

Wartime Footing

A Two-Front Strategy to Confront China and Russia

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The United States and its allies face a serious and growing threat from an authoritarian axis led by China and Russia that will erode U.S. power and security if it is not effectively countered. This report outlines a U.S. defense strategy of flexible engagement built around a two-war planning construct and a rapid shift to a wartime industrial footing to counter that axis. It prioritizes the Indo-Pacific first and Europe second, as well as deterring and, if necessary, defeating two major powers simultaneously with significant allied and partner involvement.

To develop a two-war planning construct, the United States should:

- Expand and modernize its force structure to deter multi-theater wars and develop a new offset strategy that blends advanced and lower-cost unmanned systems with long-range precision strike and nuclear modernization
- Adopt a posture prioritizing dispersed, mobile, and survivable U.S. forces
- Accelerate reforms to the defense industrial base to operate with greater speed and production capacity

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The United States is in an increasingly perilous global security environment. China presents the most serious threat to the United States, followed by Russia. The United States does not face the same degree of threat in the Middle East, Africa, or the Western Hemisphere.

Without urgent changes, the United States risks losing the ability to deter major conflict and to fight and win a protracted war in one or more regions. The U.S. military has lost “overmatch”—the ability to militarily overwhelm an adversary across all domains of conflict—against China. The number of U.S. Air Force aircraft, Army active-duty personnel, Navy ships, and Marine Corps active-duty personnel are lower than at almost any time since 1950. Moreover, the U.S. defense industrial base is not prepared for a protracted conflict.

Moving forward, the United States should adopt a **two-war planning construct** that integrates allied participation and focuses on deterring and defeating two major powers simultaneously: China in the Indo-Pacific and Russia in Europe. Deterring two wars demands shifting the U.S. industrial base to a wartime footing. Building off the U.S. Pacific Command’s concept of **Hellscape**, the U.S. military should refine concepts of Air-Sea Battle for the Indo-Pacific and Air-Land Battle for Europe.

These concepts point to five priority areas for the industrial base: (1) a high-low mix of undersea capabilities, including submarines and unmanned underwater vehicles; (2) a high-low mix of air capabilities, including cheap unmanned aircraft systems (UASs) and fifth- and sixth-generation fighters and bombers; (3) long-range precision strike systems, including cheaper systems that can be used in larger numbers; (4) air defense systems to counter missiles and UASs; and (5) other capabilities, such as advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and quantum, space, and cyber warfare.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Congress has an opportunity to bolster U.S. capabilities to deter threats in multiple regions by:

- Growing munitions stockpiles for protracted war, especially in the Pacific, through multiyear procurement (MYP) authority for systems including PrSM, GMLRS, SDB II, AIM-9X, RIM-162, RIM-116, C-UAS, and Javelin, and building on MYP for other munitions provided by the FY 2026 NDAA **P.L. 119-60**
- Expanding development and procurement of cheap unmanned aerial, undersea, and surface systems, as well as standardizing operating systems and munitions for small UASs and rapidly integrating them into training of U.S. forces
- Maintaining a high-low mix of air capabilities by providing MYP authority for advanced fighter aircraft like F-35 and F-15EX
- Strengthening the industrial base and supply chains by assessing and ensuring the supply of strategic technologies, such as semiconductors, and critical materials, such as rare earths, to curb reliance on China

- Preventing significant military posture reductions in Europe because of Russian threats to NATO by placing limitations on the reduction of U.S. military posture

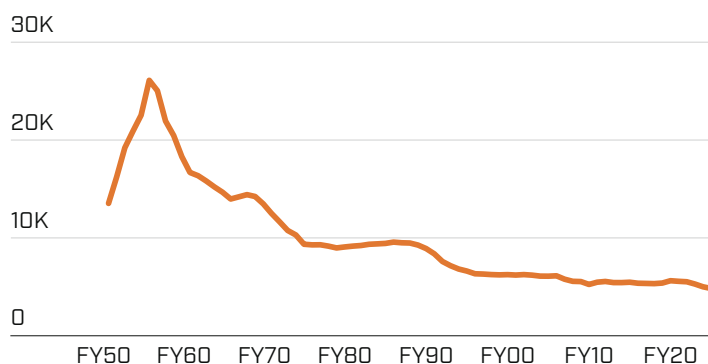
CHALLENGES AND RISKS

Roadblocks to strengthening U.S. capabilities and deterring China and Russia include:

