

Congressmen: 355 Ships Still Important, Naval Safety Prime for Oversight

NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. — At a breakfast session hosted at the Sea-Air-Space Exposition April 11, Reps. Rob Wittman, R-Va., and Joe Courtney, D-Conn., co-chairs of the House seapower and projection forces subcommittee, focused on boosting the Navy's sea power, now enabled by the most recent National Defense Appropriations Act and omnibus bill.

After some reports of the Navy's 355-ship plan being a soft target for the service to reach, the congressmen discussed the importance of having a number as a measure to guide awareness on the Navy's needs.

As the Navy ramps up, it must carefully balance what assets get built and in what amount, said the congressmen, noting that submarines are often a stand-alone investment with fewer other appropriations needs, versus an aircraft carrier, which requires investments across the board.

Wittman said enabling sea power comes down to aligning the authorization process with the appropriation process and creating certainty.

"There has to be certainty within the requirement and design realm for ships and I believe we are there," he said. That means no continuing resolutions and appropriations bills that are completed on time. Through 2019, Wittman forecasted few issues with this, but once sequestration rears up again in 2020-2021, Congress may have a challenge in enabling stability again.

"We have to have a visualization for people outside the realm of the Navy, outside the realm of the Department of Defense to

say, 'What does this Navy even look like?'" said Wittman, explaining the value of having a specific number for the future fleet. "Without a number, there is nowhere to go."

Wittman and Courtney also discussed potential congressional recommendations for the Navy after two deadly collisions in the Pacific area of operation in 2017.

"There is no way how we can possibly explain to families how this happened. It was totally preventable," said Courtney, who acknowledged the Navy has already implemented some of the recommendations from a comprehensive review after the USS John S. McCain and USS Fitzgerald incidents.

"Our subcommittee will take definitive action. ... The oversight of Congress is how it works the best," said Wittman.