CNO Richardson: Columbia SSBN Program on Track, Help on Margin Needed

ARLINGTON, Va. – The Navy's top officer said the program schedule to build the Navy's next-generation ballistic-missile submarine (SSBN) is very tight and some more margin in the program would help.

"What I am pushing the team to do is stay on track," said Adm. John M. Richardson, chief of naval operations (CNO), answering a reporter's question while speaking Sept. 5 at the Defense News Conference. "But it is right on track. We need to find some margin in that program, largely in schedule, in particular."

The Columbia-class SSBN is being built to replace the Ohio-class SSBN as the platform for the Navy's contribution to the national nuclear deterrent, the Trident D5 ballistic missile. The Navy plans to build 12 boats to succeed the 14 Ohio SSBNs as they reach the end of their service lives. Critical is the need for the first Columbia to be ready to deploy for its first ballistic-missile patrol in fiscal 2031.

"In a program of this complexity, it's just a fact of life that there are going to be things that will surprise us going forward," Richardson said. "So we need to build in enough margin to accommodate those surprises and also – very important – we make sure that the entire team – the industrial base, the Navy, everybody – understands that a program of this importance, with that little margin, perhaps requires increased oversight so that we're not making mistakes and eating into a program that has very thin margins already.

The Columbia-class SSBN program is expected to cost $128 billion for acquisition.