Government Matters: The collisions of two Navy ships in 2017 start the rethinking of just about everything about the way the Navy does business. That self-examination by the force combined with the interest of Under Secretary of the Navy Thomas Modly and how the Navy grooms future flag officers has yielded a new blueprint for education. The Education for Sea Power Report is that blueprint. At the West 2019 Conference in San Diego, the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral John Richardson, told me why executing the report’s recommendations is a high priority for the Navy.

CNO: We want to make sure that we continue to improve the Navy as a learning organization. That we’ve got to learn faster than our adversaries, really as fast as we can. We’ve got tremendous challenges ahead. We need to be improving in every way, learning in every way. And so certainly our schools but also our war games, our exercises, our experiments, our innovation, in every way that we can. And then we have to make sure that as a Navy we’re learning in a coherent way. So that the East Coast and the West Coast are informed on what each other’s doing.

So to do that we’re standing up a new three-star admiral position to be our Director of Warfighter Development.

Government Matters: Are there gaps that you think exist today, or is this just a more coordination effort?

CNO: I would say it’s more the latter, more of a coordination effort. There’s a tremendous amount of activity going on, but now that we have the National Defense Strategy which poses for us this great power competition as the challenge of our time, we need to bring all of our learning into focus around that challenge.

Government Matters: Speaking of the National Defense Strategy and great power competition, you were in China about a month ago meeting with your peer in the Chinese Navy. What’s that dialogue like? And is there a similar dialogue with the Russian Navy?
CNO: The dialogue and the main messages, the purpose of our visit, and the purpose of our habitual communication with Admiral Shen Jinlong, my counterpart, is that we need to continue to have this dialogue so that we have a deeper and deeper understanding of what each other is thinking. Right?

I think that’s actually critical so that we don’t make inaccurate assumptions about what they may be thinking.

And then while we work through our relationship there’s going to be areas where we have common interests, and then there’s also going to be areas where we clearly have differences. This shouldn’t be unexpected. But what we must do, and I think we both agree, is that as we work to converge on areas of common interest but also to work through our differences we should do so in a way that minimizes risk, particularly operational risk on the seas. So we need to continue to talk, continue to put in these operational arrangements that allow our ships to operate in the vicinity of one another in a way that minimizes miscalculation.

Government Matters: At the same time you’re having those dialogues, though, you haven’t been shy about, the Navy has not been shy about going where it believes it’s able to go.

CNO: I don’t think those two are in conflict at all. In fact, they’re very consistent with one another. So we have been consistently present there in the Western Pacific, the South China Sea, you name it, for 70 years. We have big national interests there. The United States is a Pacific nation, so going forward we’re going to remain consistently present there.

We’re also going to advocate for the set of rules and the order that has allowed free trade and has given rise to a global GDP that’s grown, and nowhere more than in the Asian economies which have exploded under this set of rules.

So all of these operations that we do are to advocate for our interests and to advocate for the rule set that really benefits everybody.

Government Matters: Regarding that great power competition, I pulled this from the Design 2.0. Much has changed since we last competed for sea control, lines of communication, access to world markets, diplomatic partnerships. Our competitive advantage has shrunk and in some areas is gone altogether.
Where are the areas that you’re most concerned about in that respect?

CNO: First of all, there are areas that exist now, domains of competition that simply weren’t even there last time we had great power competition. One goes to cyber right away. The term cyberspace was in a science fiction novel in 1982. Right? That’s kind of the last time we were in this type of a competition. Now it shapes everything that we do. This information warfare dimension. Similarly, with space. A completely new appreciation for space as a competitive domain.

And then the speed of things. It’s moving so much faster, fueled by this information age, this information revolution.

So as we consider and learn to compete in this new environment, we have to appreciate that not only the competitors have changed, but also the rules of the competition have changed. So we don’t want to be irrelevant by virtue of not being sensitive to these rules.

Government Matters: Where are the places that you would want to see the Navy and the military more broadly move, make progress faster in order to make sure that you maintain the advantage that you still have?

CNO: I would say that just about every area we need to move faster, particularly in the introduction of technologies to the fleet. So we’ve got a very innovative part of our Navy thinking up ideas, the Navy and our industrial partners, we’re very, very good at that. But then once that idea is conceived, and getting that prototyping done, getting to a product, getting that product into manufacturing, getting it distributed around the fleet. That part needs to move faster. Time is of the essence here. Time matters in these competitions. And I think it matters even more so in these information age types of competitions.

So you don’t want to be the number two Navy on the water to get the new capability out there because it’s going to be decisive. And some of these margins are in months, but these months make a huge difference in terms of the outcome so we really have to move with urgency to field those technologies.

Government Matters: Admiral John Richardson is rethinking the size and composition of the Future Fleet. Straight ahead on
Government Matters: The Chief of Naval Operations says he’s rethinking the concept of a 355-ship fleet. Admiral John Richardson has cited a number of reasons for looking at the size of the fleet in the coming years. At the West 2019 Conference in San Diego I asked Admiral Richardson exactly what he’s rethinking and why.

