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SENATE COMMITEE ON ARMED SERVICES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON READINESS,
UNITED STATES SENATE

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

PRESENTATION TO COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON READINESS
UNITED STATES SENATE

SUBJECT: Current Readiness of the Joint Force

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**INTRODUCTION**

Today's Air Force is the oldest and smallest it has ever been. However, some go further to state that today's Air Force is the "least ready" it has ever been. This last statement is far from the truth. While we still face serious challenges across our force, I can confidently state that your United States Air Force stands ready to defend our nation and its interests, at home and abroad. If called to fight, we will do so effectively alongside our joint and coalition partners, and we will win.

Any discussion of readiness must begin by considering the variables of assets, requirements, and risk within the context of the strategic environment. These variables act like the sides of a triangle in constant tension with each other; when one side is manipulated, the other sides are inevitably affected. We optimize readiness when we adequately support our forces to accomplish their required missions within an acceptable level of risk while considering the threats we face. In a permissive environment, under-resourcing immediate readiness is tolerable because the overall risk is comparatively low. However, in today's strategic environment, shortcomings in immediate readiness reduces our ability to deter our adversaries, increasing the possibility of a damaging and costly conflict. Today, our nation finds itself in a strategic competition with China. The People's Liberation Army is expanding, modernizing, and diversifying its entire military—including cyber, space, and nuclear forces—at a rapid pace to support revisionist goals and objectives. These developments pose unique and fundamentally new challenges for deterrence, and while conflict is certainly not inevitable, the risk of military confrontation is increased in this environment.

In light of this reality, the nation faces a decision about what kind of Air Force it wants. We are, and have been, built to fight the conflicts of the past, yet the new strategic environment

demands that we rebuild the lethal and ready force we need to compete and win. The readiness challenge confronting us lies in creating the force we need for tomorrow while not neglecting deterrence and readiness today. While generating readiness for today and modernization for tomorrow will be an ongoing challenge, it will be much more difficult to fight a war with a peer because deterrence failed.

The following pages will detail the U.S. Air Force's efforts to bridge this gap—remaining ready to answer its nation's call today while preparing for future conflicts. This statement focuses on three broad categories of readiness. First, the foundational accounts that drive immediate-term readiness—being prepared to fight today. Next, the near to medium-term modernization efforts and their impacts on the Air Force's readiness for sustained competition against our pacing challenge—being prepared to fight tomorrow. Finally, the infrastructure and other long-term readiness concerns we must fund now to create sustained readiness over time—being prepared to fight well into the future.

**FOUNDATIONAL ACCOUNTS: IMMEDIATE-TERM READINESS**

The foundation for readiness in the U.S. Air Force is realistic training to prepare Airmen for wartime operations. To do this, we need the right number of people with the right skills, the right amount of equipment in the right condition, and the right amount of non-deployed time at home station. These "readiness levers" —people, equipment, training, and operations—are used simultaneously to influence our immediate-term readiness. They must be manipulated in concert with each other, with consideration to how each factor influences the others and the time delays inherent in each. The spin-up time to bring in and train additional personnel can take years, and Weapons System Sustainment improvements often take months to years to bear fruit. If training is increased without prior development of people and Weapons System Sustainment, that

increase is less productive than hoped, as too few people attempt to fly too many sorties on systems that are too old and too poorly supported. Similarly, if these cycles are disrupted, the process loses momentum, and years of gains can be squandered. Therefore, the goal of foundational readiness is to support our people, equipment, and training at consistently adequate levels to sustain required operations over time. Today's Air Force maintains a high level of core tactical readiness, but a gap has opened between our requirements and our ability to meet those requirements. Decades of overtasking have put these readiness levers out of balance and threatened the viability of our force. Decreased manning and experience levels coupled with sustained high workloads have created a negative feedback loop on both our people and equipment. We must break that cycle.

The Air Force's lethality is grounded in the proficiency, capacity, and skill of its Airmen. The Air Force's recruiting and retention efforts are sufficient to meet our congressionally mandated end strength. Recruitment for the Air Force remains strong, with the active component meeting its accession goals for four of the past five years. Though there was a dip in recruiting in FY23, the Air Force successfully closed the gap in FY24 due to increased recruiter manning, changes to training processes, and an increase in the Delayed Entry Program to its highest level in ten years. Retention has been similarly on target, enabling the Air Force to maintain its mandated end strength. Critical pockets of the force, however, are less healthy. Maintenance manpower has emerged as an acute issue in the last several years. A shortfall of over 9,700 maintainers has opened across the total force—ten percent of the total maintenance manpower requirement. The manpower shortfall both reduces current aircraft availability and creates retention problems as the remaining workforce must put in extra hours to account for the missing maintainers. Likewise, aircrew shortfalls remain a persistent issue. While many of our

initiatives to reverse the decline in aircrew manning are beginning to take effect, we expect manning to continue to decline until approximately the end of FY26. After that point, we expect capacity increases in our pilot training pipeline to take effect and begin to reduce the shortfall.

