

Re: Submitted Testimony for Admiral Robert J. Natter, USN(ret); 13 April 2016

Chairman Forbes, Ranking Member Courtney, distinguished members of the Seapower and Projection Forces Subcommittee, I am honored to appear before you today to testify at your hearing on “Building the Navy of the Future: A Look at Navy Force Structure.” I also look forward to offering my independent views and assessment of the status of America’s Navy today and its needs in the world of tomorrow.

In the few years since I retired from the Navy, having had the great honor of commanding the US Atlantic Fleet, Fleet Forces Command, and especially the Seventh Fleet in Asia, I have witnessed a troubling and gradual shrinkage in the size of our Navy and its technological advantage. What makes this especially troubling for me is the corresponding increase and quality improvement of other Navy forces around the world....and those other Navy and military forces can hardly be described as our friends. There is a damaging myth about seapower, and we need to dash it for good. It is the idea that fleet size doesn’t matter. It is the fallacy that our shrinking ship numbers can be offset by technology. This is dangerous and it is wrong. Our adversaries aren’t using buggy whips and sailboats. When I commanded USS Chandler, there were about 570 ships in our fleet. Today there are about 280, and the world has only grown more dangerous. Anyone who follows the threats out there knows that the technology and numbers advantage we enjoyed only a decade ago are eroding fast and the projections are alarming. Additionally, the simple fact is that the enemy can engage us on their home turf so we also have to deal with the tyranny of distance. To be blunt, our current funding trajectory is going to cost us in standing with our allies and most probably American lives. The only unknown in my mind is: when.

I understand the Navy is conducting another Force Structure analysis. If done honestly and competently, and I am confident it will be so conducted, there must be an increase in the ship requirement above the 308 number. I believe that the number of fleet combatants must approach 350 ships. I believe this because one has only to look at the potential adversaries out there and see what they have fielded in the past few years and what they are doing today: Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, and even terrorists. And their military actions are to say the least much more emboldened by our weakening posture than we would have expected only five years ago. A perfect example is China’s militarization of atolls in the South China Sea, atolls and reefs closer

to most of the other national claimants than to China. In essence this sovereignty grab includes over 648,000 square miles of ocean, fisheries, seabed minerals, and potentially maritime traffic control.

With respect to the Navy's force structure and its shipbuilding and aircraft procurement plans going forward, I testified two years ago before your Subcommittee that the Navy's future SCN account was not worth the paper it was written on if a solution were not found for the funding of the Ohio Replacement ships. As you know, those twelve ships will employ the most survivable 70% of our nation's strategic weapons. That planned 12 ship program is still essential to our nation's defense, yet without top line relief the Navy's SCN account would be decimated if it were funded within historic shipbuilding funding limits. I was pleased to see this Subcommittee introduce language that would provide a supplemental account to start funding the Ohio Replacement separately. I am well aware that there is opposition to setting up such an account, but the alternative is to increase the Navy's top line as was done in past years for the Ohio Class construction program. There are no other options that do not defy logic and common sense.

Our attack submarine program and shipyards produce the world's best submarines. And, as this Subcommittee well knows, these ships are delivering on budget and ahead of schedule. The problem is that our build rate of two subs per year is inadequate to our combatant commanders' needs. About half of the submarine mission requirements today go unfilled. At the current build rate, we will go from 52 boats today to only 41 in 2028. And this is while the Russians are operating their subs today at rates and distances from port not seen since the Cold War. China is also constructing more submarines and anti-submarine capabilities today than ever before in its history. In short, our projected submarines numbers can't keep up.

Aircraft Carriers with their embarked air wings are still the most important and muscular ships afloat today. With existing F/A-18s and now the 5th generation F-35, with its stealthy LO signature ability to penetrate A2/AD environments, seaborne distributed lethality can now start to be enabled fully. Again, as this Subcommittee well knows, the Navy has been operating ten CVNs but filling the demands of eleven and more. The result has been extended deployments for the crews and deferred maintenance for these ships and aircraft. Fewer ships also means sailors are spending longer time at sea and more time away from their families. Deployments of

nine months have become common. And, most recently, because of this long term deficit in numbers, gaps have now occurred in the availability of these ships and air wings when and where they are needed. The reality is that with fewer than the requisite number of carriers and other ships and aircraft of our Navy, the nation's demand exceeds its supply. We are creating rationales and make-do operating patterns like the OFRP to satisfy the budget limitations imposed upon the services. We simply are building plans around fiction, instead of building plans that meet strategic reality. As long as those damaging compromises prevail our Navy will continue to degrade and our national strategic risks will continue to grow.

Of the current Force Structure Assessment, the Navy requirement includes 88 large surface combatants and 52 small multi-role surface combatants. The CGs and DDGs are very capable ships and fill a critical high end requirement against the growing and more dangerous missile threats facing our Navy and our nation today. I believe it is important to keep building new Flight III DDGs with SPY-6 Radars and continue with the upgrades to existing CGs and DDGs to stay ahead of the evolving threat. The LCS and future FF fills a more affordable niche for our Navy's many special and medium threat requirements that don't require a more capable ship assigned to that mission. Having said that, I believe that the growing capabilities of our potential adversaries mitigate an appropriate shift in our medium to high end ship balance in response to those threats.

The Navy will have to adjust upward its baseline requirements for the evolving threats. I am confident the next Force Structure numbers and overall assessment will be influenced heavily by the realities of the budget apportioned to the Navy. The Navy has been forced to make tough choices and there are no easy answers in this fiscally constrained environment. The only question in my mind is will the leadership of this country, the Executive and Congress, deal with our overall defense and Navy-Marine Corps shortfalls responsibly. The nation is asking our young people to sign up and if necessary fight and die in the ships and aircraft you are providing them. I hope that the Members of this Subcommittee will continue to do all they can to fund the Navy's priorities commensurate with the threat realities. If our country continues to fund defense on a wishful thinking shoestring budget our sailors will pay the price. I am not confident they are being provided the requisite assets to win and I am worried they won't. Our national security depends on the important decisions our fellow Americans expect of your Subcommittee.

Thank you.