U.S. Army

Wilson Beaver

Introduction[1]

On April 30, 2025, Secretary of Defense (now Secretary of War) Pete Hegseth issued a memorandum, "Army Transformation and Acquisition Reform," directing Secretary of the Army Dan Driscoll to begin to implement a "comprehensive transformation strategy" for the Army.[2] Consistent with this directive, on May 1, 2025, Secretary Driscoll and Army Chief of Staff General Randy George issued a "Letter to the Force: Army Transformation Initiative" to implement this strategy. The ATI consists of three primary lines of effort: "deliver[ing] critical warfighting capabilities, optimiz[ing] our force structure, and eliminating waste and obsolete programs."[3]

To accomplish these goals, excess ground vehicles that are more relevant to counterinsurgency operations will be eliminated, and planned procurement of obsolete systems, such as the Gray Eagle, will be canceled. At the same time, systems identified as relevant to future Army operations, including long-range missiles, modernized unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), the M1E3 tank, the Future Long-Range Assault Aircraft, and a wide range of counter-UAS (C-UAS) capabilities, will be prioritized. Just as important will be new methods of agile funding, shifting from program-centric to capability-based portfolios in an effort to field equipment faster and keep up with the pace of innovation, which is especially relevant for UAS and C-UAS procurement.

The Army is also seeking to define its role in the Indo-Pacific, which has been identified as the primary theater of operations for the foreseeable future as the entire military retools itself for deterring and, if necessary, defeating the threat posed by the People's Republic of China (PRC). New units like the Multi-Domain Task Force (MDTF) will play a crucial role in the Joint Force mission in the Indo-Pacific, deploying a wide range of new capabilities even as the Army's 31 Infantry Brigade Combat Teams continue to deploy and cross-train with allied and partnered militaries both in the Indo-Pacific and across the globe.

At the same time, the Army must not lose sight of the fact that the fundamentals of warfare have not changed and that, in pursuing innovation, one must avoid throwing out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. Drones, for example, have clear and proven combat and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities that, as demonstrated by the war in Ukraine, need to be developed and integrated. However, traditional infantry, armor, and artillery units have been just as instrumental in the conduct of the war, and the U.S. Army must remain at the forefront of these warfighting branches even while pursuing UAS and C-UAS dominance. The Army of the future must be innovative even as it is steeped in its own history and proven capabilities—capabilities that America's soldiers need to deploy, engage, and destroy the enemies of the United States of America in close combat.

Service Overview

The U.S. Army was established more than 250 years ago on June 14, 1775, and ever since then has served as America's primary agent for the conduct of land warfare. Although it is capable of all types of operations across the range of military operations and support to civil authorities, its chief value to the nation is its ability to defeat and destroy enemy land forces in battle.[4] According to U.S. law:

U.S. ARMY AT A GLANCE

EST. 1775

MOTTO
"This We'll Defend"

Daniel P. Driscoll
Secretary of the Army

Gen. Randy A. George
Chief of Staff

MAJOR BASES

1. Fort Wainright
2. Joint Base Lewis–McChord
3. Fort Bliss
4. Fort Hood
5. Fort Benning
6. Fort Gordon
7. Fort Bragg
8. USAG Stuttgart
9. Caserma Ederle
10. Camp Humphreys

CURRENT BUDGET

IN BILLIONS FOR FY 2025

$184.4

CURRENT PERSONNEL

ACTIVE-DUTY MILITARY

448,000

RESERVE MILITARY

170,000

CIVILIAN

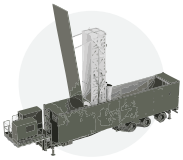
223,000

KEY EQUIPMENT (estimated current inventory)

Patriot Battalions (15)

THAAD Batteries (7)

M142 HIMARS (368)



Typhon Batteries (2)

UH-60 Black Hawk (2,100)

AH-64 Apache (750)

Stryker ICV (4,500)

M1 Abrams MBT (2,640)

JLTV (15,000)

CH-47 Chinook (465)

M109A7 (300)

Bradley Fighting Vehicles (4,500)

SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

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> [The Army] shall be organized, trained, and equipped primarily for prompt and sustained combat incident to operations on land. It is responsible for the preparation of land forces necessary for the effective prosecution of war except as otherwise assigned and, in accordance with integrated joint mobilization plans, for the expansion of the peacetime components of the Army to meet the needs of war.[5]

More than any other U.S. military service, the Army has felt the impact of the past several decades of counterinsurgency operations in the Middle East. The Army prioritized funding and planning for counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and units were reorganized to support this mission. Modernization measures not considered to be in line with this priority, such as air defense systems, were cut. Now the Army is reorganizing once again to prepare itself for great-power competition, looking to align its funding and planning with a national security strategy that identifies competition with China as the primary security challenge facing the United States.

The Army Transformation Initiative

Secretary Hegseth's April 2025 memorandum initiated a comprehensive transformation strategy for the Army. The Army had already begun transformation and modernization initiatives in 2024 with its development of new MDTFs; Indirect Fire Protection Capability (IFPC) battalions; new capabilities in counter–small UAS (C-sUAS); and Maneuver Short-Range Air Defense (M-SHORAD) battalions. Under the ATI, these efforts will be built on and augmented with a series of reforms and new initiatives to transform the Army into a "leaner, more lethal force by adapting how we fight, train, organize, and buy equipment."

Secretary Hegseth's directive requires the Army to cut waste, increase lethality, reform force structures, and employ innovative processes and systems to keep pace with the rapidly evolving battlefield technologies observed in the Russo–Ukrainian war and other conflicts. As part of President Donald Trump's agenda to build a military that is fit for purpose in America's New Golden Age, Secretary Hegseth has sought to refocus the military on warfighting and to build out capabilities relevant to America's most pressing national security interests. The U.S. Army specifically needs to attain the lethality necessary to compete in an ever-evolving and dangerous global environment, especially in terms of contending with the stunning growth of the Chinese military and the clearly expanding scope of Beijing's ambitions.[6]

As noted, the Army Transformation Initiative comprises three lines of effort: delivering critical warfighting capabilities, optimizing force structure, and eliminating waste and obsolete programs.[7]

- **Delivering Critical Warfighting Capabilities.** The ATI builds on the Transformation in Contact (TiC) concept, in which emerging technologies and innovative organizational structures are integrated into formations in training, giving soldiers the ability to "innovate, learn, refine requirements, and develop solutions faster."[8] General George has elaborated on this concept:

  > We have been watching what's happening on the battlefield in Ukraine and the Middle East and, really, around the world.... We've been doing something called transforming in contact, where we're actually getting bottom-up innovation from our troops, but it's not a lesson learned unless you've actually done something to change how you train and operate.[9]

  This also means changing how the Army procures equipment. General George has commented on this as well, saying that programs of record for some capabilities may be outdated: "I'm not a fan when anybody talks about a program of record. What that means is you buy something and keep it forever." Instead, the systems the Army procures should be "modular, open systems architecture."[10] As part of delivering capabilities to the warfighter, long-range missiles, a wide array of modern UAS, the new M1E3 tank, C-sUAS capabilities, and Future Long-Range Assault Aircraft will all be integrated into the Army.

- **Optimizing Force Structure.** The focus is on "filling combat positions with Soldiers. Every role must sharpen the spear or be cut away."[11] To achieve this goal, staff positions are being

cut, commands are being merged, and general officer positions are being reduced. Combat Aviation Brigades (CAB) will lose one Aerial Cavalry Squadron, and all Infantry Brigade Combat Teams will be converted to "Mobile Brigade Combat Teams" to emphasize mobility and lethality.

