NAVY LEAGUE LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS
POSITION PAPER: SSN SUBMARINE FORCE
AUGUST 25, 2020

NAVY LEAGUE POSITION: Congress should authorize and fund two Virginia-class hulls in 2021.

ISSUE: The SSN force faces a challenge with older Los Angeles-class (SSN 688) boats retiring rapidly over the coming years. While the current shortfall is 13 for one of our most valuable assets for near-peer competition, Navy force structure projections estimate a 24-hull shortfall of the 66-attack submarine force goal in FY27. The Congressional Research Service indicates this "could lead to a period of heightened operational strain for the SSN force, and perhaps a period of weakened conventional deterrence."

BACKGROUND: The Navy's FY20 30-year shipbuilding plan included procurement of two Virginia-class SSNs in FY21. This would help the Navy implement the 2018 the National Defense Strategy (NDS) and Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO) concept to build a more lethal and agile force. In an environment of great power competition, our submarine force's asymmetric stealth advantage and capabilities against anti-access powers enable success for the entire joint force. Sustaining the gold-standard Virginia-class acquisition program — to include procurement of two hulls per year through fiscal 2025, and the Virginia Payload Module (VPM) — is vital to the sustainment of this critical capability. This strategy minimizes both the depth and duration of the SSN shortfall and, with the VPM, the loss of undersea payload volume in the post-guided-missile submarine (SSGN) era. It also improves payload distribution across the force, which will complicate adversary planning. Additionally, it is likely an upcoming study of future Navy force-level requirements will recommend a larger fleet of nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs). The House Armed Services Committee reported that an uneven workflow of one boat in FY21 could cause "last in/first out" labor contracts to force the yards to lay off the young workers they just hired to build Columbia. The Navy also indicated in their FY21 budget brief they believe the industrial base has the capacity to take on the additional work associated with building the 10th boat in the current Multi Year Procurement contract.

DISCUSSION: A second Virginia-class submarine sits at the top of the Navy's FY21 unfunded priority list. Congressman Joe Courtney (D-CT), Chairman of the House Armed Services Seapower and Projection Forces subcommittee, described the SSN as the "tip of the spear" for deterring near-peer competitors. Ranking Member Rob Wittman (R-VA) emphasized the importance of "accelerating the undersea strike capacity and providing for our strategic deterrence". The Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Mike Gilday stated that if Congress could give him another ship today, any ship, he would choose a second Virginia-class submarine. The construction and introduction of a second Virginia-class submarine is vital to America's national security interests and would provide a steady workflow to the shipbuilding industrial base.

POLICY POSITION: The intent of the NDS, and the Navy's FY20 shipbuilding plans, call for a two ship buy for the Virginia-class program in FY21, yet press reports indicate the Office of Management and Budget removed funding from the Navy's budget submission at the last minute. Currently, the Senate bill would authorize only advance procurement dollars as a down payment and indication of their willingness to pursue this critical weapon system in the future. However, as Columbia Class SSBN procurement ramps up, and given that budgets are likely to decrease over the FYDP, finding additional dollars for a 10th boat could be challenging.

Additional Resources:

- Second Virginia Attack Boat Tops Navy's Fiscal Year 2021 Unfunded Priorities List
- Rep. Joe Courtney Questions Navy Officials Over Virginia-Class Submarine Reduction in 2021 Budget
- Wittman's Opening Statement at FY21 NDAA SPF Markup
- CRS: Virginia Class SSN Procurement
- Navy: 30-year shipbuilding plan for FY20