The Future of U.S. Naval Power:
A Conversation with
Congressman Rob Wittman

TRANSCRIPT

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Please note: This transcript is based off a recording and mistranslations may appear in text. The names of participants in the Audience Q&A have been removed. A video of the event is available: https://www.hudson.org/events/1554-the-future-of-u-s-naval-power-a-conversation-with-congressman-rob-wittman52018
Seth Cropsey: Welcome, everybody. It's good to see you here. It's a particular honor to welcome Congressman Rob Wittman to Hudson.

Rob Wittman: Thank you.

Cropsey: Mr. Wittman holds a Ph.D. from Virginia Commonwealth University and a master's degree from the University of North Carolina. He earned his Bachelor of Science degree from Virginia Tech. He is also chairman of the House Armed Services Committee's Subcommittee on Sea Power and Projection Forces and is now serving his fifth term, right?

Wittman: Yes. Yes.

Cropsey: ...Representing Virginia’s first congressional district. Mr. Wittman is also one of the most knowledgeable members of Congress on American sea power, as you will shortly see. I'm going to ask some questions, and I expect that there'll be time to open the floor up for questions after our discussion. Congressman, the Naval War College's Chinese Maritime Studies Institute – which is, I would say, the best organization of its kind in the United States – predicts that the Chinese combat fleet will reach 415 ships by the year 2030. My question is whether the U.S. will be able to keep up with China's growing navy.

Wittman: Well, I think we will. In fact, it was a great honor for me to be there in Newport and speaking specifically with the faculty there that's doing the analysis both of Chinese capability and also Russian capability. If you look at that in total prospect of what the United States faces, I do think that we will be able to have a counter to that Chinese navy. And for us, it’s about a variety of different elements. It's not just the number. It's not just the 355 ships. But it's what is contained within that force structure, how many of certain types of ships, what will those ships' capability be, what will we have to counter Chinese capabilities. So we're looking not only at the quantity of their ships, but also what capability those ships will have. So I am confident in the 2016 force structure assessment and where things need to be, looking across the spectrum and how those analyses were molded together to come up with the 355 number, where we will be too as we go forward.

Remember, the Navy will be completing another force structure assessment by the end of this year, I think, to give a little more definition to what does the future Navy look like. Not just the 355 ships, but what are the ships' system elements that need to be part of it? What are the weapons systems that need to be part of that? What do we do with unmanned systems as part of that? How do you integrate AI as part of that? How do you now – since hypersonics is going to be a Navy platform-based systems – how do you integrate all of those elements there? I believe that we will have the capability to counter a 415-ship Chinese navy. Now, they're going to do things a little bit differently than we will. I think that our capability, the sustainability of our platforms is going to be key. One of the elements that I think we absolutely have to do is to look at efficiency within the construction realm. We have to put more emphasis to make sure that maintenance availabilities are followed strictly, that these ships get into port to get work done and get out on time, and to make sure too that we do all we can to keep ships at sea longer. And what we've had in recent years is some hiccups in maintenance availabilities. And when you miss those maintenance availabilities, it shows up in deployment schedules and the availability of those ships. So I think those are some of the areas where we're going to be able to, with our 355 ships, do as much – I would argue more than – what our Chinese counterparts will do based on the systems on board, and being very aggressive in how we maintain and operate those ships.

Cropsey: And we won't reach the 355-size fleet by 2030. And another point that goes together with that is that the first time I visited China was sometime in the mid-to-late '90s. And my hosts – and the relationship between our two countries was somewhat different then – asked me what I'd like to see. And so before answering them, I called up P.X. Kelley, the former commandant, and said, "You think it'd be worth looking at asking them to see their amphibious capability?" He said, "Don't waste your time." I don't think he'd give the same answer today.

Wittman: Exactly.

Cropsey: And they're putting a large part of their construction, the construction they intend for 2030, into large-deck and smaller amphibious ships. Do you think we're OK there? I mean, the Japanese Southwest Islands are an important part of the first island chain, as Admiral Nimitz understood very clearly. And, you know, is that something that we should be concerned about, or...?

Wittman: Well, it is. And one of the things that we have emphasized is to make sure that we are, with all due speed, rebuilding our L class of ships. So this year, you notice – just – we finished yesterday...

Cropsey: That's amphibious.
WITTMAN: Amphibious ships, the L-class of ships, the LPDs, the LHAs, and the previous large-deck amphib, the LHDs, which are currently in the fleet, as well as the LSDs, which are landing ship docks that are being retired now. The good news is, in yesterday’s NDAA, we have authorized multi-ship procurement for LPD Flight II, which is essentially the replacement for the LSD. So we’re on track, to not only get to 33 amphibious ships, but to get on track to the requirement of 38. Now as you know, it’ll take us a while to get there. But it does give us that capability to be able to operate. As you know, our marine expeditionary units are amused now when they go to deploy – go as a large tank or amphib, an LPD and LSD. And it used to be when they would deploy, they would deploy as a group, which is a tremendous amount of capability. The problem today is the demand is such that when they go into theater, they disperse. So the question is how do we make sure we have enough capabilities so that when those Marine Corps expeditionary units – called MUSE – deploy, they’re able to deploy together. That’s what the Chinese are looking at in their structure of amphibious warfare.

So our concept of the MUSE and the MAGTF (the Marine Corps Air-Ground Task Force) – where you integrate a unit on board a ship that can land – can do a forceful entry. It has aircraft onboard that can help deliver marines to the shore, but also aircraft on board – the F-35B – that provides air support to be able to do that – tremendous amount of capability. That’s what the Chinese are trying to replicate: that autonomous capability where you can take a group of ships, and you can essentially be the tip of the spear, where you can execute an operation without having to wait for other ancillary support units to show up. Now, the Marine Corps’ first to fight at the tip of the spear. And they’d have others show up in support. But the element that we have right today is what the Chinese are trying to replicate. So I feel good about what we’re doing to sustain the ability to execute those type of operations.