- **Eliminating Waste and Obsolete Programs.** Programs that are deemed outdated or redundant are being cut. This includes "the AH-64D, excess ground vehicles like HMMWV and JLTV, and obsolete UAVs like the Gray Eagle."[12]

The Army in the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific is primarily a maritime theater. Strategically important countries in the region are separated by hundreds or even thousands of miles of open ocean. The United States is a treaty ally of Japan, Australia, South Korea, and the Philippines, nations that are threatened primarily by the naval, air, and missile forces of China. As a result, the U.S. Navy and Air Force would play the lead roles in a conflict with China. The Army, however, also has a critical role to play in the region, both with its existing assets and with new capabilities currently under development. In World War II, the U.S. Army played a crucial role in both theaters even though its role in the Pacific Theater has often been downplayed. The liberation of the Philippines, for example, was primarily a U.S. Army operation.

The Army's two main roles in a modern Indo-Pacific conflict would be to provide logistics and air defense for forward airfields (a familiar role) and to provide shore-based anti-access capabilities—a relatively new role for which the Army began to ready itself only recently.[13] The Army will need to operate in a contested logistics environment in which soldiers will rapidly have to secure and defend land in support of air defense, logistics and sustainment, and MDTFs.[14] The ability to conduct these operations is, however, inherently joint. The Army will not be able to forward deploy in support of the joint mission without airlift and sealift to get soldiers into theater. Navy and Air Force planners need to invest far more in airlift and sealift capabilities to ensure that the right systems for military movement are available.

Secretary Driscoll and General George outlined the role the Army is already playing in the Indo-Pacific in their May 2025 testimony before a subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee:

> In the Indo-Pacific we have forward-deployed formations almost continuously, participating in exercises like Super Garuda Shield 2024, an Indonesia-hosted exercise that actively involved 11 nations this year, and Balikatan 2025, a full-scale battle simulation alongside the Armed Forces of the Philippines. Army formations in the Indo-Pacific also stand prepared to provide the Joint Force with critical support—command and control, medical, intelligence, and logistics—through all stages of competition, crisis, and conflict.[15]

The Navy and Air Force will play the leading roles in a conflict in the Indo-Pacific and therefore draw the bulk of new funding for the near future. Given the difficulties involved in expanding the defense budget in a meaningful way, the Army may even be asked to downsize to further fund the acquisition of the ships, planes, and munitions that would be most critically needed if the United States were ever again engaged in a war in the Indo-Pacific. Given these difficulties, the Army may need to narrow its ambitions and commitments around the world to focus more on its role in the Indo-Pacific.[16]

The Marine Corps has already done something similar in a plan called Force Design 2030, divesting itself of equipment, cancelling planned purchases that would be irrelevant to a conflict in the Indo-Pacific, and reshaping the service away from how it was structured for counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan and toward near-peer adversary conflict in the Pacific.

The Army would have at least five core tasks in the Indo-Pacific if war were to break out. It would:[17]

- Serve as the "linchpin" service by establishing and protecting staging areas and joint operating bases for air and naval forces, including providing air and missile defense;
- Provide logistics for the joint force, especially in terms of secure communications;
- Provide command-and-control capacity;

- Use ground-based, long-range fires to interdict enemy missiles, suppress enemy air defense, and provide counter fires against mobile enemy targets; and

- Provide counterattack capability with ground combat forces.

In the Indo–Pacific, the U.S. Army must operate in a primarily naval theater of operations against an adversary that has the home field advantage. China is only a few hundred miles away from the potential conflict zones—as opposed to the United States' main Pacific nodes of San Diego and Hawaii, which are thousands of miles away from the potential conflict zones—and has protected interior supply lines and numerical superiority in terms of equipment and munitions in theater.[18]

The Army can draw lessons from the outsized success of both the Ukrainians and the Houthis in land-based targeting of ships in recent years. The Ukrainians, with almost no navy to speak of and only short-range and intermediate-range missiles, have sunk Russian ships, targeted Russian port infrastructure, and largely denied the Russians the use of the Ukrainian littoral for offensive operations against Ukraine. The Russians have withdrawn most warships from Crimea and now keep them safely out of range—but also out of the fight. Likewise, the Houthis are threatening international commerce and targeting Western warships with nothing more than cheap drones and land-to-sea missiles.

Until 2019, the United States had been unable to construct ground-based missiles with a range between 300 miles and 3,400 miles because of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which restricted both the United States and the Soviet Union (later Russia). The Chinese were never a party to this agreement and have been engaged in a substantial buildup of missile capabilities over the past several decades. China's most recent national security white paper states that it is "strengthening its intermediate and long-range precision strike forces... so as to build a strong and modernized rocket force."[19]

Since the end of the INF Treaty in 2019, the U.S. Army has been free to develop and field ground-based intermediate-range missiles. These missiles, coupled with air defense systems such as the Patriot missile battery, could make it exceedingly difficult for the Chinese to operate in certain contested straits—including the waters between the northernmost tip of the Philippines and Taiwan. China has designed its existing anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities to counter American warships and aircraft and may have a more challenging time targeting and destroying mobile land-based assets. In the event of a conflict in the region, land-based air defense and anti-ship missiles distributed throughout the region would give the Chinese a complex problem to solve and add another layer of deterrence.

New Weapons and Units in the Army's Arsenal

In 2021, the Army committed to fast-tracking and delivering multiple new fires systems by 2023. The Army has done a respectable job of meeting this target, surprising many doubters who were familiar with the Army's failed modernization programs in the early 2000s.

Most of the new weapons and systems discussed below have been tested successfully and have begun to deploy, first to the Indo-Pacific and then to Europe, in recent years. The Army is further developing these new weapons and systems to improve its capability to deliver long-range precision fires that would be especially relevant to a conflict in the Indo-Pacific.

The Precision Strike Missile (PrSM). The PrSM is the next-generation surface-to-surface missile being developed by the Army to replace the Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS).[20] Lockheed Martin, the missile's developer, says the missiles have a range of up to 310 miles. Like the ATACMS missile, the PrSM will be launched from the mobile High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS), although the launcher will now be capable of carrying two PrSM missiles, whereas previously it could carry only one ATACMS missile.

Hypersonic missiles, traveling at least five times the speed of sound, are a huge challenge for traditional air defense measures that the United States has yet to address adequately. If the Army could field a Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon (LHRW) battery successfully in the near future, that would go a long way toward addressing this capability gap.

