Secretary: Navy Discussing Next-Gen Carrier Concepts, Including ‘Lightning Carrier’



A total of 13 U.S. Marine Corps F-35B Lightning II are staged aboard the amphibious assault ship USS America while America conducts routine operations in the eastern Pacific Ocean. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Chad Swysgood

WASHINGTON – The secretary of the U.S. Navy said the sea service is looking ahead to determine what the follow-on aircraft carrier design will look like, even as work continues to get the new USS Gerald R. Ford out to regular operations at sea.

“With the [recent] two-carrier buy, what will the next carrier look like? We’re having discussions on that as we speak, and we will see what happens,” Navy Secretary Richard V. Spencer said, speaking Oct. 23 at the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank. “I think we actually whiteboard this thing. What will it look like in 10 to 15 years? Is it a floating platform for electrically charged unmanned aircraft? I don’t know.”

Spencer said the Navy is looking at the “lightning carrier” concept, deploying 20 F-35B Lightning II strike fighters on an amphibious assault ship. Recently the USS America operated in the eastern Pacific Ocean with 13 F-35Bs of Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 122, the Corps’ most recently equipped F-35B squadron. Earlier this year, USS Wasp operated for a short period with 10 F-35Bs of VMFA-121 on board.

“My cost performance there is tremendous,” Spencer said. “Does it have the same punch? No, it doesn’t. But it has a very interesting sting to it.”

Such lightning carriers would lack airborne early warning aircraft unless the Navy developed a capability for these smaller decks. The sea service is developing an aerial refueling tanker capability to be installed in the MV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft to refuel the F-35Bs.

> *"With the [recent] two-carrier buy, what will the next carrier look like? We're having discussions on that as we speak, and we will see what happens."*
>
> *Navy Secretary Richard V. Spencer*

During the opening phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, the amphibious assault ship USS Bataan operated as a "Harrier carrier," equipped with two full squadrons of AV-8B Harrier II attack aircraft, which the F-35B is replacing, rather than the usual six aircraft.

The concept might get a serious workout in a couple of years.

"In 2021, you will see a Marine Corps F-35B squadron on the Queen Elizabeth, which we are very excited about," Spencer said, speaking of the plan to operate a Marine Corps F-35B squadron alongside a British F-35B squadron on the new Royal Navy aircraft carrier.