong background, both as a professional DOD employee and then worked in the Obama administration. Again, another person who needed no sort of prompting in terms of her awareness about how this is going to be a big part of her portfolio.

General Austin, Secretary Austin took a lot of questions, obviously, about this. And I think he was very frank and honest with people that he spent basically decades over in the Middle East, which is one the reasons why I think naval priorities kind of slid back in the early 2000s and really up until even recent years. But I think frankly those questions that were thrown at him was probably good in terms of making him aware that the Senate and House really want him to hear about this. Because we are sort of in a frame of mind where we understand where that's an important priority.

And Rob mentioned General Milley's speech in December, which was, in my opinion, quite striking as a four star Army general, basically saying we've got to shift the pie chart within the Pentagon. So we're all watching to see when the budget comes over. It's going to be late. We're talking April. Some have even said early-May. Again, the transition didn't go so well, so there was some delay that was caused there. But that will hopefully be a good placesetter. And I think that certainly my conversations with the new team there, Austin and Hicks, was encouraging to me that there are people who are serious and will listen to the kind of advice that's coming over from people like General Milley.

Your point, though, about do people understand the military threat, in my conversations with people, there is still a little bit of a gap in terms of some people understanding how serious the problem is. Just in the last couple days, there were stories in the press that the Chinese Assembly just changed their military law to authorize Coast Guard basically militarization up to the first island chain. It's something that we sort of all have been talking about for a number of years, that the Coast Guard is not really about rescuing drunken boaters off the coast. It's very militarized sort of force that doesn't get counted in their ship count. So that. And there was, again, a story in the Financial Times today that China was talking about cutting off rare earth mineral exports to DOD firms in the US, which we all frankly have been sort of seeing that coming for a number of years. But the tension and the hostility and obviously the outrageous territorial claims in the South China Sea threaten that rules-based order that you described, Seth, in your opening comments. If you really look closely at some of the great conflicts, World War I, World War II, a lot of it sort of stemmed from that kind of aggressive policy that obviously Japan was doing in the 1930s and Germany was trying to do during the World War I era in terms of cutting off maritime commerce and traffic and whatnot.

But people have forgotten. I'm trying to remind people of that that this isn't just sort of debating fine points of maritime law. This really gets at the heart of how bad things can happen if you just let that kind of aggression go unchallenged. And Rob's point about it's about deterrence, that's really what we've got to make sure people realize is that when we talk about building up the Navy, this is about preventing a conflict, not about starting a conflict. Certainly in my party, there's folks who, it's more of a challenge to make the national security arguments. But I think that some of the hand-wringing about Democratic controlled House and Senate I think is a little overblown, and I think certainly I know that from my colleagues in defense committees from the Democratic side in the House and Senate, and Speaker Pelosi, who've I've been on codels with overseas, I think she's somebody who understands, and she's been a sharp critic of China for many years in terms of human rights violations and issues. And I was in Europe, we were talking about some of the Russian aggression in terms of violating maritime law, which I guess she just got off one of those panels.
So I'm optimistic that we're going to have good, solid shift that is really overdue. And again, but clearly that first budget, as Rob said, we're going to do everything we can to make sure it's a good placesetter for this Congress.

**Seth Cropsey:**
Thank you, Chairman. Ranking member, would you like to add some comments, or do you want me to plunge into the next question?

**Rob Wittman:**
Well, I'll add just a little more to that. Joe did a great job of covering a lot of the high points. Your question that you posed did connect the question about the national defense strategy and where does that leave us with what we're planning to counter aggression from our different adversaries. And again, the emphasis should be to deter that. I do think in that context, that people are now better understanding the threats from China just because of China's behavior. I think, too, a lot of people understand just intrinsically by what China's doing that the threat is not just strategic, but it's also an economic threat, and that those two elements are indeed tied together. I think folks are concerned about China. If you look at it on the scale of things, today, obviously, COVID-19's at the top of the list. But if you looked at it prior to COVID-19, there was a building concern about the strategic threat from China as well as other threats from around the world. So folks are looking, I think, in a more worldly way about the things that we have to deal with. And then, too, how the economic impact of China's aggressive behavior does indeed have a strategic element to that.