The Multi-Domain Task Force. The Army has introduced a new type of unit, the MDTF, to accommodate these and other precision fires systems. The Army describes the MDTF as "theater-level

maneuver elements designed to synchronize precision effects and precision fires in all domains against adversary A2/AD networks in all domains, enabling joint forces to execute their operational plan (OPLAN)-directed roles."[21]

The 1st MDTF was established in 2017 at Joint Base Lewis–McChord in Washington State, the 2nd MDTF was established in 2021 in Germany, and the 3rd MDTF was established in 2022 in Hawaii. Two more Army MDTFs will be established, with one to be stationed at Fort Carson and one rapidly deployable from Fort Bragg.[22] In 2025, the Army announced that it would be building Multi-Domain Commands to oversee and direct MDTFs: Multi-Domain Command–Pacific, Multi-Domain Command–Japan, Multi-Domain Command–Europe, and Multi-Domain Command–Army.[23]

The Strategic Mid-Range Fires System. This system, also called the Typhon missile system, has been developed to fire anti-ship missiles, air defense missiles, and land-to-land mid-range missiles. The system is mobile and therefore difficult for enemy forces to target, and its range varies by missile type.[24]

The Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon (LRHW). The LRHW, also known as Dark Eagle, is a long-range hypersonic missile with a range of more than 2,000 miles.[25] In August 2025, the Army's 3rd MDTF deployed an LRHW system outside of the continental U.S. for the first time as part of the Talisman Sabre 25 exercise in Australia.[26]

The Army's Indo-Pacific Role in Peacetime

To shape the region and establish an enduring advantage, the Army is deeply engaged in building allied and partner capabilities, especially through joint exercises and training. The U.S. military's strategy in the Indo-Pacific necessitates building up capable partners and allies in the region to deter China from launching a war of aggression against its neighbors. The stronger that Japan, South Korea, Australia, Taiwan, and the Philippines—and to a lesser extent, Vietnam, India, and Indonesia—are, the more constrained China is in its ability to solve political questions in the region by force. The Army's campaigning strategy in the Pacific demonstrates to Beijing the ability of the United States and its partners and allies to operate jointly, whether it is technically, procedurally, or simply at the human level. To further complicate matters for Chinese military planners, the Army should consider expanding joint training and exercises to newer partners, especially Vietnam, Indonesia, and India.

The Army recently opened its first regional training complex in 50 years—the Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center (JPMRC)—with the goal of training both U.S. and allied forces in a Pacific environment.[27] This center maintains two permanent campuses, one in Hawaii and one in Alaska, and one mobile campus that cycles between allied and partnered countries for joint training. Over the past several years, the JPMRC has been hosted in Indonesia, Australia, and the Philippines.

The United States has long maintained bases in Europe where joint training exercises can take place, and this new center has filled a critical gap in allied readiness in the Pacific. The Army also conducts exercises such as Operation Pathways to practice establishing supply lines and command-and-control networks in the Western Pacific. Army units such as the Fifth Security Force Assistance Brigade deploy in support of joint exercises, acting as integrators between U.S. and allied troops.

These sorts of exercises are exactly what the Army should be doing at this point. The primary issue is that the U.S. commitment of troops and resources in the Pacific does not match the Indo-Pacific's status as the primary region of concern in the National Defense Strategy (NDS). The Army continues to devote as many or more troops and resources to other theaters, especially to the U.S. European Command and U.S. Central Command. Thus, it is struggling with fully manning its units as a result of the recruiting crisis experienced during the Biden Administration. If the Army wants to be decisive in the joint effort to deter China in the Indo-Pacific, it will need to shift personnel and resources away from other theaters and to the Indo-Pacific.

The Army deserves praise for moving quickly on these new systems, for being proactive in its engagements with partnered and allied nations in the Pacific, and for being responsive to policymakers who are pushing it to reorient its procurement and force structure around the Indo-Pacific.

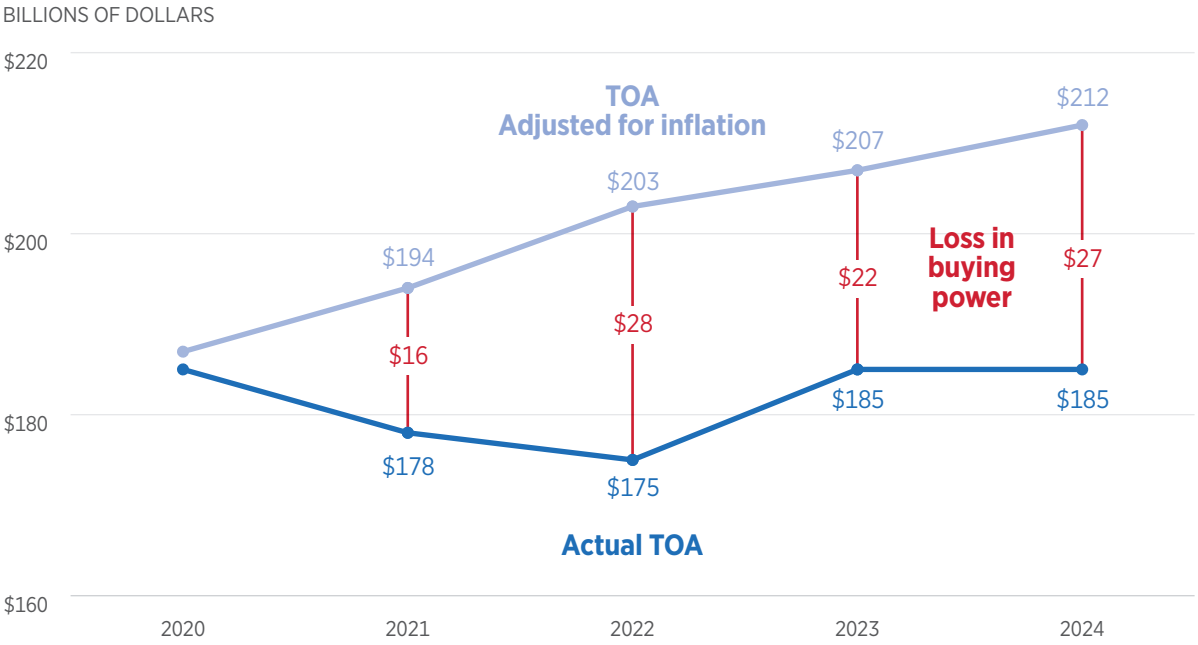
Budget

Chronic Underfunding. The U.S. Army is currently the world's most powerful army in terms of the equipment it uses and the combat effectiveness of its formations, but it is also insufficiently modern

CHART 12

Army Budget Hit by Both Cuts and Inflation

Because of declining total obligation authority (TOA) in real terms and record high inflation during the Biden Administration, the Army experienced a substantial loss of buying power from 2020 to 2024. Combined losses from 2020 to 2024 totaled $93 billion.



SOURCES: Honorable Gabe Camarillo, Under Secretary of the Army, "Army Fiscal Year Budget Overview 2024," PowerPoint Presentation, p. 14, https://www.asafm.army.mil/Portals/72/Documents/BudgetMaterial/2024/pbr/Army%20FY%202024%20Budget%20Overview%20Briefing.pdf (accessed January 20, 2026), and Table S-9, "Economic Assumptions," in Executive Office of the President, Office of Management and Budget, *Budget of the U.S. Government, Fiscal Year 2024*, p. 167, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/BUDGET-2024-BUD/pdf/BUDGET-2024-BUD.pdf (accessed January 20, 2026).

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to meet even the modest requirements of the 2022 NDS, much less to handle two major regional contingencies (MRCs) simultaneously.[28]

Even though the conflict in Iraq has ended and the military was withdrawn from Afghanistan, the Army's focus on counterinsurgency from 2001 to 2016 essentially precluded the service from modernizing the key combat capabilities that it needs now for near-peer competition. In 2011, for example, the Army cancelled its only mid-tier air defense program, the Surface Launched Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missile (SLAMRAAM), based on its assessment that it would not face a threat from the air in the foreseeable future.[29] In 2022, the Army contracted to buy from Norway largely the same system, the National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System (NASAMS), that it cancelled in 2011.[30] The Army's last major modernization occurred in the 1980s with the fielding of the M-1 Abrams Tank, the M-2 Bradley Fighting Vehicle, and the Blackhawk and Apache helicopters.

The Army's ability to transition from counterinsurgency operations was further constrained by a period of fiscal austerity that began with the Budget Control Act (BCA) of 2011. The inability to fund what was needed led to difficult across-the-board trade-offs in equipment, manpower, and operations accounts. Downward budget pressure drove the

Department of Defense (DOD) in 2014 to consider cutting the Army's Active component end strength from more than 500,000 to 420,000. Also as a result of these funding cuts, multiple equipment modernization programs for the Army were canceled, including some that would have been relevant for the return of great-power competition in recent years.

