The great power competition between the United States, Russia, and China has become the central challenge to U.S. security—both military and economic. America’s dominance in the air, space, and cyber realms can no longer be taken for granted. In some areas, such as hypersonics, those once near-peer competitors have overtaken some of our capabilities. In addition, threats from other countries are simultaneously emerging as well as from rogue nations and terror groups often allied with our great power competitors.

Since April 1953, when enemy airplanes attacked and killed two U.S. Army soldiers on an island off the Korean Peninsula, no American service member has been a casualty from enemy aircraft attack. U.S. forces have expected air superiority. Air superiority is not a given, however, and without the right resources, our nation’s future air superiority is in doubt.

Last year’s National Defense Strategy Commission testified regarding the needs of recapitalizing and modernizing the force in order to conduct the newest National Defense Strategy, and the commission particularly emphasized the importance of the Air Force.

After 1991’s Operation Desert Storm, the military services have been downsized, capabilities languished, and their equipment has grown antiquated and incapable of some of the assigned missions. The Air Force in particular downsized by a third and has become a force that is too small for what our nation requires of it. The Air Force is the only service that deployed to the Gulf in 1990 and has not yet returned home—nearly 29 straight years of continuous combat operations.

The Air Force is just too old and too small for what the nation expects of it. The Air Force needs a continuous focus on recapitalizing its antiquated equipment while deploying new technological capabilities. The Air Force must grow from 312 operational squadrons to 386 in order to conduct its many missions.

The Air Force needs stable and predictable funding—at sufficient levels. The National Defense Strategy Commission agrees stating, “…this Commission recommends that Congress increase the base defense budget at an average rate of three to five percent above inflation through the Future Years Defense Program and perhaps beyond.” The last two defense budgets have provided the Air Force with a down payment for the necessary resources to arrest its decreasing readiness, and the last budget helped the Air Force begin its long modernization journey.

THE AIR FORCE ASSOCIATION’S MISSION IS TO PROMOTE A DOMINANT UNITED STATES AIR FORCE AND A STRONG NATIONAL DEFENSE, AND TO HONOR AIRMEN AND OUR AIR FORCE HERITAGE.
1. **REBUILD COMBAT READINESS IN AIR, SPACE, AND CYBERSPACE IN A TIMELY MANNER**
   a. Advocate to Congress that Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs budgets be completed by the beginning of each fiscal year. The Air Force needs stable and predictable funding—at adequate funding levels. Continuing Resolutions (CRs) degrade readiness, while a consistent yearly budget allows the Air Force to commit to long-term plans and effectively manage its programs.
   b. Readiness must be addressed through stable increased funding over the next few budgets to overcome shortages and deficiencies experienced previously.

2. **INCREASE FORCE STRUCTURE**
   a. Size force structure to meet global requirements by increasing Active Duty strength to 350,000 personnel, the Air National Guard to 120,000, and the Reserve to 72,500 personnel. Continue to grow the professional space cadre within all total force components. The Air Force must be sized and funded commensurate with the missions it is given.
   b. Grow the Total Force to 386 operational squadrons to meet the Air Force's many missions. Operational squadrons are the core fighting unit of the Air Force. Increase from 55 fighter squadrons to 62 fighter squadrons; from 9 bomber squadrons to 14; from 53 airlift squadrons to 54; and from 16 space squadrons to 23. Tomorrow's threats require that the Air Force grow in order to carry out all of its assigned missions, and maintain our ability to ensure air superiority.
   c. Organize, Train and Equip for space. The federal government debated the best way to defend the vital interests of the United States in space. Whether their solution was a “Space Corps” or “Space Force” mattered little in the grand scheme; what's important—essential, in fact—is that the U.S. answer the rising threats posed by China and Russia against commercial, military and intelligence satellites with unparalleled military capability to deter and, if necessary, defeat enemy threats in space. U.S. Air Force Space Command leads the services' efforts in launching and operating military satellites. Today, combat operations are unthinkable without the direct support and integration of space assets managed and coordinated by U.S. Air Force Airmen. We must organize, train, and equip them for success.
   d. Emphasize development, testing, and implementation of space doctrine to guide the organizing, training and equipping of space forces. Develop this doctrine within existing operational doctrine as opposed to separately as part of an independent and likely isolated space service.
   e. Recruit and retain highly skilled support personnel, and implement selective bonuses for depleted career fields—such as pilots, cyber security, space operators, security forces, maintainers, and medical personnel. It is “cheaper to retain than retrain.”

