Courtney Urges Pentagon to Keep Columbia-Class Funding Separate

WASHINGTON – The provision for separate funding for the Columbia-class ballistic-missile submarine program is not being followed by Pentagon budget officials, which could "put tremendous pressure on the rest of the shipbuilding account," the top Democrat on the House Armed Services Seapower and Projection Forces subcommittee said July 24.

Rep. Joe Courtney, D-Conn., noted that in 2014 he and former Rep. Randy Forbes, R-Va., then-chairman of the Seapower panel, introduced legislation to create the National Sea-based Deterrent Fund to provide funding for the Ohio-replacement submarine.

"We proposed to take funding for the Columba-class program out of the shipbuilding account as a way of taking the pressure off the rest of the Navy's fleet, that was under its own pressures due to the existing [budget] top lines," Courtney told a Mitchell Institute breakfast.

The legislation was passed and still is law, he said.

"But the real question is whether the Pentagon will treat it as really a separate account," he said.

Right now, Columbia still comes out of overall pie that pays for shipbuilding.

"It's still got issues as far as the budget folks over in the Pentagon," said Courtney, who represents a Connecticut district that includes the New London submarine base and the Electric Boat submarine construction yard.

Currently, funding for Columbia is relatively low, paying for

final design and fabrication of the missile compartments. But with an estimated price tag of more than $7 billion each, paying for Columbia construction would “put a big hole in shipbuilding,” he said.

Full construction of the first Columbia is scheduled to start in fiscal 2021. A total of 12 are planned, to replace the 14 Ohio-class boats that are nearing the end of their service lives.

“This has been a totally a non-contested issue,” Courtney said.

There have been a lot of complaints about the enormous cost of the entire program to modernize all three legs of the nuclear deterrent triad, with the Air Force working to replace its Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles and buying the B-21 bomber to replace the B-52s and B-2s in the nuclear delivery mission.

But, Courtney said, “the sea-based deterrent, I think, is the least-contested leg of the triad.”

He noted that the compromise version of the fiscal 2019 National Defense Authorization Act was approved by House-Senate conferees the previous evening and probably would be passed in the House on July 26.

The bill provides “roughly $3 billion,” for Columbia detail prototyping and construction of the missile compartments, which also will go into Great Britain’s new ballistic-missile sub, the Dreadnaught, Courtney said.

“The program is moving forward. Our biggest problem is to prevent any slowing down,” because the Ohios’ service life has been extended to 42 years, which is considered the absolute limit to their ability to submerge for deterrent patrols.

The first Columbia is expected to go into service when the

first Ohio must retire.

The Navy missile boats are “the work horse of our national deterrence. … To have one of the old ships go off line, and not have a Columbia ready to replace it, obviously would create risk,” Courtney said.