Modly: 'The Preeminence of U.S. Maritime Superiority' is Key to New Defense Strategy

NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. – The undersecretary of the Navy capped the 2018 Sea-Air-Space Exposition by touching on a number of the recurring themes that emerged during the three-day event at the Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center.

In the final Sea-Air-Space keynote speech, at the Secretary of the Navy Luncheon, Thomas B. Modly, spoke of the rapidly changing security environment, the need for agility not only among the services but industry that supplies them to keep ahead of the threat, and the new National Defense Strategy and its notion of competition – and the implications that would have for the Navy-Marine Corps team going forward.

"I took my initial oath office in the Navy as a midshipman in 1979, and back then the world was a dangerous place, we all thought," he said. "But today's world is even more complex, and the threats to our security even more varied across a broader spectrum.

These threats are outlined in the National Defense Strategy, which Modly said, "makes it increasingly clear that Russia and China want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian models, and they will use every tool that is available to them to influence and coerce other nations' economic, diplomatic and security decisions."

At the same time, he said, "It does not ignore the growing and pervasive threats of North Korea and Iran, and it continues commitment to defeat violent extremism and the horrors they have perpetrated. … In short, we are re-entering an era of great power competition on a global scale, so we must be focused on responsibly developing forces that protect our

people and our interests and our friends and allies around the world."

Fundamental to the implementation of this strategy, he said will be "the preeminence of U.S. maritime superiority," something that has been increasing challenged of late as new threats have emerged and existing threats have evolved.

"The Navy and Marine Corps will rise to this challenge and we will do so by building a bigger, better, more networked, more talented and more ready force," Modly maintained. "Thanks to the support of Congress, we can say that we have already begun down this path to the future state of U.S. maritime supremacy."

The recent budget agreement not only will arrest declining readiness, it will help begin to restore it while continuing to increase lethality by building both capacity and capability, Modly said. But that can only be maintained with future budget stability and avoiding a return to the short-term continuing resolutions (CRs) of recent years that he said have proven so devastating.

"The pace of operations has put an immense strain on our fleet, leading to significant challenges to our ability to effectively provide forward presence and project power," he said. "We must return to a condition where we have enough well-maintained ships – manned by well-trained, well-rested, focused and competent crews – to meet the relentless security demands placed on them.

"We estimate that the nine consecutive continuing resolutions that we have experienced over the last several years have cost the Navy nearly $4 billion due to contract inefficiencies and interruptions that managing from CR to CR inevitably cause. We must end these inefficient boom-and-bust procurement cycles. Busts devastate workforce experience, they devastate efficiency and resiliency, and make it difficult for us to

rebuild capacity when we need it."

Building the fleet to the stated goal of 355 ships is going to take significant capital and time, even with a stable budget environment. Based on what Modly described as "stable assumptions" that include constrained top-line funding and estimates of current shipbuilding capacity, that 355-ship level would not be achieved until 2052.

And the number of ships is only part of the equation, he maintained.

"The right number is more like 355-plus, because we also need to increase the lethality of those platforms and their ability to work in a networked fashion with both manned and unmanned assets that contain, restrain, confuse, overwhelm and decisively defeat our enemies," Modly said. "A larger, more agile force will be the key determiner of the success of our maritime strategy.

"For my perspective, how we measure that 'plus' is far more important than how we end up counting the number of ships that make up the 355 mix. Specifically, how flexible and adaptable is it? How well does it collaborate and interoperate with allies and with unmanned assets or smaller combatant ships that don't fit nicely in the categories we have today? How fast is it, not only over and under the water, but in the information space? Or how quickly can it be reconfigured to address different types of threats?

"These are the critical questions we will ask ourselves as we build this new fleet, and we will demand that industry also consider these questions when they work with us to build it."

Building this agile maritime force also will require a serious and critical self-assessment of how the Department of the Navy does things as in organization, Modly added. "We must reverse the culture of normalized deviation that exists in some parts of the department. We will do this by demanding stronger

accountability from all levels of the department.

“The quote ‘close enough for government work’ is a phrase I will not tolerate in the Department of the Navy because, frankly, that’s not close enough to what we need to compete and win in this new environment we find ourselves in as a nation.”