Department of the Air Force Posture Statement

Fiscal Year 2026

Department of the Air Force
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Statement of:
The Honorable Troy Meink
Secretary of the Air Force

General David W. Allvin
Chief of Staff, United States Air Force

General B. Chance Saltzman
Chief of Space Operations, United States Space Force

OVERVIEW

The Department of the Air Force (DAF) is committed to defending the U.S. Homeland, deterring aggression and war across the world, and defeating our adversaries in battle if deterrence fails. We will accomplish this mission under Presidential direction and in conjunction with Department of Defense (DoD) policy and guidance, especially focusing on the Secretary of Defense's priorities. We will restore peace through strength by reviving our warrior ethos, rebuilding our military, and reestablishing deterrence. Delivering on these priorities is especially important in our current security environment and the threats posed by China and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The DAF will revive the warrior ethos of every Airman and Guardian by developing our people and generating readiness, honing the training and skills that give us a competitive advantage over our adversaries. We will uphold high and uncompromising standards, focusing on our shared purpose of defending our great Nation. Our personnel will train to fight in a contested environment with the assumption that they will be targeted in every domain. Doing so will give our Airmen and Guardians the will and determination to win any fight.

The DAF will rebuild our military by developing capabilities, reviving our defense industrial base, and reorganizing our Department to prepare for high-end conflict—a conventional war against a peer adversary. This process includes investing in modern technologies and rapidly transitioning them to the warfighter, developing the organizational structures and entities that will help us defend our Homeland and fight abroad, and equipping our forces with the means to fight and win today and in the future. These advancements and investments will provide asymmetric advantages across the spectrum of conflict and keep us ahead of any of our adversaries.

Lastly, **the DAF will reestablish deterrence** by projecting worldwide power whenever called upon, making our competitors rethink their ability to challenge America's vital interests. We will continue to operate two legs of the nuclear triad and the nuclear command, control, and communications (C3) systems to demonstrate our safe, secure, reliable, and effective nuclear deterrent for the Nation. We will balance our modernization efforts with current readiness requirements so that we never sacrifice our ability to fight tonight while also being ready to fight tomorrow. Our allies and partners will play a key role in our power projection and deterrence. Our combined efforts will help restore peace through strength, with our allies and partners shouldering their fair share of the security burden.

The DAF is committed to these priorities, which we are undertaking with a strong sense of urgency. Specific initiatives and requirements in each of these areas are discussed in depth in the U.S. Air Force (USAF) and U.S. Space Force (USSF) sections of this statement. However, our determination is no substitute for on-time, sufficient resources. Remaining competitive and sustaining a lethal force—anytime, anywhere—requires investment.

Timely, consistent authorizations and appropriations for defense spending are necessary to defend the Homeland, deter China, and defeat threats to our national security. Failure to do so represents time we can never get back, allowing our adversaries a free pass to close the gap or even surpass us. A lack of regular appropriations imposes unacceptable near and long-term operational risks as a failure to invest in capability and technological development today, amplifying shortfalls

tomorrow. Failure to provide on-time authority and appropriations will leave the USAF and USSF inadequately prepared for the dramatic geopolitical, technological, and economic challenges we face. To keep pace with the threats in the changing strategic landscape and support a stable industrial base, we urge Congress to enact the FY26 budget request without delay.

Responding to Increasing Threats

The scope and severity of threats to our Homeland and national interests are significant and increasing, and we now face one of the most dangerous security environments in our history. China is the only country with the will and increasing capability to challenge American vital interests. While many other serious threats exist, the DAF views China as its sole pacing threat. The USAF and USSF have structured our long-term strategies around this reality, and the specific threats listed below directly influence the DAF's fiscal priorities reflected in the FY26 budget request.

Financial Threats: China's defense budget has nearly doubled during the past eleven years, growing six percent annually on average, and they can likely support continued growth in defense spending for at least the next five to ten years with no threat of faltering over delayed appropriations or Continuing Resolutions. U.S. defense spending has seen around three percent growth over the same period, and the defense spending rates of many of our allies and partners are even lower, allowing China an opportunity to seize an advantage. China's real military budget is approximately equal to that of the United States today. From a purchasing power parity perspective, their buying power already exceeds ours. Over the last five years, U.S. defense spending has increased below the rate of inflation, essentially decreasing the effects of our funding and limiting our ability to keep pace with China's military growth and modernization.

Air Threats: The People's Liberation Army (PLA) fields the largest aviation force in the Indo-Pacific region and the third largest in the world. The PLA continues to upgrade and expand its combat forces, possessing over 1,900 total fighter aircraft. This number includes over 225 J-16s capable of carrying the PLA's very long-range air-to-air missile and an increasing number of fifth-generation J-20 stealth fighters. The PLA also unveiled two new sixth-generation fighters in December of 2024. The PLA has modernized its bomber force in parallel, introducing the H-6N and H-6K variants while also developing the new H-20 stealth strategic bomber. The H-6N can carry six land-attack cruise missiles, giving the PLA a long-range standoff precision strike capability that can reach targets in the second island chain from mainland China, and the H-6N provides a platform for the air component of China's nuclear triad. The last three years have seen several key milestones in China's comprehensive Unmanned Aircraft System (UAS) modernization, including the operational appearance of the Xianglong jet-powered UAS, the unveiling of the supersonic WZ-8 UAS, and a redesigned version of the GJ-11 stealth unmanned combat air vehicle. China has signaled its efforts in other next-generation technology, including swarming capabilities and a future multi-domain kill-web designed to target penetrating counterair by coordinating across aircraft, sensors, and missiles. Meanwhile, the PLA continues to develop its communications jamming, electronic countermeasures, aerial refueling, advanced airborne early warning and control, and airlift capabilities.