CROPSEY: It occurred to me, in thinking about our discussion, that two of our carriers are named for members of Congress from states that are not directly associated with the sea – I mean, Mississippi is, to a certain extent, Georgia is, less so – the Vinson and the Stennis. But those members of Congress came from another generation, another era. And that raised, in my mind, the question of: do other members of Congress get it? I mean, do they understand about sea power? I don't expect them to know what you know. But they don't need to. But do they understand how connected our status as a great power is with our status as a dominant naval power?

WITTMAN: I think they do. I think they still understand that we are a maritime nation. I think they still understand that the world's economy transacts over the ocean. The key for them is to be able to understand what does our Navy need to have the capability to influence efforts around the world, to be able to deter adversaries. And that's all about presence. So when I talk to other members, you have to be able to get past the number of ships, because, to members, 355 ships really doesn't mean anything. So you have to get down to what do those ships do. Where are they located? What do they do in those areas? The most effective means that I have found to get members to understand that is to take them out to a ship. And the Navy works with us to do that. In fact, I had a member today from Michigan, who has heard me time and time again in the meetings that I have spoken about the need for Navy and Marine Corps capability - has said, "Hey, listen. I want to do a carrier embark. When can we do one of those?" So we do have more members that understand that. The good news is once we get a member of Congress out on board a Navy ship – whether it's an aircraft carrier or destroyer of submarine – they get to see the capability of ships, but even more importantly the capability of our sailors. And I only need to get them out once. When I'm able to get them out once, they get it. So our effort is to get as many members of Congress out to the fleet as we can. And when we do, we've been very successful. It's always a challenge with 435 members in the House to be able to do that. But I don't need to get every one of them there. I need to get enough to where they are then the advocates to say, "Hey, I've been there. You know, what our Navy is able to do is critical." So I do think we are building a number of members that are developing that sense of what the Navy brings to the table, and what we need to do to continue to build that Navy to have that influence around the world.

CROPSEY: Does that understanding, as it develops, or as it exists, translate into the sustained support for sea power that's really necessary in order to plan increases in the fleet, and make the kinds of changes we were talking about just before we came in?

WITTMAN: I think it does. I've been very positive about the things that have happened over the last three or four years with the discussions we've had about the need for Virginia-class attack submarines – building more of them – the Ohio-class replacement effort, aircraft carriers. As we've had those debates on the floor, we've been able to get members the information they need to feel comfortable to say, "Yes, we need to make the commitment as a nation." And when we've had those issues about whether or not to make the financial commitment to do the Ohio class replacement, you know, we've been able to get 330, 340 votes on those issues, which is significant. So I do think we've been able to move the needle in the argument in members' minds, and especially when we're competing against other demands for resources. With the appropriators this past year, you know, I thought we were pretty successful in getting what was in the NDAA into the Appropriations Act. There are a couple places where we lagged. I've had some very good discussions with appropriators to make sure that, this year, the authorization is aligned with the appropriation. And I think that's the key. And our appropriators at every level on the
Appropriations Committee I think are developing the knowledge about what we need to do. We see support, too, across all the different elements of the House Armed Services Committee, and so in other committees that don’t have direct knowledge or scope on Navy operations, but understand the role the Navy plays in what we need to do today in the world. So I am optimistic with where members are developing that knowledge and the support that we’ve been able to get when we go to the members and either say, “No, don’t take resources away from that,” – and that always happens – but also, to make sure that we devote resources to those efforts, to make sure we sustain this rebuilding of the Navy. And I’ve been very, very enthused by the response that we received. And my cohort on the sea power subcommittee Joe Courtney has done likewise on his side of the aisle in gaining support there. So I think we’ve got a good growing understanding and level of support for not only our Navy, but the pathway to 355 ships.

CROPSEY: And that leads naturally into another question that I wanted to ask you. You know, the Congressional Budget Office is not quite as optimistic. The Congressional Budget Office says that there is a substantive difference between what the Navy is asking for in terms of money for shipbuilding and what’s necessary in order to achieve 30- or 30-plus-year plan that the Navy proposes. How should we think about that? How do you think about that? I mean...

WITTMAN: Well. I think even the Navy hasn’t been as direct as they need to be with their 30-year shipbuilding plan. I mean, they have a lot of it laid out, and they call it the chiclet charts – little boxes there that are shaded based on what years they believe ships are going to be built and what composition of the fleet should be. And they have a lot of blank boxes, and they said, “Oh, yeah, yeah, we’re going to get to a 355-ship Navy,” and that “Congress just has to fill in the blank boxes,” which is sometimes easier said than done. It has to be a situation where Navy says, “This is what we need; this is when we need them; these are the types of ships that we need at these particular points.” The Congressional Budget Office does point out the obligation that Congress has to make in order for us to get there. I think where we were last year with the authorization at $26.2 billion is where we need to be at a sustained level in order to get to 355 ships until we get to Columbia-class construction. And when we get into a full-scale Columbia-class production, then we’re going to have to hike up that number from $26.2 billion to probably at least $3 billion north of that.

So the thing is, you can do that on a proper scale to make sure that you’re doing advanced procurement in economies of quantity, called AP and EOQ, for those ships to make sure that it’s a sustainable ramp to get there. But it does mean that when we get to 20 or 21, the ramp speed has to increase. Now, we authorized to $26.2 billion last year. We ended up at $23.8 billion. We came up with 13 warships. The appropriators said that they had 14 ships. They weren’t 14 warships. They were actually 10 warships. So this year we’ve been pretty adamant to say it’s 13 warships. We’ll end up somewhere probably between $24.5 billion and maybe $24.75 billion – somewhere in that range, maybe even a little bit north of that – to be able to do all these things. I’ve been very engaged with the appropriators to make sure that that’s reflected in what happens on the appropriations side and that that’s where we ultimately end up budgeting to. The key, though, is going to be not this year, because the top number’s already been set for this year. So our path is a little bit easier there. The true challenge in where CBO’s concerns – although not related to what we face – still do reflect upon the challenge ahead is the sequester comes back in ‘20. And the sequester lasts until ‘21. So these next two years – ‘20 and ‘21 – are going to be the real critical segue to that sustained path to 355. I think that’s where we’re going to have to do everything we can to say that if we’re going to enjoy economies of scale in construction, if we’re going to be able to bring down the cost per unit to maintain serial production, to maintain industrial base capacity, you have to sustain at that level. In fact, I would argue increase incrementally through those two years and 2021. That’s where I think our biggest challenge rests. And where do we go with that budgeting deal there for the top-line defense number? And within that, how do we get to the right glide slope to 355 or in the SCN account or the shipbuilding account?

