



## Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies

1501 Langston Boulevard  
Arlington, VA 22209

<http://www.mitchellaerospacepower.org>

Statement for the Record  
House Armed Services Committee  
Lt Gen Joseph T. Guastella,  
Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies  
March 9, 2023

Chairman Pfluger, Ranking Member Magaziner, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. As an individual who spent over three decades in service to our nation, I am deeply concerned about the threats the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) poses to the U.S. homeland. That is why events like today's hearing are so important.

In my last assignment on Active Duty, I served as the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations at Headquarters U.S. Air Force, where I was charged with leading the development and implementation of policy directly supporting global operations, force management, weather, training and readiness across air, space and cyber fields. To this end, I am well versed in the threat China poses to the United States and the capabilities they have to manifest their objectives. It was my job to oversee airpower capabilities and capacity so that our combatant commands could respond to these challenges every day—and this included the homeland defense mission of North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) / Northern Command (NORTHCOM).

I would first like to begin by describing the threat China poses to the United States and its allies. In the 1991, when the U.S. was celebrating the end of the Cold War and victory in Operation Desert Storm, China made a concerted decision to modernize their military capabilities as a key ingredient in empowering their ascent as a leading military superpower.

Three decades later, they have largely met this mark and they seek further progress—that is why this year saw a marked increase in their defense spending. Their military now enjoys leading-edge capabilities that include long-range precision strike, hypersonic medium-range ballistic

missiles, sophisticated integrated air defense system (IADS) comprised of stealthy fighter aircraft like the J-20 aircraft, surface-to-air missiles (SAMS), and electronic warfare (EW) units. These capabilities radically complicate the operating environment for U.S. forces and could portend significant combat attrition, especially for forward operating bases and the non-stealth portions of America's combat air arm which makes up a vast portion of Air Force aircraft. Several of these offensive systems have the range to hold U.S. territory at risk, affecting us right here in the homeland.

The Chinese spy balloon, which garnered significant attention this past February, should serve as a wakeup call regarding the CCP's global ambitions. China's space-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities also gather information regarding the U.S. homeland. Nor are all these long-range systems passive threats. China's quest to field a 'fractional orbital bombardment system'—a long range missile that transits space enroute to its target—are not capabilities designed to secure China's immediate borders. They are part of a strategic global strike system. The U.S. must take note.

Unfortunately, the U.S. is stretched thin when it comes to the capabilities and capacity required to defend our homeland. NORAD was originally designed to detect and defend North America from a catastrophic attack from the Soviet Union, later Russia. An additional role was added after 9/11: to intercept, identify, and redirect unidentified aircraft heading toward restricted airspace. So, the NORAD radars were optimized and tuned to detect aircraft that meet those criteria.

Balloons—until recently—generally do not fit into that category. As the threat evolves, including balloons, stealth aircraft, UASs and cruise missiles.... so must our detection and defense enterprise. This will require that we modernize current radars and install new radars to cover emerging zones of vulnerability, not just over our nation but well outside our sovereign territory. Approaches to our homeland China would use are far different than those used by Russia. We must invest new resources in the NORAD mission. The command gets its aircraft from the Air Force, but our Air Force today is the oldest and smallest it's ever been in its history.

The balloon intrusions should be a wakeup call to rebuild our air and space defenses—we are still flying B-52s over 60 years old; tankers over 50; and fighters over 30. Homeland defense doesn't start in the homeland. It starts abroad with the combatant commands having credible offensive punch to hold targets at risk in adversary countries. The Air Force needs to be modernized in the numbers necessary to meet the demands of our national defense strategy, and to deter threats against our homeland.

More specifically, consider that the Air Force's fighter inventory is too small to meet real-world demand. This is a major security concern, for while other service branches possess fighter aircraft, the Air Force is specifically tasked with the homeland security air sovereignty mission.

