Modly: Integrated Navy Force Structure to Steer Away From Large Surface Combatants



Acting Navy Secretary Thomas B. Modly speaks Feb. 28 at the Brookings Institution. Richard R. Burgess

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Navy's forthcoming Integrated Naval Force Structure Assessment (INFSA) differs from the 2016 FSA by some inflection points, including a reduced emphasis on large surface combatants, the Navy's top official said.

Acting Navy Secretary Thomas B. Modly, speaking Feb. 28 at the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank, noted several inflection points.

"One of the more significant things is de-emphasis on large surface combatants," Modly said. "You will see that number come down in favor of more small, highly capable surface combatants like the frigate and some of the things that we're thinking about doing with the LCS [littoral combat ship]."

He said another inflection point is unmanned vessels.

"There is a large discussion about how unmanned [vessels] would work," he said. "The numbers of the end-state of that are still in flux, and I'm fully comfortable with that being in flux because, frankly, we don't have any right now. Whether we end up of 45 or something [unmanned vessels] that we don't know or 50 or 75 we don't know, it's sort of irrelevant."

"We know we have to start down the path towards unmanned to understand how that's going to work, and that's both underwater and above water, [including] large, medium, small, etc.," he said.

Modly also said that two new classes of ships are being

considered by the Navy. One is a smaller, lighter, more lightly manned amphibious ship that "can provide the distributed maritime operations and the expeditionary advanced base operations that are part of [Marine Commandant David H. Berger's] vision."

The second class is a combat support ship.

"We currently don't have those kind of ships in the fleet right now, nor on the drawing board," he said. "In this [fiscal 2021] budget, we have dollars assigned to start research and development."

Modly noted that there are differences between the Navy Department's analysis and that of the Defense Department's Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation office.

"I don't think they're that significant, when you're talking about a plan that's going to evolve over 10 years, so it's [Defense Secretary Mark Esper's] prerogative and so we're supporting him in taking a look at that," he said. "The next couple of months we'll probably tighten up some of those differences."

"We've got to invest in a new amphib; we've got to invest in a new combat support [vessel]; we've got to invest in the frigate," Modly said. "We've got to think about how we accelerate the pace in which we're going to acquire the frigate. We've got to think about unmanned."

Modly said the Navy and Marine Corps both assigned three-star flag officers to conduct the INFSA, a study that included campaign analyses.

"It's a good starting point for this future force structure," he said. "What we want to do now is take it out of the realm being something we do every four years. This is how we have to start thinking as a department. So, we are developing a process now to take that statement around and iterate it

continually so that it can inform our budget process in more of a real-time manner.”