CROPSEY: Does the deal reached this year for putting the sequester off set a precedent that you’re concerned about in the future, namely, that the increases in defense spending have to be matched by increases in domestic spending?

WITTMAN: It does. It does because that’s not a sustainable path. So what we have to do is to say there have to be some priority decisions made because you can’t sustain this level of additional spending. You know, I normally don’t vote for continuing resolutions because they’re a true abdication of our responsibility. Omnibus budget bills are not the way to do that, either. This year, for the purpose of getting this critical first step for our military done, I did support this. But I equate it to this: it’s like owning a two-story home, and having termites rife through the foundation. That represents the deficit and the debt. And you know that the longer you let that go, the more likely it is that the house eventually falls in. But you also have the second floors on fire. And the second floor on fire is the crisis point we are with readiness. So the question is: is what do you do first? Well, you have to put the second floor out. But it doesn’t take away the termites being in the foundation and what we have to do there. So I think you are spot on about what has to happen in ‘20 and ‘21. You have to be able to negotiate yourself to a place to say, here’s the sustained path for rebuilding readiness in our military. You have to go back to what Secretary Mattis said was his observation when he first came to the Pentagon. And the most alarming thing that he saw was the degradation of readiness from the time he left the Marine Corps to the time he came back to the Pentagon. And that has to be reflected in what we do. And you can’t just pile on additional non-defense discretionary spending. If you do, you’re on an
unsustainable path. I would argue, too, that you've probably used up most of the political capital that you can bring to bear to
say, we've got to take care of the military based upon the crisis situation we find ourselves in. When you get to '20 and '21,
you've already begun to address that. I don't think that you can use that argument again, which makes it even more important
that you have an agreement that doesn't have to go with or have to match defense discretionary spending with non-defense
discretionary spending.

CROPSEY: Let me turn the discussion a little bit in a somewhat different direction here. Are you satisfied with the current
strategy for the use of American sea power globally? I mean, do we have one? What is it? Is it sufficient? Are we thinking in
useful terms about how to leverage what is currently the world's dominant sea power to assure the interests of the United
States and its allies?

WITTMAN: Well, I think we do have a framework. When Admiral Richardson came in as the CNO, he did put out essentially his
vision for how sea power would be used. So that 2016 piece is a good framework. I think there are things that you have to look
at in relation to the National Security Strategy, the recent National Defense Strategy that came out from Secretary Mattis.
Also, the Nuclear Posture Review, because there are elements of that that involve the Navy, and then integrate that to say,
“Now, what is our strategy about how we operate?” Because the operational element has to match the capability that you
either currently have or that you're seeking to build in the years to come. So I do think that we have that. I do think that it's
adapting on the run. We saw where the National Security Strategy or National Defense Strategy has elements in it of
hypersonics. Also, what we're going to do with low-yield nuclear weapons, which will be sea-based. All those elements, I think,
are key to where the Navy finds itself. So I do think we have it. It is not in a single place. So there's not a single place where you
can go, “Here is the single strategy for what our navy will do.” I think if you take the parts of those four different elements – the
overview that came out 2016 – I think, between those, you do have how the Navy is going to operate, at least in the near
future. I believe, though, that more is being done to develop how that operational posture is going to change. Unmanned
systems are going to change that immeasurably. I think the development of hypersonics is going to change it, too. I think the
element of long-range strike is going to change that immeasurably, as well as artificial intelligence. All those elements are
working at breakneck speed. So the question is: how do you now, in the months and years to come, integrate that into what
we have today? That's the one place where I think there is not the level of definition that is going to be needed.

CROPSEY: I agree with you. I recall – because I was around at this point – that one of the strengths of justifying the buildup
that took place in Navy in the 1980s was the administration and its spokesman's ability to say in a very simple sentence, “Here
is the strategy for the naval forces. They will be used on the northern and southern flanks of the Soviet empire to distract
Soviet effort from the central front and endanger their second strike capability, referring to nuclear weapons, in such a way as
to affect the outcome on land.” Now, I may have not stated it most perfectly. Will we reach something like that – not that, but
something like that – so that we can say, so that policymakers can say, and so that people will understand, not only in
Congress, but throughout the nation: here's what it's about. This is the purpose of this. This is what it's intended to achieve.
This is how it protects your security because although I agree with you on the technological improvements that will have a
profound effect on our ability to project forces, I think that a clear understanding of, “What do you do with all that stuff?” is
extremely helpful, if not absolutely necessary.

WITTMAN: I agree. I think it's the key. And today, it's a different element of communication than it was back in the Cold War
days, where we had a single adversary: the Soviet Union. And we knew pretty plainly about what their capability was and how
they sought to deploy that capability. Today, it really is, I would argue, on four different fronts. It's a North Atlantic front, with
strategic submarine assets from the Soviet Union and making sure that we can counter those, making sure we know exactly
where those assets are at all times. It's also about militarization of the island chains in the South China Sea, and what we've
seen recently there and making sure we're countering that, because the Chinese are trying to push everybody out of that
region and take it by default. So the question is, you know, then they're able to hold us at risk at longer and longer distances. It
also holds our partners and allies at risk in those areas. I think you can communicate that, as well as whatever ends up with
North Korea. You still have to have the ability in that region to counter a North Korean nuclear weapon that comes out. So I
think you have to be able to say: “What does our navy do in those areas where we see these types of activities?” And there
hasn't been that simple, straightforward conversation with the American people as to what that is. I think they understand it.
But I don't think that they know what the nature of the threat is. And I think it is important for them to know the nature of the
threat. And what are we doing with building our navy to counter that specific threat?