Beyond accessions and retention, however, there is a more pernicious personnel issue facing the Air Force: the misallocation of personnel, particularly when planned Air Force divestments are later prohibited or limited. When the Air Force programs force structure divestments—often two or more years ahead of time—it also re-programs the end strength associated with those divestments. That does not mean that the Air Force separates the maintainers, pilots, or flight engineers associated with the divested platform; rather, the Air Force re-allocates those personnel to a different requirement. For example, A-10 pilots may be retrained to fly the F-35, and F-22 maintainers may be trained to work on the F-35. When those force structure divestments are canceled late in the process, the manpower requirement is disrupted. Therefore, when an F-22 squadron's divestment is canceled, it may well cause an F-35 maintenance unit to suffer personnel shortfalls. The Air Force is a large enterprise and can absorb many of these shocks, but compounding divestment restrictions over many years have added up and contributed to significant personnel shortfalls. Predictable force structure changes over time are critical for ensuring maximum utilization of our Airmen and readiness of our capabilities.

While we invest in our people, we must simultaneously invest in our equipment, creating a holistic approach to increasing weapon systems and parts availability. Many ingredients come together to generate aircraft—trained and ready maintainers, mission-capable aircraft, adequate spare parts, and serviceable repair facilities are some of the most significant. The Air Force constantly manages these elements, but since 2020, they have been knocked out of balance,

pushing aircraft availability rates steadily downward. First, inflation and labor shortages have deeply cut into the purchasing power of all aspects of sustainment. Second, aging aircraft have begun to systematically fail in an expensive, difficult-to-predict, and difficult-to-repair manner. These two factors combine to push Weapons System Sustainment requirements steadily higher, with a nearly 20% increase in Weapons System Sustainment requirements in the last five years. Despite that increased requirement, an undermined industrial base has led to curtailing parts supply and driving costs even higher for what remains. The 50% increase in the non-mission capable rate for supply since 2019 (from 11 to 17 percent, on average) indicates the severity of the issue. That increase translates to roughly 340 additional aircraft—equivalent in number to all the fighter and attack aircraft assigned to Pacific Air Forces—sitting on the ramp every day, waiting for spare parts.

Our training faces similarly significant challenges. Training takes many different shapes throughout our Air Force, but flight training funded by the Flying Hour Program (FHP) is one of the most meaningful indicators, especially since many functional training areas ultimately support flying missions. By assessing the health of flight training, we gain insight into the overall state of Air Force immediate readiness. For this reason, it is alarming to see a negative trend in the health of our flight training. Since 2020, aircrew have flown less than the required number of hours to properly build experience, and the gap between required and flown is forecasted to grow in the coming years. For the last several years, the FHP has been set to executable levels rather than the levels needed for aircrew seasoning and combat readiness. As our ability to execute programmed flying hours decreases, we set the bar lower and lower every year. Ultimately, the FHP does not provide all the inputs required to conduct flying training, and many have become increasingly out of balance in recent years. Those inputs include aircrew

manning, maintainer manning and skill levels, spares availability, aircraft age, and a continually and increasingly high operational requirement from the combatant commanders. Inflation also eats away at the buying power of the FHP over time. Closing the flying hour gap will require a rebalance of these inputs holistically—not just an increase to the FHP. In particular, the Air Force needs the right trained personnel and spares availability sustained over time. Proper training is the result of matching the right people with the right equipment, and each lever of readiness must be properly sequenced to ultimately boost readiness.

**MODERNIZATION: NEAR-TO-MEDIUM-TERM READINESS**

During the Global War on Terror, the nation consistently prioritized extending the lives of older systems because it was the most cost-effective way to meet the needs of the combatant commanders at the time. We preferred systems with long endurance and high availability over more exquisite systems. The MQ-9, MC-12, A-10, and KC-135 fleets, among others, were all sustained or expanded despite significant budgetary pressures. Recapitalization was often curtailed or elongated as a cost-saving measure to pay for decades of heavy demand in Southwest Asia. To sustain readiness across the near to medium term, we must break from this mindset. We must build an Air Force specifically designed to counter our most pressing threats today and in the future, not the threats of the past.

Moving forward, our modernization construct seeks to adapt to the rapidly changing character of war. We must divest legacy systems that are ineffective against high-end threats and inefficient against low-end threats. For twenty years in Afghanistan, the total cost of the stack of aircraft above troops in contact would often exceed $150,000 per flying hour, far more than any individual modern platform. Those same aircraft, each designed with niche capabilities often dating to the last years of the Cold War, would stand little chance of prevailing against a Chinese

