

FTCN Replay: Military Capacity Concerns Mount Amid Evolving Global Security Threats

Retired US Air Force General David Deptula assessed the current state of America's military preparedness during a recent episode of [From the Crows' Nest](#), discussing force structure trends and capacity challenges facing the Air Force in an evolving global security environment.

Deptula, who serves as Dean of the [Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies](#), told host and AOC Director of Advocacy & Outreach Ken Miller that the US Air Force faces significant challenges. "Today we're the oldest, the smallest, and the least ready we've ever been in our entire history," he stated. "People need to let that sink in for a minute because we're also faced with a set of threats that are the greatest that we've ever faced in our nation's history."

The general drew a sharp contrast with America's primary strategic competitor, noting that "the People's Republic of China's Air Force is the newest, the largest, and the most ready they've ever been in their history."

Lessons from Ukraine: Context Matters

When discussing the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, Deptula cautioned against drawing overly broad conclusions about future warfare. While acknowledging the impact of small drones and quadcopters in that specific conflict, he emphasized that "every conflict is different."

"What applies in the context of Ukraine, Russia, in terms of

small quadcopters with lethal devices having an impact on that war may not have much utility at all when you're talking about trying to deter China from a cross straits invasion of Taiwan separated by 100 miles of water," Deptula explained.

He pointed to Israel's recent operations against Iran as another example, where "the real key facet that allowed Israel to dominate the Iranians was the stealth, precision and information capabilities provided by the F-35."

Force Structure Concerns

Deptula expressed alarm at the significant reduction in US military capacity since the Cold War era. "We have less than half the number of forces today that we had in 1991 during Operation Desert Storm in the first Gulf War," he noted, questioning whether current threats are greater or lesser than those faced three decades ago.

The general was particularly pointed about resource allocation, stating: "There is no more doing more with less. There are no more efficiencies that can be squeezed out of the system that's already been squeezed out of the system."

He highlighted the aging bomber fleet as emblematic of broader issues, asking rhetorically about the B-52: "You know what the age of the youngest B-52 is?" The answer: 63 years old for the youngest aircraft in a fleet that "makes up the preponderance of not just the US but the free world's bomber force."

Air Power in the Pacific Theater

Deptula emphasized the strategic importance of air power in potential Pacific conflicts, challenging conventional assumptions about the region. "People tend to think the Pacific is a naval theater. No, it's an air theater," he argued. "The ocean might cover 70% of the Earth's surface, but air and space covers 100%. If you want to do something quick, you do it by getting there through air and space power."

He noted the vast geographic scope of the theater, explaining that “in a Pacific Theater, which has 16 time zones, the quickest way to achieve a decisive effect is by going 600 miles an hour or more. That’s air power versus going 20 knots or less, which is sea power.”

Defense Spending and Fiscal Reality

The general provided broader economic context for defense funding challenges, noting that military spending has declined dramatically as a percentage of GDP. “We are at, as a percentage of GDP spending, the least we’ve ever spent on our security requirements,” Deptula said.

He also addressed the national debt crisis, pointing out that “we now have a \$38 trillion budget deficit. You could eliminate the entire Department of Defense, and it wouldn’t put a dent in the \$38 trillion debt.”

Deptula argued that the nation faces a fundamental choice about resource allocation. “Fundamentally, we as a nation need to deal with what is an entitlements problem,” he said, adding that “no one’s going to say anything about it until the day before the whole system collapses. And then it’s going to be too late.”

Industrial Base Challenges

The defense industrial base has undergone dramatic consolidation over the past several decades, which Deptula identified as a significant vulnerability. “We used to have on the order of 50 large defense contractors that we necked down to not more than five or six,” he explained. “And that was done with intent because we were searching for a peace dividend.”

The general contrasted current production capacity with both historical benchmarks and contemporary examples. “During World War II, we had time to go from producing 10 aircraft a year,

up to 50,000 aircraft per year. We don't have that capacity anymore today. It just simply does not exist."

He pointed to Ukraine's drone production as an example of what crisis-driven innovation can achieve. The country is "now building over 4 million drones a year," Deptula noted, though he cautioned that building systems and stockpiling them isn't always the answer due to rapid technological obsolescence.

The general stressed that rebuilding production capacity takes time. "It takes time to rebuild that capacity. And quite frankly, I don't think we'll ever get back to the numbers or the capacity to build the kinds of numbers of systems that we were able to build in a short period of time that occurred during World War II."

His conclusion was stark: "What that means is you need to invest in capability and capacity during peacetime because you're not going to have time during wartime to catch up."

Balancing Innovation and Legacy Systems

Deptula addressed the challenge of maintaining both established defense contractors and encouraging new entrants to the market. "There's a balance between that approach and smaller companies that tend to be able to flex and adapt very, very rapidly in different ways than we've had in the past," he said.

He emphasized that technological advancement requires sustained investment over time. "That doesn't fall out of a tree, that takes years of development and understanding and history and proven concepts to build upon. So it's a balance of both innovation and established capability."

The general highlighted two key areas where the US has succeeded and struggled. "What we've done right is we have built a spectrum of systems that have capitalized on advanced technologies that give the United States a capability

advantage relative to any potential adversary," he stated.

However, he added: "What we've done wrong is we have not kept up with the capacity needs of our nation to deter adversaries that are growing around the world."

Congressional Dysfunction

Deptula directed sharp criticism at Congress for its budget processes, noting that "we've only passed four budgets on time in the last 50 years. That is atrocious."

He called for fundamental reforms, including term limits, arguing that without them, "Congresspeople and Senators are only going to vote in what allows them to get reelected. They're not going to necessarily vote in what's in the best interest of the nation's security."

The general also emphasized the importance of multi-year procurement authority, explaining that uncertainty discourages industrial base investment: "What is going to motivate companies to go out and take risk to invest on their own and their own money in systems that advance technologies if the Department of Defense is not going to buy the systems?"

He noted that the margins in defense are small compared to commercial sectors, and excessive regulations compound the problem. "Who wants to invest in defense, particularly with the small margins that are involved relative to the commercial space, the amount of rules and regulations that have to be followed," Deptula said.

A Sobering Prediction

Looking ahead, Deptula offered a grim assessment of potential consequences if current trends continue. "We're going to end up with a situation I'm afraid is only going to be realized when we lose the next major regional conflict. And then people are going to wonder, well, how did this happen?"

The interview, recorded on November 5 during a government shutdown, underscored ongoing tensions between defense requirements and fiscal constraints, with Deptula emphasizing the need for stable, predictable funding to maintain military readiness.