Space Threats: China is increasing its development of space capabilities to contest or deny access

to and operations in the space domain. China has a growing space inventory of over 1,060 satellites, half of which are intelligence sensors. China has developed—and will probably continue to develop—counterspace weapons targeting satellites in orbit to degrade and deny our space capabilities. These include direct-ascent anti-satellite missiles, co-orbital hunter-killer satellites, Electromagnetic Warfare (EW), directed-energy systems, and mobile jammers that can deny satellite communications and position, navigation, and timing (PNT). China is developing other sophisticated space-based capabilities, such as satellite inspection and repair, which could also function as weapons, and ground-based laser weapons of varying power levels to disrupt, degrade, or damage satellites, including a limited capability to employ laser systems against satellite sensors. By the mid- to late-2020s, China may field higher power systems to extend the threat to the structures of non-optical satellites. Taken together, China's space architecture does not just threaten our satellites, but it increasingly allows the PLA to better track, target, and strike our Joint Force on Earth.

Rocket Threats: The PLA's Rocket Force (PLARF) is advancing its long-term modernization plans to enhance its strategic deterrence capabilities. The PLARF has over 900 short-range ballistic missiles (SRBM) capable of reaching Taiwan, 400 ground-launched cruise missiles that can strike the entirety of the first island chain, 1,300 medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBM) reaching out to the second island chain, 500 intermediate-range ballistic missiles that can hit portions of Alaska and Australia, and over 400 intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons across the world. China's deployment of the DF-17 hypersonic glide vehicle (HGV)-armed MRBM will continue to transform the PLARF. The system may replace some older SRBM units and be used to strike foreign military bases and fleets in the Western Pacific. The DF-27 may have an HGV payload option in addition to conventional land-attack, anti-ship, and nuclear payloads. These threats place U.S. bases, allies, interests, and our Homeland in an increasing amount of danger.

Nuclear Threat: Over the next decade, China is projected to rapidly modernize, diversify, and expand its nuclear forces, changing our calculus as we face a state armed with a considerable suite of nuclear capabilities. China seeks a larger and more diverse nuclear force comprised of systems ranging from low-yield precision strike missiles to intercontinental ballistic missiles with multi-megaton yields. This range of capabilities provides China options at every rung of the escalation ladder. The DoD estimates that China has surpassed 600 operational nuclear warheads in its stockpile as of 2024 and that China will have over 1,000 operational nuclear warheads by 2030, much of which will be deployed at higher readiness levels.

Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) Threats: China's advancing development of dual-use technologies has raised treaty compliance concerns with both the Biological Weapons Convention and the Chemical Weapons Convention.

Cyber Threat: The PLA almost certainly is pursuing cyber capabilities to use in a crisis or conflict to degrade systems the U.S. military relies on for power projection. Beijing-linked cyber actors have targeted a wide range of government, critical infrastructure, and business networks in the United States and Japan, including those that support the U.S. and Japanese forces. In addition to critical infrastructure, Beijing-backed cyber actors continue to target U.S. defense organizations and contractors, likely for intelligence collection and cyberattack prepositioning. PLA texts

emphasize using cyber operations and other capabilities to degrade adversary Command and Control (C2), Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) weapon systems, and support nodes early in a conflict to seize information dominance.

All these capabilities continue to expand China's overall ability to project power, threatening American interests at home, in the Indo-Pacific, and throughout the world.

Other Threats: While we must keep pace with the growing military capabilities of China, we must also acknowledge the threats posed by Russia, Iran, North Korea, and other hostile regimes. Russia continues to place a strong emphasis on modernizing and developing strategic and theater-range nuclear weapons that will allow it to hold the U.S. Homeland at risk, particularly with hypersonic and other next-generation weapons. Russia is developing and deploying a range of counterspace systems, including surface-launched, air-launched, and orbital anti-satellite weapons, laser weapons, EW systems, and cyber capabilities that can threaten military and dual-use space assets. Russia is also developing a new satellite meant to carry a nuclear weapon as an anti-satellite capability. Both Iran and North Korea are also working to expand their military capabilities, focusing on conventional and unconventional military capabilities such as one-way attack drones, WMD, and other automated systems. Beyond these immediate threats, the United States must also deter conventional and unconventional threats from other regional actors and remain vigilant of potential Violent Extremist Organization threats. Additionally, an observed strategic alignment and partnerships between Russia, Iran, North Korea, and China creates dangerous synergy as an emerging anti-western coalition. The introduction of North Korean forces in the war against Ukraine is only one example of this emerging alignment. Finally, the character of war is rapidly changing with the introduction of increasingly automated systems, as seen in Ukraine and the Middle East.

The USAF and USSF cannot face these threats alone, and we will increasingly look for ways to collaborate with our allies and partners to share the security burden of advancing our mutual interests. One way the DAF will leverage support from our allies and partners is through foreign Research, Development, Test and Evaluation (RDT&E) and International Armaments Cooperation (IAC) agreements, which generate a fair share of funding for new collaborative capabilities. The DAF is currently negotiating 76 Air, Space, and Cyber IAC agreements worth a total value of $2.2 billion, equitably split among us and our foreign partners.

In light of these threats, the DAF is committed to conducting a Department-wide effort to revolutionize how we organize, train, and equip the USAF and USSF. This effort will enhance our ability to defend the Homeland, deter China, and defeat our adversaries should deterrence fail.

Meeting National Defense Priorities

Defend the Homeland

Defending the Homeland is the DAF's top priority. We do this every day by providing forces for aerospace control alert, nuclear readiness, global ISR, and space control missions, among many others. Airmen and Guardians are on constant alert against threats to our Nation. The DAF has recently prioritized operations along our **southern border** to support Presidential objectives and

protect our Homeland.

U.S. **nuclear readiness** continues to stand as a pillar of our country's overall deterrence posture, with the ultimate goal of protecting our Homeland. However, for the first time in history, the United States must be capable of simultaneously deterring two near-peer nuclear-armed adversaries. Both China and Russia's nuclear forces continue to expand and modernize. In the face of these threats, the B-21, Sentinel, and Long Range Standoff programs—as well as the modernized nuclear C3 that support these systems—are essential modernization steps in protecting our Homeland and maintaining a credible U.S. nuclear deterrent in the future.

