Modly: Unmanned Systems 'Huge Priority' in Building a Bigger Fleet

WASHINGTON – When talking about the future fleet size, the Navy's No. 2 civilian leader says he calls it "355-plus," with the "plus" meaning a lot of unmanned systems and other innovative things not normally considered part of the fleet.

"Unmanned is a huge priority for the Navy," which is looking at a range of systems to take advantage of the "huge advances in unmanned" technology, Navy Undersecretary Thomas B. Modly told a Defense Writers Group breakfast Oct. 4.

Despite that push to add unmanned systems, Modly said there is no quota or goal for the share of the fleet they will fill.

"We are definitely on a path to building a bigger fleet" and it will include "a bigger integration of unmanned."

The Navy and Marine Corps already are fielding a large number of unmanned air and ground vehicles and surface and subsurface vessels, and are developing larger and more capable systems. The Navy recently awarded a contract to Boeing to produce the MQ-25 Stingray, a carrier-based unmanned aerial refueling jet, and the Marines want a large Group 5 unmanned aerial vehicle that can operate from amphibious ships.

Modly said a new Navy force structure plan should go to Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John Richardson and Navy Secretary Richard Spencer next month and probably would be released early next year.

A lot of things have changed since the last plan was released in 2016, he said, including the build-up of Chinese capabilities and activities in the Pacific, how unmanned

systems would fit in and the effect of the planned new frigate on the force of small surface combatants.

Modly said the larger fleet obviously would require more Sailors. Asked whether there were concerns that those plans to add personnel would hit the same problems the Army suffered when it fell 6,500 short of its recruiting goal in fiscal 2018, he conceded the Navy "was going to face the same challenges." Recruiting always becomes more difficult in a "hot economy" with low unemployment rates, he said.

"We always have to make the case that the Navy is a good place to start a career," with its training opportunities, and "the ships are more comfortable to live in" than when he served in the Navy several decades ago.

Modly said the Navy was making a maximum effort to improve the sustainability of its ships and aircraft, with investments in the shipyards and a focus on improving the maintenance and supply of spare parts for the F/A-18s, which suffered badly during the years of tight budgets.

He did not believe that the emerging "dynamic deployment" concept would interfere with the planned maintenance cycle for ships, like a similar aggressive deployment plan a decade ago that had caused an epidemic of unfit ships. The ships would make their six-month deployments as scheduled so they could meet the planned maintenance periods, he said.

But what the ships would do during that deployment will be different, he said, noting the recent unusual activities of the USS Harry S. Truman battlegroup.

The "dynamic deployment" concept was proposed by Defense Secretary Jim Mattis who said U.S. forces should be strategically predictable but tactically unpredictable.

Modly recently returned from an extensive tour of many of the small island nations in the Pacific. He said the impression he

gained from their leaders was a strong desire for more U.S. presence, including port visits, and help in improving their capabilities to monitor their territorial waters.