

Acting SECNAV Modly: Force Structure is Top Focus

WASHINGTON – The Navy's force structure – “gray hulls” – is the current top focus for the acting secretary of the Navy as the service nears completion of a new force structure assessment and plans its 2021 budget proposal.

“We have to figure out this force structure,” said Thomas Modly, acting secretary of the Navy since the resignation of Secretary Richard V. Spencer, speaking Dec. 5 at the U.S. Naval Institute's Defense Forum held at the Newseum in Washington. “We have to make sure we're investing in the right things. The investment in these things [ships] takes a long time to come to fruition. We need to think about what 355 [ships] means. If 355 is not the number, we need to know what the right number is and we ought to be lobbying for that, making the case for it, arguing in the halls of the Pentagon for a bigger share of the budget if that's what's required. We have to come to a very clear determination of what that means, and also all the equipment we need to support that.

“We have to get our story straight first,” Modly said, also noting the need to focus on the readiness of existing ships.

The Navy is in the midst of a new force structure assessment that incorporates the Marine Corps and is known as the Naval Integrated Force Structure Assessment, in keeping with the guidance from the new Marine Corps commandant, Gen. David H. Berger, to return the Marine Corps to its roots as a Fleet Marine Force. The force structure assessment is due for completion in December.

Modly was clear that the Navy – currently at 290 ships in its battle force – does not have enough ships for its missions.

"We don't have a plan for 355 [ships]," Modly said. "I'm not sure it's the right force mix anymore."

He stressed the need for agility in the fleet to adapt to rapidly changing world and technological developments.

"We've had a gradual loss of our competitive advantage," he said.

Modly's second focus priority is what he called "gray matter" – human capital– which he said is the "enduring competitive advantage" of the United States military. He said the military needs a new human capital strategy and needs to think of human capital as part of the networked Navy.

His third focus priority is what he calls "gray zone" – all of the things that often escape the attention they need and affect greatly the daily and long-term operations of the Navy and Marine Corps. He included in this category such things as space operations; information management; working with partners and allies; the department audit; and counter-intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. He said the Navy and Marine Corps should look at developing asymmetric advantages over potential adversaries because using conventional forces to handle every contingency would be prohibitively expensive.