The DAF is also committed to supporting the President's **Golden Dome for America**. The DAF will have a significant role in the Golden Dome project—contributing its unique capabilities of space-based missile warning and intercept, sensor fusion, C3, and Battle Management to the initiative, as well as bolstering air and cruise missile defense as part of a layered homeland defense architecture. We look forward to working with our Joint partners and Congress to make this vision a reality.

Cyber remains central to both the USAF and USSF, supporting Joint warfighters and providing forces for both offensive and defensive cyber operations that protect our Homeland and our interests. Two key parts of modernizing defensive cyber operations are Mission Assurance Cyber Coordination Element (MACCE) teams and the Integrated Defensive Cyberspace System (IDCS). MACCE teams provide wings persistent mission assurance on the DAF's most critical weapons systems through key cyber terrain mapping and sensor placement identification. IDCS provides a common operational ecosystem through its cyber defense sensors. Failure to fund MACCE or IDCS at the required level would adversely impact power projection platforms by leaving them vulnerable to the adversary. The DAF will continue to implement mitigations in addressing installation infrastructure cyber vulnerabilities identified in response to section 1650 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2017, preventing the potential of high-consequence cyber attacks. Additionally, the funding for offensive operations is focused on Cyber-Enabled Air Superiority to field and employ an integrated system that supports aircraft and long-range munitions survivability in highly contested environments. These cyber systems are vital to national defense in an increasingly digital world.

Deter China

The DAF seeks to deter China and the CCP from initiating hostilities. We will achieve this through our people, our readiness, and our posture within the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) region.

The DAF believes that **our people** are and will continue to be one of our Nation's key competitive advantages, and we are making significant investments in our personnel. This investment starts with aligning our forces to fill core missions, rethinking the structures and methods for training, and improving the quality of service and quality of life that helps us retain the talents of our Airmen and Guardians. A few examples of investing in our personnel are our commitment to renovate dormitories, revamping training programs to focus on warfighting, and increasing the availability of childcare. All these initiatives lead to improving individual readiness, which enables

warfighters to accomplish the mission. The strength of our entire service—our Airmen, Guardians, and civilians—is our unity and our shared purpose, and the DAF is committed to ensuring that our personnel have everything they need to succeed and win in today's strategic environment.

Our readiness remains essential to deter our adversaries. Individual readiness represents the human component of readiness, different from the health of the platforms and systems that enable Airmen and Guardians to fight. The DAF believes in maintaining the highest standards, rewarding initiative, and striving for excellence. Within the last year, the USAF and USSF have emphasized readiness standards by creating new inspections, assessments, and exercises geared toward preparing our Airmen and Guardians for the rigors of high-end combat. The DAF seeks to continue investing in these initiatives to ensure our warfighters are ready to defend our Nation and its interests.

Our posture within the USINDOPACOM region is a vital component of deterrence. We must demonstrate our ability to project power and communicate our resolve to protect our interests in the region. For this reason, the DAF is committed to conducting high-level operational exercises that will test our ability to deploy and operate from austere airfields, including RESOLUTE FORCES PACIFIC (REFORPAC), a theater-level exercise taking place this summer. However, in light of the increasing threats, we also need to increase the resiliency of our bases in the Pacific. We seek to achieve a more agile, resilient, and lethal posture throughout the entire theater.

Lastly, the best deterrent is a credible and lethal force capable of defeating our adversaries. Ultimately, we must have the means to deny or punish any adversary who dares attack our national interests. The following section covers how the DAF plans to achieve decisive victory should deterrence fail.

Defeat our Adversaries

The DAF faces an inflection point. We have been postured to fight the conflicts of the past, yet the new strategic environment demands that we prioritize preparing for future conflict with a high-low mix of assets that can defend against and defeat a peer threat. **The primary challenge the DAF faces today lies in creating the force we need to defeat our future adversaries while not undercutting our ability to fight tonight**. This reality means that the DAF must balance the need to sustain foundational accounts while also leading the way in modernization. Investing too heavily in immediate readiness risks devastating modernization. On the other hand, investing too heavily in modernization starves foundational readiness accounts, reducing the immediate deterrent value of the DAF. Doing so risks a readiness tailspin that is difficult—if not impossible—to recover from. In the coming years, we will need to constantly evaluate the balance between immediate, intermediate, and long-term investments as the strategic environment continues to evolve.

It is easy to focus our readiness and modernization discussions around specific platforms. However, platforms do not perform in a vacuum. The DAF recognizes **the need to develop interconnected, multi-platform systems of systems that operate within and across services** to create a robust and redundant, long-range kill web capable of delivering effects within the most contested environments. To achieve this goal, it is vital to simultaneously invest in multiple parts

of that kill web—everything from traditional platforms to the communications equipment, support systems, artificial intelligence (AI), and the weapons delivering specific effects. Through these investments, the DAF aims to establish a balanced, high-low mix of combat capabilities optimized to project airpower both from within and outside of adversary threat environments.

Lastly, the DAF cannot succeed without the help of our **allies and partners**. To strengthen and sustain deterrence and enable victory, should deterrence fail, we are prioritizing interoperability and enabling coalitions with enhanced capabilities, new operating concepts, and combined, collaborative force planning. Additionally, the USSF is pivoting to resilient architectures that balance Joint lethality, effectiveness, and survivability to deliver space capabilities the Nation, our allies, and our partners need to fight in a contested domain. As the world's greatest Air Force and Space Force, the DAF will continue to lead by fostering strong allied and partner coalitions while also reinforcing the ability of allies and partners to maintain air and space superiority within their individual spheres of influence. As we focus on our pacing threat, our allies and partners in the region must work alongside us and prioritize their own defense spending. Meanwhile, our allies and partners outside the USINDOPACOM region must pick up the responsibilities of maintaining air and space superiority in their respective spheres of influence to maintain a safe and secure world.

