CNO: ‘We’ve Got to Restore Agility’

WASHINGTON – The Navy must be able to rapidly adjust to changing geopolitical situations and technological advances to maintain maritime superiority, the Navy’s top officer said.

“We’ve got to, in the Navy, restore agility,” said Adm. John M. Richardson, chief of naval operations (CNO), said Jan. 28 to an audience at the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank.

Richardson was not talking just of acquisition agility, a recent theme of other Navy officials to make the weapons procurement more responsive to emerging requirements, though he touched on that need as well.

The CNO said that agility has three dimensions, one of which is conceptual agility in the way the Navy operates.

“Frankly, we just need more imagination,” he said. “We have a conceptual or imagination challenge to be competitive at the low end of the spectrum [of naval warfare]. At the high end there is this capability challenge as technology moves faster and faster and more tools become available. We want to make sure that at the high end we get things done, get them done faster, get them out to the fleet faster so that we will compete.”

The second dimension is geographical agility.

“The Navy got very, very good at putting strike groups together,” he said. “Those strike groups would leave Norfolk or San Diego and book it to the [Persian] Gulf. They would do their operations and stay there as long as they could and then they would come back. We got excellent at that. But that was very predictable. We had the Optimized Fleet Response Plan,

optimized to get the most presence for the least amount of resources. It got pretty optimized that way.

“It wasn’t very flexible, it wasn’t very dynamic, and it wasn’t very agile,” Richardson said. “As we regain that muscle memory [and] go back and do those sorts of things, this geographic agility, going to places we haven’t been in a long time, we’re doing so a little bit less predictably [with] fewer indicators of where we’re going to go, is a big part of our business.

Richardson made the same point with the Navy’s role in ballistic missile defense (BMD).

“We’ve had some ships protecting some pretty static assets on land for a decade now,” he said. “That [BMD] ship is designed to be a maneuver force. If that asset is going to be a long-term protective asset, then let’s build something on land and liberate these ships from this mission.

“[BMD] is an important mission,” he said. “We will be there as long as we need to, but it seems that land-based system is better suited to protect a land-based asset than a ship. Then I can take

a ship out of those small boxes where they have to stay for ballistic missile defense and get them moving again.”

The CNO noted the recent voyage of the USS Harry S. Truman carrier strike group north of the Arctic Circle as an example of geographic agility, the first such carrier operations since 1991.

Speaking of the third type, technological agility, the CNO said, “We simply have to get better at this. It’s a strategic Achilles’ Heel. It’s the lack of tempo in terms of how we can field technology to the fleet. We cannot get outpaced in this.”

Richardson also said the current great power competition “is going to be a long competition. We have to think in terms of infinite-game-type strategy.”

He pointed out that, at the high end of the warfare spectrum, “the U.S. Navy must always de-escalate on the high end on our own terms. Which is another way of saying we want to have the best capability on the water.”