



# Military Readiness

## Summary and Key Talking Points

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### Policy Proposals

1. Ensure that the U.S. defense budget is commensurate with the challenges the U.S. is facing.
2. Support the transition to a posture of great-power competition.
3. Increase the size of the Navy fleet.
4. Commit to a major investment in naval shipyards.
5. Accelerate the procurement of fighters.
6. Sustain and support readiness.

### Quick Facts

1. The majority of America's combat aircraft were purchased in the 1980s and 1990s and are now on average 31 years old.
2. The Navy is currently too small and too old to accomplish all of its tasks.
3. Nearly one-third of U.S. spending on defense is devoted to manpower, not to equipment or training.
4. Weighed against the demands of great-power competition in the modern age, the U.S. is not spending enough on defense.
5. America's military presence overseas has declined significantly since the end of the Cold War.

### Power Phrases

#### A Constitutional Function

- It is the federal government's Constitutional duty to provide for the defense of the United States and its interests.
- Our military should be ready, capable, competent, and large enough to defend U.S. interests at home and abroad.
- A weak U.S. military incentivizes our enemies to act boldly and more aggressively, while a strong defense promotes peace.

### The Aspects of Readiness

- Troops must be properly educated, trained, and equipped. Equipment must be on hand and in working order.
- Forces and assets must also be positioned strategically and fully practiced to be most effective.

### Planning and Preparedness

- A force cannot be made ready overnight, and it is too late to get ready once a crisis has emerged.

## The Issue

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Americans expect the military to fulfill its constitutional obligation to defend our country and protect our national interests at home and abroad. They understand that a strong America garners respect, gains friends and allies, enjoys strong economic and trading relations with more countries, and deters bad behavior on the part of its competitors and enemies. Conversely, Americans understand that a weak military invites aggression and undermines the protection of our national interests.

A weak military incentivizes competitors to act boldly and more aggressively because they have less concern that the U.S. can impose any sort of cost or prevent them from imposing their will on others. A military that is ready, capable, competent, and large enough to defend U.S. interests globally both reflects and contributes to American confidence. It signals to the world that the U.S. prioritizes ensuring that its interests can be defended.

Military readiness can be measured in many ways and means many things: All aspects of readiness contribute to the ability of a military force to win in battle. Individuals are ready if they are properly educated, trained, and equipped. Readiness can be viewed as a measure of a unit's equipment as well: If a specific percentage of necessary equipment is on hand and in working order, the unit is ready by that measure. Readiness is also a function of how the force is postured: where it is physically located in relative to anticipated threats; whether it has operational employment concepts that are relevant to anticipated battlefields and opponents; and whether the constituent parts of the force—ground units, aviation squadrons, battle groups at sea, space and cyber units, special operations elements, supporting logistics organizations, and the network of surveillance, intelligence, reconnaissance, and headquarters units that binds everything together—are competent at working together to accomplish tactical and operational objectives. The force can be fully manned, equipped, and individually trained, but if it has not practiced together to a level that ensures effectiveness, all other aspects are meaningless.

Military readiness means all of these things, and they all require funding, time, and sufficient capacity to ensure that the overall force is able to train even while parts of it are operationally committed. A force cannot be made ready overnight, and it is too late to get ready once a crisis has emerged. Readiness is the product of sustained and intentional investment in defense. It is expensive—but much less expensive than a lost war, lost markets, and lost influence. Investing in military readiness is a long-term investment in the strength, safety, and wealth of the United States.

## Recommendations

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**Ensure that the U.S. defense budget is commensurate with the challenges the U.S. is facing.** The Department of Defense has been trying to accomplish more (or the same) with fewer resources for years. Earlier in the 2010s, the Budget Control Act artificially constrained the defense budget to a ceiling. Since its end in Fiscal Year (FY) 2022, the administration has not requested the level of resources necessary to achieve the mission given to the Department. Since 2017, there have been multiple Secretaries of Defense and a bipartisan independent commission which have called for consistent increases of between 3 and 5 percent above

inflation. This increase is necessary today in order to modernize and to expand the force as it pivots towards great power competition and away from counter-terrorism operations in the Middle East.

**Support the transition to a posture of great-power competition.** The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) marked an important change and transition in our nation's military by moving its focus away from a two-decade emphasis on fighting terrorism. The 2018 NDS outlined the importance of great-power competition against Russia and China, prompting all military services to change their postures and investment profiles. These shifts are ongoing and will take both time and resources to materialize. A good example is the Marine Corps, which is changing its operating concept toward distributed operations in contested environments to reflect the scenarios that it would most likely encounter in the Indo-Pacific region.