While we focus on rebuilding our USAF and USSF, we must also ensure we **streamline our force wherever possible**. The first area to consider is our infrastructure and inventories. Base Realignment and Closure has been politically unpalatable for decades. Still, excess infrastructure on existing bases forces us to invest critical dollars in areas that do not directly contribute to warfighting. For example, maintaining two under-utilized bases imposes duplicate costs on the personnel, facilities, and base operating support functions needed to sustain each base. By consolidating missions, we can also consolidate costs, potentially saving hundreds of millions of dollars annually per consolidation. Aging inventories and legacy systems with limited utility against our pacing threat act in the same way; they absorb precious resources while minimally supporting efforts to keep ahead of our adversaries. The DAF must prioritize the missions, platforms, and systems that directly contribute to deterring our pacing threat and eliminate those that do not align with our national security objectives. The second area to consider is high operational demand. Worldwide commitments and operational requirements significantly impact our force. Decades of enduring operational rotations have worn down our people and platforms, making us less prepared for a high-end conflict. Finally, the DAF recognizes its need and responsibility to pass our financial statement audit by 2028. We are accelerating our efforts—committing both people and resources—because passing an audit is an urgent priority toward our goal of rebuilding our military. With compliant financial statements, we gain the critical information and data integrity that yield greater insight toward optimizing our resources for higher warfighting priorities. While these are difficult and politically charged topics, we must be willing to discuss how to wisely invest the taxpayer's dollars while maintaining our commitment to serve the American people and their communities.

Achieving peace through strength will require a comprehensive and coordinated effort from the entire Joint Force by reviving our warrior ethos, rebuilding our military, and reestablishing deterrence. USAF and USSF programs needed to support these priorities are detailed for each DAF Military Service in the sections below.

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

The U.S. Air Force is the most dominant Air Force in the history of the world. This dominance is not, however, maintained by inertia. We require a rigorous assessment of our initiatives—both new and old—to maintain our qualitative advantage. Having the right force structure is paramount in today's shifting and dynamic security landscape. Striking the right balance between exquisite and low-cost capabilities, informed by the tactical realities of the 21st-century battlefield, is a necessity. Modernization, therefore, means fielding a collection of assets of all kinds that provide unique dilemmas for adversaries—matching capabilities to threats—while keeping the USAF on the right side of the cost curve. We aim to create a nimble, affordable force designed to asymmetrically deny our adversary at every point along the spectrum of conflict. We will continue to be the world's best example of speed, agility, and lethality, and we will do it at a price point that is not exorbitant. The Joint Team and our Nation rely upon us to do so.

The FY26 USAF budget request is devoted to reviving our warrior ethos, rebuilding our military, and reestablishing deterrence. Our Nation's Airmen deserve the best training, weapons, and equipment so they can fly, fight, win—anytime, anywhere. Modern warfare affords no sanctuary. Our Airmen will be required to fight and launch sorties under fire and from austere locations, and our stateside units will need to defend their bases. Rebuilding our military, therefore, means many things—among them is funding a family of medium- and long-range penetrating airframes, modern munitions, survivable refueling, human-machine teaming, and a hardened warfighting network supported by a robust logistics chain. Reestablishing deterrence means backing these elements with a responsive, modern nuclear force and large-scale, challenging exercises that demonstrate top-tier coordination, agility, and lethality.

AIR FORCE'S ROLE IN REVIVING OUR WARRIOR ETHOS

The USAF stands poised on the edge of a new era. We will foster an unyielding spirit of courage, peerless competence, and unwavering commitment in every Airman. Air dominance in the 21st century demands a force ready to confront the multifaceted and brutal challenges that warfare without sanctuary spaces provides. Reviving the warrior ethos means equipping our Airmen with the skills that this type of warfare demands, the unit-level training and resources to win in these environments, and the support systems at home that let them keep their heads in the fight while abroad. Only through sustained investments in our personnel can we realize the full potential of the world's greatest Air Force and guarantee America's continued leadership in an increasingly complex world.

Our commitment begins with **recruiting** the very best. The USAF is on track to meet its FY25 recruiting goals, a testament to the appeal of service. The new Air Force Accessions Center streamlines the overall process of identifying and cultivating our talent. The Delayed Entry Program boasts 13,000 recruits—a ten-year high—demonstrating the success of adapting entry requirements without compromising quality. We must address the current funding shortfall in the accessions and recruiting marketing budget to sustain this momentum. This shortfall directly impacts our ability to attract and inspire the next generation of Airmen.

Cultivating the Warrior Ethos extends beyond accessions and recruitment. It demands investing in cutting-edge **training** across all domains. We transformed the United States Air Force Academy into a crucible for developing leaders with an emphasis on realistic combat training that cultivates adaptability. It is critical to continue investing in physical development, warfighter priorities, and academic excellence. The reintroduction of Warrant Officers in cyber warfare and IT operations underscores our commitment to dominate the digital battlefield. Basic Military Training now culminates in PACER FORGE, a 72-hour combat exercise that emphasizes the Warrior Ethos and produces Airmen with the will to fight and the determination to win. Securing consistent funding is paramount to keep turning innovations like these into reality.

Furthermore, our service needs a comprehensive plan for **deploying** our warfighters into combat. Our Units of Action force structure will contain Combat Wings and Institutional Wings. The structure of these units is a decided step up in performance over their crowd-sourced predecessors. Their adaptable structure ensures the agile and lethal deployment of airpower in response to a wide range of global threats while allowing our Airmen to simultaneously maintain their focus on defending our Homeland.

