

General: Replacements for Marines' Cold War-Era Assault Amphibious Vehicles Are on Track and on Budget



U.S. Marines with Company A, 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, disembark from an Amphibious Combat Vehicle during an integrated training exercise at Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms, California, April 7, 2021.

U.S. MARINE CORPS / Cpl. Jamin M. Powell

ARLINGTON, Va. – The Marine Corps' new Amphibious Combat Vehicle (ACV) is on track, both for performance and cost, with the first two platoons of replacements for the aging Assault Amphibious Vehicle (AAV) prioritized for duty with forward-deployed Marine Expeditionary Units, a top general told a congressional panel.

In its fiscal 2022 budget request, the Marine Corps is seeking to procure the second full-rate production lot of 92 ACVs, 20 more than in fiscal 2021. The ACV is an advanced eight-wheeled armored ship-to-shore connector craft, providing improved lethality against dismounted enemy troops and increased force protection and survivability from blasts, fragmentation and kinetic energy threats, according to budget documents.

"We're on track for the production numbers that we anticipated seeing," Lt. Gen. Eric M. Smith, head of Marine Corps Combat Development Command told the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Tactical Air and Land Forces June 7. "We've produced the first two platoons of those vehicles," said Smith, who is also deputy commandant of the Corps for Combat Development and Integration, adding that each platoon can carry a company of Marines. The first two of those platoons are at the Marines' desert training base at Twenty-Nine Palms, Calif, Smith said,

adding, "Their readiness is good."

Changing from the tracked AAVs to wheeled vehicles "required a little bit of adjustment for our drivers," Smith said, but they made the change and met their objectives for the initial operating testing capabilities. "So, we did declare initial operating capability."

Calling last year's Amphibious Assault Vehicle mishap that drowned eight Marines and a Sailor "100% preventable and 100% inexcusable," Smith said the remaining AAVs won't go in the water for training without water-tight seal inspections and accompanying safety boats.

A Marine Corps investigation into the sinking of an AAV off the coast of California on July 30, 2020, concluded in "a confluence of human and mechanical failure caused the sinking of the mishap AAV and contributed to a delayed rescue effort ..."

"There's a pretty robust checklist for everything from training to the actual seals on the vehicles to make sure that those vehicles that do enter the water – with safety boats for training – are completely viable and safe," Smith told the House panel.

He added that the ACV "has a completely different hull form that has fewer penetration points so that water cannot get in and accumulate," as it did in the July 2020 AAV mishap.

USMC Seeks to Jettison Some

Weapons Platforms to Invest in Mobility, High Tech



Landing Craft Utility (LCU) 1661 deploys a Utility Tactical Vehicle from the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit during CONTEX-PHIBEX, a bilateral amphibious exercise between the U.S. and Portuguese naval services, May 9, 2021. *U.S. MARINE CORPS / 1st Lt. Mark Andries*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Marine Corps plans to shrink its force and divest itself of heavy weapons platforms such as tanks and towed artillery to pay for new investments in cyber space, artificial intelligence and high mobility, according to new budget documents and briefings.

The Department of the Navy, including the Marine Corps, is seeking \$211.7 billion from Congress in its fiscal 2022 budget request. The Marines would get \$47.98 billion, an increase of 6% over their 2021's enacted budget, "with real growth in their operational, maintenance and procurement accounts," Adm. John Gubleton, the deputy assistant secretary of the Navy for budget, told a Pentagon briefing at the Defense Department budget rollout May 28.

Overall, the Navy "realigned tens of billions of dollars towards higher priority programs and divested of legacy capabilities," Gubleton said. For the Marine Corps those divestments include the Corps' Abrams main battle tanks and towed artillery, to pay in part for a lighter, swifter widely dispersed force with the right skills for future challenges such as distributed operations, crisis response, and electronic, information and cyber warfare, according to budget documents.

Force Design

As part of that modernization, included in the Force Design

2030 plan announced in March 2020, the current budget request calls a reduction of 2,700 enlisted Marines, from 159,716 in 2021 to 156,650 in fiscal 2022. With the addition of 366 new officers to the existing officer corps, the total force in fiscal 2022 would be 178,500.

In the months leading up to the budget announcement, Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David Berger has stressed the Marines are divesting 20th century weaponry, like main battle tanks and towed artillery, to make room for capabilities that are unique to the threat posed by China, which Pentagon leadership has identified as the number one pacing challenge, a near-peer competitor that is catching up. But Berger has also stressed the Marine Corps has to be ready for other contingencies like natural disaster relief and rapid response across the globe.

