SECNAV Nominee Calls Chinese Adventurism His Main Threat Concern



The Theodore Roosevelt Carrier Strike Group transits in formation with the Makin Island Amphibious Ready Group in the South China Sea April 9, 2021. The Theodore Roosevelt Carrier Strike Group, Makin Island Amphibious Ready Group and the Ticonderoga-class guided-missile cruiser USS Port Royal (CG 73) are conducting expeditionary strike force operations during their deployments to the 7th Fleet area of operations. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Faith McCollum*

ARLINGTON, Va. – Former U.S. Navy surface warfare officer Carlos Del Toro, the Biden administration's choice to be the next secretary of the Navy, told a Senate hearing July 13 that he will be "exclusively focused on the China threat."

At a confirmation hearing before the Senate Armed Services

Committee with four other nominees for senior Pentagon posts, Del Toro, a U.S. Naval Academy graduate and former destroyer commander, was quizzed on several topics from lagging shipbuilding plans and aging shipyards to the challenge of projecting power in the Arctic without sufficient deep water ports, sturdy-hulled Navy ships or Coast Guard ice breakers to operate in the far north.

However, several Republican lawmakers, who view the Navy's $211.7 billion fiscal 2022 budget – with $22.6 billion for shipbuilding, a 3% reduction from $23.3 billion in 2021 – as too little to maintain Navy readiness, zeroed in on the People's Republic of China and the challenge it presents as a pacing competitor and a threat to Taiwan.

Noting China's "global adventurism" presented both a national security threat and an economic threat, Del Toro said it was "incredibly important to defend Taiwan, in every way," adding that a comprehensive approach should be taken to provide Taiwan with "as much self-defense measures as humanly possible."

Asked by Sen. Rick Scott of Florida about Indo-Pacific wargame scenarios indicating the United States and its allies would not be able to defend Taiwan, Del Toro noted that as a graduate of the Naval War College as well as Annapolis he was well acquainted with war gaming programs but has not been privy to recent classified studies. However, if confirmed as Navy secretary, Del Toro said he intended "to dive into that immediately, so I can better understand that threat and match that threat."

Del Toro added, "I'm going to be exclusively focused on the China threat and exclusively focused on moving our maritime strategy forward in order to protect Taiwan and all of our national security interests in the Indo-Pacific theater."

Both Democrats and Republicans were concerned about the fiscal

2022 plans to decommission 15 ships, including four littoral combat ships and seven Ticonderoga-class guided missile cruisers, while requesting funds to build just one destroyer. Sen. Roger Wicker (R-Mississippi) noted those changes would drop the fleet size to 290 ships, below the 355-ship fleet mandated by 2018 legislation.

Del Toro said he fully supported the 355-ship goal, and with the shift to "a more dominant maritime strategy in the Indo-Pacific" to deter China, the Navy and Marine Corps will need more resources to field "the combat effectiveness we will need." He committed to working to make that case with Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and the White House in developing the Navy's fiscal 2023 budget request.

SASC Chairman Jack Reed (D-Rhode Island) noted at the hearing's start that "deferred ship maintenance, reduced steaming and flying hours, and cancelled training and deployments have created serious readiness problems," and "cost overruns and delays in schedules have plagued both public and private shipyards."

Citing his experience in the Navy and a small business owner for 17 years, Del Toro said he understood the responsibility of the Navy secretary "to ensure the return on investment that American taxpayers make in supporting our Navy."

It was "incredibly important to ensure, that requirement creeps don't interfere with the continuing cost of projects," he said, adding that having the right program managers in place and the right oversight from their leadership to ensure projects stay on track was a key element as well as paying immediate attention when challenging problems are first identified and taking necessary actions to correct them.

"It takes a team to make that happen, they have to have the support from their senior leadership and the military as well for it to be an effective solution," he said.