Marines to Leverage Unmanned Systems, More Capable Amphib Fleet to Fight Great Power Competition

WASHINGTON – The Marine Corps and the amphibious fleet will be critical to prevailing in the emerging great power competition in which U.S. forces will have to "fight to get to the fight" against China's growing military capabilities, the Marine's top combat development officer said Feb. 7.

To meet that challenge, "We have to work on some things to make this amphibious force more lethal, more survivable," Lt. Gen. David H. Berger, the Deputy Commandant for Combat Development and Integration, told a Capitol Hill forum sponsored by the Amphibious Warship Industrial Base Coalition.

That would include installing vertical launch tubes, "or other ways to make the ships more lethal" to give them organic ways to defend themselves, "including air defense," Berger said, noting the services has had decades of not having to worry about being attacked from the air. Berger said. And they must do that while decreasing ships' electromagnetic signature because "if they can find us, they can target us."

In addition to their traditional role of projecting Marine forces ashore, Berger said the amphibs "can be mother ships," capable of launching and recovering scores of unmanned systems "from sovereign territory. Why wouldn't you want to do that?"

Those unmanned systems could operate from shore or from ships, to observe and kill things. "We don't have the now, but they are coming," he said.

Citing his recent command of Marine Forces Pacific, Berger

said China “knows they have one team to match” and have “poured 100 percent of their resources into overcoming us.” As a result, the U.S. military is losing its traditional technological advantage.

While joining the industry representatives and an array of House members in urging continued development of a larger and more capable amphibious fleet, Berger drew on his command’s role in producing land combat equipment that can support the fight for sea control.

Noting that the National Defense Strategy advocates the Marines returning to their historic role of establishing and defending forward operating bases, he said they would “need long-range fires, from the ship, from the shore.” In order to control land, they will need “platforms that can move from one to the other.”

To do that, the amphibious force will need connectors, but not the current connectors of amphibious tractors, landing craft utilities and landing craft air cushions, but a new family of connectors being developed by Maj. Gen. David Coffman, director of Expeditionary Forces, who was in the audience.

Those will designed to go “ship to shore and shore to ship. If you’re going to move a distributed force, it’s going to be back and forth. It can’t be the old connectors,” Berger said.

Another thing they will need to operate in the littorals, he said, is anti-mine capability, an area where “we fell asleep… We have to have a mine clearance capability to move fast. If we are going to be moving around in the littorals, we need to fight mines.” That is another threat Coffman’s office is addressing.

Earlier in the forum, eight House members, most of whom serve on the House Armed Services Committee, supported the Navy-Marine Corps goal of expanding the amphibious force from the current 32 ships to 38, including building the new Amphibious

Transport Dock (LPD) Flight II ships that will replace the aged Landing Ship Docks (LSD).

The industry representatives emphasized the need to move the planned procurement of the next “big-deck” amphibious assault ship, LHA-9, up from 2024 to 2021 to avoid a seven-year production gap that will harm the shipbuilding work force and substantially add costs.

The House members, including Rep. Joseph Courtney, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee Seapower and Projection Forces Subcommittee, urged the industry coalition to put pressure on lawmakers to support the defense budget, particularly shipbuilding funds.

Courtney noted that the federal budget will not be released until March 12, more than a month late, which “will intensify the need” for industry pressure. “Things will move really fast.”