3. **ACCELERATE RECAPITALIZATION / MODERNIZATION**
   **Accelerate the Air Force's top acquisition programs.** The warfighters deserve equipment in a timely and sufficient manner, while mitigating costs to the taxpayers.
   a. F-35A Lightning II—The U.S. must speed up acquisition of the game changing multi-domain strike fighter, which is the only fifth-generation fighter in production and is survivable against today's defenses. During the last two years, the Air Force requested 48 aircraft annually, however, it needs to recapitalize at a much faster rate by procuring at least 72 aircraft per year to keep up with future demands and decrease unit costs.
   b. KC-46A Pegasus Tanker—Replace the costly 50-year-old aircraft that are at the end of their service lives. The Air Force is expected to receive only about 15 aircraft annually, which is a very small down payment on the 500 total new tankers that are required to fulfill the mission; continue to procure the new tankers at least at the economic order quantity (EOQ) level.
   c. B-21 Raider Bomber—Procure 180 B-21 bombers. The current long-range strike force averages 40 years in age and 87 percent of today's bomber fleet predates existing stealth available technology. Continue to provide the necessary development money to keep the bomber on time for a 2020s arrival. The B-21 is a critical component and the most flexible element of our nation's Strategic Deterrent, the nuclear TRIAD.
   d. Support full funding for the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD) to replace the Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile system (ICBM). The Minuteman III is growing increasingly expensive to maintain, is nearly 50 years old, and faces critical sustainment and future capability gaps. Given its strategic range and constant state of readiness, the GBSD must go forward on the current plan, especially as it is the most responsive and cost-effective leg of our nation's Strategic Deterrent—the nuclear TRIAD.
   e. Advance essential efforts to sustain and modernize the airlift fleet that provides our nation's global mobility. We strongly encourage the Air Force, with the support from Congress, to conduct planning for follow-on strategic airlift aircraft.
   f. Accelerate the Air Force's new Advanced Battle Management System (ABMS)—a more survivable architecture which utilizes a network of integrated sensors. Define its data architecture through initial software development before identifying satellites and aircraft for the system.
g. Advance the Long Range Standoff Weapon (LRSO) with nuclear capability.

h. Grow robust space launch and on-orbit capabilities, taking advantage of cost-reducing measures in the commercial space industry and examining commercial operating models of extended satellite networks for warfighting utility.

i. Endorse the Air Force’s “Next Generation ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) Dominance Flight Plan,” utilizing a sensing grid that fuses together data from legacy platforms and incorporates emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) to help decipher data faster. Leverage existing space assets while planning for future systems to fully integrate into the ISR network and the Internet of Things (IoT). Continue upgrades to reconnaissance and surveillance platforms and battle management systems.

j. Enhance and streamline collaboration between Congress, industry, and the Air Force to institute defense industrial base policies that ensure a robust defense industrial base capable of meeting Air Force acquisition/procurement requirements.

k. Recapitalize the UH-1N fleet as soon as possible for missile force security and VIP movements.

l. Ensure that Nuclear Command, Control & Communications (NC3) and Multi-Domain Command and Control (MDC2) requirements are being met.

4. INCREASE INVESTMENTS IN TECHNOLOGY

a. Invest at least 10 percent of Science & Technology (S&T) funding in sustainment technologies, since a huge portion of the Air Force budget is consumed by sustainment costs. Increase the budget commensurate with the Air Force's increased emphasis on basic and applied research to drive long-term innovation and dominance in air and space power.

b. Advance hypersonic technologies more aggressively and leverage those technologies to deploy hypersonic systems and integrate operations in the air and space environments. The U.S. trails behind the Chinese and the Russians in hypersonic system deployment and is not fully leveraging technology development.

c. Invest in the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems and strategies, which will enhance warfighting capabilities. Initial AI efforts are rightly focused on assessing and categorizing the abundance of data from aircraft, satellites and weapons, however, we must be flexible enough to explore additional uses for AI to ensure we don't fall behind our strategic competitors.