Lastly, our service must commit to **supporting** our Airmen and their families. A warrior fights better knowing that his or her home and family are secure while he or she executes the mission. Reducing childcare waitlists by 45% (from October 2023 through October 2024) is a significant achievement, but sustaining this progress requires consistent funding for on-base childcare options, subsidies, and staffing. Since FY19, 13 newly funded Child Development Center projects will create 1,800 new childcare slots. This is a good start, but we can do more. Our commitment to family housing remains strong, with $550 million allocated for FY24-FY25, but we need continual funding to sustain safe living facilities for our Airmen. We are also committed to Military Construction and Facilities Sustainment, Restoration, and Modernization (FSRM). Our planned FSRM investment is the largest investment in dormitories in over a decade. This is a step in the right direction, but we need on-time, consistent, sustained funding to ensure our Airmen have access to safe living facilities.

AIR FORCE'S ROLE IN REBUILDING OUR MILITARY

Rebuilding our Air Force starts with our strategy. At the end of the Cold War, the USAF was purpose-built for a specific theory of victory—to defeat a Soviet threat through superior penetrating Offensive Counter Air and quickly achieving theater-wide air superiority as an enabler to further Joint Operations. The capabilities that enabled this strategy were not an accident; it took years of planning and investment to make them a reality. Since that time, changes to our strategy and capabilities have been incremental, not transformational. We still operate many of the same platforms and rely on a similar path to victory. However, our adversaries spent the last three decades learning how to dismantle and defeat that strategy. They developed new platforms, weapons, and defenses that specifically counter our tactics and target our vulnerabilities. As a result, the strategy that has bought us air dominance for a generation is increasingly put at risk. We must make a generational shift to stay ahead of our competitors.

That shift starts with a new **Force Design**—one that provides a balanced mix of high-end and low-end capabilities, and options across geographies, timelines, and threat depth. Each element targets

our adversary in different ways, generating specific capabilities to match and counter the threats we face. However, this Force Design will take time and intentional investment, just as it did at the end of the Cold War. USAF Force Design describes a future Air Force capable of responding to not only the pacing threat but also across contingency and future uncertainty across the spectrum of threat densities. We will prioritize the systems, capabilities, and processes that support this goal above legacy programs with less utility.

As we transform our force, we face the challenge of **balancing modernization with current readiness**. This tension has been out of balance over the last few years, underfunding our foundational readiness accounts, and we seek to correct this trend in FY26. Our Flying Hour Program (FHP) is one example of this tension. Over the last few years, we have funded our FHP to executable levels that our airframes and personnel can realistically support. Regardless, we have still consistently under-executed our total programed flying hours and failed to meet minimum Ready Aircrew Program (RAP) training requirements. However, increasing FHP alone cannot solve this problem. The USAF needs to balance and align our Weapon System Sustainment (WSS), training capabilities, and operational requirements in conjunction with our FHP to regain our ability to meet RAP requirements. To this point, our WSS is the most significant readiness lever to fix, which will require stable, consistent, and long-term funding, coupled with a robust strategy for expanding our industrial base. This is crucial to arrest the decline in FHP and improve the effectiveness of our flying operations. The challenge is compounded by our aging fleet and rising costs as WSS and FHP portfolios struggle to maintain the same flying and availability rates. The specific tensions between modernization, recapitalization, and readiness in a variety of our platforms and portfolios will drive future priorities as we focus on the pacing threat.

Our **fighter aircraft** and the way we employ them will undergo a revolutionary transformation. As recently announced by President Trump, the F-47—the Next Generation Air Dominance (NGAD) family of systems' manned fighter platform—represents a monumental leap forward in securing America's air superiority for decades to come. This platform will be the most advanced, lethal, and adaptable fighter ever developed—designed to outpace, outmaneuver, and outmatch any adversary that dares to challenge our brave Airmen. The F-47 will also work directly with Collaborative Combat Aircraft (CCA), which represents a generational leap forward in autonomous systems and AI. Furthermore, developing and funding the entire NGAD family of systems will provide credible fighter capability and capacity at a lower cost and on a threat-relevant timeline. Additionally, the modular design architecture of CCAs will put systems before platforms, enabling the systems to rapidly evolve with the threat axis and receive new technologies, all while reducing overall system ownership costs. While developing the NGAD family of systems is a top priority, we must maintain and improve our current fighter platforms. F-35 TR-3 and Block 4 modernization efforts and additional investments in sustainment are required to secure F-35 relevance in the high-end fight. The F-15C/D divestments, F-15EX bed-downs, and F-15E modernization will continue to enable recapitalizations on an aging fleet with superior sensors, range, and payloads necessary to defend critical locations with out-sized long-range weapons. The F-16 program will continue to be relevant with the addition of critical fleet modernization upgrades to sustain its viability. Finally, the F-22 program requires RDT&E funding to support sensor enhancements, navigation systems, pylons, and communication systems.

While our **mobility fleet** remains effective, it is becoming increasingly vulnerable against our

pacing threat. The KC-46A will require organic depot standup, aircrew and training support equipment, and spares. It will also require resolving outstanding critical deficiencies needed to improve the KC-46 availability from around 50% to 80%. We are also working to recapitalize our KC-135 fleet to continue operations well into the future.

Special-mission aircraft will complement the USAF inventory and provide unique capabilities against our pacing threat. Over time, aging aircraft will be supplanted or replaced by modern, more adaptable options. We are committed to replacing the 35-year-old VC-25A with reliable air transport equipped with communications capability and security equal to that of the White House. We are working through modification delays attributed to supplier transition, manpower limitations, and wiring design completion. The ability to win high-end conflicts requires transitioning to connected, survivable platform investment and accepting short-term risks by divesting legacy ISR assets. The USAF plans to transition all U-2 capabilities to other reconnaissance aircraft post-divestment. The HH-60W, 60 of which have been delivered to date, is the only dedicated DoD Combat Search and Rescue helicopter and is expected to cap at 96 total vehicles by FY29. In FY26, we will complete the divestment of the HH-60G. The T-7A replaces Air Education and Training Command's aging T-38C fleet of 427 with 351 aircraft and associated ground-based simulators and trainers. The MQ-9A program will be maintained in FY26 with minimal upgrades for the remaining fleet, enhancing survivability into the near future.