“We’re willing to trade things like heavy armor for capabilities I think are unique to the Marine Corps, that provide a unique contribution to the combatant commander to the Joint Force,” Berger told a live-streamed forum at the Brookings Institution 10 days before the budget release. “And that is the expeditionary, the amphibious, the parts that we do better than anybody else.”

Berger said he was “willing to trade capacity, end strength, for quality,” adding, “we’ll have a slightly smaller Marine Corps in terms of end strength, but they will be more senior and better trained. So that’s a trade I’m willing to make.”



U.S. Marine Warrant Officer Zachary DeLong, a defensive cyber weapons officer with 7th Communication Bn., III Marine Expeditionary Force Information Group, demonstrates Defensive Cyberspace Operations-Internal Defensive Measures capabilities during a virtual training session with members of the Philippine Marine Corps on Camp Hansen, Okinawa, Japan, April 19, 2021. *U.S. MARINE CORPS / Cpl. Nicholas Filca*

Procurement

The fiscal 2022 request includes \$3 billion in procurements, up from \$2.7 billion enacted in 2021, including key Marine Corps development programs such as the Ground Based Anti-Ship Missile (GBASM), Ground/Air Task Oriented Radar, CH-53K King Stallion helicopter and the Amphibious Combat Vehicle.

Procurement requests include 17 short take off and vertical landing F-35B Lightning II joint strike fighter aircraft and six KC-130 aerial refueling tankers.

The request calls for replacing the CH-53 Sea Stallion, the ship-board compatible heavy-lift helicopter the Marines have been operating since the early 1980s, with the CH-53K King Stallion. The fiscal 2022 request seeks nine King Stallions.

The fiscal 2022 request would procure 613 Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTV) vehicles, 139 less than fiscal 2021, and associated kits. The kits will support the baseline vehicle by providing the warfighter the ability to augment the vehicle's configuration in order to respond to environmental conditions or threat situations. Kit procurement provides up to 75 individual kit options.

For the Amphibious Combat Vehicle, which will replace the legacy Assault Amphibious Vehicle in the Assault Amphibious battalions, the request is for a second full-rate production lot of 92 vehicles (20 more than FY 2021), plus procurement of related items such as production support, systems engineering/program management, engineering change orders, government furnished equipment, and integrated logistics support.

Fiscal 2022 funding seeks eight Ground/Air Task-Oriented Radar (G/ATOR) systems as well as the initiation of radar decoy procurement capabilities to support air defense, air surveillance, and counterbattery/target acquisition.

The Marines are asking for \$47.9 million to begin the procurement of the initial capacity Naval Strike Missiles in

support of the GBASM/Remotely Operated Ground Unit Expeditionary (ROGUE) Fires Vehicle for the Marine Littoral Regiment.

For the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System, a C-130 transportable, wheeled, indirect fire, rocket/missile launcher, the Marines are also seeking funding to procure launchers, carriers and equipment to support the continued expansion of marine Corps launcher capacity, and the procurement of Reduced Range Practice Rockets for tactical training, classroom training, and handling exercises.

Berger Says Supporting a Widely Distributed Maritime Force Will Be a Challenge



U.S. Marines load into combat rubber raiding crafts for a night mission at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Calif., April 7, 2021. *U.S. MARINE CORPS / Cpl. Seth Rosenberg*
ARLINGTON, Va. – The biggest problem facing U.S. Navy and Marine Corps plans to deter great power competitors is how to supply a widely distributed maritime force in a contested environment, the commandant of the Marine Corps says.

With his Force Design 2030 plan, Gen. David Berger, seeks to reshape the Corps so it can operate and survive inside the area of operations of a peer competitor equipped with advanced manned and unmanned aerial systems and cruise missiles.

“For the first time in a generation, we have a strategic competitor and that is China,” Berger said May 12 at the

McAleese Associates FY2022 Defense Programs Conference webinars. "I think our force must be lighter, must be more mobile, has to be more expeditionary. We've got to be able to operate from a variety of platforms."