In 1991, the Air Force possessed 4,459 fighters. Today, it has 2,221. This represents a 49 percent reduction in capacity—the majority of which were produced in the Cold War. However, this decrease in volume is not matched with a drop in operational demand. Quite the contrary given that the Air Force has been meeting non-stop combat requirements since Desert Storm in 1991. As the numbers of fighters decreased, the workload assigned to the remaining aircraft increased. They are now physically worn out and must be retired. Fourteen years ago, a Congressional Budget Office report concluded: “By 2009, 80 percent of the [Air Force's fighter] aircraft had used more than 50 percent of their originally planned service life. Clearly, the Air Force's fighter fleet is wearing out.”<sup>1</sup> Circumstances have not improved over the ensuing decade, in fact, they have gotten worse. That is why you saw F-15C/Ds fighter aircraft withdrawn from Kadena Air Base in the Pacific this past year—not because the Air Force wanted to do this, but because the aircraft were so old they had to be retired and there were not enough new fighters to backfill them. Think of the signal that sent to China.

The simple reality is that Air Force has lacked funding necessary to procure a sufficient volume of new fighters to ensure the outflow of aging aircraft is matched by the inflow of newer examples. They have ranked third—behind the Army and Navy—in terms of Department of

---

<sup>1</sup> Congressional Budget Office (CBO), [Alternatives for Modernizing U.S. Fighter Forces](#) (Washington, DC: CBO, May 2009), p. 55

Defense funding for the past three decades.<sup>2</sup> That manifested very real results. Consider that the Air Force's leading 5<sup>th</sup> generation fighter, the F-22, had its production terminated at less than twenty five percent of the original requirement. In the 2000s, leaders outside the Air Force thought the era of peer conflict was over. They were wrong. Nor is this a one-off example, with the production ramp rate of the F-35 lagging dangerously behind original intentions. In 2020, the Air Force was supposed to have 800 F-35As in its inventory, but instead only had 272.<sup>3</sup>

The Air National Guard, the entity which bears the preponderance of the homeland defense mission is particularly hard hit by gap between older aircraft aging out and a lack of new aircraft arriving to backfill their spots on the ramp. The Air National Guard tends to fly older fighters, so they are a fleet lead indicator for the broader Air Force. What happened at Kadena will be replicated throughout bases across America absent rapid intervention to reset the Air Force's fighter force.

Homeland defense also requires investment and modernization in command and control, resiliency, ground and space-based sensors, data fusion technology, AI, and air refueling capabilities. Homeland defense is our highest priority mission, we need to start treating it that way.

We also lack sufficient capabilities and capacity to defend against a concerted air and missile attack at our forward bases. On January 8, 2020, eleven Iranian ballistic missiles struck U.S. forces based at the Ayn al Asad military complex in Iraq. I was the Coalition Forces Air Component Commander at the time. Our leadership possessed intelligence signaling the attack would happen, we were able to detect the missiles being launched, and we could track their trajectory. However, when it came to defeating these missiles, we lacked viable options because the joint force lacked sufficient missile defense *capacity* given other global commitments. American service members and many allies had to ride out the attack and hope for the best. That

---

<sup>2</sup> David Deptula and Mark Gunzinger, [\*Decades of Air Force Underfunding Threaten America's Ability to Win\*](#) (Arlington, VA: Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, 2022), p. 3

<sup>3</sup> John A. Tirpak, "Keeping 4th-Gen Fighters in the Game," Air Force Magazine, October 1, 2019.

was an appalling set of circumstances. Think if that had happened in your hometown or key bases here in America.

Adversaries like China understand these vulnerabilities. The United States is gradually waking up to this reality, but leaders have yet to seriously address the shortfall. Note how difficult it is to provide effective, sustainable solutions to Ukraine—guarding against everything from air strikes, drone attacks, and missile bombardment. We are still in a “problem admiring” phase, not in a “solution implementation” window. This must change.

It is worth remembering that some of the first responders on the morning of 9/11 were airmen. Two of them quickly scrambled from Andrews Air Force Base to intercept a hijacked airliner bound for the nation’s capital. We had no time to arm those F-16s because in the post-Cold War era, we *thought* our homeland was safe—we had stopped sitting alert. That meant those airmen were prepared to sacrifice their lives to bring down that hijacked aircraft. The passengers on Flight 93 bravely took matters into their own hands before our airmen were asked to make that sacrifice. The point in telling this story is to highlight that we have the bravest men and women in uniform. But we owe it to them to ensure they are prepared for the mission we ask them to execute. We also owe it to our citizens, to ensure they are protected from attack. America’s homeland is no longer a sanctuary. We must recognize this new reality and aggressively close critical gaps in capacity and capabilities for homeland defense. Thank you for focusing on this topic today. With that, I look forward to your question.