
Conventional Defense Posture and Readiness

Policy Briefing

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Executive Summary

Over the last few decades, the scope of international warfare has drastically changed from that of conventional strategies and tactics to more unconventional operations. However, it is clear that it is essential that the U.S. continues to pursue the advancement of conventional capabilities in order to stay prepared for future conflict that will require the integration of both conventional and unconventional strategies. Currently, America still stands as one of the strongest conventional military forces in the world, with the largest Naval fleet and the largest international military presence, especially in the Indo-Pacific region. Additionally, while other countries still have archaic military structures, the U.S. has made improvements over the years that have modernized our military leadership structure, though there is still room for more modernization. Last, America has the largest defense budget in the world, proving that our priority is to strengthen and maintain military dominance and preparedness.

While America is well positioned to face minor conflicts in the coming months and years, there are rising threats that will test the strength of our conventional tactics and military alliances in the event that larger military action is needed. These growing challenges include:

- 1) New developments in the Arctic region, due to the lack of international oversight.
- 2) Rising tension in the Indo-Pacific region, due to China's heavy increase of aggressive military training and movements.
- 3) The lack of America's ability to be fully present in more than one theater simultaneously.

Current Status of America's Conventional Defense Readiness

Overall Strength and Readiness

One of the most prevailing challenges of America's conventional defense readiness is the question of whether or not our military is prepared and capable to be fully present in more than one theater of war simultaneously. Not since WWII has America's military been fully present in more than one theater of war simultaneously, and even at that time, the two different theaters that we were involved in consisted of completely different geographies and ongoing issues, therefore, our Naval defenses were able to be almost completely deployed in the Pacific region (later to be followed up with ground troops toward the end of the war) and the Army being mainly deployed in Europe. After assessing all aspects of U.S. military capabilities, several strategists have determined that the U.S. is in fact not prepared to become fully involved in more than theater of war simultaneously (Wood et al., 2023, 231).

A development which some attribute to the lack of our readiness has been the amount of financial and tactical support that we have given to the Ukrainian military and other nations in the last two decades. Currently, the U.S. has sent more than \$17.5 billion in aid, several units of tactical support, and intelligence support to the Ukrainian government to be used for military purposes (Blinken, 2022). The weapons contributed to Ukraine include mobile artillery rocket systems, Howitzer rocket launchers, and surface-to-air defense systems (Brown et al., 2022). However, with the donation of the monetary aid and tactical weapons, many have warned that the U.S. has significantly decreased our arsenal stockpile too quickly— a stockpile that is slow to rebuild, especially in times of dire need. For example, during peacetime, only around 30,000 rounds of artillery for the Howitzer launcher can be produced in a year— it is estimated that

Ukrainian troops use this amount in just about two weeks (Turak, 2022). While producers like Lockheed Martin have begun to swiftly increase the production of these weapons, they have explained that it will take 12-18 months to replace just a portion of the ammunition and weapons already used in the last eight months (Turak, 2022).

Not only is the U.S. running low on weapons, along with funding complications, but the military is experiencing alarmingly low levels of recruitment paired with the lack of appropriate training in areas such as the Army (Howard, 2022). Due to the low numbers of recruitment, the DoD is currently in the process of analyzing recruitment requirements, such as strength and academics, to find different factors that can be altered in order to allow for more recruitment (Howard, 2022). Additionally, active military training has been lagging when compared to more active wartimes. For instance, in 2017, more than 80% of Marine aviation units did not have the adequate minimum training in order to be deployed, and they are still experiencing major shortages in supplies and aircraft that are needed for full deployment (Woody, 2017).

Developments in the Arctic Region

A new challenge that the U.S. has been posed with, politically and militarily, is the ongoing developments and advancements in the Arctic region. This region is currently divided between the U.S., Canada, Russia, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. One of the most alarming factors about future developments in the Arctic is the lack of oversight and guidance provided by international law regarding developments and advancements in the Arctic. This is the most problematic factor regarding the Arctic, given that more than an estimated 30% of the earth's oil and natural gas is stored in the Arctic, ensuring that aggression regarding disputed territory and the drilling of that oil will occur in the future, as Russia has already been

conducting drilling operations for the past decade (“Who Owns the Arctic and Should They Drill for Oil and Gas?” 2022).

America lacks major capabilities in the Arctic, including equipment needed to navigate the region. This equipment includes ice-breaking ships, navigation systems for extreme conditions, and appropriate communication and networking systems. To add pressure to the rising tensions in the Arctic, countries like Russia who have more extreme equipment at their disposal, have been conducting training operations in the Arctic with more than 10 different pieces of major equipment, vehicles, and technology systems (Egorov, 2018). Currently, the U.S. only possess two ice-breaker ships that are capable of navigating the harsh conditions of the Arctic, which have caused grave concern within the military (Perez, 2022).

Not only is Russia a major ongoing threat in the Arctic region, but so is China, even though they do not have any recognized territory in the region. While China has not publicly declared their goals for the Arctic region, Chinese president, Xi Jinping, has made it clear that they intend to be a major Arctic power by 2030 (Doshi et al., 2021). On that same token, China has made an economic priority to become an active country in the Arctic by visiting Arctic countries on several occasions in the past decade in efforts to establish trade agreements and relationships with those countries (Doshi et al., 2021). Additionally, the Chinese military has been active in this region by sending naval forces on two recent occasions, and it has been announced that they have produced an ice-breaker ship with the intentions to continue production for more in the future (Doshi et al., 2021).