Marines will be trained and equipped as a naval expeditionary force-in-readiness, prepared to operate inside actively contested maritime spaces in support of fleet operations. Berger's plan calls for both force structure and operational changes, including dispersing smaller and highly mobile Marine expeditionary units – carried by smaller, cheaper and more numerous surface vessels

"Of all the things we're working on in the naval force, and narrowly within the Marine Corps, this is the hardest problem going forward: logistical sustainment in a distributed environment, in a contested environment," said Berger, noting, "nobody has contested our supply lines in 70 years."

He added that this was an area where industry could help. The planned light amphibious warship (LAW), designed to complement and fill a gap in capability between the Navy's large, multi-purpose amphibious warships and shorter range landing craft, is "going to give us the organic mobility that we so desperately need in the littorals anywhere in the world," the commandant said.

He emphasized the driving force behind LAW's concept is mobility, not creating an offensive weapons platform. "Perhaps at some point it would make sense to integrate some type of naval strike missile on a light amphibious warship, that's not the driver," Berger said. "My focus is on the mobility of it."

He noted with its shallow draft, lower heat signature and organic mobility allowing it to remain forward deployed, the LAW gives commanders "the ability to move the force around in a littoral environment."

Unmanned systems in the air, and both on and beneath the sea

will also play a “central, more prominent role” in the Marines, Berger said. “We’re doubling the inventory of our unmanned aerial squadrons,” he said.

Berger speculated that future platforms could be designed specifically for undersea warfare, carrying weapons systems, sonobuoys or sensor packages, and conventional amphibious ships with well decks might deploy unmanned surface vessels, possibly for a subsurface fight. “I think within a decade, half of our aviation, half of our logistics will be unmanned,” he added.

Navy’s No. 2 Civilian Says Balanced Planning Needed to Confront Current and Future Threats



The Honorable James F. Geurts, performing the duties of Under Secretary of the Navy, center, speaks with a Naval Special Warfare (NSW) operator, right, about emerging NSW capabilities during a visit to various NSW commands in the San Diego region. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Sean Furey*

ARLINGTON, Va. – While Pentagon planners and lawmakers puzzle over which platforms to retire and which to keep in service in the coming decades, it’s important to balance competing priorities of readiness to meet current threats as well as preparing for ones yet to be imagined, the second-highest ranking civilian in the U.S. Navy says.

It's a "false dilemma" to say the Navy Department has to choose between current readiness and future readiness," James "Hondo" Geurts said May 12 at the McAleese Associates FY2022 Defense Programs Conference webinars. "We have to do both of them. Balance is really important, particularly in today's operational environment," where thousands of Marines are forward deployed in the first island chain of the Pacific, and a third of the fleet is at sea.

Geurts, until Jan. 21 the assistant secretary of the Navy for research, development and acquisition, was designated as performing the duties of Under Secretary of the Navy in February by acting Navy Secretary Thomas Harker. In the new role of principal assistant to the Secretary, Geurts acts as chief operating officer and chief management officer for the department.

Navigating the great power competition, in what is expected to be an era of shrinking defense budgets, will require resilience in dealing with cyber, climate and competition challenges, Geurts said, as well as balancing "how we think about future readiness in things like remotely crewed or unmanned systems with today's manned systems."

Geurts said that question has weighed on him for the last two years, but he was encouraged by the Unmanned Campaign framework released by the Navy and Marine Corps March 16. He also said he was feeling positive "that we have started the right motions, people are thinking about it," but he wants to see improvement in the "scale and speed" at which technology discoveries move from development to deployment with the fleet.

As for the issue of retiring older platforms like cruisers and amphibious warfare ships, to make way for new technologies, a hot topic on Capitol Hill, Geurts said he wouldn't discuss specifics until the Biden administration's first defense budget is released. However, "we're looking at what's that

right balance of keeping things while they're still useful, but not keeping things to the point where they're not adding value to the missions we see going forward," Geurts said, adding "we want to maximize the return on investments made and maybe in new and interesting ways."

He noted that Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday has been [outspoken](#) about continuing to use Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) in the Western Pacific. "There is a place for it. We just need to be creative in how do we maximize that previous investment going forward," Geurts said.

CNO Says LCS Will Still Have a Role After Propulsion Issue is Fixed



U.S. Sailors sail the Freedom-class littoral combat ship USS Detroit (LCS 7) through the Pedro Miguel Locks while transiting the Panama Canal. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Nathan T. Beard*

ARLINGTON, Va. – Despite serious propulsion problems with the newest Freedom-class littoral combat ships (LCS), Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday says he is "very bullish" about the small surface combatant.

