CNO Richardson: Rail Gun Is a ‘Case Study’ in ‘How Innovation Maybe Shouldn’t Happen’

WASHINGTON – The Navy’s effort to field an electromagnetic rail gun has taken too long to develop but is yielding other technological advances, the Navy’s top officer said.

“I would say that rail gun is the case study that would say, ‘this is how innovation maybe shouldn’t happen,’” said Adm. John M. Richardson, chief of naval operations (CNO), speaking Feb. 6 to an audience at the Atlantic Council, a Washington think tank.

“[The rail gun project] has been around 15 years, maybe 20; ’rapid’ doesn’t come to mind in a time frame like that,” the CNO said, having just addressed the need for rapid prototyping and acquisition agility in order to maintain a technological edge in great power competition.

“Now we’ve learned a lot [from the project], and the engineering of building something like that that can handle that much electromagnetic energy and not just explode is challenging,” he said. “So, we’re going to continue after this – we’re going to install this thing, we’re going to continue to develop it, test it. It’s too great a weapon system so it’s going somewhere, hopefully.”

Richardson said that it was not uncommon in innovative approaches to yield unforeseen benefits.

The projectile conceived for the rail gun “is actually a pretty neat thing in and of itself,” he said. “The high-velocity projectile is also usable in just about every gun we

have. It can be out in the fleet very, very quickly independent of the rail gun. So, this effort is breeding all sorts of advances. We just need to get the clock sped up with respect to the rail gun.”