One of the things that I think is incredibly important for all of us to communicate today is not just the immediate need, and you can look at that and say, "What do we do to counter China, China's behavior in the Indo-Pacific?" But we see them now expanding to a worldwide naval presence. So their designs are not just inside the first island chain, and not really out to the second island chain. They have a worldwide design to have an impact on the world, and they are on track to be able to do that with what they are building in capability. What we have to look at is how do we make sure that we are building the right capability in the right places, and doing that in two ways. First of all, assuring that we get more per our dollar than the Chinese get per their yuan or the Russians get per their ruble, for that matter, and how we spend our money. Because this is not going to be like the Cold War where we just outresource the Chinese because they are very capable of resourcing at the same level.

And I hear a lot of times from folks saying, "Oh, the United State spends X number of times more than China." Well, we know that China doesn't accurately report what it spends and the different elements of capability that don't come under a "budget line item" that they communicate. So I think we have to be aware of that. Secondly is we have to also be aware of how we are making decisions today in context of the decisions that we need to make for tomorrow. And I say that in that the demand signal that comes back to the Department of Defense on a daily basis comes from our combatant commanders. And that demand signal is, "I need readiness today. I need for you to generate these number of ships, these number of personnel, these number of Marine Corps units, these number of Air Force units, so that I can meet today's missions so that I can put in place the requirements in these operations plans." But what it doesn't take into account is the resources that it's going to take to create that readiness a year from now, five years from now, 10 yeas from now, based upon the threats that we face then, not the threats that we are facing today.

And we have always been, as a nation, sometimes overly focused on what we face today. And Seth, you brought out we had a plan for Japan, but then it took us all that time to actually put that into place, and luckily we had a few interim capabilities that allowed us to get there to be ultimately successful. I would argue today that we're not anywhere close to having that bridge capability for what potentially we could
face. And that means we have to look at how are we generating readiness today and looking at how do we generate readiness tomorrow. And listen, in both realms you have to accept some risk. The question is is what's the proper balance of risk? How much risk can we afford to take on today in order to offset risks that we will face in the future? I think those are going to be fundamental questions that folks in the Pentagon have to ask, that we as members of Congress have to ask in relation to the decisions that are being made by our service branches and what we are going to authorize and what we are going to appropriate for.

Because if we don't do that, then a 405 ship Navy means nothing. It's just a number on a page. Looking at how do we put in place unmanned systems is only a concept. Looking at how do we create the deterrence necessary in the nuclear triad still becomes, well, we're eventually going to get there but we're not quite sure how or we're not quite sure the elements of how they are operationalized. And listen, I think we're on a great track with Columbia class. I think we're on a great track with B21. The key is is how do we stay on that. And how do we make sure, too, that the enablers for those platforms are going to be there when those platforms come online? So all those things are incredibly important. In fact, I would argue the answers to those questions today are more important than they probably have been in the history of the United States.

Seth Cropsey:

All right, well, that sort of leads me into the question that I wanted to ask you, and then, again, we'll go back to the Chairman for his response if he wants to continue the discussion. And you've touched on this, both of you, but the armed forces, as you know, are experiencing a lot of change now. And there will be more in the future as unmanned systems, cyber warfare, artificial intelligence, hypersonics, and directed energy weapons grow in importance to US forces' strength. What do these mean for the future shape of the Navy? How will new technologies shape the US fleet's current design and its mixture of legacy combatants? How do we get from where we are right now to all these things that have been appearing over the past five to 10 years?

Rob Wittman:

Well, Seth, I think that is an incredibly important question about, as I spoke about earlier, building that capability necessary to deter and to defeat if necessary our adversaries. And where we are today is in a realm of transitioning from an older, more monolithic, more tiered bureaucratic system and making decisions about how to bring on technology, whether it's in platforms, whether it's in combat systems, whether it's in the elements of software, in an acquisition system that was slow, it didn't react well to new technology, it had more of a one-size-fits-all. I would argue there's still a ways to go for the Pentagon and the service branches to do rapid acquisition, to take technology off the shelf to create capability quickly and to get that in the hands of the war fighter. Also, to change the mentality in the Pentagon that says it's okay to fail, it's okay to fail, but if you do so, fail quickly. Try some concepts, if they don't work, let's move on and try something else. Because you never are able to get to a point of determining what's best if you don't try things. And not everything has to be program of record. And we have to get past the mindset of using a million dollar missile to shoot down a $50,000 threat. Those are the things that we have to go back to.

