

CNO: Three Virginia SSNs Per Year A 'Challenge'



The Virginia-class fast-attack submarine USS New Hampshire (SSN 778) returns to port at Naval Station Norfolk, May 7, 2021. Reaching a production rate of three Virginia-class submarines a year will be challenging, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Michael Gilday says. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Alfred A. Coffield*
ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Navy's top officer said reaching a production rate of three Virginia-class nuclear-powered attack submarines a year will be a challenge for a number of reasons.

"I do think that three a year is a challenge," said Adm. Michael Gilday, chief of naval operations (CNO), speaking May 13 at the McAleese FY2022 Defense Programs Conference. "I think that industry recognizes that three a year is a challenge.

"I do think that the analysis that was done highlighted the fact that, look, we believe we have an advantage right now under the sea," Gilday said. "We need to maintain that advantage. [The attack submarine is] our most survivable strike platform. It performs a heavy lift for us across the world right now. We need to double down on it, if you will."

The Navy has too few attack submarines (SSNs) to meet more than half of the requirements of the regional combatant commanders, according to testimony before Congress in recent years. The Navy is facing a shortage in attack submarines that will become more severe during the mid-2020s because submarine production is too low to replace the Los Angeles-class SSNs that are being decommissioned. The Navy plans to extend the service lives of several Los Angeles-class boats to partially mitigate the shortfall. Accelerating procurement of the

Virginia class from two to three boats per year, a move supported by key members of Congress, also would help alleviate the shortfall.

Production now is underway on the first Columbia-class nuclear-powered ballistic-missile submarine (SSBN), which is the Navy's top procurement priority in that the strategic deterrence is the Navy's No. 1 mission. The cost of the Columbia class is putting the Navy budget planning under heavy pressure, making the affordability of three Virginia SSNs per year a budget challenge. The capacity of the two submarine builders – General Dynamic's Electric Boat and Huntington Ingalls' Newport News Shipbuilding – in terms of available infrastructure and skilled workers also raises questions about the ability to squeeze and other SSN in a given year. The addition of the Virginia Payload Module, which adds expense to the Block 5 of the Virginia class, also pressurizes the shipbuilding budget.

"So, it's really a challenge to industry," Gilday said. "Can we get to a place where we produce three a year? I do think that is a challenge. Right now, the answer is we can't produce three a year. We hope we get to a place where we could, but it's also going to come down to affordability with respect to what the [budget] topline is, and how much money we have left for affordable growth with respect to capacity."