

## Ballistic Missile Sub Program Navy Working through 'Challenges' on Tight Schedule

The Navy is working through challenges with its Columbia-class ballistic missile submarine program as it tries to meet a tight delivery schedule for its next generation of nuclear-armed boats, said the commander of Naval Sea Systems Command 12 November 2020. The project is the sea service's top modernization priority as it seeks to replace its aging Ohio-class subs. On 5 November 2020, it awarded a \$9.4 billion contract to General Dynamics Electric Boat for full construction of the lead ship and advanced procurement for the second vessel. The Pentagon plans to buy a total of 12 boats. The Navy aims to have the first ship, USS Columbia, on patrol by 2031, and officials have said there is little margin for schedule slippage.

“The program is on plan,” said Vice Adm. William Galinis. However, “we are seeing ... some challenges as we come through the final parts of the design and get into construction a little bit.” This stage of the process is often where issues can spring up, he told reporters during a meeting hosted by George Washington University’s Project for Media and National Security. For “new ship construction programs in general that's always kind of a challenge point ... to get that design completed and get into construction,” he said. “And then you're building the first vessel and you're going to have production issues along the way. And then the next phase is when you start to activate the systems, bring the submarine online and then get it delivered to the fleet. So that will really be our next challenge.”

Galinis gave the two main shipbuilders involved with the program — General Dynamics Electric Boat and Huntington Ingalls Industries Newport News Shipbuilding — high marks for working with the program executive office to keep the project on schedule. About 350 companies in the industrial base and supply chain are considered to be critical for the program, Galinis said. Among those, the Navy believes about 5 to 10 percent are “somewhat challenged” in one area or another to be able to meet the demand for the submarines, he noted.

“The supplier base is something that we continue to watch pretty closely,” he said. PEO Submarines “has done a pretty good job reaching out and working with their supply base through the shipyards to really kind of get a good understanding of where ... the risks are.” Across the supplier base, the Navy is most concerned about welding and non-destructive testing skills. “That’s a big part of shipbuilding — and that's not just for Columbia, that's sort of across the enterprise,” Galinis said. “I'm seeing some challenges there.” The sea service is working to ensure it has enough electricians and mechanics to meet the demand, he said. Writ large, the Navy’s biggest challenge is on-time delivery of ships and submarines, Galinis said. “We want them complete [and] we need the right level of quality,” he said. “That's both in new construction and repair.”

Maintenance, which the Navy has struggled to perform on time in recent years, is one of Galinis’ top focus areas. While more improvement is needed, he noted that the service is making progress. Last year, the service conducted a study of its maintenance availabilities and found that it was not properly planning for availability duration, he said. Following that analysis, the Navy “reset” the availability duration of its ships, a move which Galinis believes will help the service

overcome issues. From fiscal year 2019 to 2020, the service decreased the “days of maintenance delays” by over 80 percent, he said, from more than 7,000 to about 1,100. However, “we adjusted the duration of the availability in some cases, so we changed the baseline,” he added. That means that percentage decrease would actually be closer to 40 if the service went with its original baseline, he noted.

“Overall, we absolutely made a significant improvement in FY ’20 compared to FY ’19,” Galinis said. However, “going forward, what I would tell you is we're not going to get to zero [delays] in ’21,” he added. There are about half a dozen ships that will pose challenges, he noted, including some Aegis cruisers as they undergo extended maintenance for the service’s cruiser modification program. About 67 percent of the Navy’s maintenance availabilities are tracking toward on-time delivery, he said. “That’s up from less than 50 percent last year,” he said. “We’re moving the needle in the right direction, but there's still a lot of work to do there.”