"We've got 33 of them. We've got to wring the most operational availability that we can out of those ships," Gilday told a livestreamed edition of the United States Navy Memorial's SITREP speakers series May 6.

To that end, Gilday said, the Navy will place the long-range

Raytheon-Kongsberg Naval Strike Missile on all the LCS, and in about 18 months, start delivering either anti-submarine warfare or mine counter measures modules to the ships – once a defect with the Freedom variant's combining gear is corrected.

In 2020, problems with the combining gear, which links two gas turbines to the ships' two diesel-powered engines, enabling acceleration to 40 knots, sidelined the USS Detroit (LCS-7) and USS Little Rock (LCS-9). Both are assigned to the 4th Fleet, a component of U.S. Southern Command.

In January, the Navy said it would not accept any more of the odd-numbered Freedom ships until the Lockheed Martin-led manufacturing team fixed the design flaw in the complicated mechanism. The Freedom variant is manufactured by Marinette Marine in Marinette, Wisconsin. Even-numbered Independence-class LCS are built at Austal USA in Mobile, Alabama.

"The vendor is doing land based testing," Gilday said, "and once that new design is proven, we will first install those new combining gears in the ships delivering out of Wisconsin, and then we'll back fit some of the older hulls."

There is plenty of work for the LCS to do, whether it is in SOUTHCOM or the Western Pacific, Gilday said. "I'm very bullish about the LCS," he said. "We intend to put them forward in the 5th Fleet and, of course, in the 7th Fleet. They were designed to operate inside, close to land and transit at high speed. You better believe we're going to make use of that capability in the Western Pacific."

Gilday: Unmanned Systems, Hypersonic and Laser Weapons Will Maximize Navy's Range and Security in the Pacific



The MQ-25A Stingray unmanned aerial refueling vehicle, along with other unmanned aircraft, surface and under-sea vessels, will help maximize the U.S. Navy's future range across the Pacific Ocean, according to Adm. Mike Gilday, the chief of naval operations. The Navy plans to procure 72 Stingrays from Boeing and Gilday directed the establishment of Unmanned Carrier-Launched Multi-Role Squadron 10 (VUQ-10) on Oct. 1, 2021. *BOEING*

ARLINGTON, Va. – Unmanned aircraft, surface and under-sea vessels will help maximize the U.S. Navy's future range across the Pacific Ocean, while ships and submarines armed with hypersonic or directed energy weapons could protect them in contested areas, the chief of naval operations says.

"Our biggest R&D effort is in hypersonics," Adm. Mike Gilday told a live streamed question and answer session April 27 at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, a Washington think tank. Hypersonic weaponry is planned for delivery in 2025. "First on surface ships and then on Block 5 submarines," Gilday said. "We want to bring that kind of capability forward, using distributed maritime operations to come at an adversary in a variety of different vectors and make it very difficult for him to target us."

Gilday said he sees unmanned systems as a path to affordability and lethality despite expected leaner defense budgets in coming years. "Probably by the mid-to-late 2030s, we think up to a third of the fleet could be unmanned, if everything goes right," Gilday explained. "And for the air wing of the future, we think about the same, initially about 40%, potentially going to 60% unmanned" teamed with fourth- and fifth-generation fighters in contested areas," he added.

The MQ-25A Stingray carrier-based unmanned aircraft system should reach initial operational capability around 2025, Gilday said. Once it's integrated into the carrier wing, the Boeing-built Stingray will enhance aircraft carrier reach as a sea-based, aerial refueling drone, that can also provide persistent intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance around the carrier strike group.

On March 16, the Navy and Marine Corps released the Unmanned Campaign framework, (<https://seapowermagazine.org/navy-marine-corps-release-unmanned-campaign-plan/>) which presents their strategy for making unmanned systems a trusted and integral part of warfighting. The Navy is conducting collaborative experimentation and rigorous testing of unmanned systems "to get to a point, in probably five to seven years, where we're much more confident about two real big pieces: reliability and trust," Gilday said.

He added that trust is all about command and control. Reliability, is key in terms of operations. "With respect to the surface fleet, we really want a platform that's going to run, run, run, run and not break down on us," Gilday said, noting the Freedom-class littoral combat ships have 7,000 sensors in their engineering plant. "We can't have that kind of complexity on a platform that's eventually going to be unmanned. It's got to be very reliable."