threat in the Western Pacific. Instead of relying on these expensive older capabilities, the Air Force must continue its modernization push and realize both the cost and effectiveness gains from new mixes of equipment. This modernization imperative goes beyond the procurement of platforms. Though Collaborative Combat Aircraft, B-21s, or F-35s will allow us unparalleled access, connectivity, and survivability, platforms are only one link in the long-range kill chain. Other critical links include advanced munitions, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities, cyber forces, communication platforms, battle management, electromagnetic warfare platforms, tankers, resiliency, and other elements of a family of systems that support a weapon getting to its target. Each of these links extends the kill chain and increases its resilience to enemy action. Development and procurement of munitions and other supporting systems must be a top priority to ensure conventional lethality. Finally, the Air Force remains fully committed to a robust and credible nuclear deterrent. The Air Force's full-scope nuclear modernization program—to include the E-4C Survivable Air Operations Center, Sentinel intercontinental ballistic missile, the B-21 Raider family of systems, the Long Range Stand Off cruise missile, and a modernized B-52—recapitalizes all current systems and supporting infrastructure whose life cannot be extended to deliver modern and credible deterrence capabilities. This is particularly true of the ballistic missile leg of the nuclear triad. Despite the restructuring of the Sentinel program following the recent Nunn-McCurdy breach, it remains the best path forward to ensure the United States maintains the most responsive leg of the nuclear triad.

The Air Force must, however, balance modernization against foundational readiness accounts to optimally distribute risk over time. Investing too heavily in readiness today risks disrupting or eliminating necessary modernization—eating the seed corn of tomorrow. On the other hand, too heavy an investment in modernization starves foundational readiness accounts,

reducing the deterrent value of the current force and risking a readiness tailspin that would be difficult to recover from. Over the last few years, we have prioritized modernization at the cost of immediate readiness. In the coming years, we will need to constantly evaluate the balance between immediate and near-to-medium-term readiness as the strategic environment continues to evolve.

**INFRASTRUCTURE: LONG-TERM READINESS**

As the Air Force continues to focus balancing available resources against the current strategic environment and across the different time horizons, our infrastructure requires careful re-examination to ensure it is both resilient and efficient. Years of competing priorities have eroded the Air Force's ability to maintain its infrastructure across the globe. Simultaneously, air bases are threatened in ways not seen in modern history. the Air Force's Installation Infrastructure Action Plan, released in November of 2024, details actions we intend to take to resolve some of these issues,

Air base resiliency has proven to be increasingly important as adversary long-range precision attack capabilities have rapidly improved. Particularly in the Indo-Pacific, China has spent decades building a deep magazine of advanced cruise and ballistic missiles specifically to threaten U.S. force presence in the region. In response, the Air Force has spent considerable time, energy, and resources to develop an Agile Combat Employment (ACE) scheme of maneuver, emphasizing rapid mobility and force dispersal in the region. ACE complicates the adversary's wartime calculus and denies them the lucrative targeting opportunities that known, fixed, and thinly protected locations provide. Additionally, the Air Force, in collaboration with our Joint partners, is actively seeking measures to improve air base air defense capabilities. The successful defense of Israel against several Iranian missile and UAS attacks in 2024 and the

Houthi attacks on merchant shipping in the Red Sea paint a stark picture of the need for robust defense against airborne threats as well as increased capacity to restore our bases after attack. Those incidents also emphasize the level of resources required for an effective defense, with airborne, space-based, ground-based, maritime-based, and international assets all participating in defense activity. Air Force defensive capabilities must also include additional capabilities to counter small drones. In recent congressional testimony, the NORTHCOM commander noted the continued incursions of civilian drones into controlled airspace at several Air Force bases in 2024, highlighting the problem's pervasiveness. The capability to detect and intercept unmanned aerial systems in peacetime equates directly to our readiness and ability to respond to enemy aerial incursions in wartime.

The Air Force currently carries significant excess infrastructure across the board, along with a $49.5 billion maintenance backlog that continues to grow. Since 1990, the Air Force has reduced in size considerably, including a 40% reduction in end strength and a 60% reduction in fighter squadrons, but it has only reduced its CONUS footprint by 15%. Moreover, today, roughly half of all infrastructure across the Air Force is in a moderate or high-risk condition. While the Air Force has been able to prioritize its resources to keep critical mission generation infrastructure (e.g., runways) in good working order, such prioritization has come at the expense of our supporting infrastructure. For example, over 70% of utility infrastructure on Air Force bases in the Indo-Pacific are in a high-risk condition, a problem made acute by the highly corrosive tropical or arctic environments of many facilities and by limited skilled local labor. Meanwhile, our buying power has eroded, with construction costs rising roughly 50% in the last ten years. The Air Force acknowledges the FY25 NDAA section 2680 requirement to fund infrastructure investment at four percent of plant replacement value by FY30 and is moving out

with a number of initiatives outlined in our Installation Infrastructure Action Plan. However, we will struggle to meet this requirement in full without support for reductions in inventory.

**CONCLUSION**

We are in a race to maintain our position as the world's preeminent Air Force. The United States faces a competitor whose national purchasing power exceeds our own and is actively developing a force to counter America's air and maritime competitive advantages. Conflict is not inevitable—we must seek to prevent it through readiness. We must ensure that readiness is optimized across time, with proper consideration to both immediate-term foundational readiness, but also to medium-term modernization, and long-term infrastructure concerns. Only by solving the readiness equation across all three time horizons can we underwrite the nation's security and prosperity in the decades ahead. The Air Force appreciates the continued support of our Congress, and I look forward to working with the members of this committee to create the momentum needed to address these challenges.