The change of Administrations in 2017 forestalled those cuts in end strength. The addition of billions of dollars by Congress and the Trump Administration served to arrest the decline of the Army and significantly improve unit readiness, unfortunately, however, it proved insufficient to reverse the decline that began during the Obama years, and modernization efforts and end strength remained stalled.

Loss of Buying Power. Of all the services, the Army has fared the worst in terms of resources. Its funding levels plateaued with the FY 2020 budget and since then have declined in constant dollars. The Army received approximately $181 billion in FY 2019, $186 billion in FY 2020, $177 billion in FY 2021, $185 billion in FY 2022, $185 billion in FY 2023, $186 billion in FY 2024, and approximately $186 billion again in FY 2025, amounting to a relatively flat budget over the past half-decade while the costs of manpower, matériel, and energy have increased. The second Trump Administration looks set to begin reversing this trend, with an FY 2026 request of $197 billion for the Army, a 6.9 percent increase over the FY 2025 budget.[31]

Testifying before the House Appropriations Committee's Subcommittee on Tactical Air and Land Forces in April 2023, Lieutenant General Erik Peterson, then Army Deputy Chief of Staff for Programs, summarized the situation in starkly candid terms:

> Several years of ruthless prioritization, eliminating, reducing and deferring lower priority and less necessary modernization efforts, as well as divesting of legacy capability affords virtually no further flexibility in our fiscal top line. [¶] We have made the easy choices, the difficult choices, and the hard choices over the past several years. We are now down to the excruciating choices....[32]

Former Army Chief of Staff General James McConville's more than $1.9 billion Unfunded Priority List for FY 2024, containing dozens of critical items, is testament to what the Army was not able to include in its budget request: air defense systems, organic industrial base modernization, and helicopter replacement—among many other programs.[33]

Capacity

Capacity refers to the sufficiency of forces and equipment needed to execute the National Defense Strategy. One of the ways the Army quantifies its warfighting capacity is by its number of Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs).

Brigade Combat Teams. BCTs are the Army's primary combined-arms, close-combat force. They often operate as part of a division or joint task force, both of which are the basic building blocks for employment of Army combat forces. BCTs are usually employed within a larger framework of U.S. land operations but are equipped and organized so that they can conduct limited independent operations as circumstances demand.[34]

BCTs range between 4,000 and 4,700 soldiers in size. There are three types: Infantry, Armored, and Stryker. At its core, each of these formations has three maneuver battalions enabled by multiple other units such as artillery, engineers, reconnaissance, logistics, and signal units.[35]

The simplest way to understand the status of hard Army combat power is to know the readiness, quantity, and modernization level of BCTs. With respect to the number of BCTs in the force, the Army announced in 2013 that because of end strength reductions and the prior Administration's priorities, the number of Regular Army BCTs would be reduced from 45 to 33.[36] Subsequent reductions reduced the number of Regular Army BCTs from 33 to 31, where they remain today.

When the Trump Administration and Congress reversed the planned drawdown in Army end strength and authorized personnel growth beginning in 2018, instead of "re-growing" the numbers of BCTs, the Army chose to "thicken" the force and raise the manning levels within the individual BCTs to increase unit readiness. Army end strength was reduced during the Biden Administration, but the second Trump Administration's first President's Defense Budget request reversed this trend in 2025, increasing Army Active Component end strength from the 442,300 authorized for FY 2025 to the 454,000 authorized for FY 2026.[37]

TABLE 2

Major Army Combat Formations

Brigade Combat Teams	Regular Army	Army National Guard	Total
Infantry Brigade Combat Teams	14	20	34
Stryker Brigade Combat Teams	6	2	8
Armored Brigade Combat Teams	11	5	16
Total	**31**	**27**	**58**

Aviation Brigades	Regular Army	Army National Guard	Total
Combat Aviation Brigades	11	–	11
Expeditionary Combat Aviation Brigades	–	8	8
Theater Aviation Brigades	–	2	2
Total	**11**	**10**	**21**

SOURCES:

- U.S. Department of the Army, *Department of the Army Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 Budget Estimates, Volume I, Operation and Maintenance, Army, Justification of Estimates*, June 2025, pp. 3, https://www.asafm.army.mil/Portals/72/Documents/BudgetMaterial/2026/Discretionary%20Budget/Operation%20and%20Maintenance/Regular%20Army%20Operation%20and%20Maintenance%20Volume-1.pdf (accessed Janaury 23, 2026).
- U.S. Department of the Army, *Department of the Army Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 Budget Estimates, Volume I, Operation and Maintenance, Army National Guard, Justification Book*, June 2025, pp. 42 and 98, https://www.asafm.army.mil/Portals/72/Documents/BudgetMaterial/2026/Discretionary%20Budget/Operation%20and%20Maintenance/National%20Guard%20Army%20Operation%20and%20Maintenance.pdf (accessed January 23, 2026).

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President Trump deserves significant credit for ending the recruiting crisis of the past several years with the last month of 2024 after his election victory seeing the highest recruiting numbers for the Army in 15 years.[38]

Combat Aviation Brigades. The Regular Army also has a separate air component that is organized into Combat Aviation Brigades. CABs are made up of Army rotorcraft such as the AH-64 Apache and perform various roles including attack, reconnaissance, and assault. The number of Army aviation units also has been reduced. The Regular Army now has 11 CABs.[39]

Functional or Multifunctional Support Brigades. In addition to the institutional Army, a number of functional or multifunctional support brigades provide air defense; engineering; explosive ordnance disposal; chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear protection; military police; military intelligence; and medical support among other types of battlefield support. Special operations forces such as the 75th Ranger Regiment, six Special Forces Groups, and the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment are also included in these numbers.

New Concepts and Supporting Force Structure. At the same time that it faces the need to cut units to meet its new end strength, the Army is also trying to adapt its force structure to meet the anticipated new demands of near-peer competition. The foundations for these changes are contained in the Army's Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) concept, published in December 2018, which describes how the Army views the future.[40]

In January 2022, the Army announced that it planned to modify its force structure for MDO under the designation "Army 2030." Other than that announcement, the Army has been silent on future

force structure, and its plans are seemingly in flux as it grapples with recruiting shortfalls from the past Administration. As part of its adaptation to MDO, the Army did reactivate V Corps Headquarters on October 16, 2020, to provide operational planning, mission command, and oversight of rotational forces in Europe.[41] On June 8, 2022, the Army reactivated the 11th Airborne Division in Alaska as an element of its arctic strategy.[42]

To relieve the stress on the use of BCTs for advisory missions, the Army has activated six Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs), one in the National Guard and the other five in the Regular Army, although the Army announced in 2025 that it plans to eliminate two SFABs.[43] These units, each one of which is composed of 816 soldiers, are designed specifically to train, advise, and mentor other partner-nation military units. The Army had been using BCTs for this mission, but because train-and-assist missions typically require senior officers and noncommissioned officers, a BCT comprised predominantly of junior soldiers was a poor fit. Other than the National Guard SFAB, the five active SFABs are regionally aligned to combatant commands.[44]

Force Too Small to Execute the National Defense Strategy. Army leaders have consistently stated that the Army is too small to execute the NDS at less than significant risk. For FY 2026, the Defense Budget Request has requested a total authorized end strength of 954,000 for the U.S. Army:

- 454,000 in the Regular Army,
- 172,000 in the Army Reserve, and
- 328,000 in the Army National Guard (ARNG).[45]

In March 2021, General McConville stated that "I would have a bigger...sized Army if I thought we could afford it, I think we need it, I really do.... I think the regular Army should be somewhere around 540–550 [thousand]," and "we're sitting right now at 485,000." (Of course, the Army is "sitting" now at 452,000.) He further observed that "I've probably already had to give up the growth that we're going to have planned" and that "[w]e're probably not going to grow the Army even though I'd like to, more, because end strength is something we have to take a look at."[46]

Overall end strength dictates how many BCTs the Army can form, and by cutting end strength, the service not only will be unable to add more combat units or other in-demand units such as air and missile defense units, but also will have to reduce manning levels in the units it possesses. This will drive a higher operational tempo (OPTEMPO) for Army units and increase risk both for the force and for the Army's ability to carry out its mission.

