



Forum for American Leadership

Common Sense Defense Reforms

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Amid the strategic competition with the Chinese Communist Party and the war in Ukraine, the 118th Congress has an opportunity to make the Department of Defense (DoD) more effective at defending the national security of the United States. To win today and tomorrow, DoD needs a healthy topline that [funds](#) the force required to achieve U.S. strategic priorities [combined](#) with robust [reform efforts](#) that directly contribute to a more capable and lethal force. This [Forum for American Leadership](#) brief describes key areas for Congress to focus on during the budget resolution, NDAA, and appropriations process for Fiscal Year 2024.

- **Provide a strong national defense budget on time:** The Biden Administration recently [proposed](#) a \$842 billion budget for the Pentagon, a 3.2% increase that, given persistently high inflation, would result in a [real cut](#) for defense. Republican defense leaders in Congress rightly [criticized](#) the proposal as inadequate to meet today's threats and modernize U.S. conventional and nuclear forces simultaneously. Additionally, the war in Ukraine has accentuated the post-Cold War atrophy of the U.S. [national security industrial and innovation base](#). Addressing these challenges will require a [minimum of 5% real growth](#) year-over-year in the defense budget, as recommended by the bipartisan 2018 National Defense Strategy Commission. Without on-time appropriations, however, annual increases above the President's budget request are essentially wiped out by continuing resolutions.
- **Address Indo-Pacific shortfalls.** The Pentagon has identified the Indo-Pacific as its priority theater, but its budget request failed to invest in theater capability and capacity needed to deter Chinese aggression. U.S. Indo-Pacific Command has identified \$3.5 billion in unfunded requests, including in key areas such as space, cyber, undersea warfare, allied interoperability, munitions production, and forward posture. Congress should prioritize these areas for additional investment in authorization and appropriations legislation.
- **Address politicization at the Pentagon:** The [2022 Reagan National Defense Survey](#) found that overly politicized military leadership and [woke practices that undermine military effectiveness](#) were two [notable factors](#) contributing to decreased public confidence in the military. Through oversight investigations and policy language, Congress should ensure that professional military education and other DoD training programs are focused on core military functions that advance U.S. national defense, not political or ideological agendas.

- **Rein in the Pentagon’s civilian bureaucracy:** The DoD civilian workforce is meant to serve the uniformed services, not the other way around. Yet in the period from [2010-2022](#), there was a close to 6 percent decline in active-duty personnel while Pentagon civilians grew by 5.65 percent. There are now roughly 815,000 federal defense civilians, compared to an active duty force of 1.3 million. Rightsizing the growth in the civilian bureaucracy will require a targeted approach that evaluates where adjustments might be needed while maintaining robust civilian control of the military. As FAL Defense Co-Chair Mackenzie Eaglen recently [argued](#), “Congress should...ensure that the [long-term] growth of the federal defense civilian workforce is tied to the growth (or decline) of the active-duty military.”
- **Support continued DoD audit progress:** Since beginning department-wide financial statement audits in 2018, the DoD has [utilized](#) tools developed from the audit process to improve performance management and decision-making. Congress should work with DoD to continue efforts to modernize the [defense resourcing process](#) and leverage automation and better data collection to improve department operations.
- **Encourage DoD integration of innovative technologies that field capabilities quicker:** The Pentagon fails to provide clearly-articulated pathways to programs of record for a majority of its technology priorities, earning it a D grade for “customer clarity” in a new [National Security Innovation Base Report Card](#). This has made private capital increasingly weary of investing in innovative defense technology startups, which could threaten long-term U.S. economic and military competitiveness. Congress should [modify the acquisition incentive structure](#) to reward risk-taking and encourage quicker decision-making. It must also provide sufficient and stable funding for DoD to acquire and scale critical technologies through on-time appropriations and that leads to faster production and fielding.
- **Appropriate multi-year funds for the production of critical munition stockpiles:** The war in Ukraine and the possibility of conflict over Taiwan have forced a recognition that America needs to shift its procurement approach from “just in time production” to “just in case capacity”—not just for itself, but also for our allies and partners who will need these weapons and who will pay American manufacturers for them. The Army’s use of multi-year contracts are a [model](#) for this kind of reform. Congress should revisit the concept of a Critical Munitions Acquisition Fund put forward by the Department last year, which would have created a special, multi-year fund to produce critical munitions needed to support Ukraine but also to refill chronically under-produced weapons. Appropriating multi-year monies sends a signal to U.S. small and medium-sized suppliers and manufacturers that there will not be disruptions to their business models and that they can go ahead and procure long-lead materials and supplies needed for sustained weapons production.

This brief is a product of the Forum for American Leadership’s [Defense Working Group](#).

