‘Great Power’ Fight Might Require Different Blend of Vessels, But Marines Won’t Shun Amphibious Operations, NDIA Speakers Say

ANNAPOLIS, Md. — Despite the commandant’s stark warning about the vulnerability of current amphibious warships, the Marines are not moving away from amphibious operations. But to operate in the future highly contested littoral waters, the amphibious force must be more numerous, adding a lot of smaller, cheaper and “risk worthy” vessels and unmanned systems, senior Marine and Navy officers and civilian analysts said Oct. 23.

Those officers and experts and other groups of uniformed and civilian officials also argued that providing logistical support for amphibious operations in waters threatened by the modern deadly weapons employed by peer competitors, such as China and Russia, will require starkly different systems and tactics.

And in an extensive series of panel presentations during the second day of the National Defense Industrial Association’s conference on expeditionary warfare in the era of great power competition, the speakers appealed to industry representatives in the audience to help provide the new

technologies and platforms the naval forces will need to fight and win in any future conflict.

Much of the discussion was shaped by the Commandant's Planning Guidance issued this summer by the new Marine leader, Gen. David Berger, which highlighted the threat to traditional large, complex and relatively expensive amphibious ships, if they have to operate within the reach of the long-range precision weapons and submarines fielded by China and, to a lesser extent, Russia and Iran.

"We are not walking away from amphibious operations," said Brig. Gen. Benjamin Watson, commanding general of the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory. He noted that the new operational concepts proposed by Berger – Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations and Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment – require amphibious operations. "The commandant is not calling for a smaller amphibious fleet, but a larger one" with "smaller, less expensive and more risk-worthy ships" to complement the larger ships, Watson said.

Maj. Gen. Tracey King, director of expeditionary warfare, said he "hears a lot of talk inside [the Pentagon] that we'll never do another amphibious landing. We don't want to do another Iwo Jima … but we will do amphibious operations again."

The new amphibious missions will involve "distributed operations," a Navy-promoted concept that provides "the

advantage of mass with distributed forces," King said. That will require larger numbers of smaller units with "risk worthy platforms and connectors," because "we're absolutely going to take some body blows."

Asked by an audience member how they measure "risk worthy," Watson conceded "we don't know" whether it is defined by lives or by the cost of the platforms, noting that the current amphibs "are these expensive platforms that we, as a nation, cannot afford to replace."

Two panels addressed the challenges of providing logistical support to naval operations in the contested waters, with Lt. Gen. Charles Chiarotti, deputy commandant for installations and logistics, admitting that "Marine Corps logistics is not postured to sustain the future fight." They will require "hybrid logistics," that blends the legacy assets with what new systems they can acquire to provide Integrated, maneuverable logistics "in concert with the Navy."

Other speakers from logistical support organizations and program managers cited the need for very different logistical platforms, including a variety of unmanned surface, subsurface and aerial systems, some of the existing smaller, cheaper vessels, such as the Expeditionary Fast Transport, Expeditionary Mobile Base and Littoral Combat Ships, and even Military Sealift Command and commercial cargo vessels.