

THE DEPARTMENTS: NAVY

The Ohio-class ballistic-missile submarine USS Tennessee conducts routine operations in the Atlantic Ocean in January.



MASS COMMUNICATION SPECIALIST
1ST CLASS REX NELSON/U.S. NAVY

UNDERWATER BALANCING ACT

Navy prioritizes the replacement of aging nuclear subs

By Matt Alderton

THE U.S. NAVY CELEBRATED its 240th birthday on Oct. 13. As sailors celebrated, however, Navy leadership was busy contemplating a less immediate, yet far more pressing, event: the eventual retirement of the nation's nuclear ballistic submarines, or SSBNs.

The current Ohio-class of SSBNs is scheduled to retire at a rate of one sub per year beginning in 2027. By then, however, the average age of the subs will be 42, and replacements for the fleet that contains half the U.S. nuclear arsenal are not a sure thing.

"(The Ohio) was designed as a 30-year ship class; that we're going to 42 years on that ship class is extremely impressive," said Vice Admiral Joseph Tofalo, com-

mander of U.S. Submarine Forces. "But that's it. There is no more margin. We will be at the design limit at that point."

The four oldest Ohios, which began patrolling in 1981, already have been converted to conventionally powered, non-nuclear missile platforms known as SSGNs. Replacing the remaining 14 is the Navy's No. 1 priority, according to Tofalo, who said the Navy's SSBN(X) Ohio Replacement Program must deliver a new class of Ohio subs by 2029 in order to maintain the nation's current maritime capabilities. "(The Ohio) needs to be recapitalized so we can prevent major power war for another seven decades."

If it sounds serious, it is, according to naval expert Mackenzie Eaglen, a resident fellow in the Marilyn Ware Center for Security Studies at the American Enterprise

Institute. "The threat of nuclear war, you could argue, is lower today in the absence of the sort of superpower rivalry we saw at the height of the Cold War," Eaglen observed. "At the same time, however, the number of nuclear states has gone up. ... It would be foolish for the United States to give away its nuclear power when the number of nuclear states is rising by the decade."

The issue is all about deterrence. Ohio subs currently carry 50 percent of the nation's nuclear arsenal, and that number is slated to rise. In 2018, when the U.S. reduces its nuclear arsenal under the terms of its "New START" nuclear arms reduction treaty with Russia, the subs will be carrying 70 percent, said Tofalo.

"Keeping its nuclear arsenal up to date is one way the Navy projects credibility,"

STILL WATERS RUN DEEP

The Navy's 14 Ohio-class nuclear ballistic submarines:

- Are designed for stealth and to serve as a deterrent.

- Serve as an "undetectable" launch platform for Trident II D5 missiles.

- Are at sea, on average, for 77 days, followed by 35 days in port for maintenance.

SOURCE: U.S. Navy

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PETTY OFFICER 2ND CLASS KEVIN V. CUNNINGHAM/U.S. NAVY

U.S. sailors assigned to the USS Stethem cast off lines to a tug as they get underway in Sasebo Harbor, Japan, in November. The Stethem, a guided missile destroyer, was patrolling the U.S. 7th Fleet area of operations in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region.

Eaglen added.

Credibility at sea is especially important going forward, according to Tofalo. "The last 10 to 15 years, we've been primarily supporting a land war in the Middle East, so our emphasis has been on power projection at shore," he said. "The next 10 to 15 years are going to have a different emphasis with a reorientation to high-end maritime warfare (in the Arctic and the Pacific). ... That's why Ohio replacement is so important."

Under the SSBN(X) Ohio Replacement Program, the Navy wants to replace the 14 existing Ohio subs with 12 new, modernized variants that, collectively, will cost an estimated \$100 billion to build. Its cost means the Navy will need additional funding to proceed with the replacement program — a tall order in austere times.

"The Ohio Replacement Program is the same size annually as the Navy's entire shipbuilding budget, which today builds about seven to nine ships a year depending on what we're building," Eaglen said. "That's not realistic. You can't just build one

submarine a year and abandon all the other things you need to build."

The Navy set the technical baseline for the Ohio Replacement Program in October as part of the acquisition approval process, outlining the program's technical requirements and cost specifications.

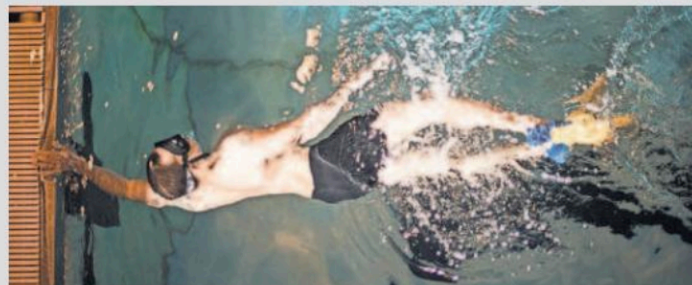
The program is awaiting a decision from the Defense Acquisition Board — a thumbs-up would allow the Navy to release a request for proposals and award a design contract by fall 2016.

In order to have new Ohios in the water by the time the old ones expire, the Navy must commence construction on the first SSBN(X) by 2021.

Eaglen said funding is tied up in a larger debate about nuclear policy in general, including whether the U.S. should pursue long-term nuclear disarmament. "From here, it's about forcing lawmakers to have a debate about the future of our nuclear deterrence policy for the next 50 years; if they can agree that our policy should be to modernize the Navy, presumably the money — at least some of it — will come." ●

A LOOK AT 2015

► The **USS Seawolf** submarine concluded a six-month mission in the Arctic in August as part of a larger effort by the Navy to increase focus, presence and readiness there in response to threats from climate change and competing states such as Russia.



MASS COMMUNICATION SPECIALIST 2ND CLASS ABE MCNATT/U.S. NAVY

▲ Several months ahead of the Pentagon announcing that all military combat positions would be open to women, the Navy had already indicated in August that it would open its **elite SEAL teams** to women who can pass the demanding BUD/S training course.

► Also in August, **maternity leave** for female sailors was tripled from six weeks to 18 weeks as part of a Navy-wide effort to attract and retain more women.



MASS COMMUNICATION SPECIALIST 3RD CLASS KATARZYNA KOBILJAK/U.S. NAVY

▲ In August, the Navy announced changes to its **Physical Fitness Assessment (PFA)**, a twice-yearly test assessing sailors' physical readiness. Previously, sailors with too much body fat failed the entire PFA; beginning next year, however, they will be allowed to complete the remainder of the PFA with stipulations. The change is a move to retain good sailors by focusing on overall fitness.

► The aircraft carrier **USS Ronald Reagan** arrived at its new homeport in Yokosuka, Japan, in October. The ship, which recently completed a yearlong modernization program, is considered one of the most powerful ships in the U.S. Navy. Its transfer to the 7th Fleet area of operations in Japan is part of the U.S. military's rebalance to the Pacific. The Navy plans to base as much as 60 percent of its fleet in the Pacific region by 2020.

► The aircraft carrier **USS Theodore Roosevelt** returned to the U.S. in October after six months in the 5th Fleet of operations in the Middle East, where it launched strikes against ISIL in Syria and Iraq as part of Operation Inherent Resolve. It was the first time since 2007 that the U.S. has not had an aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf. With five of its 10 carriers undergoing maintenance or repairs, the Navy said it is operating at a carrier "deficit."