Fleet Forces Commander: Careful Balance Needed Between Current and Future Readiness

ARLINGTON, Va. – The growing threat of great power competition and a shrinking industrial base means that being able to fight with the Navy the nation has now is as important as building the Navy the nation needs for the future, Adm. Christopher Grady said Jan. 17.

“That places greater emphasis on current readiness. … We must squeeze every ounce of readiness out of every dollar we get,” Grady, the commander of Fleet Forces Command, told the Surface Navy Association’s annual symposium.

Grady also warned that the Navy must rethink its traditional battle doctrine of concentrating forces against an enemy.

“We have to recognize that, given the reach and capabilities of our competitors, force concentration may be problematic,” he said. That means commanders must think of “massing effects rather than massing forces.”

That shift in tactics is indicated in Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Adm. John Richardson’s new concept for maritime dominance that advocates distributed maritime operations (DMO), Grady said.

After decades of unfettered control of the sea, “we are once again in a long-term strategic competition with nations that want to change the international order in their favor,” he said. In addition to being in an era of great power competition, “we are in a maritime era,” and with the CNO’s naval strategy and the new National Defense Strategy, the Navy

has a maritime strategy “to address the security challenges of this era.”

Grady said the new strategic era ends the 18 years of focus on land warfare in which fleet commander served as force providers to the combatant commander. Now, fleet commanders once again “can command and control forces at the operational level of war,” and employ the concepts of DMO to mass combat effects at the fight time, he said.

But in preparing the Navy for the new era, Grady noted the need to balance efforts to build the Navy the nation needs with the requirement to be able to fight today if necessary.

The Navy the nation needs is bigger, more capable and agile, he said. “But just as important as building the Navy the nation needs, is fighting with the Navy the nation has. … We aim to both build and sustain a lethal force” and to maintain a balance “between future readiness and current readiness” to be able to fight today.

The need to sustain the current force is made more essential due to the shrinkage in the industrial base, particularly shipbuilding, since the end of the Cold War and during the time of budget constraints and threat of sequestration, Grady said. “We are no longer the world’s largest manufacturer and have significantly less shipbuilding capacity that our rivals,” he said, apparently referring more to China than to Russia.

The smaller industrial base is aggravated by the highly technical nature of war and combat systems, he added. “It simply takes more time and superior craftsmanship to build a fifth-generation fighter than it did to build a P-51 Mustang” for World War II.

That means the U.S. industrial base is unlikely to be able to provide the surge of combat systems as it did in the 1940s, he said. And that demands greater focus on sustaining the current

fleet, speeding up the acquisition of new technologies and training the force to fight and win with the Navy the nation has, Grady said.