Unmanned platforms, both on and under the sea, are also going to play a major role in distributed maritime operations in the future, although they have not yet been classified as part of the battle force. "They're separate and distinct from the 355" ship Navy mandated by Congress, Gilday said.

While the Navy's strategy calls for highly mobile and distributed maritime operations in the Pacific, in an age of ubiquitous satellite imagery, "it's going to be difficult to hide," Gilday said, adding "Directed energy, with respect to the future survivability of the fleet, is really important."

Noting that Navy ships from Ford-class aircraft carriers to Zumwalt-class destroyers generate excess electrical power, Gilday said, "If we could get that same capability on an unmanned vessel," armed with a directed energy weapon, it could provide a surface fleet with a "high degree of defense-in-depth coverage against an incoming threat."

GAO Report: Massive Sustainment Costs Creating

F-35 Affordability Issues



An F-35B Lightning II assigned to the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) lands on the flight deck of the forward-deployed amphibious assault ship USS America (LHA 6). America, lead ship of the America Amphibious Ready Group, along with the 31st MEU, is operating in the U.S. 7th Fleet area of responsibility to enhance interoperability with allies and partners and serve as a ready response force to defend peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Matthew Cavenaile*

ARLINGTON, Va. – Sustaining the troubled Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II strike fighter over its expected 66-year service life will cost more than the total purchase price of thousands of the aircraft, the Pentagon's most expensive weapons platform, a government watchdog told lawmakers.

The Defense Department plans to acquire nearly 2,500 F-35 aircraft for about \$400 billion over the next five decades for the Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps. However, the latest Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on the nation's

biggest weapons program indicates the services will incur an additional \$1.3 trillion in sustainment costs for maintenance, repairs and technology upgrades over that same period.

That raises the issue of the services' affordability targets, "how much the Air Force, the Navy and Marine Corps can afford to spend to sustain the F-35," GAO's Diana Maurer, director of military structure and operational issues, told a joint hearing by two subcommittees of the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) April 22. Originally estimated at \$1.11 trillion in 2012, sustainment costs for the Fifth Generation fighter have grown to \$1.27 trillion, despite efforts to reduce costs.

"The bottom line here is the services have a plane that they can't afford to fly the way they want to fly it, at least in the long term," Maurer told the HASC Tactical Air and Land Forces and the Readiness subcommittees.

The services face a substantial and growing gap between estimated sustainment costs and affordability constraints – costs per tail, per year that the services project they can afford. The preliminary GAO report to Congress said the gap would total about \$6 billion in steady state year 2036 alone. The services will collectively be confronted with tens of billions of dollars in sustainment costs that they project as unaffordable during the program.



Marines with Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 211 conduct pre-flight checks on F-35B Lightning II Joint Strike Fighters aboard the Royal Navy aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth (R 08) in the North Sea, Oct. 10, 2020. VMFA-211 is an F-35B

Lightning II squadron assigned to Marine Aircraft Group 13, 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing. Its mission is to intercept and destroy enemy aircraft under all weather conditions and attack and destroy surface targets in support of Fleet Marine Expeditionary Forces. *U.S. MARINE CORPS / 1st Lt. Zachary Bodner*

The Air Force, which is buying the most aircraft, 1,763 F-35As – the conventional takeoff and landing variant – needs to reduce estimated annual per-plane costs by \$3.7 million (or 47%) by 2036, or costs in that year alone will be \$4.4 billion more than the Air Force can afford, the GAO said. The Navy and Marine Corps, which are buying hundreds fewer aircraft, face smaller, but significant affordability gaps. For the Navy, which plans to buy 273 F-35Cs, the aircraft carrier variant, the gap would total \$655 million, and for the Marine Corps buy of 353 F-35Bs, the short takeoff and vertical landing variant, and 67 of their own F-35Cs, the total cost overrun in 2036 would be \$886 million.

GAO's draft report suggested Congress consider requiring annual Pentagon reports on progress in achieving the affordability constraints. It also suggested making F-35 procurement decisions contingent on Defense Department in achieving these constraints.

Subcommittee members' reaction to the report ranged from outrage to dismay. If the F-35 program can't control and reduce sustainment costs, "we may need to invest in other, more affordable programs," said New Jersey Democrat Rep. Donald Norcross, chairman of the readiness subcommittee.

