

Wider Development of Unmanned Systems Must Consider Navy's Global Scale, Geurts Says



Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Research Development, and Acquisition, James Geurts, shown here addressing the commissioning ceremony of USS Billings (LCS 15). U.S. Navy / Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Marianne Guemo

ARLINGTON, Va. – One of the big challenges facing the U.S. Navy in the future deployment of unmanned systems is how to obtain and use them effectively on a global scale, the Navy's top acquisition official says.

Unmanned systems are already a key part of the force, whether in the air, on the surface or under it, but "how do we scale that to take advantage of the unique opportunities" they provide the Navy, James "Hondo" Geurts asked in a Sept. 8 livestreamed keynote address to the Unmanned Systems Defense, Protection, Security virtual conference.

"We need to be bold in trying new things," said Geurts, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Research, Development and Acquisition, "but disciplined in how we scale that so we don't get into exquisite fragility, where we have systems in one specific niche for one specific set of conditions."

Geurts said scale and balance are two key attributes going forward. He noted Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday's unmanned systems campaign plan seeks to move from a collection of systems, often treated as unique, into an integrated capability that share command and control, concepts of operations and data systems and avoid reinventing the wheel for every platform.

A key challenge is "how we're going to communicate with all

these different systems and how they can come in and out of our network,” Geurts said. It will take technology that can cut across multiple platforms, to align technical, business, programmatic and operational architectures, he said.

Geurts was asked if large unmanned surface vessels (LUSVs) should be counted as ships, an issue that has roiled the debate over how to increase the Navy’s size to 355 ships. Geurts said he was “less interested in what numbers we count in what column.” He is more interested in a vessel’s capability, and when they prove they have the capability “appropriate for what we consider right now a battle force ship, then we’ll put them in the right column,” Geurts said.

“In the end we have to get away from manned vs, unmanned. It’s manned and unmanned together, that will enable us to be the most successful,” he added.