CNO Warns Forum of Challenges of ‘Great Power Competition’

With the return of the “Great Power Competition,” the U.S. Navy’s top officer on April 29 emphasized the need to strengthen ties with allies and partner nations and to condition commanders to avoid turning at-sea incidents into major battles while giving them training that prepares them to fight those battles if necessary.

The Navy also must ensure it acquires new technologies that will win a future war, rather than preserving current capabilities, and that it conducts futuristic training to build a flexible and resilient force that can cope with the unexpected challenges of the future, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John M. Richardson told the Future Security Forum in Washington, D.C.

“One thing that characterizes our view of success is how we move forward,” Richardson said. The worst thing the Navy could do is remain static, he said.

“What is more relevant for the future? Is it the Harry S. Truman or something else,” he said, noting that revolutionary technologies “are just around the corner.”

The CNO was responding to a question about the Navy’s fiscal 2020 proposal to retire the aircraft carrier Truman at midlife – rather than refueling her – to free up funds to develop the future technologies. That proposal is opposed by key leaders in Congress.

Asked how the Navy was preparing for the return of the “Great Power Competition” with an increasingly antagonistic Russia and rapidly modernizing China, Richardson said it was important to think of tensions in the Black Sea and the western Pacific as regional, not bilateral issues and to help

“make all our allies and partners more resilient to this. … How do we reply as an alliance, a team.”

He also stressed the need to be able to respond faster to the competitors’ actions and “to anticipate what the adversary is going to do, and not be reactive.”

Richardson said the Navy also spends a lot of time focusing on things that can happen at sea and doing everything it can “to mitigate the risk” of those contacts with Russian or Chinese ship escalating into a clash. That includes the protocols they have with China “on what to do when we meet at sea,” to communicate and not overreact.

He said he makes that point in his frequent contacts with his peers in the Chinese navy.

“If we don’t consider each other as enemies, don’t act as enemies” when meeting at sea, he said.

Asked if he was concerned that the Navy has not had to fight a major blue water battle since World War II, Richardson said “it’s a real challenge.” He said that he had a discussion of that issue during a recent visit to the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, and during a dinner with a group of future ship commanders.

“It’s about training. How to make it as challenging, as demanding as possible,” and addressing the challenge of training commanders “to exercise the full scope of their authority.”

He also emphasized the need to use simulation and virtual reality to make training more realistic and to better train Sailors to prepare for the challenges of the future.