

OVERMATCHED

Why the U.S. Military Needs to Reinvent Itself

America's military has defended the free world for 80 years.

Our dominance is fading.

Rivals know this and are building to defeat us.

Opinion

The Editorial Board

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President Xi Jinping of China has ordered his armed forces to be ready to seize Taiwan by 2027. Though the United States maintains a policy of strategic ambiguity on how it would respond to an invasion, Republican and Democratic presidents alike have said that America would defend the island nation. The Pentagon has produced a classified, multiyear assessment that shows how such a conflict would play out: the Overmatch brief.

The report is a comprehensive review of U.S. military power prepared by the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment and delivered most recently to top White House officials in the last year. It catalogs China's ability to destroy American fighter planes, large ships and satellites, and identifies the U.S. military's supply chain choke points. Its details have not been previously reported.

The picture it paints is consistent and disturbing. Pete Hegseth, the secretary of defense, [said](#) last November that in the Pentagon's war games against China, "we lose every time." When a senior Biden national security official received the Overmatch brief in 2021, he turned pale as he realized that "every trick we had up our sleeve, the Chinese had redundancy after redundancy," according to one official who was present.

The assessment shows something more worrying than the potential outcome of a war over Taiwan. It shows the Pentagon's overreliance on expensive, vulnerable weapons as adversaries field cheap, technologically advanced ones. And it traces a decades-long decline in America's ability to win a long war with a major power.

War games can be wrong; analysts sometimes overstate adversaries' abilities. Yet this larger point should not be ignored. Nearly four decades after victory in the Cold War, the U.S. military is ill prepared for today's global threats and revolutionary technologies.

It is an ancient and familiar pattern. Despite ample warnings, military and political leaders trained in one set of assumptions, tactics and weapons fail to adapt to change. Whether it was the French army in 1940, stuck behind its defensive Maginot Line, or Russian armored formations in Ukraine in 2022, decimated by Javelin missiles, the result is devastating for the side that will not discard old concepts, adopt new weapons or rethink its way of war.

That's where the United States risks finding itself. The Trump administration wants to increase defense spending in 2026 to more than \$1 trillion. Much of that money will be squandered on capabilities that do more to magnify our weaknesses than to sharpen our strengths.

The global consequences could be dire. The United States has not always used its military effectively or for just causes. Yet a strong America has been crucial to a world in which freedom and prosperity are far more common than at nearly any other point in human history. Western Europe, Japan and South Korea are all affluent democracies today, thanks in part to American might. A world in which a totalitarian China [achieves military superiority](#) in Asia and Russia feels free to [menace](#) Europe would make Americans poorer and threaten democracies everywhere. It is a prospect we should act resolutely to prevent.

This is the first of a series of editorials examining what's gone wrong with the U.S. military — technologically, bureaucratically, culturally, politically and strategically — and how we can create a relevant and effective force that can deter wars whenever possible and win them wherever necessary.

The new reality has come into focus in many places, particularly in Ukraine since Russia invaded in 2022. Inventive Ukrainian forces neutralized the once formidable Russian Black Sea Fleet using small, [remote-controlled](#) boats loaded with explosives. Many of Russia's most valuable [heavy bomber](#) aircraft were badly damaged or destroyed in June by small Ukrainian drones, sneaked into the country and launched against bases as far away as Siberia. In eastern Ukraine, drones that typically cost a few hundred dollars to make, and which Ukraine and Russia now produce by the millions, [have transformed the battlefield](#) into “a mash-up of ‘All Quiet on the Western Front’ and ‘Blade Runner,’” as the national security writer Max Boot [has observed](#).

To see where American defense dollars go, consider the U.S.S. Gerald R. Ford, America's latest aircraft carrier, which deployed for the first time in 2022 after more than a decade of construction and delays. The ship incorporates new technologies, including advanced nuclear reactors and electromagnetic catapults for launching aircraft, which make it more efficient than the Nimitz-class aircraft carriers it is intended to replace. The price tag: an estimated \$13 billion. That figure is for a single ship. It does not include the billions of dollars worth of military aircraft carried by the Ford and the escort ships needed to defend it.

Such formidable firepower is effective if you want to go to war with a relatively poor, weak country like, say, Venezuela. Yet the Ford, which is currently deployed in the Caribbean, is fatally vulnerable to new forms of attack. China in recent years has amassed an arsenal of around 600 hypersonic weapons, which can travel at five times the speed of sound and are difficult to intercept. Other countries possess quiet diesel-electric submarines [capable](#) of sinking American carriers.

In war games like those depicted in the Overmatch brief, ships like the Ford are often destroyed. Still, the Navy plans to build at least nine additional Ford-class carriers in the coming decades. So far, the United States has yet to deploy a single hypersonic missile.

Or take the possibility of a Russian attack on a NATO member state such as Estonia. Evidence suggests that Moscow may already be testing ways to do this, [including by cutting the undersea cables](#) on which NATO forces depend. And Russia is learning fast in the laboratory of war in Ukraine. Earlier this year, Kyiv's forces captured a Russian drone made of commercially available parts that can navigate autonomously to a target — akin to an off-the-shelf cruise missile.

