



## Achieving Peace Through Strength: A Sustainment Imperative

By

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Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth’s directive to achieve “[peace through strength](#)” inherently relies on a restored warrior ethos, a rebuilt military, and reestablished deterrence. However, sustainment challenges within the Air Force—including personnel shortfalls and aging infrastructure—threaten the execution of this mission. Addressing these challenges is vital for maintaining operational readiness and strategic deterrence against pacing threats, particularly posed by nations like China and Russia.


Informed by the works of Lieutenant General Tom D. Miller, particularly “[The Defense Sustainment Industrial Base](#)” and “[Capability, Capacity, and Risk in Sustainment of Air Force Weapon Systems](#),” it is clear that the challenges and strategies surrounding maintenance of Air Force weapon systems are multifaceted. The first article highlights the foundational elements necessary for a robust defense sustainment industrial base, emphasizing the need for a resilient infrastructure. The second publication further develops this analysis, delving into the evolving landscape of capability, capacity, and risk management in the context of sustaining advanced weapon systems. Collectively, these works offer critical insights and recommendations on optimizing the sustainment process, ensuring readiness and effectiveness in a changing security landscape.

This passage highlights a significant juxtaposition of key themes present in the Secretary of Defense’s goals and Gen. Miller’s examination of Air Force sustainment challenges. To navigate these challenges effectively, specific focus must be placed on three pivotal areas: restoring the warrior ethos, rebuilding the military, and reestablishing deterrence. In the effort to restore the warrior ethos, the military needs skilled personnel, modern facilities, and a sustainable defense industrial base. Workforce retention and a shortage of technical expertise undeniably impact operational readiness. According to the Secretary of Defense’s mandate, there is a pressing need to “revive the warrior ethos and restore trust in our military.”

Miller’s analysis reveals that the sustainment workforce is facing severe challenges such as an aging workforce, a lack of recruitment, and significant technical expertise gaps. [The Air Force Sustainment Center \(AFSC\)](#) is currently experiencing a 30 percent shortage in experienced depot maintenance personnel. This shortfall adversely affects the maintenance and throughput of mission-critical aircraft. A 2022 report by the [Government Accountability Office \(GAO\)](#) [reported](#) that workforce shortages at Air Logistics Complexes (ALCs) contribute to an average delay of 20 percent in aircraft depot maintenance cycles, diminishing operational readiness.

Transitioning from a counterterrorism focus to one that emphasizes great power competition necessitates a sustainment workforce capable of advanced manufacturing and software maintenance, but current training pipelines struggle to produce such expertise. The implications are stark; a degraded sustainment workforce directly undermines operational readiness, particularly in maintaining high-end platforms like the F-35, which are essential for effective deterrence.

In relation to rebuilding the military, the defense industrial base faces significant hurdles due to aging infrastructure, inefficient procurement processes, and inconsistent funding. Secretary Hegseth emphasizes the importance of this rebuilding process, stating the need to



match threats with capabilities. Gen. Miller's assessments indicate that the Air Force's sustainment infrastructure is outdated and that funding for depot modernization is inconsistent. The average age of Air Force maintenance depots exceeds 60 years, with several facilities dating back to World War II. Supply-chain vulnerabilities also arise. Significant dependence on a sole supplier for 67 percent of critical spare parts for legacy aircraft creates potential crises during conflicts. Moreover, extended procurement cycles often delay readiness enhancements, averaging 8 to 10 years from requirement to fielding for sustainment modernization projects. Thus, without rapid modernization of sustainment infrastructure and necessary acquisition reform, the Air Force will struggle to maintain aging fleets while simultaneously integrating essential next-generation capabilities for initiatives like joint all-domain command and control (JADC2) and agile combat employment (ACE).

Reestablishing deterrence requires a comprehensive assessment of readiness to ensure that sustainment capacity effectively aligns with the threats posed by nations such as China and Russia. As stated in the SECDEF mandates, deterrence must be reestablished through defense of the homeland and collaboration with allies. However, Miller's 2022 assessment points out a disconnect between current sustainment funding models and the operational requirements of deterrence in contested environments. For instance, from 2012 to 2022, the [readiness rates](#) for the USAF fighter fleet plummeted from 75 to 57 percent, with sustainment backlogs contributing significantly to non-mission-capable status. Only 40 percent of American sustainment infrastructure is currently forward-positioned in the Indo-Pacific, which is crucial for countering aggressive actions from adversaries.

To counter these challenges and bolster national defense strategy, courses of action should be implemented. First, revitalizing the sustainment workforce through expanded training and technological improvements is essential. According to projected outcomes, this could reduce depot maintenance delays by 15 to 20 percent within five years while raising mission-capable rates for advanced platforms.

Second, prioritizing infrastructure and acquisition reform will require streamlining procurement processes and integrating industry best practices. This reform could lead to a reduction in aircraft downtime and enhance rapid repair capabilities essential for operating within geographic regions such as the Indo-Pacific. Finally, adopting a risk-based resource-allocation strategy aligned with high-threat mission areas can significantly strengthen deterrence, ultimately raising mission-capable rates of critical platforms.

By aligning sustainment actions with the objectives of the *National Defense Strategy*, the Air Force can demonstrate improved deterrence capabilities, build enduring advantages, and modernize its force. An immediate investment in revitalizing the sustainment workforce, modernizing depot infrastructure, and aligning resources with operational needs is imperative. A reformative approach to sustainment is not merely an operational necessity; it constitutes a vital aspect of maintaining peace through strength. Without these necessary adjustments, the Air Force risks facing severe mission degradation in high-threat scenarios, ultimately jeopardizing national defense.

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