Our **munitions portfolio** will be maintained by substantial investment in FY26, and we will build inventory to support today's air dominance while simultaneously investing in technology to counter future near-peer threats. Hypersonics will play a role in future warfare and have cemented their place in the overall USAF game plan via wargaming and analysis. Hypersonic Attack Cruise Missile is entering flight test, with a planned production start in FY27, and will remain a component of the USAF strategy now and in the foreseeable future. The Air-Launched Rapid Response Weapon completed its rapid prototyping in August 2024. The USAF will also pursue long-range, affordable mass weapons that can be replenished faster than expenditure rates. The field of propulsion, a domain in which we've always enjoyed supremacy, also demands attention. Efficient fuel consumption is another key area of focus, which is purely based on increasing mission effectiveness. Our energy optimization and resilience efforts are enabling aircraft to travel at greater range and spend longer time on station, enhancing our ability to project airpower in contested environments, which is especially critical in the USINDOPACOM theater. Recent efficiency efforts resulted in $222 million in cost avoidance from FY20 through FY23.

The USAF requires robust and survivable **Command and Control (C2) and Electromagnetic Spectrum (EMS) Operations** capabilities to operate in a contested environment. The DAF Battle Network is one part of this solution, enabling us to close Air Force and Joint priority kill chains and deliver decision advantage for operational C2 and battle management nodes. Our investments in Advanced Battle Management Systems and Air Operations Centers (AOCs) represent our flagship contributions to the DoD's broader Combined Joint All-Domain Command and Control initiative, supporting multiple combatant commands. Agile cryptographic solutions are a large part of our overall cyber security, requiring significant investment across all platforms. Coordinated EMS efforts will diminish adversary long-range kill chains and enhance friendly command, control, and operations.

Lastly, our **installation infrastructure** needs rebuilding and consolidation. Currently, the USAF carries significant excess infrastructure. Since the end of the Cold War, the USAF has reduced end strength by nearly 50%, but in that time, we have only reduced our infrastructure footprint by about 15%. Moreover, roughly half of all infrastructure across the USAF is in a moderate or high-risk condition, and much is vulnerable to cyber, man-made, and natural threats. In FY25, the Air Force spent approximately $900 million maintaining this excess. The USAF also acknowledges section 2680 from the FY25 NDAA, which sets a spending floor of 4% of plant replacement value annually on FSRM funding by 2030. This number is over double the USAF's current spending on FSRM. Coupled with our excess infrastructure, we will soon be forced to pay double for unneeded infrastructure that provides little value to the Nation. The USAF seeks to prioritize Maintenance & Repair funding to rebuild and consolidate infrastructure across the entire portfolio. However, inflation, construction, labor, and materials costs continue to reduce purchasing power.

AIR FORCE'S ROLE IN REESTABLISHING DETERRENCE

The USAF remains fully committed to providing the robust and credible **nuclear deterrent** needed for the President's vision of achieving peace through strength. The Air Force owns three-quarters of the United States' nuclear C3 system and two legs of the nuclear triad. The USAF's full-scope nuclear modernization program—which includes Sentinel intercontinental ballistic missiles, the B-21 bomber, Long Range Stand Off cruise missiles, and a revitalized B-52 bomber—will upgrade aging weapons systems to cover short-term needs while investing in next-generation technologies that provide nuclear security for the future. Additionally, a Survivable Airborne Operations Center (SAOC) is crucial to any future warfare endeavor. SAOC will provide an enduring node of the National Military Command System suited to eventually replace the E-4B, which is approaching the end of its service life in the 2030s.

Despite the program's delays, **Sentinel** remains essential to national security and the best path to ensure the United States maintains the nuclear triad's most responsive leg. While continuing to work with industry, the USAF is taking a disciplined, event-driven approach to reach a Milestone B decision. This includes ongoing requirements definition and decomposition, acquisition strategies, exploration of the design trade space, and implementation of necessary contract direction. Until the Sentinel Program is fully implemented, the Minuteman III requires funding to sustain the U.S.' intercontinental ballistic missile capability.

Our **bomber** fleet is undergoing significant upgrades to support both conventional and nuclear missions. The B-21 family of systems is progressing as planned, promising a cutting-edge platform. The B-21 will be a component of a larger family of systems that includes conventional long-range strike, including electronic attack, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, and other manned and unmanned capabilities. We are on track with the government acquisition program's baseline for cost, schedule, and performance. The program is executing flight testing and has awarded the first two production lots. Our B-1B and B-2 fleets remain a credible strategic deterrent until they are divested and replaced by the B-21. The future Air Force will include a two-bomber force made up of the B-21 and the recapitalized B-52.

Beyond nuclear deterrence, the USAF must also demonstrate its ability to **execute Joint missions in contested environments**. In February 2025, our Air Force led more than 10,000 Joint and

allied troops, operating 175 aircraft from 15 locations as part of Exercise Bamboo Eagle 25-1. REFORPAC will forge a more lethal and resilient force. This summer's exercise will immerse Airmen and our partner nations in realistic, contested environments with degraded C2. It will force them to make distributed decision-making and stress-testing logistics while under fire. It will assess combat readiness, ensuring Airmen are equipped to prevail in any conflict. Funding REFORPAC is a direct investment in saving lives and ensuring mission success.

UNITED STATES SPACE FORCE

With every passing year, the space domain becomes more foundational to the American way of life. Of the 16 sectors of critical national infrastructure, satellites directly support and enable more than half. A third of crops are grown using weather data from space. Credit card terminals and digital transactions are timestamped with satellite signals. In so many ways—from the national power grid to the internet—the institutions that define day-to-day activities would simply not be possible without space-enabled services. The U.S. Space Force delivers all these things and more.

There is **no better bargain** in the DoD than the USSF. The American military is sized and built around the assumption that it will have unfettered access to spacepower. For about 3% of the FY25 defense budget, the Nation has purchased 100% of its missile warning and tracking capabilities, 100% of its PNT services, and 100% of its satellite communications throughput. 95% of U.S. Space Command's capability derives from the USSF.