Nor is it just our allies that are at risk. China has installed malware in the computer networks that control power grids, communications systems and water supplies for American military bases. The advanced cyber campaign, carried out by the state-sponsored hacking group known as Volt Typhoon, threatens the military's ability to move weapons and forces in the event of a crisis in the Pacific, and could affect civilians as well. America's cybersecurity officials have struggled to find and remove the malware.

Why have successive administrations, Republican and Democratic, persisted in investing in the old way of war?

One reason is inertia in Congress and the Pentagon. The channels through which funds flow to weapons systems are deep and difficult to reroute. An entrenched oligopoly of five large defense contractors, down from 51 in the early 1990s, has an interest in selling the Pentagon ever-costlier evolutions of the same ships, planes and missiles.

Another factor is military culture. Senior officers tend to be wedded to the technologies and tactics in which they made their careers. When Gen. David H. Berger, who was then the commandant of the Marines, decided in 2020 to get rid of the Corps's tanks (which are difficult to transport and maintain) for the sake of creating a lighter, more agile force that could better counter China, he had to overcome intense institutional resistance. General Berger was right. The war in Ukraine [demonstrated](#) how vulnerable tanks have become.

There is also a conceptual failure: the idea that more sophisticated is always better. For decades the American military has relied on systems that are bespoke, complex and wildly expensive.

That made some sense back when our primary adversary, the Soviet Union, pursued a similar approach, allowing the West to spend it into the ground. The trouble with highly engineered and expensive weapons is that they are all but impossible to produce rapidly or purchase in large numbers. The Army wants to field its own small drones — not for a few hundred dollars per unit, as in Ukraine, but a more sophisticated version of the same weapon for tens of thousands of dollars. Unsurprisingly, the more complex version takes much longer to produce.

Traditional weapons — such as artillery shells, ships and aircraft — will still be crucial to future wars, but the U.S. defense industry has lost the ability to produce them at scale and speed. In the event of a war with China, the United States would rapidly run out of essential munitions, as Jake Sullivan, the national security adviser in the Biden administration, [has warned](#). The Pentagon reportedly expended [about one quarter](#) of its overall stockpile of high-altitude missile interceptors helping to defend Israel against Iran's ballistic missiles earlier this year. And that was in a war that lasted just 12 days. Three years into the war in Ukraine, the United States can't produce enough Patriot missiles to meet Kyiv's demand.

The American military has resisted change for decades. The Pentagon has not had a strong secretary of defense willing to impose tough choices since Robert M. Gates, who served both George W. Bush and Barack Obama, left the office in 2011. Former Secretary of Defense Ashton B. Carter, an early recipient of the Overmatch brief, instituted multiple pilot projects and experiments in service of reform at the Pentagon, to limited effect. John McCain spent years raising the alarm on Capitol Hill, only to see Congress continue its support for outdated strategies.

There are some signs that the current administration may be willing to change. The Army [has canceled](#) the unsafe and unreliable M10 Booker light tank and other problematic programs. The White House is pushing for [an overhaul](#) of the way it buys weapons. But Mr. Hegseth has mainly presided over management chaos, officer purges and intelligence leaks that, in a normal administration, would have forced his resignation. President Trump's use of the armed forces for domestic deployments and illegal antidrug missions is not the kind of change we need.

Transformation is a long-term endeavor. The chaotic first months of Mr. Trump's second term have shown the dangers of misusing the military. They also have distracted from the urgency of reform. The strategic challenges the United States faces — among them a rising China, a revanchist Russia and A.I.-generated

cyber threats and bio threats — will outlast this administration. While none can be defeated by force alone, they still require credible U.S. military power as a backstop to international order and the security of the free world.

In the short term, the transformation of the American military may require additional spending, primarily to rebuild our industrial base. As a share of the economy, defense spending today — about 3.4 percent of G.D.P. — remains near its lowest level in more than 80 years, even after Mr. Trump's recent increases.

A more secure world will almost certainly require more military commitment from allies like Canada, Japan and Europe, which have long relied on American taxpayers to bankroll their protection. China's industrial capacity can only be met by pooling the resources of allies and partners around the world to balance and contain Beijing's increasing influence.

Ultimately, a stronger U.S. national security depends less on enormous new budgets than on wiser investments. Spending heavily on traditional symbols of might risks shortchanging the true sources of American strength: relentless innovation, rapid adaptability and a willingness to discard old assumptions.

To be clear: The United States needs a stronger military primarily to deter future wars, not to start them. As we rebuild our military, we must pursue diplomacy with our adversaries. At the same time, we need to prepare for the worst. Deterring war is the first goal of any successful strategy to avoid protracted conflict, and we need to address our weaknesses before enemies look to exploit them.

Mr. Trump and his administration have received the latest warnings of the Overmatch brief. The need for change is urgent. The question is whether we will do so in time.