d. Leverage industry's progress, and increase expenditures, on autonomy and quantum computing.

e. Advocate for support to the Air Force Research Laboratory and National Laboratories including Department of Energy laboratories.
5. SUPPORT AIRMEN AND THEIR FAMILIES; TREAT RETIREES AND VETERANS WITH DIGNITY AND RESPECT; CHAMPION CIVILIAN MATTERS

**AIRMEN AND FAMILIES**

a. Pay and Benefits
   - Tie military pay raises to the Employment Cost Index (ECI).
   - Enhance the needed authorities for special pays and bonuses for select career field service members.
   - Defend against adverse changes in educational opportunities.
   - Protect the ‘Shopping Benefit.’ We support efficiencies and ways to enhance the benefit but advocate against Commissaries and Exchanges consolidation, at least until further studies are conducted.

b. Healthcare: Healthcare is a readiness issue
   - Fully fund TRICARE to provide proper care for military members and families.
   - Prohibit the Defense Department from realigning or reducing the proposed 17,000 military medical positions until analyses are conducted on potential manpower realignments and the availability of health care services for military families in their local area.

c. Air Force Housing: Family housing is both a readiness and retention issue.
   - Continue close monitoring of housing conditions to prevent any recurrence of sub-standard or unsanitary conditions that impact Air Force Families.

**VETERANS**

a. Pay and Benefits
   - Support Cost of Living Allowances (COLAs) to ensure a promise kept.

b. Healthcare: Honor our nation’s promise to veterans.
   - Challenge TRICARE fee increases proposed by Congress.
   - Preserve TRICARE for Life (TFL). It is a national obligation to retirees, earned long ago. TFL is costing less, not more. Negative changes are perceived as a breach of faith.
   - Improve VA Health Care to ensure veterans have the health care they deserve. Safeguard full funding for the VA Mission Act and keep the development of the new Electronic Health Record on schedule.

c. End “The Widow’s Tax”: Repeal the requirement for reduction of survivor annuities under the Survivor Benefit Plan for military surviving spouses to offset the receipt of veterans dependency and indemnity compensation. Now, even though retired members have paid into SBP, the surviving spouse will have promised SBP payments reduced by the amount they receive from DIC when the military spouse dies from a service-connected disability. This can greatly harm the income needs of a surviving military spouse who has probably had to exhaust retirement savings while caring for a sick military service member in the last stages of their life.

**CIVILIANS**

a. Support the recruitment, talent management, and retention of quality Air Force civilians. Eliminate, for all officer grades below lieutenant colonel and all enlisted grades, the 180-day restriction against retired military accepting civil service positions. The Air Force is missing out on opportunities to hire experienced maintainers, particularly at the depots, because those with great maintenance experience either cannot or will not wait half a year to take a job after retirement. We are losing civilian talent and expertise to other opportunities due to long delays and a burdensome hiring system. DOD has experienced a 30-percent cut in numbers over the past two decades. Civilians serve as the institutional memory for the force, and their corporate knowledge and skills cannot be easily replaced.

b. Promote civilian pay raises. They are key members of the Air Force’s Total Force, and our nation needs to retain them.

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Photo by SrA Taylor Curry/USAF


**AIR FORCE ASSOCIATION CORE VALUES**

- Integrity First
- Service Before Self
- Excellence in All We Do
- Independence and Nonpartisanship
- Diversity and Inclusiveness

**AIR FORCE ASSOCIATION MISSION**

To promote a dominant United States Air Force and a strong national defense and to honor Airmen and our Air Force heritage. To accomplish this, we:

**EDUCATE** the public on the critical need for unmatched aerospace power and a technically superior workforce to ensure U.S. national security;

**ADVOCATE** for aerospace power and STEM education; and

**SUPPORT** the Total Air Force family and promote aerospace education.

The Air Force Association (AFA) is a 501(c)(3), independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit educational organization promoting public understanding of aerospace power and the pivotal role it plays in the security of the nation. AFA disseminates information through Air Force Magazine, airforcemag.com, the Mitchell Institute, national symposia, and other forms of public outreach. Learn more about AFA by visiting www.afa.org.