Decades of Air Force Underfunding Threaten America’s Ability to Win

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Why This Report?

Provide a data-based reference to communicate the magnitude of Air Force underfunding and force structure cuts it has absorbed for decades and their implications

• The Air Force has the oldest, smallest, and least ready force in its history due to 30 years of chronic underfunding
  o Air Force’s budget less than Army and Navy’s for 30 years in a row
  o Army averaged over $66B/year more than AF for 20 years after 9/11

• Correcting that underlying cause requires increased awareness of these facts by Congress, OSD, and the public

• Lack of a force sizing methodology inhibits understanding of the risks created by chronic Air Force underfunding and continued delays in modernization
Air Force Fighter & Bomber Inventory Trends Since The Cold War Have Been In One Direction—Down

- Lost half its fighters and two-thirds of its bombers since 1990
- Inventories have reached an unprecedented high average age
- 80% of fighters are past their original design lives
- About 20% of the Air Force’s fighter and bomber mission aircraft are stealthy
- Attrition reserves are not sized for a peer conflict
Air Force Fighter & Bomber Capacity Falls Short of National Defense Strategy Requirements

- The Air Force runs out of forces well before it meets National Defense Strategy requirements
- Shortfalls in Air Force mission capacity increase risk for all U.S. joint force operations
- No other service can bring enough combat air capabilities & capacity to fill existing gaps

Notes: Data on charts from studies directed by the 2018 NDAA to assess the USAF’s aircraft requirements; fighter and bomber requirements adjusted for their mission capable rates.
Development of an Air Force 5th Gen Combat Force Lags Real-World Operational Needs

Based on FY04 plan to buy 381 F-22s and grow production to 36/year and FY05 plan to buy 1,763 F-35As and grow production to 110/year

- Only Air Force fighters and bombers have the range & lethality to go on the offensive within hours to blunt, then deny a Chinese invasion
  - No other force can get there in time and project the offensive mass over long ranges needed to defeat a Chinese *fait accompli*

AF will have less than 45% of its original planned 5th gen force in the critical 2027-2030 timeframe when China may be ready to attack Taiwan
Why? These Trends Primarily Driven By Insufficient AF Budgets, Not Strategy Or Declining Operational Demand

- Budget cuts forced the AF to retire forces to sustain readiness of its remaining forces – new capabilities and more capacity are now needed
- New AF weapon systems delayed or ended short of planned buys (B-2, F-22, new bomber...) – forces designed in the 1970-80s are aging out
- Upgraded/stretched the lives of existing aircraft instead of replacing with next-gen systems – further upgrading old aircraft has reached a limit
# FY 2023 National Defense Budget Request

(Dollars in Billions)

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Table from DOD’s official “Defense Budget Overview” briefing, March 2022

$988 billion total Air Force pass-through from FY 1991-21

- $169.5B for the Air Force
- $24.5B for the Space Force
- $40.1B pass-through
Average of $66B more for the Army per year than the Air Force for the 20 years after 9/11

The Army alone has received $1.3 trillion more than the Air Force’s true budget since 2002

Air Force Has Long Been Underfunded: Budget Less Than Army and Navy’s for 30 Years in a Row

OSD should change service budget allocation to fund the right capabilities and capacity to deter/win against China
Underfunding and the “Valley of Death” – Enough Budget to Develop New Technologies But Not Buy Them

Must accelerate buying new now, starting with next-generation systems in production – survivable munitions, 5th gen stealth, etc.
Air Force New Aircraft Procurement Flat

This will not build a force that can win against China
The Navy Has A Track Record Of Acquiring More New Combat Aircraft Per Year Than The Air Force

Budget is the driver: The Navy’s topline has consistently exceeded the Air Force’s
Recommendations

1. **Shift pass-through funding to other non-service DOD organizations.** Clearly identify resources that actually go to the Air Force by shifting pass-through funding to DOD’s budget category for defense agencies and other non-service organizations.

2. **Allocate funding to forces that are most needed for a China fight.** The Air Force followed by the Navy should receive the largest service budget shares given the increased need for modernized air, space, and maritime capabilities and force capacity to defeat Chinese aggression – the pacing threat.

3. **Real Air Force budget growth.** Grow the Air Force’s budget by 3-5 percent plus inflation for a decade or more – real budget growth plus a more equitable distribution of funding is the only viable path to a modernized Air Force that also has the force capacity to win.

4. **Reduce risk in the critical period of 2027-2030.** Increase the Air Force’s acquisition of next-generation capabilities that are currently or will soon be in production.

5. **Need an Air Force sizing construct.** A force sizing construct will help explain and obtain resources the Air Force requires – it provides a critical tie between strategy and force structure needed to execute it.
Break The Destructive Cycle of Tradeoffs That Has Hollowed Out The Air Force

- Reverse Air Force underfunding to build the force we need, the force that can deter and win against China

Stop this cycle of destructive tradeoffs...

...by getting the AF resources it requires

1. 3-5% real budget growth over inflation for a decade or more
2. Fund capabilities and force capacity most needed for a China fight – Air Force, followed by Navy
3. Maximize production of advanced capabilities in production or soon in production

- No other service or Allied military can provide the capabilities and capacity to go on the offensive on day-one to blunt and then defeat Chinese aggression