Many outside experts agree that the U.S. Army is too small. In 2017, Congress established the National Defense Strategy Commission to provide an "independent, non-partisan review of the 2018 National Defense Strategy." Among its findings, the commission unanimously reported that the NDS now charges the military with facing "five credible challengers, including two major-power competitors, and three distinctly different geographic and operational environments." The commission assessed that "[t]his being the case, a two-war force sizing construct makes more strategic sense today than at any previous point in the post–Cold War era." In other words, "the United States needs a larger force than it has today if it is to meet the objectives of the strategy."[47]

In addition to the increased strategic risk of not being able to execute the NDS within the desired time frame, the combination of an insufficient number of BCTs and a lower-than-required Army end strength has resulted in a higher-than-desired level of OPTEMPO. Former Assistant Deputy Chief of Staff, G-3/5/7, Major General Sean Swindell recently stated that the Army had tried to reduce the demands on the force but that this "effort has been going in the opposite direction."[48] The Army will either need to have its OPTEMPO reduced or need to grow in strength.

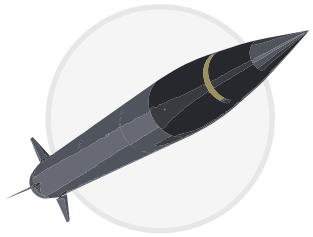
Army Force Posture

The Army also has transitioned from a force with a third of its strength typically stationed overseas, as it was during the Cold War, to a force that is based mostly in the continental United States. An average of 311,870 troops were stationed in Europe from 1986 to 1990, and the majority were Army soldiers. After the Berlin Wall fell, that number decreased to 109,452 from 1996 to 2000, and the numbers have continued to drop to approximately 84,000 U.S. troops as of early 2025.[49]

In 2025, the 173rd Airborne Brigade in Italy and the 2nd Cavalry Regiment and 12th Combat

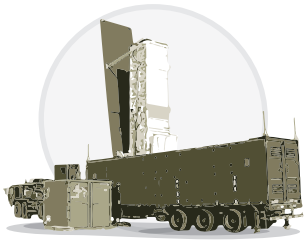
FIGURE 1

Army Weapons Systems to Be Deployed to the Indo-Pacific



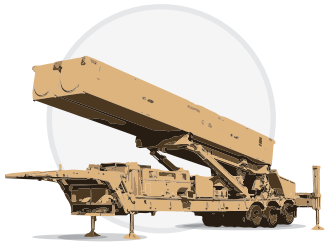
Precision Strike Missile (PrSM)

A next-generation, long-range precision strike surface-to-surface missile. It replaces the ATACMS missile system and provides increased range and survivability. Its reported range is 310+ miles and will soon be extended.



Strategic Mid-Range Fires (SMRF)

Also known as the Typhon. This mobile fires system is capable of carrying surface-to- surface missiles, including anti-ship and surface-to-air missiles. Its range varies depending on the missile type.



Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon (LRHW)

A ground-launched, long-range hypersonic weapon designed to defeat enemy anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, enemy long-range fires, and other targets. Still in testing, its reported range is 1,725+ miles.

SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

heritage.org

Aviation Brigade in Germany are all permanently stationed in Europe. Army units are also forward deployed to Poland, the Baltics, Romania, and Bulgaria contributing to collective deterrence alongside NATO allies.[50] Despite likely shifts in forces to the Indo-Pacific, some Army units are likely to remain in Europe and continue to contribute to collective deterrence in NATO. As a general rule, these troops should be forward positioned to decrease logistics issues involved in getting them to Poland or the Baltic states. Given their role within NATO planning, the Army's units stationed in Europe need to be among the most interoperable of any Army units and maintain a high training operational tempo with allied militaries.

Army units are actively contributing to the mission to defend the homeland, with more than 9,000 Active, Reserve, and National Guard troops deployed to the border to support the Department of Homeland Security with its mission as of May 2025.[51]

Among Army units that deploy periodically are Armored Brigade Combat Teams (ABCTs) and Stryker Brigade Combat Teams (SBCTs) and Patriot Battalions that rotate to and from Europe, Kuwait, and Korea. Rather than relying on forward-stationed BCTs, the Army currently rotates ABCTs to Europe and Kuwait and Stryker BCTs to Korea on a "heel-to-toe" basis so that there is never a gap.

Proponents of rotational BCTs argue that they arrive fully trained, that they remain at a high state of readiness throughout their typically nine-month overseas rotation, and that the cost of providing for accompanying military families is avoided. Those who favor forward-stationed forces point to a lower overall cost (when their equipment remains in place), forces that typically are more familiar with the operating environment, and a more reassuring presence for U.S. allies. Both types of force postures have merit, depending on strategic intent, not only for the reasons mentioned, but also because the mechanisms by which a unit is deployed, received into theater, and integrated with the force stationed abroad should be practiced on a regular basis.

In 2025, the strategic consensus among American conservatives is that the Army's footprint abroad needs to be further reduced with more funding made available to the Navy and the Air Force. In Europe, this will likely mean a reduction both in the number of permanently stationed troops and in

the number of rotational forces, although it is very likely that some Army forces will remain.[52]

Capability

Capability in this context refers to the quality, performance, suitability, and age of the Army's various types of combat equipment. In general, the Army is using equipment developed in the 1970s, fielded in the 1980s, and incrementally upgraded since then. This "modernization gap" was caused by several factors: the predominant focus on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan after 9/11; pressures caused by budget cuts, especially those associated with the BCA; and failures in major modernization programs like the Future Combat System, Ground Combat Vehicle, and Crusader artillery system.

Army leaders today clearly view this situation as a serious challenge. General James Rainey, former head of Army Futures Command, has said that "[w]e need to approach 2040 with a sense of urgency now" because "[t]ransforming the Army to ensure war-winning future readiness...is the best guarantee that our successful materiel modernization efforts will produce lethal formations that will deter our enemies, and, if required, dominate the land domain in conflict."[53]

The Army embarked on an ambitious modernization program to put 24 new systems into the hands of soldiers in FY 2023. Among these systems were hypersonic missiles, a precision strike missile, a directed energy air defense capability, and the Lower Tier Air and Missile Defense Sensor.

