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December 11, 2018

The Honorable Richard V. Spencer
Secretary of the United States Navy
1000 Navy Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20350

Dear Secretary Spencer:

At the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Seapower hearing on November 27, 2018, I questioned the Honorable James F. Geurts—the Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Research, Development, and Acquisition—about the attack submarine maintenance backlog and the Navy’s plans to reallocate maintenance work from public to private shipyards. I was pleased that Secretary Geurts affirmed that the COLUMBIA Class Program remains an acquisition priority and supported increased Advance Procurement funding to reduce supplier risk. But given the continued maintenance backlog, I urge the Navy to provide a detailed submarine maintenance workload allocation plan and to consider awarding submarine maintenance contracts to Electric Boat to utilize approximately five million labor hours of available work.

In the report entitled “Navy Readiness: Actions Needed to Address Costly Maintenance Delays Facing the Attack Submarine Fleet,” the Government Accountability Office (GAO) concluded that “[the] Navy has not effectively allocated maintenance periods among the public and private Shipyards to limit attack submarine idle time.”¹ The GAO report further highlighted that since FY 2008, an estimated 14 attack submarines have spent a combined 61 months—1,891 days—idling while waiting to enter shipyards for maintenance. In addition to compromised readiness and reduced operational availability for combatant commanders, the maintenance backlog has increased costs for the Navy. GAO estimates that since FY 2008, the Navy has spent approximately \$1.5 billion on attack submarines that are sitting idle and awaiting shipyard maintenance due to continued operating and support costs, even though private shipyards have immediate availability to provide maintenance.

There is a clear solution to address the maintenance backlog, ensure drydock availability at public shipyards, and mitigate impending workforce decline prior to production for COLUMBIA Class submarines. The Navy should transfer submarines awaiting maintenance from the public yards to the private yards as a short-term solution to prevent deployment delays. At the Seapower subcommittee hearing, Secretary Geurts announced Navy plans to contract only

¹ GAO-19-229. “NAVY READINESS: Actions Needed to Address Costly Maintenance Delays Facing the Attack Submarine Fleet.” November 19, 2018. <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-19-229>.

two attack submarines to the private sector in Spring 2019. Given the significant backlogs detailed in the GAO report, the Navy has not demonstrated that only two private sector availabilities will effectively mitigate the maintenance delays. I request additional information regarding which submarines require maintenance, when this maintenance is necessary, and the number of hours required for this work. Further, I urge the Navy to specify—as soon as possible—whether these maintenance contracts will be sole-sourced or openly-competed. Given that Electric Boat has approximately five million hours of labor available from 2019 to 2024 to support maintenance work, the Navy should take full advantage of this capacity by awarding timely contracts that correlate with Electric Boat’s available capacity. The talented, skilled workforce in Connecticut should be fully utilized as the Navy determines a detailed allocation plan for submarines to undergo maintenance at private shipyards – including timelines, cost estimates, and submarines awaiting maintenance.

Given their stealth, firepower, and unlimited endurance, submarines are a critical Navy asset to maintain undersea superiority—an especially important investment to protect U.S. interests from Russia and China. Not only must the Navy build more submarines, but also ensure efficient and timely maintenance of those already in the fleet. I look forward to discussing this issue with you at the Senate Armed Services Joint Subcommittee on Seapower and Readiness hearing on Wednesday, December 12, and to working together to ensure that the U.S. submarine force remains one of the Navy’s greatest asymmetric assets.

Sincerely,



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senate