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The Navy Needs to Close the Projected Gap in the Attack Submarine Fleet

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Last year, the Bush Administration and Congress missed an opportunity to strengthen the Navy's attack submarine fleet when they failed to appropriate funds that had been authorized for the long lead-time items necessary to start procuring the Virginia-class attack submarine at the rate of two per year in fiscal year 2009. As a result, the Navy will not start procuring two Virginia-class submarines per year until 2012, and the attack fleet will fall below the 48 submarines required for meeting operational requirements at an acceptable level of risk for a 16-year period.¹ Without action from Congress, this problem will not solve itself.

Attack submarines provide invaluable capabilities to the Navy and the nation. These ships can gather intelligence, provide surveillance and reconnaissance, support special operations forces, conduct covert strikes against land targets with cruise missiles, conduct offensive and defensive mine operations, and counter enemy submarines and surface ships. Today, some 40 percent of the requests for submarine missions from the military's combatant commanders go unfulfilled.²

The Navy, however, has resisted proposals to advance the higher procurement rate for the Virginia-class submarines because it believes such a step will upset its established ship-building plan.³ Leaving aside the fact that the higher production rate will reduce the per-unit cost of the submarines, this argument is valid only if the Navy's long-term ship building budget is inadequate—a revelation that should not come as a surprise. The Heritage Foundation calculates that the Bush Administra-

tion's overall defense budget is roughly \$400 billion below appropriate levels in the period from FY 2009 through FY 2012.⁴ If an initiative to move to begin the procurement of the Virginia-class submarines at the rate of two per year requires the Navy to curtail other elements of its ship building plan in later years, Congress should provide additional resources to fund the overall plan.

Several Courses of Action for Attack Submarine Procurement. Congress and the Navy have several options for narrowing the forecasted shortfall in attack submarines, though not all would be equally effective. Given the severity of the shortfall, some combination of these options should be explored. The following five options, ranked in order of the relative contributions they make in addressing the shortfall problem, are available to Congress and the Navy:

Option #1: Start the procurement of the Virginia-class submarines at two per year in FY 2010. Congress would do this year what it failed to do last year. Last year, Congress had the option to fund the Virginia-class program to reach the two-per-year construction rate in FY 2009. Now, the best it can do is to raise construction rate in FY 2010. This would make the largest contribution toward

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closing the attack submarine shortfall. It also promises the largest reduction in the per-unit cost of procurement.

Option #2: Provide funding in FY 2008 for “ship sets” that are not tied to construction of a specific boat. Ship sets are the long-lead procurement items for the construction of a nuclear-powered attack submarine like the Virginia-class submarine. A ship set mostly consists of the nuclear power plant, but also includes additional components. Industry has proposed to Congress that it provide roughly \$470 million for the procurement of these components in FY 2008 but not tie the procurement to funding for an additional submarine in FY 2010.⁵ This approach would preserve the option of procuring the second submarine in FY 2010, which Congress could decide to fund at a future date. If Congress chooses not to fund the second submarine, the ship set would remain in the inventory for application to future submarine procurements. This would allow Congress to preserve the option to increase submarine procurement rates without committing a path that could destabilize the Navy’s broader ship-building plan.

Option #3: Shorten the construction timelines. Currently, it takes 72 months to build a Virginia-class submarine. The Navy has stated that this time can be reduced to 60 months.⁶ Shortening the construction time would allow the same overall production rate to result in a greater operational capability within a specific time-frame. Ultimately, it will reduce the time that the

Navy’s inventory of attack submarines is below the appropriate level.

Option #4: Extend the service lives of the existing Los Angeles-class submarines. The Navy has also suggested this option as an alternative to increasing the production rate of Virginia-class submarines.⁷ This would entail having some of the Los Angeles-class submarines enter a service life extensive program. Such a program would include refueling the boats, which costs about \$200 million per submarine.⁸ Extending the service lives of some of the Los Angeles-class submarines would shorten the time during which the Navy will field too few attack submarines. These ships, however, will not be as advanced as the Virginia-class submarines.

Option #5: Increase the operational tempo of the attack submarine fleet. The Navy has suggested extending the deployment time for some submarines from six to seven months.⁹ The idea is that the extended deployments would allow a fleet of equivalent size to meet more of the mission requirements imposed on it. This is really a stopgap measure only practicable for a limited time, under limited circumstances. Increasing the operational tempo permanently would impose undue wear on both men and material. If increasing the operational tempo of the attack submarine fleet did not carry significant risks, the Navy would be taking this step now.

Conclusion. The Navy faces a critical shortage of attack submarines, and no single step will fully mitigate the effects of this shortfall. Congress should

1. David D. Gentilli and Baker Spring, “Congress Should Accelerate Submarine Procurement,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 1084, May 17, 2006, at www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/wm1084.cfm, and Admiral Charles L. Munns, Commander, Naval Submarine Forces, Department of the Navy, Statement to the House Armed Services Committee, March 28, 2006.
2. Charles L. Munns, Statement to the House Armed Services Committee.
3. Dave Ahearn, “Doubling Subs Build Pace Would Ease Shortage, But Other Moves Better,” *Defense Daily Network*, March 30, 2007, at www.defensedaily.com/VIP/common/pub/dd/dd03300705.html.
4. Baker Spring, “Defense FY 2008 Budget Analysis, Four Percent for Freedom,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2012, March 5, 2007, at www.heritage.org/Research/Budget/bg2012.cfm.
5. Winfred Nash, President, BWXT, Nuclear Operations Division, Testimony to the Subcommittee on Seapower and Expeditionary Forces of the House Armed Services Committee, March 8, 2007.
6. Dave Ahearn, “Doubling Subs Build Pace Would Ease Shortage, But Other Moves Better.”
7. *Ibid.*
8. Jack Spencer, “Congress Should Restore Funding to Refuel Attack Submarines,” Heritage Foundation *Executive Memorandum* No. 967, March 30, 2005, at www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/em967.cfm.
9. Dave Ahearn, “Doubling Subs Build Pace Would Ease Shortage, But Other Moves Better.”

not allow critical mission requirements go unmet. This means that Congress will have to instruct the Navy to take several steps, the most powerful of which is to increase the rate of production of the Virginia-class submarines to two per year starting in 2010. The Navy is rightly concerned that this may destabilize its broader ship-building program. Preserving the ship-building program will likely require Congress to increase the Navy's procurement budget. Nevertheless, exercising the option to

purchase ship sets and other steps suggested by the Navy will serve to limit these destabilizing effects. What Congress should not do is assume that the Navy is not facing a serious shortfall in attack submarines or that the problem will solve itself.

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