Loss of Competitive Advantage. As an example of how Army equipment had been falling behind that of U.S. competitors, the Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS), first introduced in 1991, had been the Army's only ground-launched precision missile with a range greater than 100 kilometers (km). Because of restrictions in the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and other factors, it was limited to a maximum range of 300 km. The INF, however, expired in 2019, and the Army's development and production of the PrSM missile since then has gone some way toward correcting this deficiency.[54]

China and Russia have much more substantial inventories of conventional and precision ground-launched missiles and rockets. China has nine major ground-launched missile systems and more than 425 launchers. These capable systems can range from 600 km (DF-11A and DF-15) to 4,000 km (DF-26).[55] Russia, on the other hand, at least before the war in Ukraine, had the world's widest inventory of missiles: at least four conventional ground-launched missile systems that can range from 120 km (SS-21) to 2,500 km (SSC-8).[56]

Similarly, the U.S. Army's Patriot missile system is an excellent system, but Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and India have either purchased or recently expressed interest in buying the Russian competitor system, the S-400.[57] Why would they do this? One answer is that the Patriot system is tremendously expensive. A Patriot battery (one-fourth of a battalion) costs about $3 billion for the launchers and a basic load of missiles; an S-400 battery has been estimated to cost $500 million.[58]

Combat Systems

Within the Army's inventory of equipment are thousands of combat systems, including small arms, trucks, aircraft, soldier-carried weapons, radios, tracked vehicles, artillery systems, missiles, and drones. The following sections provide updates on some of the major systems as they pertain to Armored, Stryker, and Infantry BCTs and Combat Aviation Brigades.

Armored Brigade Combat Team (ABCT). The ABCT's role is to "close with the enemy by means of fire and movement to destroy or capture enemy forces, or to repel enemy attacks by fire, close combat, and counterattack to control land areas, including populations and resources."[59] The Abrams Main Battle Tank (most recent version in production: M1A2 SEPv3, first unit equipped in FY 2020[60]) and Bradley Fighting Vehicle (most recent version: M2A4, first unit equipped in April 2022[61]) are the primary ABCT platforms.

The M-1 tank and Bradley Fighting Vehicle first entered service in 1980 and 1981, respectively. An ABCT has 87 M-1 Abrams tanks and 152 Bradley Fighting Vehicle variants. Despite upgrades, the M-1 tank and the Bradley are now at least 40 years old, and their replacements will not arrive until the platforms are at least 50 years old.

Optionally Manned Fighting Vehicle (OMFV). The Army's replacement program for the Bradley, the OMFV, was on an aggressive timeline, but the Army cancelled the request for proposals (RFP) in January 2020 and rereleased an RFP for what it called a "concept design" in December

2020. In 2025, American Rheinmetall and General Dynamics Land Systems (GLDS) were approved to continue designing the replacement for the Bradley, which has now been dubbed XM30, after the Army approved Milestone B, the engineering and manufacturing development (EMD) phase of the process.[62]

A New Tank? A potential clean-sheet replacement for the M-1 tank is even further down the road. Major General Glenn Dean, Program Officer for Ground Combat Systems, reportedly has said that "funding to pursue what could be next for Abrams would likely not appear in a budget cycle until fiscal 2025 at the earliest."[63] Meanwhile, the Army has another upgrade for the Abrams platform in the works: the M1A2 SEPv4, which would incorporate a "3rd Generation Forward Looking Infrared (3GEN FLIR)" in addition to "new color cameras to the gunner/commander primary sights" as well as "an improved laser range finder, integration of a laser warning receiver system, improved lethality via Fire Control System (FCS) digital communication with a new Advanced Multi-Purpose round, improved accuracy via integration of a meteorological sensor, and improved onboard diagnostics."[64]

Armored Multi-Purpose Vehicle (AMPV). The venerable M113 multi-purpose personnel carrier is also part of an ABCT and fills multiple roles such as mortar carrier and ambulance. It entered service in 1960 and is being replaced by the new AMPV, which after numerous delays entered low-rate initial production on January 25, 2019. The system's first fieldings took place on March 13, 2023.[65] The Army's FY 2024 budget includes a request for procurement of 91 AMPVs. At that rate of procurement and given prior year procurements, it will take the Army at least 25 years from 2024 to meet its objective of 2,897 AMPVs (putting it in FY 2049).[66]

Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT). The SBCT "is an expeditionary combined arms force organized around mounted infantry" and is able to "operate effectively in most terrain and weather conditions" because of its rapid strategic deployment and mobility.[67] SBCTs are equipped with approximately 321 eight-wheeled Stryker vehicles.[68] These vehicles are among the Army's newest combat platforms, having entered service in 2001.

In response to an Operational Needs Statement, the SBCT in Europe received Strykers fitted with a 30 mm cannon to provide an improved anti-armor capability.[69] Based on the success of that operation, the Army decided to outfit at least three of its SBCTs that are equipped with the Double V-hull, which affords better underbody protection against such threats as improvised explosive devices (IEDs), with the 30 mm autocannon. The Army is also integrating Javelin anti-tank missiles on the Stryker platform and began to train crews on this capability in May 2022.[70]

Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT). The IBCT "is an expeditionary, combined arms formation optimized for dismounted operations in *complex terrain*," which the Army defines as "a geographical area consisting of an urban center larger than a village and/or of two or more types of restrictive terrain or environmental conditions occupying the same space."[71] IBCTs have fewer vehicles and rely on lighter platforms such as trucks; High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWVs); Joint Light Tactical Vehicles (JLTVs); and Infantry Squad Vehicles (ISVs) for mobility.

Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTV). The JLTV aspires to combine the protection offered by Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles (MRAPs) with the mobility of the original unarmored HMMWV. The vehicle features design improvements that increase its survivability against anti-armor weapons and IEDs. As part of the Army Transformation Initiative, the Army is canceling procurement of excess ground vehicles like the JLTV and HMMWV, considering them outdated, and shifting to lighter, more agile platforms.[72]

Infantry Squad Vehicle (ISV). Airborne BCTs are the first IBCTs to receive a new platform to increase their speed and mobility. The ISV provides enhanced tactical mobility for an IBCT nine-soldier infantry squad with equipment. The ISV is the big winner among ground combat vehicles in the Army Transformation Initiative, with increased orders of ISVs coming along with divestment of JLTVs and HMMWVs. ISVs offer greater deployability and lower costs than the JLTV, although there has been some concern about the ISV's minimal armor. The ISV is also an Army Transformation Initiative poster child in that it features 90 percent commercial off-the-shelf parts and is based on the Chevrolet Colorado ZR2 platform.[73] Army planners hope that investments in commercially available options like this will lower costs and shorten supply chains across the board.

Mobile Protected Firepower (MPF). The Army had developed a light tank, previously called Mobile Protected Firepower (MPF) and then officially named the M-10 Booker, to provide IBCTs with the firepower to engage enemy armored vehicles and fortifications.[74] The M-10 Booker was among the ground combat vehicles canceled under the ATI. Army Secretary Driscoll explained the decision: "The Booker is a classic example of sunk cost fallacy, and the Army doing something wrong.... We wanted to develop a small tank that was agile and could be dropped into places our regular tanks can't. We got a heavy tank."[75]

Combat Aviation Brigade (CAB). CABs are composed of AH-64 Apache attack, UH-60 Black Hawk medium-lift, and CH-47 Chinook heavy-lift helicopters. The Army has been methodically upgrading these fleets for decades, but the FY 2024 budget request continued the reduction in legacy aircraft procurement that began in FY 2022, presumably to create "budget room" for the planned introduction of two new aircraft: the Future Long-Range Assault Aircraft (FLRAA) and Future Attack Reconnaissance Aircraft (FARA). The reduction in legacy aircraft procurement is a continued reflection of downward budget pressure and incurs additional risk for the Army as its legacy helicopters are expected to be around for decades.[76] In 2025, the FARA was cancelled, but the FLRAA was funded and continued.[77] The ATI pledges to "consolidate aviation sustainment requirements and increase operational readiness."[78]

UH/HH-60. The Army is upgrading its fleet of Black Hawks, including by equipping some with the ability to launch drones. Long-term, however, the Army is likely to begin divesting itself of Black Hawks. Long-range assault missions currently covered by the Black Hawk will be carried out by the new tiltrotor helicopters in development, and some missions currently carried out by the Black Hawk are likely to be handled by drones in the future. According to Secretary Driscoll, "I see Black Hawks are going to be with us for a while, but I do think we're going to have to adapt what we're doing. There just may be less Black Hawks."[79]

CH-47. There is no planned replacement on the horizon for the CH-47F Chinook, a rebuilt variant of the Army's CH-47D heavy-lift helicopter, which is expected to remain the Army's heavy-lift helicopter for the foreseeable future.