Pentagon IT Challenge: Introducing New Technology, While Still Using Legacy Systems



Sailors simulate the navigation of a littoral combat ship inside Integrated Tactical Team Trainer 2 at the Center for Surface Combat Systems LCS Training Facility, April 6, 2021. In 2007 the LTF became the first surface warfare training facility to provide integrated bridge and combat systems tactical-scenario training for Sailors assigned to a littoral combat ship. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Kevin C. Leitner*

ARLINGTON, Va. – As the U.S. Defense Department races to develop a 21st century systems of systems linking all services, commanders, platforms and personnel, two top Pentagon officials say the challenge won't be just acquiring new

technology, but getting rid of the old 20th century stuff.

The Defense Department's Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2) strategy aims to connect sensors from all of the military services – Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, Navy and Space Force – into a single network to share intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) data to enable faster decision making. The change is needed because in a digital-driven world, decisions in future conflicts with degraded environments will have to be made swiftly, perhaps within seconds, say Pentagon officials.

An unclassified version of the strategy for public release is still awaiting approval by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and other leaders, Marine Corps Lt. Gen. Dennis Crall, the chief information officer for the Joint Chiefs of Staff (J6), told the virtual C4ISRNET conference April 21. Crall, who is overseeing JADC2, said Army Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks have already been briefed on the document. "We're making some final revisions on that draft and it should move quickly" from Milley to Hicks and then on to Austin, he said, possibly "in days."

The massive shift to artificial intelligence and machine learning across the department presents a test for a decades-old, platform-centric culture, Crall said. "The biggest challenge is our own history," he added, noting that once legacy platforms and technologies are rolling, "it is incredibly difficult" to bring the new thing on-board.

"Then you have a resource problem. You've got to keep the legacy alive while you're on-boarding the very thing you're trying to do," Crall said, adding that there comes a curve in the cost continuum where "it's the most expensive to operate during that transition." How funding streams are made available should get a hard look, the general said. "We need to collapse those things that are both expensive and not

delivering results.”

In the conference’s last session, Vice Adm. Jeffrey Trussler, the director of Naval Intelligence, made a similar point about Project Overmatch, the Navy’s plan to develop a new fleet architecture using artificial intelligence and manned/unmanned teaming to enable Distributed Maritime Operations.

“The Navy is a platform-centric service, big capital ships and submarines. That’s what we do, and it enables us to operate around the world 24/7/365,” Trussler said. “As we’ve gotten into the Information Age in the 21st century, the Navy has discovered, as have all the services, we ought to be able to connect those sensors and pass data seamlessly among each other.

“It’s not really a technological problem we have,” Trussler said, “our challenge in that technology is the legacy platforms and systems we have now,” and replacing them across a 298-ship Navy with software-defined radios and other digital systems.

EUCOM Commander Seeks More Destroyers, F-35s to Deter Russian Belligerence



A Boeing P-8 Poseidon flies over the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Donald Cook (DDG 75) during a photo exercise in the Black Sea, Feb. 9, 2021. Donald Cook, forward-deployed to Rota, Spain, is on patrol in the U.S. Sixth Fleet area of operations in support of regional allies and partners and U.S. national security in Europe and Africa. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Will Hardy*
ARLINGTON, Va. – The Air Force general heading U.S. European Command says more Navy destroyers and Air Force strike fighters are what he needs to both deter and monitor Russia's aggressive behavior from Arctic waters to the Black Sea.

“I see a concerted effort on behalf of Russia's maritime forces in the Baltic, in the Barents and Black seas,” Gen. Tod Walters told a House Armed Services Committee April 15 during a hearing on national security challenges and U.S. military activities in Europe. Improving overall strategic indications and warnings (I&W), as well as command and control (C2), “starts with two destroyers to improve our ability to see undersea and it also culminates with F-35s.”

Wolters said he anticipated receiving the first set of U.S. F-35 Lightning II joint strike fighters in Britain this Fall. There are already 30 non-U.S. F-35s in Europe and the total number is expected to reach 450 jets by 2030. "And we're programmed now with the United States Navy in the 2025 and 2026 timeframe to hopefully receive two additional destroyers," he said.