And as I spoke about earlier, the element is is how do we get more per our dollar than the Chinese get for their yuan or the Russians get for their ruble? That is going to be the linchpin to strategic success in our ability to win strategically in the future. How do we get technology more quickly, field it, how do we make sure that we use our innovative and creative opportunities, which I think we have more of than the Chinese, how do we get those in the hands of the war fighter more quickly? How do we also do more with technology to create uncertainty for our adversaries, to make them spend money not just on
offensive capability, but on defensive capability? How do we heighten the uncertainty for them? How do we heighten the risk that they face as they operate around the world? We know that we face increased risk, and we're not going to be operating in uncontested environments. We want to make our adversaries see and feel the same thing in the realms that they operate.

That means to do things creatively, to do them innovatively, to get that technology quickly, and to get it out at a cost that's less than our adversaries, and to get it out in a more efficient and effective manner. I think we can do those things. But make no mistake about it, the path to get there is indeed going to be an arduous one, just because of the size and the structure of how things happen within the Pentagon.

Seth Cropsey:
All right. Very helpful. Chairman Courtney?

Joe Courtney:
Yeah, one point because I know we've got a lot more to cover. But I think that one big question that we hear a lot about is just, "Well, what does Congress really want to do about unmanned?" Which is clearly if you look at the Battle Force 2045, there's a massive sort of boost in the number of unmanned platforms that are contemplated in that document. And I think there's support for that new technology. Again, the whole concept of distributed lethality, which is about making some smaller, more sort of agile platforms. And General Berger is doing the same thing with the Marine Corps of the Future that he's sort of proposing. Unmanned obviously sort of fits into that vision extremely well.

Congress is not anti-unmanned, because that's sort of belief out there with some people. We actually boosted funding for a medium unplanned platforms in what came over from the administration, and the smaller platforms. Again, I don't think there's really any concern or opposition. The large unmanned ships that, again, are a big part of this new vision that came over at the end of last year, I do think that we want to see more in terms of just the prototyping and the testing. We just do not want to go rushing headlong, starting a shipbuilding program of larger vessels. Because as we all know, turning those off is not easy. You're creating constituencies when you create contracts for those types of investments. And frankly, there's still some, I think, legitimate questions that need to get fleshed out and can be fleshed out by using sort of land-based testing systems and really, again, also thinking about what exactly do we want these vessels to do. Without bringing up a painful subject, the littoral combat ship is sort of the poster child of procurement that kind of got lost in terms of just what was the mission. And then obviously we're having these persistent problems with the combining gear, malfunctions that are out there. And we don't want to overlearn that lesson, but I think it's still important for us to really keep our eye on the ball as far as that goes.

Because you may have some listeners who are really wondering about that question about whether or not we're somehow obstructing the development of unmanned, that's not the case. It's just that I do think we want to see some more answers in terms of how particularly these larger vessels are developed.

Seth Cropsey:
That's helpful. Look, we're having fun here and we're also running out of time. So I'd like to get to another question here. Less than a decade ago, China commissioned its first aircraft carrier. It was rather primitive by current standards. By standards of the time, certainly by today. But still capable of projecting air power. Last month, the South China Morning Post reported that China will shortly begin laying the keep for its fourth aircraft carrier, which like its third, which is now under construction, will be a very large carrier equipped with electromagnetic catapult launchers. It looks as though China will
continue to build a larger and more sophisticated carrier fleet. I'd like to know what does this mean for the design and the number of the US carrier fleet? Can the US counter the possibility that China will have an equal or larger carrier fleet by increasing the number of our attack submarines? Is such a measure possible? And would it prevent China from projecting global power? And I want to direct this to Chairman Courtney and then we'll go over to ranking member Wittman for the back and forth.

Joe Courtney:

Well, again, it's interesting because there's a pretty, I think, active, busy debate going on with some of the think tanks about whether or not carrier vulnerability, US carrier vulnerability, means we've got to sort of go in a different direction in terms of that part of the fleet that's there. Which is sort of ironic in a way when you see that China's actually investing in carriers. Again, one of the items that came over with this Battle Force 2045 was actually moving towards a light carrier sort of option within the fleet. Which again, unfortunately, that came over so late, that document, we really didn't have a chance to sort of drill down much with the Navy, but that's certainly going to be a topic moving forward. Because again, if you look at the sort of architecture of the carrier fleet in that document, it looks a little different than sort of the 12 carrier straight line that's been in past shipbuilding plans that are there.

