CNO: ‘More Sporty Security Environment’ Will Affect Next Force-Structure Assessment

ARLINGTON, Va. – The Navy’s top officer said that a forthcoming force structure assessment will reflect the guidance of the National Defense Strategy, the changing security environment and emerging technology.

“The security environment has only gotten more sporty, so we’ll take that into account,” said Adm. John M. Richardson, chief of naval operations, speaking Feb. 1 to reporters in the Pentagon, referring to the emergence of increased and sometimes aggressive naval activity in recent years by the Russian and Chinese naval and air forces.

Richardson also said that “technology is starting to come into play, so what counts as a naval platform is going to be an interesting discussion in this new force structure assessment. We want to make sure we are moving forward in a very evidence-based way, so that we’re not counting on something that hasn’t been relatively proven when it comes to the security of the nation, but we also want to make sure we’re moving fast.”

Increased agility in operations and more rapid development of technology are themes that Richardson has emphasized in recent public addresses.

Although the CNO did not discuss further what counts as a naval platform, the issue is likely to come forth as the Navy develops large and medium unmanned surface vessels as part of its Future Surface Combatant fleet. Unmanned underwater vehicles such as the Orca and Snakehead may also blur the definition of a platform and hence what counts as a ship to be counted in the fleet.

“We’re on a path to grow the Navy,” he said. “The last force structure assessment was done about 18 months ago, put out this 355-ship number. There is structure within that 355, so sometimes people don’t recognize that. … That 355 number really came about by a number of studies that were conducted inside the Department [of the Navy] and outside the department. They consistently advocated for a stronger naval force, more naval power. The all converged into something in the mid-to-upper 300s in terms of numbers of platforms.”

The 355-ship Navy was codified by the Congress in the fiscal 2018 National Defense Authorization Act. The Navy determined its goal of 355 ships in a force structure assessment released in December 2016.

Richardson said the new force structure assessment report is due later this year.

“We’ll see where that goes,” he said. “We’ll get a new number. We may hold to it, we may not. The analysis is in process.”