Wittman: Third SSN in Budget Helps Reduce Risk for Columbia SSBN

WASHINGTON – The addition of a third Virginia-class attack submarine (SSN) in the proposed 2020 defense budget is a long-sought goal of the leaders of the Seapower and Projection Forces subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee. If approved, the third SSN would help with the construction of the Columbia-class ballistic-missile submarine, a congressman claimed.

"Chairman Joe Courtney [D-Conn.] and I were pretty adamant with [then-Defense] Secretary Mattis and said, 'Listen, we need to add another Virginia-class submarine as we're transitioning into Columbia class,' " said U.S. Rep. Rob Wittman (R-Va.), speaking March 13 at the McAleese Defense Programs Conference in Washington. "It does two things: it gives us an additional submarine and gets us hopefully above the 42 number [the low in 2028 before the number increases toward 66] and, if you do that in combination with taking existing nuclear plants that we can replace into some of the 688[-class] submarines [Los Angeles-class SSNs], we can get close to 50 [SSNs] when it's all said and done.

"But it also helps us to de-risk Columbia," Wittman said. "It lets us put work force into place that develops the knowledge, skills and abilities to transition directly over from building a third Virginia-class submarine to building the Columbia class. As we know with new boats in these programs – we watched it with Virginia class and others – the learning curve is steep, where all the risk is embedded in the early side. When you look at welds and all the things that happen with these ships, we want to make sure we de-risk that.

Courtney, who also spoke at the conference, noted that the effort to include the third SSN in the 2019 budget failed, but also noted that, with the administration now supporting the third SSN in the 2020 budget, “even though we lost the battle [in 2019], we won the war.”

On another topic, the Navy’s plan to cancel the Refueling and Comprehensive Overhaul (RCOH) of the aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman was met with concern from both Courtney and Wittman. The Truman is 23 years old, and its service life could be extended to 50 years with the RCOH, as has been done with the oldest half of the 10 Nimitz-class carriers to date.

Courtney, who pointed out that the Navy already has purchased the nuclear reactors for the Truman, said the plan to cancel the RCOH “doesn’t make any business sense to me.”

Wittman, noting that the move would drop the aircraft carrier force level to 10 ships, said: “I would argue that it is not wise.”

Aircraft carriers “are still extraordinarily critical elements of sea power, projecting power forward,” Wittman said.