So what I would say, though, is that I think most people would agree that the best countermeasure is attack submarines in terms of dealing with that new reality that's there. It's one of the, I think, reasons why we were successful in terms of our at least rear guard action in last year's budget. Again, if you look at the document that came over at the end of December, it talked about going to a three per year production of Virginia class. It's something Rob and I have been shouting from the rooftops, and actually almost got a third sub in a couple years ago, which we won't go through that painful subject now. We lost on the floor at an appropriations event. But the document also, I think, understands that with the Columbia program now in production officially this year, that's happening over at Quonset Point in Rhode Island, the first modules for the first boat, and with the two a year cadence that we've really kept in place since 2011, frankly, we need more facilities if we're really going to get serious about going to three per year on a regular basis.

And they did actually put a number in the document, about $1.7 billion to invest in new facilitization. Again, our staff, who's listening in, are already asking lots of questions over at the Navy about what does that number mean? What does it involve? There's a whole other question of workforce because you're talking about growing the workforce even more than it has. And again, I'm very bullish on that, by the way. But the point is, is that what you described, Seth, is just another example of how the sort of belief that a 280 ship Navy or a 290 ship Navy, we're at 296 right now, by the way, just for the record books, getting to 355 with retirements of ships that already slated, that's going to be a big, tall task for us to accomplish as it is. But again, the document that comes over, the budget that comes over later this year, where I think really we are at this almost inflection point in terms of what is going to be the right proportion of service budgets and whether or not, frankly, naval and air and cyber are going to basically take a larger portion of the pie chart, that conversation has to happen. And Milley conceded that and embraced it in his speech last December.

And then, lastly, I would just say this. We have got to keep performance of these shipyards and the repair shipyards, public yards, uppermost. Because we could spend a whole nother hour talking about some of the frustrations that are out there right now that we have to live with that. Speeches are great. The reality of oversight and budget is where it suddenly gets a lot harder in terms of getting good results. I talked to long, I apologize. I'll yield to Rob.
Rob Wittman:

Yeah. Well, Joe, you bring up a lot of great points. And listen, the Chinese are building more carriers for a reason, that is carriers are a very effective way to project power. And yes, [inaudible 00:45:39] hold them at risk. But there's no other comparable asset out there. Now listen, you can have smaller carriers out there, but remember, what makes our carriers so effective is they are part of a carrier strike group. And if you look at the [inaudible 00:45:52] ships that go along with them, if you look at the attack submarine that is along with that, they're a very, very effective fighting force. And make no mistake about it, the Chinese observe us very intently to look at how we operate. So it's not just them building ships to replicate what we have, but it's replicating how we operate. And they know the secret sauce is how we can generate the number of sorties on an aircraft carrier, to know that we can sustain naval operations around the world without having to return to port. They understand how critically important that is. That's what they are looking to replicate.

And you're right, in order to deter a building presence of carriers, that attack submarine force is going to be critical. And if you look just at today, and I talked about readiness demand today but readiness demand in the future, the one thing that remains constant is an increasing demand for attack submarines. That's where we can maintain our advantage. And it's not just building Virginia class, the Virginia payload module, but as Joe and I have talked about, it's really getting underway with planning the next generation submarine. That's going to be critically important. Because we went through the issue with Sea Wolf in seeing a very fast and effective submarine, but very expensive for a copy. So the question is what do we need in the next generation of submarine that has the right extension of capability, that gives us that continued undersea strike advantage, but how do we do that at a price tag that allows us to build the number of platforms that we need? Those are going to be incredibly important.

And we can continue to have the debate about carriers, small carriers versus large carriers, but you still have to sustain that carrier, which means if it's not nuclear powered, it has to be fuel, which means you have to have more tankers in the fleet, you have to have more support ships. And we could go in a whole new different subject area about our logistics fleet and how weakened we are there. So all the elements about talking about adding these different ship types sound good, but it's the support elements. It's how does that carrier operate? It's not going to operate by itself. It's going to have to have other ships to be there to give it a dome of protection, to be able to extend understanding where its air missions are going to occur, how it does ISR, all of those elements are critically important parts of what we do with that. It's not just saying we can have more of them and disperse them, but it's how do they operate? How do we sustain them?