There are four destroyers already based in Rota, Spain, which Wolters described as "the workhorses of deterrence," projecting U.S. presence into the Mediterranean and Black seas and then back out again and up to the Arctic. Two more, also to be based in Rota, are required because of a consistent increase in Russian undersea activity in the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom gap. The historic maritime chokepoint in the 20th century is an access lane to the Atlantic Ocean for Arctic-based Russian subs. "The destroyers' participation in undersea warfare, C2 and I&W is absolutely, positively critical," Wolters said.

While the U.S. submarine fleet is "performing admirably," Wolters said, command and control involves other assets like the Boeing P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft and destroyers.

"To comprehensively defend in this area, from undersea to all the way to 25,000 feet with a P-8, we need to make sure we have the right hardware and software, and we're traversing in that direction," Wolters said, adding. "It's very challenging with respect to numbers."

Asked by Virginia Republican Rep. Robert Wittman if he believed Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014 "gives them a strategic foothold in that area" and helps efforts to modernize the Black Sea fleet? Wolters said "our vigilance is sky high" in the Barents and Baltic seas, as well as the Black Sea. "And every point that you alluded to with respect to potential intentions, we are preparing for, and planning for

and expecting it occur.”

Laura Cooper, the deputy assistant secretary of defense for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia, who also testified at the hearing, said the Pentagon had increased its focus on the Black Sea. “And we’re taking an approach that looks holistically at all of our allies and partners in the region,” she said, adding, “We’ve started with efforts to build maritime domain awareness capacity” in Ukraine, Georgia, Bulgaria and Romania.

China and International Crime Cartels Threaten U.S. Influence in the Americas, Commanders Say



The crew of the Coast Guard Cutter Bertholf (WMSL-750) offloads approximately 7,500 pounds of seized cocaine and marijuana in San Diego, March 20, 2021. The drugs, worth an estimated \$126.7 million, were seized in international waters of the Eastern Pacific Ocean between January and February representing 10 suspected drug smuggling vessel interdictions off the coasts of Mexico, Central and South America. *U.S. COAST GUARD / Petty Officer 2nd Class Travis Magee*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The chaos created by transnational organized crime groups in Central and South America is creating opportunities for China and Russia to undermine United States influence in the Western Hemisphere, top U.S. military commanders say.

“Two of the most significant threats are China and transnational criminal organizations,” Navy Adm. Craig S. Faller told a House Armed Services Committee hearing April 14. China is the “Number One strategic threat of the 21st century,” said Faller, the commander of U.S. Southern Command (Southcom), adding “the Chinese Communist Party with its insidious, corrosive and corrupt influence seeks global

dominance.”

Faller said China was increasing its influence in the Western Hemisphere with more than 40 commercial port deals, making significant loans for political and economic leverage, pushing its IT structure and “engaging in predatory practices” like illegal fishing by industrial fleets.

Southcom’s 2021 posture statement to Congress notes that South and Central America have been reeling under a wave of challenges, including the coronavirus pandemic that has savaged Brazil, political instability and corruption in Venezuela and back-to-back hurricanes that devastated Central America, prompting mass migrations north. The statement notes external state actors like China and Russia are “looking to exploit the conditions posed by these threats.”

Russia has been pushing narratives on social media about U.S. mismanagement of COVID-19 and claiming U.S. government sanctions are choking the Venezuelan people at their most vulnerable time. Meanwhile, China is offering \$1 billion in loans to the region for their COVID-19 vaccine and improvements to medical infrastructure, securing agreements with Argentina, Brazil, Peru, and Venezuela. “This will further indebt the region to the PRC [People’s Republic of China], which already holds \$165 Billion in loans,” according to the posture statement.

“Transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) pose a direct threat to our national security,” Faller testified. “They traffic in arms, humans, drugs and claim tens of thousands of lives here in the United States each year. Their murderous tactics has resulted in 43 of the 50 most violent cities of the world in this hemisphere. They drive illegal migration, and they allow bad actors like China to gain influence.”

Air Force Gen. Glen VanHerck, commander, U.S. Northern Command (Northcom) and the North American Aerospace Defense Command,

agreed, saying the rise of TCOs “and subsequent instability they create has generated opportunities for our competitors to exploit.”

He noted China has been very active making deals in the Caribbean including a facility in the Bahamas, part of Northcom’s Area of Operations. China has new and very aggressive ambassador and the largest embassy in the Bahamas. “They do have access right now to an over watch, if you will, of Navy test and training facilities, [off Florida] which is very concerning,” VanHerck said.