CROPSEY: Could you answer your own question?

WITTMAN: (Laughter) Yes, yes, yes. I believe so. I think that the things that we're doing today to counter those threats,
whether it's in the South China Sea, with being able to aggressively pursue freedom of navigation operations there, to make
sure that China doesn't by default take those areas, to make sure, too, we have the ability to operate there both under the sea,
which is, again, a big advantage for us, as well as being able to counter-risk Chinese naval assets the same way that they can
hold our assets at risk with longer-range weaponry. I think that that we are able to do that with our Aegis systems and our advanced radars, especially the new generation that's coming out on surface ships. We will be able to counter North Korean missiles that may be launched towards the United States, and the same with tracking Russian assets out of the North Atlantic. And these are things, though, that we have had to work very hard to catch up on. But I am confident in the briefings that I've received that we are where we need to be and building capability on a daily basis.

CROPSEY: That leads me to another question I want to cover here before the time is up on...

WITTMAN: Sure.

CROPSEY: I could go on. I suspect we could go on for some length here. Our surface fleet has had some problems, as everybody knows, with fatal collisions last year. Are you satisfied with what Navy is doing to address those issues? And could you talk a little bit about that?

WITTMAN: No. I'm not satisfied with what the Navy's doing. I think there needs to be a wholesale change in ways that really shake up the status quo. And we've done some things in this year's NDAA. I know that when we've had conversations with the Navy, the Navy is not in any way, shape or form in agreement with or happy with. I understand that. But it shouldn't take away from our determination to make sure that those 17 sailors who lost their lives in those collisions, to make sure their lives were not given in vain. I want to make sure that we are doing things that are necessary.

The things that need to happen, is the surface navy needs to, I believe, pursue the path of specialization where you have surface warfare officers that are specialists in engineering systems to know the engineering systems on those ships backwards and forwards. You have those that are also experts in ship navigation and seamanship. Because right now what happens is officers do a little bit of everything but don't become an expert in any of those realms, and it takes away from the ability for the fleet to operate the way it should. Another element too is training going to the fleet. As you know, it's atrophied through the years so that sailors going to the surface fleet many times have limited – sometimes only circumspect – experience before they stand watch. That's absolutely unacceptable. So what we want to make sure is that there is some standard of training, I think, at least equivalent to the applicable areas of a third mate's license. My son is a mariner that runs a large commercial fishing vessel. The time that it took for him in the classroom and at sea before he got his commercial certification, before he could legally captain or pilot that ship, well, it's orders of magnitude above what we now today require a young junior officer to stand watch on the deck and to captain or pilot a grey hull. There's no reason why that disparity should exist. I think that you have to address that.

Also, the elements of command. Command chains are bifurcated, where there's one element of command for the Pacific, one element of command for forward-deployed naval forces, another element of command for other Navy assets, for OFRP. So we have to make sure that we close that particular gap. And again, we have to make sure too that ships don't miss maintenance availabilities, that we stand by how our INSURVs are done, the inspections of the ships, to make sure they are done on time, to make sure that they are comprehensive, to make sure those INSURVs inform what must happen when maintenance availabilities come up, and make sure every bit of that work gets done when that ship is in dry dock, not allow that ship to go back to sea with things left undone. Because, then, what we see happens from that, is you have lapsing mission certifications, either for sailors' knowledge, skills and abilities or on ship systems. And that's what leads you to the accidents that we've had.

So I think in every one of those areas, the Navy has to aggressively address that. Some of the things they've done have addressed that. I think the comprehensive response to that needs to go even farther than where the Navy has gone. And we've been very direct and prescriptive in this year's sea power mark in the House. As you know, there's a bill that Senator McCain and Senator Wicker put in that have 38 different items it prescribes the Navy to do in response to these surface ship collisions.

CROPSEY: Let me just push that a little bit.

WITTMAN: Sure. Sure.

CROPSEY: As many of you may know, there was a piece of legislation passed many, many years ago called Goldwater-Nichols. And one of the important consequences of that legislation was the requirement that officers from the military services spend more time on Joint Staff assignments, or what were labeled as Joint Staff assignments, like with the Joint Staff itself or with combatant commanders around the world. Is that related at all to the issues that we've seen with seamanship? The problem for Navy here is that the more time an officer is required to spend on a Joint Staff assignment – or that the time that is required to spend on the Joint Staff assignment comes at the expense of something else. And if that something else is time at sea, there's bound to be a consequence. Is that something that you think about? I mean, is that something that concerns you? Or do you see this as an issue?
WITTMAN: I think it is an issue. It does concern me. I think the structure that is pursued for these young officers to get those joint-billet experience times -- I think -- many times occurs at the wrong time in their career, and so they don't get the full complement of experience in the fleet. So they're just getting to the point where they have that full scope of confidence and experience, and then they're pulled away from the fleet to go do a joint-billet. So they're pulled away for several years. And then once they get back, that knowledge, skill and ability, just by nature, atrophy somewhat. So they get back to the fleet, and then they have to spin that back up again. And then, two, what happens on the path to command is another element, that you have to look at the continuity about how a junior officer comes to the surface navy, the experience that they gain and then where they ultimately end up in commanding the ship. And I think if you look at how that occurs, it is inconsistent at best. And the inconsistency is because those surface warfare officers are pulled away at critical times to be able to assume these joint-billets.

I would argue that developing that expertise to be an expert ship driver, mariner, expert engineer is what makes them the irreplaceable asset that the Navy needs in order to make sure they're operating at the highest level. I do not see that happening in all instances today because of how Goldwater-Nichols interjects itself into that. Now, I think some of that's things that the Navy can do because the Navy has control over scheduling when those periods away from the fleet occur. And I know it always becomes an issue to say, “My gosh, you know, how do you go back and address Goldwater-Nichols without really creating some other issues there?” I think initially, the Navy would need to look internally about how it addresses the career path -- especially, for surface warfare officers, but I think in all areas -- of making sure that those individuals are the best based on their knowledge, skills and abilities in the areas that we ask them to practice in. Because as Navy operations and challenges around the world become more and more complex, my concern is our officers get a little bit of a lot of things but not a whole lot of a single thing. So they're great generalists, but they're not the type of specialists that we need. And I know when we push the Navy to make sure we move toward specialization, we get a significant amount of pushback. And I just think that specialization in the world of complex ships and ship systems is more applicable today than it's ever been.