**Increase the size of the Navy fleet.** The Navy badly needs increased funding for its shipbuilding account. Ship construction costs are increasing, and the availability of shipyards to repair the ships it has is decreasing. The fleet bottomed out at 271 ships in 2015. It is our smallest fleet since 1916 and today faces growing challenges abroad as China aggressively builds its own blue-water navy and countries like Russia and Iran modernize their ships, maritime patrol aircraft, and mobile land-based vehicles with more capable anti-ship missiles. At current and projected levels of spending, the Navy does not expect to reach the *minimum* fleet size necessary to perform its role within the Joint Force until the mid-2030s. Ship manufacturers, the yards conducting related maintenance, and the web of suppliers that provide the parts and materials needed for new ships could expand capacity if there were some assurance that future work would offset the upfront costs of expanding facilities and hiring more workers. As things stand, constrained shipbuilding budgets and volatility in funding even for current contracts have made manufacturers and suppliers risk averse. This affects all ship classes, from a desperately needed small surface combatant to logistics support vessels, destroyers, and the new ballistic missile submarine that is meant to replace the aging *Ohio* class.

**Commit to a major investment in naval shipyards.** Over its history, the Navy has operated 13 naval shipyards; today, it operates only four. The oldest (Norfolk) was established in 1757, and the youngest (Pearl Harbor) was established in 1908. Most of these facilities are in various stages of disrepair, lack adequate drydocks, have outdated support equipment, and have trouble employing an adequate workforce. All of these problems contribute to substantial backlogs in ship maintenance, which in turn lead to lost steaming days (fewer ships available for use) and increased costs once a ship is inducted for maintenance. Commercial shipyards are contracted to perform much of the Navy's ship maintenance, but some actions can be performed only by the Navy's yards.

**Accelerate the procurement of fighters.** Because the Air Force has not been replacing retiring fighters with new ones rapidly enough, it is left with an older and smaller fleet that is unable to meet current demands. The service also has been investing more in research and development than it has in procuring contemporary aircraft. As a result, programs like the F-35A that could and should be accelerated have been operating at a slow rate of production and have not yet been fielded in sufficient numbers. Additionally, the Air Force has misguidedly been purchasing F-15EX fighters that are not survivable in any modern, high-end scenario against a peer adversary.

**Sustain and support readiness.** America's ability to deter its adversaries is highly dependent on having a ready force that is capable of acting effectively when needed. Readiness is a consumable that requires investment and maintenance through the years. Members of a unit are ready to fight only when they train together and develop the skills they need to operate together. The same goes for a ship and for any aircraft. When called upon, the military will fall to its level of training, which is why there needs to be consistent investment in readiness levels at different level of formation.

## Facts + Figures

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**FACT: The majority of America's combat aircraft were purchased in the 1980s and 1990s and are now on average 31 years old.**

- Because of divestments and retirements in the 1990s, few aircraft were available for use as military operations ramped up in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.
- New aircraft are not being purchased fast enough to replace those that are being retired.

**FACT: The Navy is too small and too old to accomplish all of its tasks.**

- At 296 total ships, the Navy is the smallest it has been since 1916.
- While each ship is better than its predecessor, a ship can only be in one place at a time.
- The Navy is not projected to grow to 350-plus ships until the mid-2030s; China already has 355 ships.

**FACT: Nearly one-third of U.S. spending on defense goes just to manpower, not equipment or training.**

- To compete for talent with the civilian sector, the military services must offer competitive wages and benefits.
- Of spending on manpower, the largest increases have occurred in healthcare costs, just as in the private sector.
- Of American youth ages 17–24, almost three out of four are *ineligible* to serve in the military due to obesity, health problems, criminal records, or substance abuse, among other factors.
- Consequently, the military must compete for a comparatively small pool of youth who have the willingness and the aptitude to serve, and who meet eligibility standards.

**FACT: Weighed against the demands of great-power competition in the modern age, the U.S. is not spending enough on defense.**

- Manpower costs, especially with respect to health care, have dramatically outpaced inflation during the past 30 years.
- The cost of platforms capable of surviving on a technologically advanced battlefield has also increased, making it more expensive to maintain a force that can win against other major powers like China and Russia.
- The U.S. military must protect America with almost half the force that it possessed during the Cold War.
- Entitlement spending and interest on the national debt (now at \$30 trillion and climbing) continue to squeeze all other spending, including defense spending.
- Measured both as a percentage of the federal budget and as a percentage of our nation's gross domestic product (GDP), spending on defense is near historic lows.

**FACT: America's military presence overseas has declined significantly since the end of the Cold War.**

- The U.S. presence in Europe has been cut by two-thirds, leaving no permanently based U.S. armor brigades on the continent.
- Facilities in Germany that once hosted U.S. forces and training ranges that provided opportunities to hone important combat skills have been converted to civilian use, increasing the challenges that would be involved in reintroducing U.S. forces should the need arise.

- NATO forces have shrunk to all-time lows while Russian forces have been improving in quality and experience.
- A minimal U.S. presence in Europe means that it would take much longer to deploy forces to counter Russian aggression against NATO allies, and U.S. forces could be forced to gain access through ports and airfields that were under attack.

## Additional Resources

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