AH-64. The Army is divesting itself of up to half of its Apache fleet with attack squadrons remaining but recon battalion being cut and their mission reassigned to drones. One Aerial Cavalry Squadron per CAB in the active component will be cut.[80] This change is seen as permanent with the Army planning to cut 6,500 aviation jobs from the active-duty ranks as part of the divestment and restructuring.[81]

Overall, the Army's equipment inventory, while increasingly dated, is maintained well. Under its current modernization plans, "the Army envisions all three vehicles [the M-1 Abrams Tank, M-2/M-3 Bradley Fighting Vehicle (BFV), and M-1126 Stryker Combat Vehicle] to be in service with Active and National Guard forces beyond FY2028."[82]

Future Programs. In addition to seeing to the viability of today's equipment, the military must look to the health of future equipment programs. Although future modernization programs do not represent current hard-power capabilities that can be applied against an enemy force today, they are a leading indicator of a service's overall fitness for future sustained combat operations. In future years, the service could be forced to engage an enemy with aging equipment and no program in place to maintain viability or endurance in sustained operations.

The U.S. military services are continually assessing how best to stay a step ahead of competitors: whether to modernize the force today with currently available technology or wait to see what investments in research and development produce years down the road. Technologies mature and proliferate, becoming more accessible to a wider array of actors over time. After 20 years of a singular focus on counterinsurgency followed by concentration on the current readiness of the force, the Army is now playing catch-up in equipment modernization.

New Organizations and Emphasis on Modernization. In 2017, the Army established eight cross-functional teams (CFTs) to improve the management of its top modernization priorities, and in 2018, it established a new four-star headquarters, Army Futures Command, to lead modernization efforts. Army Futures Command is now being merged with Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) as part of the ATI in an effort to streamline efforts and reduce overhead.[83]

Even though it has been six years, it is still too early to assess whether these new structures,

commands, and emphasis will result in long-term improvement in the Army's modernization posture. The Army aspires to develop and procure an entire new generation of equipment based on its six modernization priorities: "long range precision fires, next generation combat vehicles, future vertical lift, network, air and missile defense, and Soldier lethality."[84]

Although the Army has put in place new organizations, plans, and strategies to manage modernization, the future is uncertain, and Army programs remain in a fragile state with only a few in an active procurement status. The Army has shown great willingness to make tough choices and reallocate funding for its modernization programs, but this has usually been at the expense of end strength or reduction in the total quantity of new items purchased.

As budget challenges such as nuclear deterrence programs, inflation, rising personnel costs, health care, and the need to invest in programs to respond to China's increasingly aggressive activities continue to present themselves, the Army desperately needs time and funding to modernize its inventory of equipment. Recent modernization programs seem generally to be on track with some exceptions like the Self-Propelled Howitzer Modernization (SPH-M) program[85] and the Improved Turbine Engine Program (ITEP),[86] which have suffered some setbacks. The Army also is experiencing some success, one example being the number of Stryker vehicle-mounted Maneuver Short Range Air Defense (M-SHORAD) systems that have been delivered to Europe.[87]

Readiness

BCT Readiness. Over the past four years, the Army has made steady progress in increasing the readiness of its forces. Its goal is to have 66 percent of the Regular Army and 33 percent of National Guard BCTs "at the highest levels of readiness."[88]

As of July 14, 2023, the Army reported that "83 percent of Active Component Brigade Combat Teams are at the highest levels of tactical readiness."[89] This is 17 percentage points above its goal and two percentage points above last year's reported level. This means that 25 of the Army's 31 active BCTs were at either C1 or C2, the two highest levels of tactical readiness, and ready to perform all or most of their wartime missions immediately.

There also are 27 BCTs in the Army National Guard: five Armored, 20 Infantry, and two Stryker. The Army has allocated two Combat Training Center (CTC) rotations for two National Guard BCTs. These two BCTs "are resourced to achieve company-level proficiency, while the remaining 25 BCTs and enabler units are on a path to platoon minus-level proficiency and will meet Directed Readiness Table requirements."[90] These training levels usually reveal the extent to which additional training time would be required before the unit could be deployed. Given the paucity of data provided by the Army, it is hard to assess the current readiness of ARNG units.

Steady Decline in Training Resources. When measuring resourcing for the training of BCTs, the Army formerly used full-spectrum training miles (FSTMs), which represents the number of miles for which formations are resourced to drive their primary vehicles on an annual basis. In FY 2024, the Army changed the terminology to Composite Training Miles but explained that they are the same thing. Since FY 2019, these training resources have been declining. In FY 2021, the Army budgeted 1,598 FSTMs to train BCTs to 100 percent of the requirement.[91] In FY 2024, only 1,137 composite training miles were funded for non-deployed units.[92] This is a cut of 28 percent, suggesting that unless the Army's training strategy radically changed, BCTs are funded only to 72 percent of the training requirement.

Uncertain Training Level Goals. Starting with the FY 2022 budget justification books, the Army began to omit the Unit Proficiency Level Goal, which for years has been to train a BCT to operate as a BCT; it is now likely training to operate as a battalion or company. This implies that brigade combat teams will not be effective in executing brigade-level or brigade-size tasks if called into action. Having competent companies or battalions is one thing; being able to orchestrate their actions to achieve higher-order tactical and operational tasks is another thing entirely.

CTC Rotations. The Army uses Combat Training Centers to train its forces to desired levels of proficiency. Specifically, this important program "requires Soldiers to perform individual and collective tasks and missions in a realistic environment under mental and physical stress that approaches conditions found in combat."[93] The institutional

training domain "is a key enabler for unit readiness."[94] For FY 2024, the Army resourced 22 BCT-level CTC rotations: eight at the National Training Center, eight at the Joint Readiness Training Center, four at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center, and two exportable rotations. Two of these 22 rotations were for Army National Guard Brigades.[95]

New Readiness Model. The Army has transitioned from one readiness model to another. Its Sustainable Readiness Model, implementation of which began in 2017, was intended to give units more predictability. Its new Regionally Aligned Readiness and Modernization Model (ReARMM) is designed to "better balance operational tempo (OPTEMPO) with dedicated periods for conducting missions, training, and modernization."[96] ReARMM features units that spend eight months in a modernization-training-mission cycle while preparing to deploy to a specific part of the world. The Army shifted to this new model on October 1, 2021. Since announcing the model in 2021, the Army has been silent on the topic.

In general, the Army continues to be challenged by structural readiness problems as evidenced by too small a force attempting to satisfy too many global presence requirements and Operations Plan (OPLAN) warfighting requirements.

Scoring the U.S. Army

Capacity Score: Weak

Historical evidence shows that, on average, the Army needs 21 BCTs to fight one major regional conflict. Based on a conversion of roughly 3.5 BCTs per division, the Army deployed 21 BCTs in Korea, 25 in Vietnam, 14 in the Persian Gulf War, and approximately four in Operation Iraqi Freedom—an average of 16 BCTs (or 21 if the much smaller Operation Iraqi Freedom initial invasion operation is excluded).