CROPSEY: Does this require changes in the legislation? Is this something that...

WITTMAN: Well, we...

CROPSEY: What happens here?

WITTMAN: Well, we've begun the track this year in the National Defense Authorization Act to get the Navy towards saying you'll provide a specialization track within the surface navy for your officers there -- engineering and ship operations. So we're pushing in that direction. Now, as I said, we're getting pushback from the Navy. The question then becomes, from that particular standpoint, seeing what we're able to accomplish this year in the NDA, does that naturally lead you now to ask questions about the career path in the Goldwater-Nichols requirements on what sailors need to do along that career path in order to be able to promote? And, you know, a lot of that is checking the boxes, too. You know, you have to be in a joint-billet in order to qualify for promotion. So I think that's a question that naturally comes after we look at, you know, how does the Navy internally structure how surface warfare officers receive their training, and how do they operate on that path to becoming not only certified as a surface warfare officer, but how do they then, as they assume higher levels of command on the ship, how do they progress with that in an area of specialization?

CROPSEY: The services have become so joint since 1986 -- following the legislation in 1986 -- that there are many more billets that could be classified as joint than are currently being classified as joint. I mean, that's just happened as a result of the legislation and success of chairman's use of the legislation to -- some would say -- advance, increase their bureaucratic heft, and -- others would say -- to implement the spirit of the legislation. But still, that's the net effect.

WITTMAN: It is. It is. And that's a critical part of it, is to make sure that we expand those number of billets so that, again, these junior officers have experience in the fleet. The closer you can get that experience to where you ultimately hope those officers operate in that position of leadership -- in command, in assuming command -- the better those officers are going to be. And I understand you want them to have some view about what happens above them in decision-making and what happens in the Pentagon and big Navy. But my view is you want them to be the best -- and that is, the expert -- on the ship that ultimately they're going to go to command. And I don't know that you can say that today for every sailor that assumes command, whether it's on a cruiser or on a destroyer or even on other surface ships. So I think that needs to be the sole purpose of how career paths are laid out so that you prepare every one of those sailors so when they command one of those ships, they are the experts, on whether it's the ship's systems itself, you want them to be there, but also ship navigation and operations. And I think what we've seen in these recent collisions is that full scope of experience didn't manifest itself in command decisions.

CROPSEY: Let me try to stay on schedule for once here.

WITTMAN: Sure, absolutely. Yes.
CROPSEY: Are there questions from the floor? OK, well, I see a gentleman in the back there. Let's start from the back and move forward.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: Hi, good afternoon...

CROPSEY: I'm sorry, could you please tell us your name and the organization you're associated with, if possible.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: Sure. [...] for Refugees Defense and (unintelligible). One small question. As a fleet plans to have 70 new ships to get 355, by how much does the naval personnel have to grow in order to be able to handle those 70 new ships? I think according to a website, the U.S. Navy website, right now there are 325,000 sailors. How much do you need to grow to handle these new ships? Thank you.

WITTMAN: Well, that's a great question because we've asked the Navy to chart out how they need to grow the Navy. And again, if they start now, the path is a manageable path, because you want to make sure that you not only recruit sailors but you have them trained in the proper areas for the ships that come on. And then you also have to make sure too that you build maintenance budgets, because those ships are going to end up having to come back to the dry dock. As far as a hard-and-fast number, I don't have that for you right now. But I do know that the Navy, again, with conversations with us, is going to put out what they believe that number should be and the track that we should pursue to get there. In other words, you can't wait until all of the sudden these ships now start to go to sea and then say, "Well, now we're going to recruit sailors and put them on board." You need to be able to start now, recruit those sailors, build that component up, and rotate those sailors through the different classes of ships.

Another element that's going to be the key, too, is the way sailors are trained now, in some areas, is ship-specific. And I'm not talking about class-of-ship specific. I'm talking about ship to ship. One of the things we saw from the collisions of the McCain and the Fitzgerald was that each of those surface ships were different. We had young sailors that came onboard that were operating the helm that were not familiar with the upgraded ship helm control systems. And that led to some of the problems in the collision there, is not knowing how steering and throttle response occurred with the systems onboard. So what we have to do, too, is not just address the total number of sailors, but we also have to look at how we structure training in the future, so that as we bring new sailors onboard they get the full scope of training, they can operate within a class of ships. So if they're coming in as a surface navy sailor, we want to make sure that they are certified for every one of the cruisers, or every one of the destroyers, or every one of the LCSs. So it's not just in building the numbers, but it's, what do you do to train them? And then what do you do to retain them, too? So those are elements that have to be there. But it is a critical part of this. And as we begin that ramp-up in building ships, we have to begin now in funding how the Navy will begin to increase in strength. The good news in this year's NDAA yesterday is we began the slope of Navy increasing in strength. So as far as what they'll need in total by the time we get to 355 ships is yet to be determined. But it is something the Navy is tasked with and is going to chart out what we need to add to the force structure each year as we get to 355 ships.

CROPSEY: Sir?

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: (Inaudible)

CROPSEY: Yeah.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: (Unintelligible) Retired Foreign Agricultural Service. Thank you so much for a very interesting and thoughtful presentation. Could you please comment on the strategic role of the aircraft carrier in future naval warfare? My understanding is that the last carrier, the Gerald R. Ford, was built by Huntington Ingalls Industries last year, and that two more were authorized in the recently passed defense budget.