All those are critical elements of that. So when we ask those questions and when the Navy does the study on that, it has to also get into those realms. But what this points out too, as Joe pointed to, and that is it points out as Chinese build more carriers, it points out how incredibly important getting to building three attack submarines per year will be for this nation going forward.

Seth Cropsey:

Thank you, Rob. The issues we've been talking about today are brought together by and can be united under one question. What is the Navy's strategy to deter war in the Pacific? During the Cold War, the Navy had a maritime strategy to counter the Soviet invasion of Western Europe. Rather than convoy supply ships across the Atlantic as in World Wars I and II, the Navy would target the bastions where Soviet second strike ballistic missiles hid and divert the Soviets from the central front by using carrier-based air power to attack its northern and southern flanks. Do we have a maritime strategy today to prevent war in the Pacific, or if necessary, to defeat China? And if we do, what is it and who is explaining it to Congress and the public?
Joe Courtney:

As this question, just to give you an example of carrier vulnerability, it came up in last Congress. There was a number of members on the armed services committee that wanted to find out what is the Navy’s take on this. And we did have some classified briefings, I wouldn't say they were at the highest level in terms of O plans in terms of dealing with an outbreak in the Indo-Pacific region, but clearly I think people got a pretty good taste of sort of the planning that's going on. And so again, I think that there is definitely, I think we all know this, in terms of the different war gaming and different O plans that are sort of out there. But if you listen to our combatant commanders going back to Harry Harris, they really have been pretty unified in the sense that quantity at some point does mean quality in terms of dealing with the vastness of the issue, and again, the growing size of the Chinese navy times two, with the coast guard, that I still think we’re sort of scrambling to sort of process that and understand it.

I would say there are two things that I think is really important. Number one is our allies, which Rob mentioned at the beginning. And a number of us have been out there, and I'm co-chairman of the Friends of Australia caucus. I know Rob has made the rounds there and stuff. And I do think that's going to be a big emphasis with this administration. It's really trying to maybe sort of do a little bit of cleanup in terms of just the sort of uncertainty that people may have had in terms of the different moments that occurred over the last few years or so. And again, you can even go back to President Obama’s administration, that there's going to be a pivot to Asia, and then it just seemed like we kept sort of getting drawn back into the Middle East with the rise of ISIS. So there’s been sort of the stop-start sort of signals really in the last two administrations. And I think with Blinken's emphasis in terms of that part of the world, already his kind of outreach to foreign ministers, Austin talked to Linda Reynolds in Australia the other day, the minister of defense in that government there.

I think that's going to be a big part of what I think is an effective strategy is just to really try and integrate as much as we possibly can. Some of the exercises, that talisman exercises with Australia which they just announced will take place in the summer, RIMPAC, all of these ways of trying to really foster the strongest effort I think is one way of dealing with this sort of suddenness. And frankly, I personally feel that we can bolster that with once and for all getting into [UNCLAS 00:53:08]. I really think our absence from that is really a problem. And we may try and do something jointly with the foreign affairs committee this year in terms of trying to really, in a very policy level discussion, about what are the reasons we’re not in it, and with what's happening in the world, is it time that we really go back and revisit this. Obviously, the House can't vote on it, but we feel that that discussion needs to get more elevated an public out there in terms of just how we move forward.

And then again, all the other things that we've talked about today in terms of what a new Navy looks like. I think the fleet architecture in some ways is the most important part of any shipbuilding plan, whether it's Mabus's, whether it's Esper's, whether it's [inaudible 00:54:00], or whether it's Austin and Hicks. That's really what I think is more important in some ways than the top number. It's really about what does the Navy look like? And I think your questions today are being echoed by a lot of people both inside Congress and outside Congress. We can't just kind of keep sort of building on what we've been building on autopilot moving forward. And we've got to really put our thinking caps on about what we need and how do we implement that in a way that's executable and affordable.

