

# Military Readiness

---

## Executive Summary

As both China and Russia aggressively pursue military dominance, the global order teeters on the brink of major conflict. In stark terms, a 2024 [report](#) from the Commission on the National Defense Strategy, appointed by Congress, found that "the threats the United States faces are the most serious and most challenging the nation has encountered since 1945." The U.S. is now in a race to regain its military edge, with China having "largely negated the U.S. military advantage in the Western Pacific" and growing partnerships between China, Russia, and Iran heightening the risk of a multi-theater war.

And that was before Iran's most recent attack on Israel, which saw hundreds of missiles launched at Tel Aviv.

### How did we get here, and what can we do to restore America's military might?

This No Labels discussion guide will help you understand the basics of the U.S. military, the challenges we face, and the obstacles in the way.

## THE BASICS

---

### U.S. Military Structure and Spending

The U.S. military is made up of six branches: the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard and the new Space Force. Together, these branches have about [1.3 million](#) active-duty troops. The Army is the largest branch with 453,000 soldiers, while the Space Force is the smallest branch with fewer than 9,000 members called "guardians." There are an additional 767,000 people serving in the National Guard or as military reserves who can be deployed in an emergency or a war.

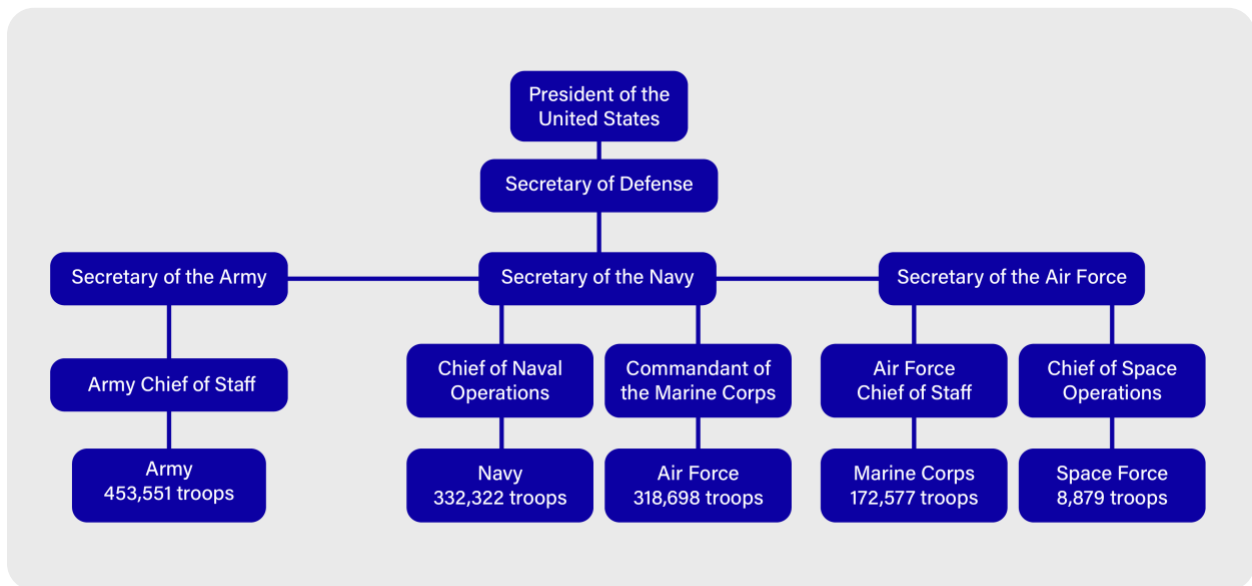
The Department of Defense (DoD) is the federal department that manages the U.S. military (except for the Coast Guard, which is under the Department of Homeland Security). Last year, DoD spent [\\$820.2 billion](#) on the armed forces – approximately 13 percent of the entire federal budget.

All branches ultimately [report](#) to the President of the United States, whom the Constitution deems "Commander-in-Chief" of the armed forces. The Secretary of Defense is second-in-command, overseeing all day-to-day operations of the DoD. This is a position appointed by

the President and confirmed by the Senate; it is currently held by Secretary Lloyd Austin. Below Secretary Austin are the Secretaries of the Army, Navy, and Air Force.

The President and the Secretaries are civilian positions, re-enforcing the American principle of [civilian control of the military](#). This adds democratic accountability to the armed forces, preserving the delicate balance of power in our government. Other countries have since adopted this principle: [NATO](#) requires its members to have civilian control of the military, for example.

Immediately below the Secretaries in the administrative chain of command are the top military personnel: the Army Chief of Staff, the Chief of Naval Operations, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, the Air Force Chief of Staff, and the Chief of Space Operations. These leaders sit on the [Joint Chiefs of Staff](#), an advisory board that counsels the President, the Secretary of Defense, and the National Security Council. The Joint Chiefs also coordinate between the civilian leaders and the military commandants.