WITTMAN: Sure. Well, the Ford class carrier is tremendously capable. It generates now about a 15 percent increase in the number of sorties. It's a new ship in the class. They have integrated an astounding number of new technologies, from electromagnetic systems to launch aircraft, to advanced arresting gear to new systems to elevate weapons to the hangar bays. All those new systems on board are unbelievable in their capability, but also create a variety of technological challenges as you incorporate that large number of technical advancements there. The CNO has said if they had to do it over again, they probably wouldn't have tried to integrate as many new technologies into a new ship class. I think, though, what you'll find is that the learning curve on this has been very aggressive. I've been to the yard there to see where they're going with CVN-79. Lessons learned on 78 are now being incorporated in the 79. I've been very, very impressed by what they're doing there. I've been on board the Gerald R. Ford in her workups to figure out what she can and can't do. Again, some hiccups there. But you always expect that in the first ship in the class.
Remember, with ships, unlike aircraft, they don't get to build a prototype and test them and figure it out. The first ship in the class is the prototype. So we learn on that one, which we're doing on the Ford, a tremendously capable ship. As far as the future of the aircraft carriers, there's always a back-and-forth debate about, you know, do you pursue these large aircraft carriers that can sustain hundreds of sorties a day? Or do you build a bunch of smaller ones and disperse them around and sustain operations that way? And we'll continue to ask that question because I do think it's one that's worthy of our consideration. I still believe with every bit of information that I've seen in those evaluations that, still today, the aircraft carrier as we construct them now gives us the greatest capability and the greatest ability to sustain an operation where we need to. Now, we're going to have to add things to it like the MQ-25 that allows that carrier to be farther away from risks, since we have these longer-range anti-ship missiles. But these ships will still be able to operate there and will still be able to sustain operations and fight their way in. The only way you're going to fight your way in is to have a platform that can sustain that level of operation. And if you look at our adversaries: our adversaries are continuing to do what? Build large aircraft carriers. So if there was a problem with that framework, then you would think that they would be pursuing something different. I still think we need to ask the question, because the key is going to be: how do we integrate modernized systems? How do we integrate unmanned systems? How do we integrate artificial intelligence? How do we integrate hypersonic weapons? All those things are really going to continue to beg the question, what do we do? And we may have to change path along the way on this 30-year shipbuilding plan to the path to 355. We should continue to ask that question. None of us want to be in the situation to have built a bunch of ships and then look at them tied up and go, "Wow, those ships don't have the capability that we really need." And we've seen some of that in the past. So we've got to learn our lessons from that and make sure that we are continuing to ask the question: "Do we have the type of ship that we need? Does it have the capability we need? Are we able to integrate modern technology onboard seamlessly, and make sure that that ship can operate in the full spectrum that it needs to operate with it?"

CROPSEY: One more question here in the first row. We'll go back.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: Thank you for coming.

WITTMAN: Thank you.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: My name is [...] of the Reagan Foundation. Away from the actual Navy operations regarding the South China Sea, I heard something I don't like to hear. And that is that China is preparing, or already prepared, for the missile capability, especially in the Spratly Islands. The news came from Philippines and so forth. And can you give us an update on that?

WITTMAN: Sure. Well, the reality is: yes, the Spratly Islands and the Chinese are putting additional missile capability on there. Not just missile capability to defend the islands, but missile capability that has a longer-range strike capability to be able to hold at risk U.S. and partner and allies' assets at risk. They also, too, on the airstrips of their building there now have tactical aircraft. Those are aircraft that can fly out, hold U.S. ships and other assets at risk. So the Chinese said originally that they had no plans for those islands to be able to project Chinese power. It was only as purely a defensive mechanism. I would argue that what we're seeing mature on those islands is much more than a defensive capability. It is a significant offensive capability meant to hold U.S. assets and partner and allied nation assets at risk.

CROPSEY: Sure. The mic will be there in a moment.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: I hope this is a relevant question. My name is [...]. I'm retired from the State Department. Concerned as I am about military naval power, I'm even more concerned about America's commercial naval power. As I understand the situation, less than 2 percent of the cargoes that are brought into this country and shipped out of this country are carried by American-flagged vessels, American-owned vessels. All the rest are carried by foreign flags of convenience or, alternatively, have heavily subsidized fleets, like those of China. So I'm wondering whether the Congress has any plans to do anything about this or whether we're just going to accept flags of convenience as the future for our country.

WITTMAN: That's a great question. You know, we have a bill that we passed years ago called the Jones Act that says U.S. commerce has to transact on a U.S.-flagged ship. We're finding ourselves, even with the Navy, with the ready reserve fleet, being unable to attain that because our domestic fleet has atrophied so much. We're having to place an exemption for the first 10 ships in rebuilding that fleet to be foreign-manufactured factory ships—they're U.S.-flagged, but they're foreign-manufactured—before we can get into actually manufacturing our own. Our domestic shipbuilding industry has atrophied to the point where it does not and cannot compete with foreign manufacturers. So you just don't see those U.S.-flagged ships transacting U.S. commerce even if it's just domestic freight that now is going overseas. The question always becomes—and the reason the Jones Act went into place to begin with—is the question of the need for that industrial capacity in the United States to be able to produce that shipping capability. I argue that that is a critical economic and national security capability, that it needs to continue. Others have a different viewpoint. Others will say, "No, it is a subsidized effort for certain folks in
certain industries to either build or maintain or to operate those ships.” I would disagree with that, because I do think that we are a maritime nation. And being a maritime nation, having the capability to transact business based on ships that we build and ships that are U.S.-flagged is a critical part of that. I don’t know that there is an easy answer to how our companies get back into that shipbuilding realm because foreign shipbuilders have shown that they can build ships much less expensively for a variety of different reasons, whether it’s underwritten material cost, whether it’s labor cost, whether it’s the regulatory realm that they have to operate in. All those things I think add to the disparity of cost of building ships.

So it comes down to a default position to see if you can buy ships significantly less expensive somewhere else. That’s where things have ended up, not what do we need to have as far as an industrial base in the United States that serves us economically, but also serves a national security element. Now, I would argue we are at the very ragged edge of the amount of shipyards that we need just to build warships. This doesn’t include the capability to build any kind of domestic tonnage, just warships. So if you were to get back into that production, the question is: could those yards spin up and still build the ships necessary for a military? I’m not sure that we’re at that point today. The question then becomes, too, could you attract companies that are building these ships on foreign soil here to the United States to build here, to put in place their practices? And I visited. And, let me tell you, they do a very good job process-wise in creating efficiencies and building those ships. The question is: could they bring those concepts here? Could they partner with a U.S. shipbuilder to reinvigorate the domestic shipbuilding industry? I think all those things are questions that should be at least explored in the interest economically and strategically for the nation.

