Navy Undersea Warfare Director: 'We Cannot Be Out-Escalated' in Nuclear Deterrence

WASHINGTON – The Navy's director for undersea warfare said the nation's nuclear submarine-based strategic deterrent is more important than ever and that the 12 planned Columbia-class ballistic-missile submarines (SSBNs) are needed to sustain a credible strategic triad for the future.

Speaking Feb. 2 at a discussion of the Columbia SSBN event at the Heritage Foundation, a Washington think tank, Rear Adm. John W. Tammen pointed out that, with the new era of great power competition, "the need for deterrence has never been greater. That's based on the destructive [power] of modern-day weapons and the competitive landscape that we are seeing with [Russia's and China's attempts] to make their place in the global domain.

"We have to own the top rungs of the escalation ladder," Tammen said. "Our competitors must understand that we cannot be out-escalated in our part of the [strategic] triad and we must have the will and the credible capability to respond as necessary to their aggression and the cost that they would take would be greatly outweighed by any perceived gains."

Tammen said that all three legs of the U.S. strategic deterrent triad – bombers, intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and submarine-launched ballistic missiles – are important, as are the command, control and communications systems associated with those weapons.

Tammen said the most survivable leg – the SSBN – "gives the president time to make a decision. He does not have to worry

that he is going to have an attack that will decimate his ability to respond.”

The requirement for at least 12 Columbia-class SSBNs is predicated on having 10 available for deterrence patrols while two are in deep maintenance. The 12 new subs, which replace 14 Ohio-class SSBNs, will have 42-year service lives because their reactors will never need refueling.

Tammen said that, with the Columbia class, the nation will get an ultra-quiet platform that will benefit from the success of the Virginia-class attack submarine program, that will leverage more than 50 years of SSBN experience, and that will deploy a weapon – the Trident D5LE missile – that has had 11 successful test launches.