---

## Current Deployments and Missions

Today, over 168,000 U.S. troops are stationed across [179 countries](#), with the largest deployments in Japan (53,000), Germany (35,000), and South Korea (24,000). But these numbers do not tell the full story: they do not include troops on classified missions, those on naval fleets, or anyone involved in “contingency operations,” which have recently included large activities such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and against ISIS.

Despite America's withdrawal from Afghanistan, there are currently [40,000 U.S. troops](#) in the Middle East with thousands more on the way to prepare for potential escalations by Iran and to help protect Israel. When Iran launched attacks on Israel in April and early October 2024, the U.S. Navy shot down many of the missiles and drones. Elsewhere in the region, U.S. troops are fighting the Houthi terrorists in Yemen and a resurgence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

All of this is in service of the U.S. military's overarching goals, which are laid out in a periodic report from top DoD officials called the [National Military Strategy](#). In the most recent report from 2022, they said the military's top priorities are:

1. **Defend the homeland**
2. **Peace through deterrence**
3. **Strengthen alliances**

To deter violence and build alliances, the U.S. has forged a number of [defensive pacts](#) since World War II. NATO's "Article 5" is perhaps the best known: an attack against one NATO country is considered an attack against all, so whichever country is attacked will have 31 allies by their side. The U.S. has similar individual agreements with Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand, Japan, and Korea, as well as the 21 Latin American countries who signed the Rio Treaty. One reason why the U.S. is supplying Ukraine and Taiwan is to prevent wars from spilling over into countries we have defensive pacts with, so that the U.S. is not dragged into a major war.

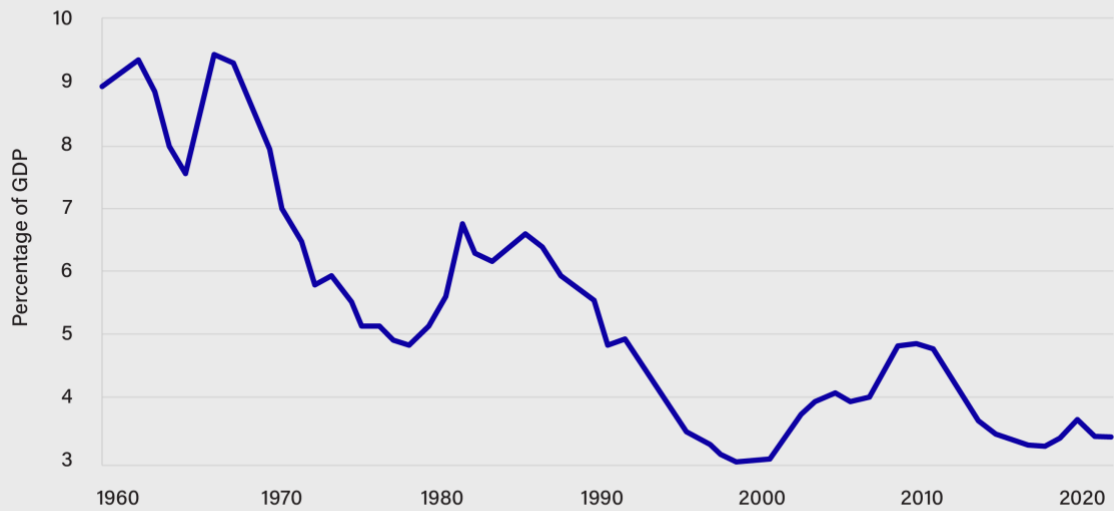
## **THE PROBLEMS**

---

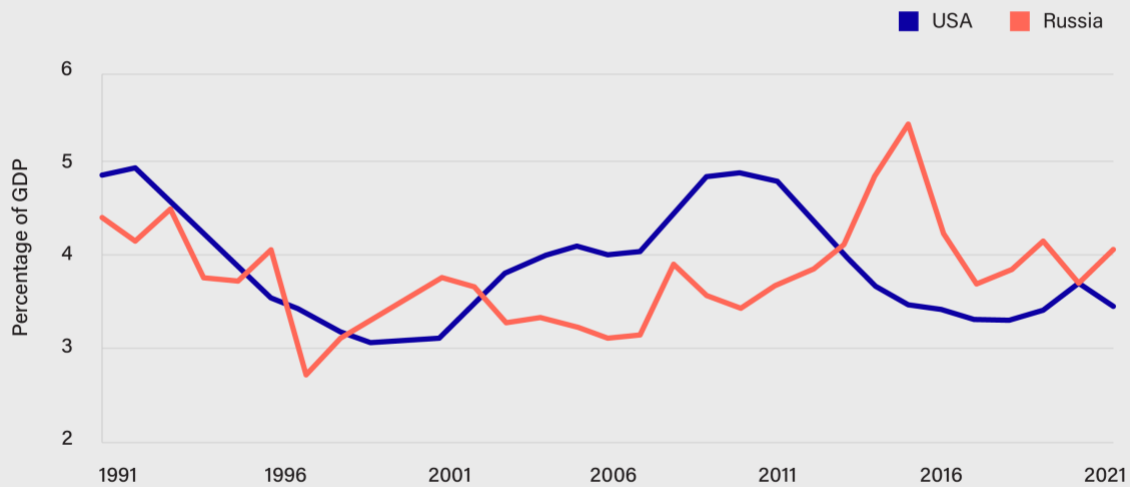
### **Recruiting and Readiness**

Compared to the size of our GDP (a broad measure of the economy), America's spending on the military is [less than half](#) of what it was 50 years ago:

