STRATCOM Commander: Number of SSBNs Needed Depends on Threat



An artist rendering of the future Columbia-class ballistic missile submarine. U.S. NAVY

ARLINGTON, Va. — The U.S. Navy is planning to build 12 Columbia-class ballistic-missile submarines (SSBNs) to replace its 14 legacy Ohio-class SSBNs, but the number could change if the threat to the United States changes.

With the increasing concern about the growing power of China and Russia in the era of "great power competition," the numbers in the U.S. nuclear deterrence triad — Navy SSBNs and U.S. Air Force bombers and intercontinental ballistic missiles — might need to be changed to meet the future threat.

Adm. Charles Richard, commander of U.S. Strategic Command, speaking July 30 at a webinar sponsored by the Mitchell Institute, said that the U.S strategic deterrent is "going to be tested in ways that it hasn't been tested before," noting that "it has been 30 years since the United States contemplated a nuclear conflict."

Richard noted that Russia has been modernizing its forces for the last 15 years and that there has been a "breathtaking expansion" in China's forces.

"China is on a trajectory to be a peer to us by the end of the decade," he said.

The admiral praised the U.S. nuclear deterrent triad because of the "flexibility of its design," which allows U.S. Strategic Command to respond to every contingency.

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>
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"If you take away any leg [of the triad], you just took away a stack of attributes that we have found useful in that past and see being useful in the future," he said. "Can I compensate in some respects by coming across and using other elements of the triad? Yes, but not with those same attributes. Which means you just narrowed the range of the situations that we are able to effectively deter. You just took away a future hedging capability. If you took a piece [of the triad] away, that's going to make it that much harder for me to execute the policy of this nation as documented in the Nuclear Posture Review."

Richard addressed the survivability of the SSBN leg of the triad, armed with Trident missiles.

"When we say the submarine leg is survivable, that's not just based on individual platform survivability," he said. "Submarines are very difficult to find. They are not impossible to find. They have to be operated correctly like any stealth platform. But you derive that from force survivability. It is the combination of the number and location and the way you are operating the force is what gives you that very high confidence that that leg is going to survive."

"I'm very confident that the Navy has taken the right steps to ensure that we are able to maintain force survivability," Richard continued. "I think it's important that when we set the requirements, particularly the numbers for the platforms, that was based on a specific threat. If you change the threat on me, then we have to come back and re-think what the right number is. That's going up. Going down, it's not just what the threat looks like, but it's what it takes to maintain that attribute of the leg. There's a minimum number of submarines

you can get to. It doesn’t matter what number of weapons or missiles are on them, it’s the number of platforms I have to have to make my statement remain true on force survivability. That is why the Navy and the STRATCOM will say ‘at least 12’ [Columbia-class SSBNs]. We need to see what the threat looks like.”

Richard praised the introduction of the low-yield W76-2 nuclear warhead into the deterrent force. “It is a very welcome addition,” he said. “It is doing exactly what it was designed to do, but it is important to remember it added into an already existing stack of capabilities.”

He also noted that the Nuclear Posture Review “wisely talked about a sea-launched [nuclear] cruise missile … a very good beginning to offset the numbers of non-treaty-accountable weapons that has great benefit in the assurance of our allies.”