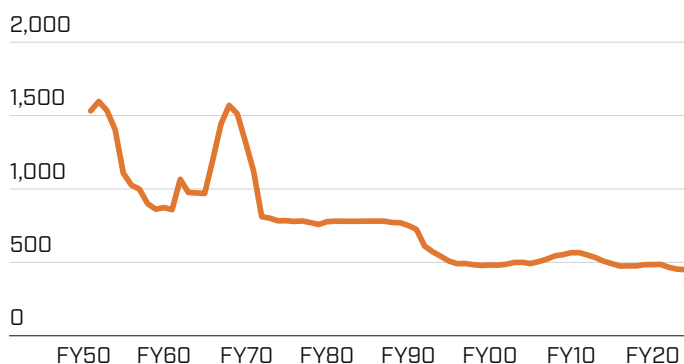
- Delays to appropriations through extended continuing resolutions and government shutdowns, which hinder effective development and procurement of capabilities
- Continued shortcomings in major acquisition programs that delay fielding timelines
- Extended military operations in regions that are not of major significance to deterring China and Russia and reduce U.S. munitions stockpiles and readiness
- The reduction of U.S. force numbers in Europe

Figure 1: U.S. Force Structure Elements, FY 1951–FY 2025

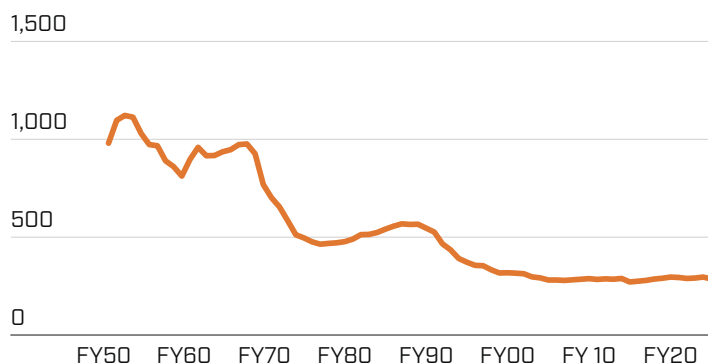
Air Force (Total Aircraft Inventory)



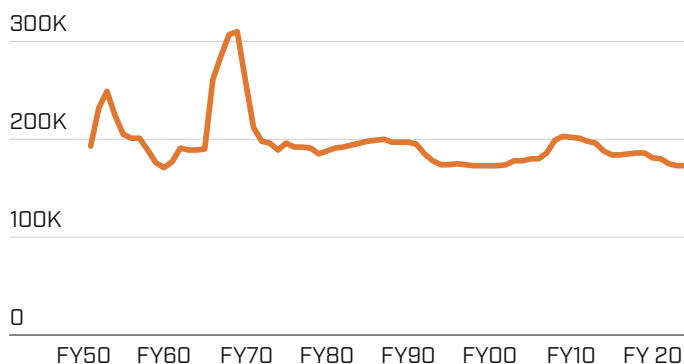
Army (Total Active Duty Personnel)



Navy (Total Battle Force Ships)



Marine Corps (Total Active Duty Personnel)



Source: Based on data from the FY 2025 DoD Green Book, Congressional Research Service, Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, Air Force Magazine Almanac, and Naval Vessel Register.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Seth G. Jones, Seamus P. Daniels, Riley McCabe, and Daniel Byman, *Wartime Footing: A Two-Front Strategy to Confront China and Russia* (Washington, DC: CSIS, June 2026), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/wartime-footing-two-front-strategy-confront-china-and-russia>.

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