CNO: As I think about our future Navy and the future fleet, the way I think about it is that there is a great consensus of judgment that we need more naval power for the Navy to meet its responsibilities to the United States as a global and growing nation. We just simply need more naval power.

There are a number of dimensions or ways you can think about naval power. One is the size of the Navy. Right? There’s also sort of the quality of the Navy, and then finally there’s the readiness of the Navy.

So all of those dimensions interplay, right? So as we build naval power, expressing it in terms of the number of ships, there was a big consensus, again, around sort of the mid to upper 300s as the appropriate number for ships. So we’ve been on that, we centered on 355. That’s where our analysis took us. And that 355 has a structure to it in terms of what types of ships. It’s just not 355 of anything. And we’re building towards that number right now, and we’re not only building towards that number but we’re using pretty much every trick in the book to see how fast, how quickly we can achieve a bigger fleet.

So we’re life extending our destroyers. We did the engineering analysis, found out that we can keep them around longer. The eventual size of the fleet is a combination of ships entering the fleet, minus the ships leaving the fleet. And if we can keep the ships around longer, we grow faster.

So for all of those things, the fleet is growing.

As far as the final number, whether it’s 355 or more, this is exactly what I think the American people expect the United States Navy to do. In view of the changing security environment we’re going to go back and take a look at our assumptions. Take a look at our analysis. Things have changed since the last time
we did this assessment even in 2016. So we want to make sure that we validate all of that and come up with the most current assessment of naval power, what’s the best way to get after that.

So not only the security environment but the technology environment has changed, and so the quality of those platforms is also something that we can consider.

So we’re doing a force structure assessment, and it’s incorporating all of that. It starts with the assumptions that we had, the change in the security environment, the change in the technology environment, and we look forward to the results of that later this year.

**Government Matters:** I was going to ask you if you have a timeline in mind for that. Will you see that on your watch?

**CNO:** Yeah, just right about that, summer of 2019.

**Government Matters:** I note that you said whether it’s 355 or more. You didn’t say whether it’s 355 or less.

**CNO:** Well, we’ll see how it comes out. My thumbnail assessment is that the security environment hasn’t gotten any less complicated.

**Government Matters:** Understood.

One important component of the fleet will be the men and women who are working those ships. Tell me about Sailor 2025 and what your vision is. Again, after you’ve completed your service you have this vision for what the force looks like.

**CNO:** Sure. Sailor 2025 is really a package of efforts that are designed to improve and update the way we recruit, the way we train, the way we assign, the way we pay, and the way we retain our Sailors. And it really is a revolution in each one of those areas. We could go on for an hour about how to do this, but --

**Government Matters:** We have the time, sir.

**CNO:** As we think about the commitment that our young people have made to the nation, given that they could go anywhere. This is a very, very talented cadre of people. We really owe it to them to have the most modern way of improving them and making sure that they are using the very latest techniques to learn.
So we have one component of Sailor 2025 is Ready Relevant Learning. Taking and leveraging all of our learning science that has been done in academia and industry, leveraging all of the very high technology to be able to create very high-fidelity environments, learning environments. Incorporating feedback to the Sailor to say hey, you did this, you should have done this. We learn very fast by virtue of combining all of those things.

Then we chop that knowledge and training up into pieces so that it comes to the Sailor at exactly the right time before they need it. Right? So that’s part of it.

With respect to how we do career management. This is another area where we’re putting much more transparency and choices and power, really, into the hands of our Sailors, literally on their smart device. So you can imagine now getting an alert on your phone that says hey, it’s time to get on-line, fill out this bit of paperwork because you’re moving in six months to your new duty station, and making that whole process so much easier, taking the perspective of the Sailor and their family to move them on through, taking advantage of technology.

Then finally, what about the choices in terms of where that Sailor may want to serve next, with their families. Understanding each and every individual Sailor, what do they want to do? Some of our Sailors just want to operate. You know? They want to just go to the sound of gunfire no matter where that is. Hey, I’ve got a lot of jobs like that. Some Sailors want to maybe get some geographic stability with their family so that they can put their kids through school. I’ve got opportunities like that. You can still have a viable career. Some Sailors want education for their own selves, right? We’ve got educational opportunities.

So what I want to do is understand what are the priorities for each one of our Sailors. I can then put together a compensation package and approach them with this. And certainly the needs of the Navy will be met. So it’s a win/win all around if we can continue to address the priorities of the Sailors while meeting our mission. It makes everybody more enthusiastic about staying Navy and retaining for longer careers.

**Government Matters:** I have about 30 seconds left, Admiral. You’re departing, as I alluded to earlier, in the next several, toward the end of the year. What are you happiest about that
you leave behind, and what do you wish you had more opportunity to work on before you leave?

**CNO:** I think in terms of what you wish you could have done, I think there’s always a sense that boy, you really wish you could have got started faster and earlier. You know, and pushed harder. But I’m so grateful for the opportunity to have had the chance to serve in the Navy at all. We’re so privileged to be Sailors. And to have the chance to lead and represent the Sailors not only around the fleet, but within the United States, in our government and around the world. It’s truly been fantastic. So it’s been a great privilege.

**Government Matters:** Admiral Richardson, thanks very much.

**CNO:** Thank you.