CROPSEY: You have a question?

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: Hello. I am [...]. I am an intern at the Hudson Institute. I’m originally from Lithuania. And I have a question. Does the United States have a strategy together with NATO allies how to restrain Russia in the Baltic Sea? Thank you.

WITTMAN: Great question. I was there visiting the Baltics recently, talking to both the prime ministers there and ministers of defense about what’s happening in the Baltics, the very aggressive behavior by Russians both in the air and on the sea, and how we counter that with U.S. presence. You know, we’re having more U.S. naval presence in the area as well as air asset presence. The idea of there being a unified approach to counter Russian aggression there is part of NATO’s plans to defend. The problem is in many instances it doesn’t directly address these one-off instances of Russian aggression. And it doesn’t address, too, the instances that we saw before Russia went in to destabilize the Ukraine, and then these snap exercises where you’d have Russian forces that would gather and roll right up to the border. And if you were looking at that, you’d say, “Wow, this is an attack getting ready to happen.” They’d roll right up to the border and then disperse and then roll back. But it was practice as to what would happen there. Those things, I think, are all concerning to us. And what should NATO allies do to counter? The reality is the U.S. presence, going back to the Cold War compared to today, is much, much less. And as I met with the Baltic states, there – everyone to a person there said, “We would love to have at least a battalion of U.S. soldiers in our country.” They would love to have a brigade, but at least a battalion there. And we don’t have the numbers in Europe to be able to sustain that. We have moved more assets in.

So we do have a plan where all the NATO allies can marshal their forces in order to counter a Russian effort that comes across the border. The reality is in that instance is our enemy. So the way that you counter that is to make sure that when Russia does something, that we do something to counter that, to where Russia finds that objectionable or finds that as enough of a deterrence not to do what they might think about doing. So the NATO allies have become more aggressive in what they’re doing in those operations. And the effort has been to bring all NATO allies up to making their contributions to building their militaries to the NATO requirements. And the Baltic states have actually been pretty good in making that commitment. Some of the other NATO allies not so much, but they’ve done more recently because of Russian aggression in that particular area. So the Article 5 provisions there I think are key for us to keep our eye upon. I think by any measure you’d have to say that there is more that could be done to counter Russian aggression. The European Reassurance Initiative, I think, has done a lot to put resources back in the area. This year we’re funding even more dollars to go to the European Reassurance Initiative. Another question that comes up is the rebalance of naval assets: the 60-40 split now between 60 percent of our assets in the Pacific, 40 percent in the Atlantic. The question becomes, with more and more Russian naval activity, is that the right balance? With more activity in the Mediterranean, is that the right balance?

The Navy has now reconstituted the Second Fleet. So the Second Fleet now is going to be an ancillary force to the Sixth Fleet, like the Third Fleet is an ancillary force to the Seventh Fleet in the Pacific, and I would argue ancillary also to the Fifth Fleet that operates in the lower part of the CENTCOM area of – AOR. So I think all of those elements have to be addressed. And it comes down to, you know, taking a finite amount of assets, and how thinly can you spread them? And how do you use them to the maximum efficiency? And Russia will continue to test what we do, how we do it and where our assets are located, and what they can do. The key is how do we make sure that we maximize what the United States can do in leveraging what our allies can
do? And that's where NATO comes in, because that formal alliance there and the commitment that those nations have to make now is more critical than ever.

CROPSEY: We've gone over the time limit. Do you have time for one more question?

WITTMAN: One more question. Yes. Yes. OK. Yes? Where's the mic? There we go.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: So my name is […]. I'm with Voice of Vietnamese Americans. I'd like to come back to the South China Sea.

WITTMAN: Yes.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: Would you explain to us a strategy, a comprehensive strategy that the Congress would support, our current president, to defend our...

WITTMAN: Sure.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: ...Sea air, especially to support our allies and Southeast Asia? I talked to all of my Southeast Asian nations, my friends there. I'm listening to you.

WITTMAN: Yeah. Sure. Well, you know, our effort right now is in making sure that we are properly resourcing that effort between our allies in the region. As you know, it's not just the Spratly Islands, but it's the Paracel Islands also. We visited there with the leadership in Vietnam. They are not happy at all with Chinese aggression in the area. And for years, Chinese and the Vietnamese had been somewhat of a partnership there – not as much today. I know the Vietnamese are not happy with the Chinese for a variety of different reasons, mainly because the Chinese have not been honoring what has been seen through the time as Vietnamese sovereignty in that particular area. As far as the strategy: our strategy boils down to what we do with maintaining freedom of navigation operations there. So we're going to aggressively make sure we have presence in that area. We're going to make sure that we pass within the 12-mile limits established in those reefs that now China has built into islands to make sure that China cannot by default now claim that area as a territorial sea, which they do now. They claim that that area is a Chinese territory, not in international water.

Now, I know people criticize the United States for not being a signatory to the treaty of the seas, but it still has an obligation to make sure we maintain freedom of navigation operations in those regions. So that's what the United States is doing now to make sure that we push back on Chinese aggression in the area. The second element that I think is critical is not just freedom of navigation operations, but what do we do to address the continued construction of those islands and capability on those islands? You know, the Chinese have just finished building a new dredging ship, the largest dredging ship in the world. In fact, that ship can dredge the volume of two Olympic size swimming pools in an hour of dredge material to build land. That is an amazing capability. And they are, along with that ship and others, continuing to build those islands, building a tremendous amount of capability there. So when they're building airstrips and they're bringing missile batteries in that have all those capabilities, those things should be deeply concerning to everyone. The strategy in the area, though, right now is freedom of navigation operations and additional naval assets to be able to counter Chinese presence in the area. And remember: it's not just the Paracels and the Spratlys, but it also goes up the southern island chain to the Senkakus and what's happening there. And that involves Taiwan. It involves Japan. And it involves China. And as you see, the Chinese Coastal Defense Force, which is their Coast Guard. It's more than Coast Guard, I would argue. And then what you see the Chinese doing, too, with civilian fishing vessels there that essentially become their eyes and ears and also operate very aggressively in those areas. And we see when we do freedom of navigation operations those Chinese fishing vessels are transecting the bow of our ships and getting in the way and trying to slow our ships down. So that aggressive behavior demonstrates that China has much more than just a desire to occupy that area. They want to drive others out of that area.