With less than 0.08% of our national Gross Domestic Product, **the USSF secures and defends the single largest physical domain**, paving the way for a commercial space market estimated to grow to $1.8 trillion within the decade. As the smallest military branch with fewer than 9,800 uniformed Guardians—0.8% of the DoD's active-duty force—the USSF delivers astonishing asymmetric returns on investment. For example, in 2024, the USSF budgeted $2 billion for the operation and sustainment of the GPS constellation. According to a 2019 Department of Commerce report, the estimated cost of a GPS outage is $1 billion per day.

Investments in the USSF provide the personnel, equipment, and enterprise activities necessary to perform **three core functions**:

1) **Space Access**: This includes launch and range operations as well as the links, antennae, and networks needed to perform satellite telemetry, tracking, and control (TT&C).
2) **Global Mission Operations**: These are the critical enabling capabilities prerequisite for all Joint operations. They include missile warning, satellite communications, weather, space-based sensing and targeting, and PNT.
3) **Space Control**: These are the capabilities needed to protect U.S. space assets, defend the Joint Force from space-enabled attack, and deny adversary hostile uses of space. They include orbital warfare, electromagnetic warfare, and cyber warfare operations.

The USSF is committed to being a good steward of taxpayer dollars, and it will manage its people, processes, and budget to execute these functions in a constrained fiscal environment. Regardless, for each core function, significant challenges persist.

Space Access

A fundamental challenge to our Space Access capability is the aging and saturated Satellite Control Network. Since 2004, only 7 of the 14 total antennae have been upgraded, leaving 50% well beyond design life. Additionally, the support structure required to enable launch and range operations has not been rescoped to handle our tremendous increase in launch tempo.

2014 heralded a record-breaking number of launches: 18 at the Florida Spaceport and 4 at Vandenberg's complexes in California. In 2024, the USSF supported 93 launches on the Eastern Range and 47 on the Western Range, totaling 140 supported launches—a nearly 700% increase in operations tempo in just ten years. Neither the number of support personnel nor the sustainment of launch and range infrastructure has been able to keep pace with demands imposed by this rapid acceleration in Space Access activity. The need to rapidly reconstitute degraded or destroyed satellites—previously demonstrated by USSF VICTUS missions—presents an additional strain on routine launch resources.

The USSF is addressing these challenges in a variety of ways. First, we are fielding a modern Satellite Control Network architecture intended to replace our aging tracking stations and increase capacity to alleviate TT&C contact saturation. In FY26, we expect to field the first article for testing, and with a stable funding line, we plan to wholly replace this critical capability over the next few years. Second, the USSF is using new appropriations to perform vital maintenance and upgrades on our launch infrastructure, and we have a solid strategy to rapidly execute resources.

In addition to these enhancements, additional work is required to meet the increasing demands on the USSF's launch infrastructure. We look forward to working with Congress to increase these critical capabilities.

Global Mission Operations

Regarding Global Mission Operations, the USSF's most acute challenge is the urgent need to increase service resiliency in the face of growing counterspace threats. The PLA has already demonstrated direct-ascent anti-satellite capabilities. It has presented multiple ground-based laser weapons to disrupt, degrade, and damage satellite sensors. Furthermore, the PLA regularly exercises counter-SATCOM jammers across a range of frequencies, including our protected Extremely High Frequency systems.

The USSF is countering this challenge by shifting to more resilient architectures to perform critical functions like missile warning, nuclear C3, data transport, and PNT. However, time is of the essence, and our pace of fielding is dictated by the availability of near-term funding. **Failure to protect the capabilities encapsulated within Global Mission Operations puts every one of the Joint Force's military objectives at risk**.

Space Control

Unlike challenges we face in other core functions, the issue we face with Space Control is not one of modernization or adaptation but rather of creation. The requirement to contest and control the space domain was newly established with the formation of the USSF, and the service is still

working hard to build the infrastructure of Space Superiority from whole cloth.

While it will always be necessary to protect U.S. space capabilities, we can no longer assume it will be sufficient to meet our overarching military objectives. The PLA has fielded satellite-enabled, space-based targeting of terrestrial forces. This kill web has extended the range and accuracy of PLA weapons to hold U.S. forces at risk.

The USSF has the task of defeating this kill web and protecting the Joint and Combined Force from space-enabled attacks. However, advancing this new mission area also requires new resources. We cannot shift personnel or funding away from Space Access or Global Mission Operations without incurring impacts to other vital missions. While we have many programs in various stages of development intended to support this effort, **it is essential that we resource them at the level required to field meaningful capability in an operationally relevant timeline**.

SPACE FORCE'S ROLE IN REVIVING OUR WARRIOR ETHOS

The USSF is committed to building space-minded warfighters. Historically, the military approached space as a benign environment, and it trained its personnel accordingly. This created a culture that avoided risk and prioritized efficiency over combat effectiveness. The establishment of the USSF has completely upended this mindset with a new paradigm: **space is a warfighting domain**, and our Guardians stand ready to achieve Space Superiority and defeat any adversary.

To accelerate this seismic shift in culture, the USSF stood up a variety of initiatives to train and mold its personnel into **the elite space warfighting force of the future**. In July 2024, we committed the first synchronized cycle of our forces to Combatant Commanders via our Space Force Generation process. This model centers around expanded advanced training, preserving positional currency while building readiness for the high-end fight. Likewise, the USSF is in the process of establishing a component field command to serve as USSF Service Components for each combatant command. This effort will "normalize and integrate" spacepower as a key component of Joint Force success. Finally, in September 2024, we established the Officer Training Course, which will ground every new accession in an operational mindset, equipping them with the knowledge they need to prosecute combat in space. In these ways and more, the USSF is working to build a threat-oriented workforce that is tested and measured against the standard of a thinking adversary.

At present, the Space Force is exceeding its recruiting goals, allowing for hand-picked selection of promising Guardians with much-needed skillsets.