In the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review, the Obama Administration recommended a force capable of deploying 45 Active Component BCTs.[97] Previous government force-sizing documents discuss Army force structure in terms of divisions and consistently advocate for 10 to 11 divisions, which equates to roughly 37 Active Component BCTs.

Considering the varying recommendations of 35 to 45 BCTs and the actual experience of nearly 21 BCTs deployed per major engagement, our assessment is that 42 BCTs would be needed to fight two MRCs. Taking into account the need for a strategic reserve, the Army force should also include an additional 20 percent of the 42 BCTs, resulting in an overall requirement of 50 BCTs.

Previous editions of the *Index of U.S. Military Strength* counted a small number of Army National Guard BCTs in the overall count of available BCTs. Because the Army no longer mentions Army National Guard BCTs at the highest state of readiness, they are no longer counted in this edition of the *Index*. Increasing the readiness levels of Army National Guard BCTs could go a long way toward fixing this issue and helping the Army to reach the two-MRC benchmark. The Army has 31 Regular Army BCTs with a two-MRC construct requirement of 50. The Army's overall capacity score therefore remains unchanged from 2022.

- **Two-MRC Benchmark:** 50 Brigade Combat Teams.
- **Actual FY 2025 Level:** 31 Regular Army Brigade Combat Teams.

The Army's current BCT capacity equals 62 percent of the two-MRC benchmark and is therefore scored as "weak."

Capability Score: Marginal

The Army's aggregate capability score remains "marginal." This aggregate score is a result of "marginal" scores for "Age of Equipment," "Size of Modernization Programs," and "Health of Modernization Programs." The Army is scored "weak" for "Capability of Equipment."

Readiness Score: Very Strong

The Army reports that 83 percent of its 31 Regular Army BCTs are at the highest state of readiness.[98] The Army's internal requirement is for "66 percent... of the active component BCTs [to be] at the highest readiness levels."[99] Using the assessment methods of this *Index*, this results in a percentage of service requirement of 100 percent, or "very strong."

U.S. Military Power: Army

	VERY WEAK	WEAK	MARGINAL	STRONG	VERY STRONG
Capacity		✓			
Capability			✓		
Readiness					✓
OVERALL			✓		

ABOUT THE ASSESSMENT CATEGORIES

OVERALL ASSESSMENT. The overall assessment of a military service is measured against its ability to perform its respective role in a two-major regional contingency (MRC) scenario. The assessment of the U.S. Marine Corps is sized against a single major regional contingency (MRC) scenario. This benchmark is the *minimum* standard for U.S. hard-power capacity with the understanding that maintenance, operational tempo, training cycles, crisis response, treaty commitments, and/or strategic reserve considerations can cause some forces to be unavailable. Other factors that influence this assessment are the availability of logistical support to enable combat power (fueling ships, supply ships, cargo aircraft, etc.) and the ability to reconstitute combat power for protracted conflict (defense industrial base capacity, etc.).

CAPACITY. The U.S. military must have a sufficient quantity of the right capability or capabilities to meet its mission sets. Capacity (numbers) can be viewed in at least three ways:

- Compared to a stated objective for each category by each service,
- Compared to amounts required to complete various types of operations across a wide range of potential missions as measured against a potential adversary, and
- As measured against a set benchmark for total national capability.

CAPABILITY. Examining the capability of a military force requires consideration of:

- The proper tools (material and conceptual) with the design, performance characteristics, technological advancement, and suitability that the force needs to perform its function against an enemy successfully;
- The sufficiency of armored vehicles, ships, airplanes, and other equipment and weapons needed to win against the enemy;
- The appropriate variety of options to preclude strategic vulnerabilities in the force and give flexibilities to battlefield commanders; and
- The degree to which elements of the force reinforce each other in covering potential vulnerabilities, maximizing strengths, and gaining greater effectiveness through synergies that are not possible in narrowly stovepiped, linear approaches to war.

READINESS. While capacity and capability considerations are central to the warfighting ability of the U.S. military, readiness performs a crucial role in determining whether combat power is prepared when it is needed. Factors that are considered include (among others):

- Sufficient staffing levels,
- Fulfillment of training requirements, and
- Age and maintenance of equipment.

Overall U.S. Army Score: Marginal

The Army's overall score is calculated based on an unweighted average of its capacity, capability, and readiness scores. The unweighted average is 3.33; thus, the overall Army score is "marginal." This score was derived from the aggregate score for capacity ("weak"); capability ("marginal"); and readiness ("very strong"). This score is the same as the assessment in the 2024 *Index*, which rated the Army as "marginal" overall.

Policy Recommendations

In view of the above scores and what they indicate about the Army's current capacity and capability, as well as its overall rating of "marginal," the U.S. Army needs to:

- **Maintain its modernization programs.** The Army must not lose sight of the fact that the fundamentals of warfare have not changed and that in pursuing innovation, one cannot abandon tried-and-true warfighting concepts. Drones, for example, are critical new capabilities that have clear and proven combat and ISR capabilities, as demonstrated by the war in Ukraine. However, traditional infantry, armor, and artillery units have been just as instrumental in the conduct of the war, and the U.S. Army must remain at the forefront of these warfighting branches even while pursuing UAS and C-UAS dominance.

- **Prioritize MDTFs and Long-Range Fire Battalions.** Given how critical they are to

deterring Chinese aggression against Taiwan, equipping and fielding MDTFs and Long-Range Fire Battalions should be among the Army's highest priorities. These units should either be rotated or forward deployed to the Western Pacific as much as possible.

- **Emphasize joint planning.** If the Army is to succeed in its identified role in the Indo-Pacific, it will need to be brought into theater by the airlift and sealift capabilities that the Air Force and Navy provide. The Navy and Air Force need the Army to secure and defend airfields and logistics and sustainment hubs and need to invest far more in airlift and sealift systems.
- **Maximize interoperability.** The U.S. Army should be as interoperable as possible with its allies in both the Indo-Pacific and NATO, and cross-training with these allies to increase interoperability should be a continuing and high-level priority.

Endnotes

1. It should be noted that this chapter also reflects the considerable research contributions made by Thomas W. Spoehr, author of the U.S. Army chapter in several previous editions of the *Index of U.S. Military Strength*.
2. U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, Memorandum for Senior Pentagon Leadership, "Subject: Army Transformation and Acquisition Reform," April 30, 2025, https://media.defense.gov/2025/May/01/2003702281/-1/-1/1/ARMY-TRANSFORMATION-AND-ACQUISITION-REFORM.PDF (accessed December 11, 2025). Cited hereinafter as Hegseth Memorandum.
3. Secretary of the Army Dan Driscoll and Chief of Staff of the Army General Randy George, "Letter to the Force: Army Transformation Initiative," May 1, 2025, https://www.army.mil/article/285100/letter_to_the_force_army_transformation_initiative (accessed December 11, 2025).
4. Thomas W. Spoehr, "U.S. Army," in *2024 Index of U.S. Military Strength*, ed. Dakota L. Wood (Washington: The Heritage Foundation, 2024), pp. 409–437, https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/2024_IndexOfUSMilitaryStrength_0.pdf.
5. 10 U.S. Code § 7062(b), https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10/7062 (accessed December 11, 2025).
6. Driscoll and George, "Letter to the Force: Army Transformation Initiative."
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Association of the United States Army, "George: Army Transformation Needs Speed, Agility," May 29, 2025, www.ausa.org/news/george-army-transformation-needs-speed-agility (accessed December 12, 2025).
10. Ibid.
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