

Modly: Navy Needs More 'Distributed' Fleet



An E-2D Hawkeye prepares to land on the deck of the USS Gerald R. Ford. Acting Navy Secretary Thomas B. Modly says the Ford and other carriers of its class present big targets for potential adversaries and that the Navy needs to lean more toward the distributed fleet concept. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Ruben Reed

WASHINGTON – The U.S. Navy's top official was mum on details of the recently completed Integrated Force Structure Assessment (IFSA), but he said the Navy needs a more distributed fleet to counter peer competitors.

"There are going to be a lot of new things in this that weren't in the 2016 Force Structure Assessment," said acting Navy Secretary Thomas B. Modly, who answered questions from an audience at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, a Washington think tank, speaking of the IFSA. "It is a spectacular step forward in thinking about what our force structure should look like."

"We're going to have to build a fleet that is more distributed to support distributed maritime operations," Modly added. "We're going to have to build a fleet that has distributed sensor capability ... that is less concentrated in its lethality ... that per platform is less expansive than it is right now."

The acting secretary pointed out that the average cost of a new ship during the build-up to the 600-ship Navy in the 1980s was about \$1 billion, whereas the average cost now is \$2 billion in constant dollars.

"It's just not sustainable anymore," he said.

"We have to be in a lot of places at once, and we need to complicate the calculations of our adversaries in the

[Pacific] region.”

He said there are “some platforms that we need to invest in that we currently don’t have. We’ve got to get on with that, both from the research and development side of it, also, perhaps, expanding the size of the industrial base to produce those things.”

He said the new guided-missile frigate – FFG(X) – “is a critical program for us” in that as a smaller platform it will enable the Navy to be more distributed.

The Navy is expected to continue to push for new seagoing medium and large unmanned surface vessels, though these are not likely to be included in the Navy’s official count of ships in its battle force – an accounting Modly said he found to be irrelevant, in that counts of ships and unmanned vessels would total the same whether counted together or separately.

The Navy is going as fast as it can with the funding that is being provided for unmanned ships, he said.

Modly said the big question for the future fleet is the next aircraft carrier design. The Gerald R. Ford class of carriers currently under construction cost \$13 billion per ship, and they are large targets for an adversary – a characteristic he cited as demonstrating the need for more distribution of the fleet, including smaller ships.

He also pointed out that, by current planning, the Navy will not be able to reach a force level of 12 aircraft carriers until 2065, “[at which point] we will all be dead.”

The build-up to a 355-ship Navy, as currently codified into federal law, as delineated in a 30-year shipbuilding plan, “needs not to be a 30-year plan, [but] something within the next decade,” he said. “It’s going to require some trades.”

Modly stressed that the Navy, with its shipbuilding needs, does not want to short-change current readiness, saying, "We don't want a hollow force."

Modly said the Navy's intention is to continually update the IFSA, pulling in academic thinking and wargaming to validate the assessment.