CNO: Aviation-Capable Combatant Needed in Future Fleet

The aircraft carrier USS Nimitz (CVN 68) departs the Gulf of Bahrain after a maintenance and logistics visit in Bahrain. CNO Adm. Michael Gilday says Battle Force 2045 will include eight to 11 aircraft carriers for the high-end fight. U.S Army / William Gore)

ARLINGTON, Va. – The chief of naval operations (CNO) said that the future naval fleet will need some sort of aviation-capable ship in the 2045 time frame, but the form of that capability is not yet in focus.

Speaking Oct. 13 in a Defense One webinar, CNO Adm. Michael Gilday addressed in general terms the forthcoming 2045 Future Naval Force Study for Battle Force 2045 to be released soon by the Defense Department. Defense Secretary Mark Esper, speaking Oct. 6 at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Analysis, said that Battle Force 2045 would include a force of eight to 11 aircraft carriers for the high-end fight – equipped with the carrier air wing of the future. The Navy will study the possibility of building up to six light carriers – equipped with short takeoff/vertical landing strike aircraft – to free up the super carriers for the high-end fight.

Gilday said "the hidden point that need to be drawn out is the comparison – or not – to light carriers. … Whether or not the aviation platform of the future looks like the [USS] Gerald R. Ford or the Nimitz class is questionable. It's largely going to be driven by payload."

The CNO said that considering 0 to 6 light carriers in the study "allows us to do much more deeper analysis about what type of functions in a distributed maritime fight across the

spectrum of conflict might we want a smaller aviation combatant to do. One example might be IRS&T [intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and targeting].”

He said that the Navy had a gap in IRS&T capability and asked if that gap could be closed with something smaller than a supercarrier, not necessarily taking on the carrier’s role of long-range strike, but supplementing the capabilities of a super carrier.

Gilday said that studies of large carriers versus smaller carriers in the past jostled with issues such as nuclear propulsion versus conventional propulsion, sortie rate, sustainability, “that leads to a fait accompli that the smaller carrier just doesn’t compete with the supercarrier.

“I think that’s just a set of false choices,” he said. “The United States Navy needs to take a look at where we’re going to go in the future, which there is a requirement – which I think is likely – to deliver effects down range from the sea through the air, I think that some type of aviation combatant is going to be required.”