So I think there's more that we can do. But it's limited right now to freedom of navigation and to the Navy assets that we have that we can deploy to those areas. But another element that I think is key is: what do we do with our allies in the area? We've had discussions with the Philippines about Navy assets. And we're looking at partnerships and foreign military sales to possibly sell or provide additional ships, like an Oliver Hazard Perry-class frigate. And the same with Vietnam. What can we do to leverage the assets that those countries have, work jointly with them to push back against Chinese presence there?

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: (Inaudible)

WITTMAN: We haven't. Sanctioning has been mentioned, but it hasn't been pursued by Congress at this particular point. The key elements of that, I think, are ways away from actually getting to the point of a piece of legislation that would be debated in coming to the floor. I think there are other elements that Congress and the administration would want to pursue in the meantime. Not to say that ultimately you wouldn't get to that particular point. But remember, too; the world courts have ruled
in favor of the Philippines and their sovereignty with the Spratly Islands, and China continues to not follow the findings of the world court. So there is a frustration with that, I know, from our standpoint, and what else can we do? There's so many other moving parts with what's happening with China-U.S. relations today, with upcoming negotiations with North Korea, with President Xi Jinping and what he's done to help with that. I think that there is only enough volume of attention and ability to address one of those big issues at a time. I'm hopeful that we're able to find the right place to be with North Korea to get a nuclear proliferation treaty done with them or some type of agreement that's verifiable. I think getting that done frees up a tremendous amount of attention and focus on Chinese aggression in the South China Sea. So I think it's one of those things where it's hard to do multiple things at one time because of all the attention and effort that it takes, but I don't think it lessens our resolve or concern about what's happening in the South China Sea.

CROPSEY: All right, I said one more, but I meant two more.

WITTMAN: OK (laughter).

CROPSEY: The last question's here.

WITTMAN: Yes.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: My name is [...]. I'm with the Voice of America Persian service. Two days ago, we listened to President Trump deciding to get out of JCPOA. And also, yesterday, we saw a fight between Iranians and the Israelis, so my question is this: do you predict that the next theater will be the Persian Gulf area? And given the fact that Saudi Arabia has differences with another U.S. ally, Qatar, do you think the U.S. fleets are safe there, and can they safeguard the U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf? And the last part would be your take on the president's decision to get out of JCPOA.

WITTMAN: Well, I think the president's decision on JCPOA is to try to get the agreement to a better place, in the extent of efforts that Iran is undertaking to denuclearize their strategic capability. I think there's a better place for us to be. Now, our European allies are going to continue to pursue that. The good thing is that there is a much higher level of motivation, I think, for Iran, our European allies to say, "Let's get this deal to a better place." I think you see the aggression that happened between Iran and Israel today, regardless of who started it, is potentially an area where folks have some elevated concern. I think that it also allows more pressure to be brought upon the Iranians to say, "You can't be doing this in the area." We also know that the Iranians through their proxy efforts are pushing back against Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia feels very threatened by Hezbollah and exporting unrest and terrorism in other areas, supporting other sympathetic elements in the area that will push back against other nations that Iran sees as a threat, pushing back against Israel. So, you know, Iran continues to pursue this aggressive behavior in the area. So it's even outside the nuclear agreement. What this does is it brings all of those questions to the forefront. It says, "Okay, what are we going to do in the region," and not just for a nuclear agreement that by anybody's measure – folks on both sides of the aisle – was lacking in many different areas.

So there is definitely an effort by Iran to expand its influence in the area. And the thought process behind the nuclear agreement is that it's only a small part of what Iran's overall effort is in expanding influence in the area, whether it's through Hezbollah and exporting unrest and terrorism in other areas, supporting other sympathetic elements in the area that will push back against other nations that Iran sees as a threat, pushing back against Israel. So, you know, Iran continues to pursue this aggressive behavior in the area. So it's even outside the nuclear agreement. What this does is it brings all of those questions to the forefront. It says, "Okay, what are we going to do in the region," and not just for a nuclear agreement that by anybody's measure – folks on both sides of the aisle – was lacking in many different areas.

So now the main question is: what do we do going forward? What do we do in one effort with our allies and with others in the world to not only address what Iran has been and could be doing in the realm of developing a nuclear weapon, but what are we doing also to counter what is a concerted effort by Iran to expand their influence in the area? To go after adversaries in the area? I think those things have to be part of this because, as you said, every one of those individually by itself doesn't reach a critical level, but when you add all of those up, it does reach a critical level. And Iran is being the bully in the neighborhood. And if you don't address the bully in the neighborhood, I think, by pushing back as aggressively as they are projecting things, then I think the bully's going to continue. So this is an opportunity. You know, you could criticize this and say, "Well, we should've kept this in place." And the reality is, the president's made his decision. So the question is now: what do we do going forward? And what do we do to address Iranian aggression in total, both with its tactical operations around the region, and with its nuclear ambitions, and what it will like to do to hold others in the region at risk, as well as ultimately, at some point, the United States at risk? So now's the opportunity for us to do that. And the recent events in the region, I think, just point to there being a pretty large issue and problem with Iran, and we have to address that.

CROPSEY: Congressman, I would like to thank you for joining us today. You've been as patient and generous with your time as your answers have been clear and eloquent. Please come back...

WITTMAN: Thank you. We will.

CROPSEY: ...And join us again. Thank you all for joining us and...
WITTMAN: Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you.

(APPLAUSE)