Analysts: Congress Shifting Money to Readiness, Seems Less Willing to Boost Shipbuilding, Unmanned Systems

Fire Controlman 3rd Class Jacob Rather (left) and Quartermaster Seaman Trevor Gilchrist prepare to hoist the union jack during morning colors on the flight deck aboard the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman (CVN-75). Harry S. Truman, moored at Naval Station Norfolk conducting targeted maintenance and training, sits in the middle of a debate in Congress over whether to retire the carrier at midlife. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Apprentice Victoria Sutton

Congress this year is less willing to boost shipbuilding funding above the Trump administration's request than in recent years and has shown some skepticism over the U.S. Navy's push for rapid adoption of unmanned systems, the two top congressional analysts on naval issues said June 19.

While still generally supportive of shipbuilding and unmanned systems, Congress appears to be shifting some money to improved readiness and isn't willing to sacrifice conventional capabilities, such as the aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman, to accelerate the move to unmanned vessels, analysts Eric Labs and Ronald O'Rourke told an American Society of Naval Engineers forum.

At the same forum, a panel of senior civilian Navy officials said the emphasis in designing the future combat fleet was on greater commonality of systems to improve flexibility, interoperability and lethality and on acquiring combat systems that could be updated quicker and cheaper. Both of those priorities would help reduce the sustainment cost of the future fleet, the officials said.

Labs, the senior naval forces analyst at the Congressional Budget office, described a “leveling off” of support in Congress for funding shipbuilding above the requested levels and a willingness to “substitute their own priorities” for the Navy’s push for new technologies including unmanned systems. He noted shipbuilding funding in preliminary congressional actions of about $1 billion less than requested, compared to an average $2 billion increase in recent years.

O’Rourke, the naval affairs analyst at the Congressional Research Service, saw similar reduction in shipbuilding funding by the panels that have acted on the fiscal 2020 budget and a reluctance to fund the third Virginia class attack submarine. He also cited congressional concern over fleet readiness following the two fatal at-sea collisions and over the delayed maintenance of attack submarines.

Responding to questions, the analysts cited congressional support for funding to bolster the shipbuilding industrial base, opposition to

the Navy’s plan to retire the Truman at midlife to add funds for unmanned surface vessels and said the effort by the House Armed Services Committee to prohibit the Navy from accepting the USS John F. Kennedy, the second in the Gerald R. Ford class of carriers, until it is able to operate the F-35C could add to the cost of the ship.

The panel of four officials on the Navy staff also expressed concerns about fleet readiness and rising sustainment costs. That led to the stress on requiring the maximum possible commonality in future ships and systems, which can reduce the cost of procuring and sustaining the fleet and the cost of training sailors to operate them. A key goal was a common combat system that could be scaled to equip the future frigate, which is close to contract award, and a future large surface combatant, which still is under review. But commonality should extend to the hull, mechanical and electrical components of future ships, they said.