The challenge here is that we still lack appropriate training tools to reinforce and enhance readiness. We have therefore invested heavily in a modern space Operational Test and Training Infrastructure (OTTI), which will supply the ranges, simulators, and models our Guardians need to fight and win in the space domain, but this is a costly endeavor that spans the entire enterprise. Though we have a plan to deliver OTTI in increments over the coming years, on-time, stable funding would accelerate delivery of these crucial assets during a time of increasing competition in space.

The USSF is working to **balance its obligations to the Joint Force while developing its own essential Service capabilities**, but limited resources slow their fielding. For several years, we have prioritized the "fight tonight" mentality, delaying modernization and accepting risk tomorrow. In the case of Space Control, creation is a better word than modernization since the function is being wholly constructed from scratch. At present, we do not have the full set of capabilities necessary to secure the space domain at the scale we need to assure Joint Force success. These decisions have disproportionately impacted the USSF's ability to meet its obligations to the Nation.

SPACE FORCE'S ROLE IN REBUILDING OUR MILITARY

To equip and sustain its warfighters, **the USSF is working hard to reimagine the way it approaches space capability delivery**. Owing to the highly technical and complex nature of space operations, fully two-thirds of the USSF's budget is devoted to research, development, testing, and engineering. Moreover, the rapid innovation of the commercial space sector has presented the USSF with a range of opportunities. For well-understood missions with stable requirements, traditional processes may suffice. However, we are exploring accelerated pathways for demonstrations, prototypes, and experiments to speed novel capability to the battlefield.

To that end, the USSF is leveraging the expanded acquisition authorities granted by Congress to rebuild, acquire, and deliver capabilities to the warfighter more rapidly than we have in the past. In particular, Guardian acquirers are utilizing Other Transaction Authorities and contracts that reward innovation to deliver in years rather than decades. Additionally, we are capitalizing on the robust commercial space industry where we can by adapting innovative technologies to military use consistent with our force design. The USSF is actively pursuing hybrid architectures that incorporate commercial solutions as part of a resilient and adaptive network of warfighting capability.

For FY26, the USSF's single greatest priority remains building out the infrastructure of Space Control. The USSF is rapidly acquiring purpose-built technology, developing novel tactics, techniques, and procedures, and driving requirements for resiliency and domain awareness throughout the Service. Even so, 78% of the USSF's budget is dedicated to service delivery to the Joint Force, which leaves less than 22% for Space Control or any other critical new mission set that may be identified.

At the macroscale, the USSF is moving forward by charging a new 2-star Field Command to take responsibility for our force design: Space Futures Command. This organization would project the future operating environment and align capabilities to threats to ensure we overmatch our adversaries in, from, and to space. Documenting the force we need as the "Objective Force" will communicate a clear demand signal to our allies and partners, shaping industrial research and development, basic science and technology work, and collaborative investments. The end result will be clearly established space capability needs and requirements, enabling a transparent and effective feedback loop between the USSF and Industry.

SPACE FORCE'S ROLE IN REESTABLISHING DETERRENCE

As a domain that links and enables all others, **space—and therefore the USSF—is a linchpin in the American deterrence strategy**. For example, our satellites provide global and persistent missile warning and tracking around the globe, and we ensure the steady flow of nuclear C3 in spite of any barriers or interference. To enhance deterrence, we have worked hard to disaggregate and distribute our capabilities, thereby complicating the targeting calculus for any opposing force.

To that end, we have invested heavily in resilient and proliferated architectures that deny our adversaries the benefit of an attack in space. The Space Development Agency continues to field its Proliferated Warfighter Space Architecture, which represents a leap forward in this effort in a fraction of the time required for traditional space acquisitions programs. Lessons learned from these efforts are actively being flowed back into traditional acquisition pipelines.

Speaking more broadly, the USSF will play a central role in the **Golden Dome** for America. While still in the planning phase, we expect USSF capabilities to play a central role from sensor to shooter. Certainly, the USSF would be responsible for space-based interceptors, but our satellites will also provide much of the enabling capability required to make the operational concept feasible in terms of finding, fixing, and tracking inbound threats as well as in flowing data from one node to another. We will expand and integrate our existing capability into a holistic defense of the Homeland.

Another key component of deterrence is the ability to impose costs on our adversaries. For example, the USSF is pursuing Space-Based Sensing and Targeting. Specifically, the Space-Based Ground Moving Target Indicator program is a key capability that enables terrestrial target acquisition from space. To ensure success in a resource-constrained environment, the USSF is partnering with the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency, National Reconnaissance Office, National Security Agency, and others across the interagency. Once fielded, this capability will deliver moving target indicator data and synthetic aperture radar imagery to the warfighter on tactically relevant timelines, **closing long-range kill chains and enabling battle management and command and control at scale**.

Moreover, as part of its Space Control portfolio and to deny adversary hostile uses of space, the USSF continues to invest in the counter-command, control, computing, communications, cyber, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and targeting mission area.

CONCLUSION

The DAF is at an inflection point. We are engaged in a fast-paced race for technological superiority against a well-resourced strategic opponent. However, we simultaneously face personnel and platform challenges affecting our immediate readiness. We must balance our requirement to generate readiness and project power today with the imperative to rebuild our military and develop capabilities so that we can continue deterring our adversaries tomorrow. The DAF is focused on addressing the balance between these realities. We recognize both the need to cut wasteful spending and divest old systems while building key programs that will increase our

military's lethality and further our deterrence goals. We must do all this while maintaining our ability to develop people who possess a warrior spirit and can win a high-end conflict.

The DAF is aligned with the priorities of the Secretary of Defense under the direction of the President of the United States. We are focused on addressing mission requirements while instilling a warrior ethos in our people, rebuilding our military, and reestablishing deterrence. We are committed to defending the U.S. Homeland, deterring aggression and war across the world, and defeating our adversaries in battle if deterrence fails. We urge timely approval of the FY26 budget request to allow us to execute these missions and keep pace with the challenges facing the United States.