Seth Cropsey:

All right. Thank you, Chairman. Let me ask the final question because I see we're about done here to ranking member. The Goldwater Nichols legislation of 1986 gave more power over budgets, enforced planning, acquisition, and access to the president and to the chairman of the joint chiefs, the secretary of defense, combatant commanders. This power came from the military services. But as the late Professor Samuel Huntington argued in the 1950s, the military services require the ability to draw on
their own expertise to offer strategies for fighting and winning wars. Is Professor Huntington's observation still valid? Has the Goldwater Nichols legislation prevented or limited the service chiefs from developing strategy and arguing for it in the public arena, supporting it in the public arena? This goes back to the point that Chairman Courtney made just a moment ago. Is it time to look again at Goldwater Nichols? The world has changed a lot in 35 years.

The formal answer to my question is pretty clear. The secretary and the chief of naval operations speak for the Navy. But what are they saying? Are they saying anything? Are they explaining? Are they articulating what the strategy is? And the strategy is what everything else depends on. Are they saying, "This is our strategy and here's the ships that are needed to make it happen"? Those arguments resonate, they work together. If you just say we need more ships, we need to have more capabilities, you don't have quite as convincing an argument. So, for example, previous acting secretary of the Navy tried to establish a commission to look at the future of the aircraft carrier and its role in deterring conflict, and the secretary of defense took it away. We need to revisit Goldwater Nichols? Is the system working the way it ought to work?

Rob Wittman:

Well, it's interesting you ask that, Seth, because a number of years ago when I was the ranking member on oversight investigations, we actually looked at Goldwater Nichols, a lot of the different elements of Goldwater Nichols. And I do think there are improvements that can be made to Goldwater Nichols. The problem with it is it's always addressed in pieces, this part of Goldwater Nichols, that part of Goldwater Nichols, professional military education, decision making matrices, all of those different elements. I think one of the things that's critically important today to make sure that we have the right decisions that are being made, not just for today as I said earlier, to generate readiness today, but what are we doing to generate readiness in the future and what are we doing to make sure we have an accurate reflection of what the strategy needs to be, not just for today, but how to combat those threats in the future, is to look at ways that we can create accountability but also authority.

And Goldwater Nichols has done some of that, it has devolved some of the decision making down into the Pentagon. I would argue that there's still reforms that can be made to make the Pentagon more efficient in the decision making realm. Can make sure, too, that the decisions that happen happen in a more timely way, happen in way that assures that we use our resources to the maximum utility possible. Because in this realm, it's going to depend on who uses their resources in the best way possible, who has the right mix of generating readiness for today, but also generating readiness for what future threats might be. So asking those questions, I think, are incredibly important today, and making sure that we have the right answers to them.

We look at the strategy, I think we have the right elements of the strategy, but they're located in different areas. You see Battle Force 2045, you see the 30 year shipbuilding plan, you see the national defense strategy. So the different elements of the things that need to come together are in different places. And another place that needs to have a direct connection is the operations plans. The O plans many times are about generating readiness for today's threats. But the O plans do nothing to look into the future. So we have to have the ability, Seth, to not only look at what do we face today, but how are we positioning ourselves for what will happen tomorrow. Because we all know that if you continue down the path, and we have unfortunately had this structure to where we're preparing for what we face today, we'll never be ready for tomorrow. And we always seem to find ourselves flatfooted when we face a threat that emerges or is before us, and we say, "Well, gosh, why weren't we more ready for that?" That's what our challenge is today, looking at Goldwater Nichols, looking at what we do both in acquisition, what we do in decision making, what we do in setting strategy, what we do in building the
force, not just for today, but for tomorrow, are going to be central to making sure that we have what we need to defend this nation and to deter conflict.

Seth Cropsey:
Thank you, Rob. This has been a very interesting conversation. I'm sure that our audience will benefit from it. And I'd like to thank you both for taking the time to continue this series here. And I look forward to the next one. And let us hope, as both of you have mentioned, that the administration comes across with a budget to support the challenges that we're facing now and that it's clear we're going to be facing in the future. And with that, I would like to thank you once again, which you continued good health and safety, and we'll be in touch.

Rob Wittman:
Thank you, Seth.

Joe Courtney:
Thank you, Hudson Institute.

Rob Wittman:
Yeah, thanks, Hudson Institute. Thanks for the opportunity.