Developments in the Pacific

The Pacific region is one in which the U.S. has not been fully active in since WWII, however, in an effort to continue their world presence and military dominance, China has become increasingly active in this region. Recently, the Chinese signed an agreement with the Solomon Islands, which would allow for the growth of military presence in the Pacific, opportunities for more diverse training, and an opportunity to have larger amounts of troops and equipment stored in reserve for times of potential war (Harding & Pohle-Anderson, 2022). This move poses a major threat, not only to the U.S., but also our close allies such as Australia, as they would have a closer striking range if they were to take severe military action. Additionally, China has been drafting plans to use former U.S. runways in the Pacific on islands such as Canton Island, Kiribati, and the U.S. does not have the legal capability to outright deny the Chinese's use of this runway (Harding & Pohle-Anderson, 2022).

In recent studies, when referring to past and future potential capabilities, the U.S.'s Naval force has been regarded to as very weak in terms of capacity, capability, and readiness due to the lack of appropriate upgrades following WWII (Wood et al., 2023, 16). For instance, it is assessed that the U.S. would need around 400 manned ships to conduct successful missions if a war were to occur in the Pacific; however, the U.S. only has 298 prepared ships, which will again decrease to 280 by 2037 (Wood et al., 2023, 16). Not only is the Navy assessed as a weak branch in terms of capacity, capability, and readiness, but so is the Air Force. As it stands, the Air Force is only at 86% of the potential capacity to meet two-MRC benchmarks (Wood et al., 2023, 17). Additionally, the Air Force is facing a major pilot shortage to the tune of 650 pilots (Wood et al., 2023, 17). Lastly, the average fighter aircraft fleet is more than 32 years old, and while new

fleets are in production, there are not enough to completely replace old fleets, as it is a very slow process, which can be further delayed by supply chain and budget complications (Wood et al., 2023, 17).

Capabilities

While the U.S. lacks the standard to which many military leaders would hope, there is still much strength to be found. For instance, the U.S. still has the largest number of aircraft carriers, the largest military presence (in terms of international bases), the ongoing modernization of our military and military leadership structure, and our immense international alliances. For the past several decades, these factors have allowed the U.S. to continue international diplomacy and strength while maintaining the leverage to act in the instances of aggression or military action if needed.

As part of the U.S.'s vast international military presence, the U.S. Navy currently has 21 Naval installations across the globe, including six that are positioned in the Indo-Pacific region and one positioned off the coast of Australia (Sadler, 2022). These positions allow the Navy to have more effective response times in events of crises, and it also allows the Navy to conduct in-depth and collaborative training operations in the regions in which future military actions are possible. Out of the entire Naval fleet, the U.S. is able to deploy 13 Carrier Strike Groups, 13 carrier air wings, and 15 Expeditionary Strike Groups (Sadler, 2022). Most importantly, especially for possible combat missions in the Indo-pacific region, the Navy currently possess 11 nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, which allows for prolonged time at sea, though the U.S. has multiple refueling station agreements with multiple countries throughout the region (Sadler, 2022).

Alliances

One of the most effective tools that the U.S. currently has, especially in the Indo-Pacific region, is our alliances with surrounding nations and islands. These states include Australia, India, Japan, New Zealand, the U.K. and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Mohan, 2022). While the U.S. has been able to call these states a reliable ally in this region, long-term defense strategies have revealed that the U.S. intends to build these relationships even stronger in the future. Another factor that assists the U.S. in these efforts and alliance relationships is the overlapping goals of U.S. and European long-term strategies. Countries like France and Italy also have trilateral agreements with Australia, meaning that there are more key players whose outlook on the Indo-Pacific region are similar to the U.S., which leads to the possibility of growing collaboration of efforts in that region among allies (Mohan, 2022). Last, the U.S. has held a strong alliance with Japan since the end of WWII, in which the Mutual Defense Treaty was signed, ensuring that the U.S. and Japan will cooperate throughout challenges facing the Indo-Pacific region (Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, 2021).

Priorities

After reviewing the challenges and capabilities of the conventional defense posture, it is clear the U.S. still leads in all aspects when compared to the capabilities and posture of countries across the globe; however, there are significant improvements to be made in the coming months and years as the international political landscape and powers continue to evolve. Again, these rising powers' priorities include recent Chinese aggression and movements in the Indo-Pacific region and Russian progression in the Atlantic region. Of the overall long-term conventional

posture strategic planning, these conversation must include these following topics in order to ensure full preparedness in the coming months and years:

- 1) Facilitate conversations with Indo-Pacific allies to include the possibility of increasing military training and intelligence sharing to minimize the amount of ground that China can continue to make in their advancements in the region.
- 2) Be lenient when considering further aid to other countries until we are deffinent that we have the resources to be fully prepared for one, if not two, theaters of potential war.
- 3) Continue the construction of Naval fleets, which would include nuclear submarines and ice-breaking ships (to be used in the Arctic region).
- 4) Prioritization of the Indo-Pacific and Northern Commands as the most vital assets of the U.S. military in long-term strategic military plans.

While this is a brief list of overall military priorities, it is increasingly important to integrate these strategies and tactics with those of the unconventional approach, as different missions across the globe will require assistance from both of these approaches. Additionally, other capabilities must be present in these conversations, such as U.S. international soft power, economic options as a means of defense, and the importance of international military and economic allies. As a means of ensuring that these priorities can be met, some suggest that the most effective method of doing so would be to have long-term strategies set in place that will reach beyond one political party or tenure of presidential administrations, and these policies should include a decentralization of military powers from the federal government (Clary 2022). This decentralization would allow Commands such as the Indo-Pacific and Northern Commands to make operational decisions at a swifter and more efficient pace.

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