## U.S. Military Spending as a Percentage of GDP



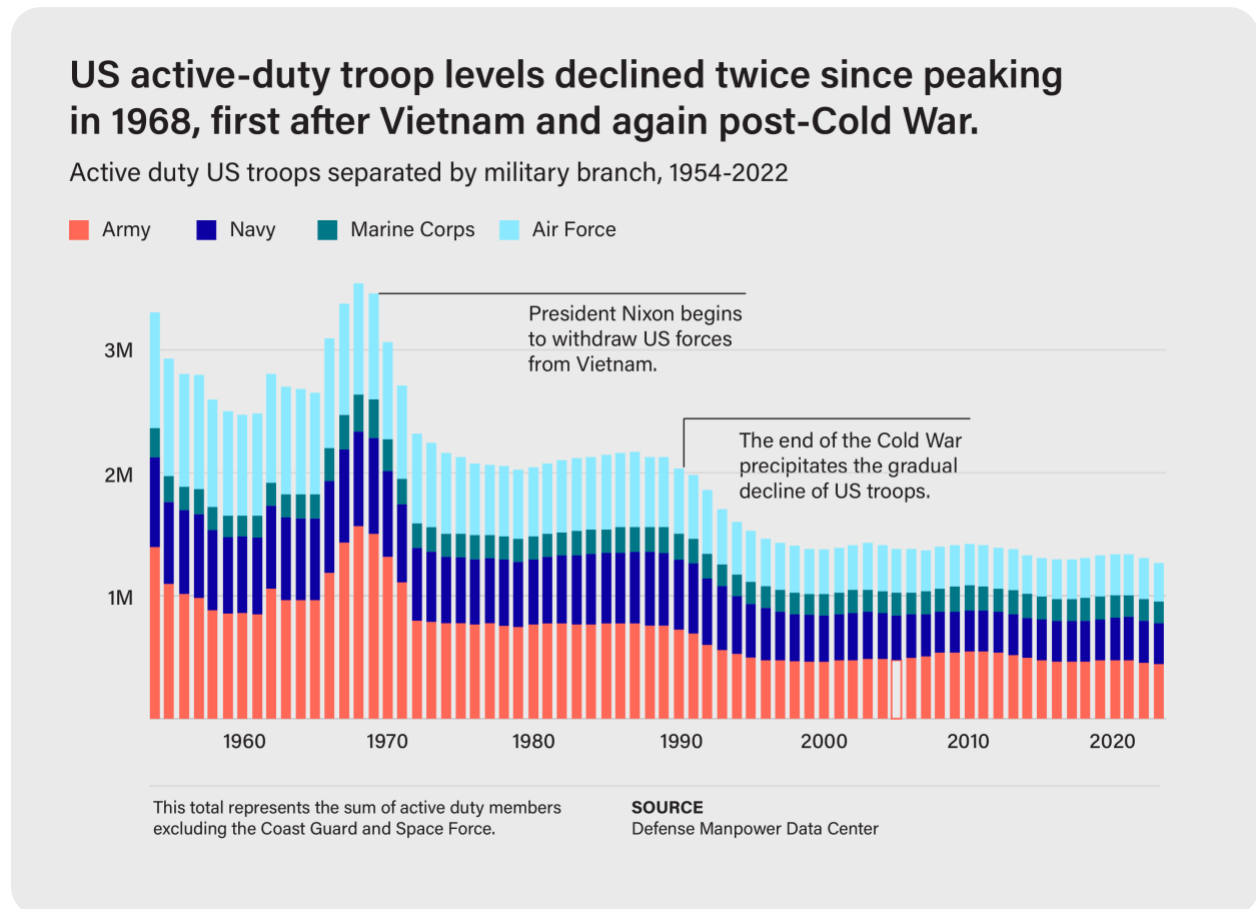
## Military Spending as a Percentage of GDP United States vs. Russia



By this metric, America spends more than our allies but less than our adversaries as a share of our economy. Russia was spending 4.1% of their entire GDP on the military in 2022; it is likely even more now considering their invasion of Ukraine. And while China reports less spending, U.S. military officials [believe](#) China is hiding or fudging some of their

numbers. Their figures do not include the coast guard or other paramilitary organizations that could be used in a war, and experts believe China is disguising military research and development as civilian expenditures. Plus, low wages and cheap goods mean a dollar spent in China goes further than it would in the U.S.

As a consequence of under-investment, there are now fewer active-duty troops today than at any point in the last 70 years:



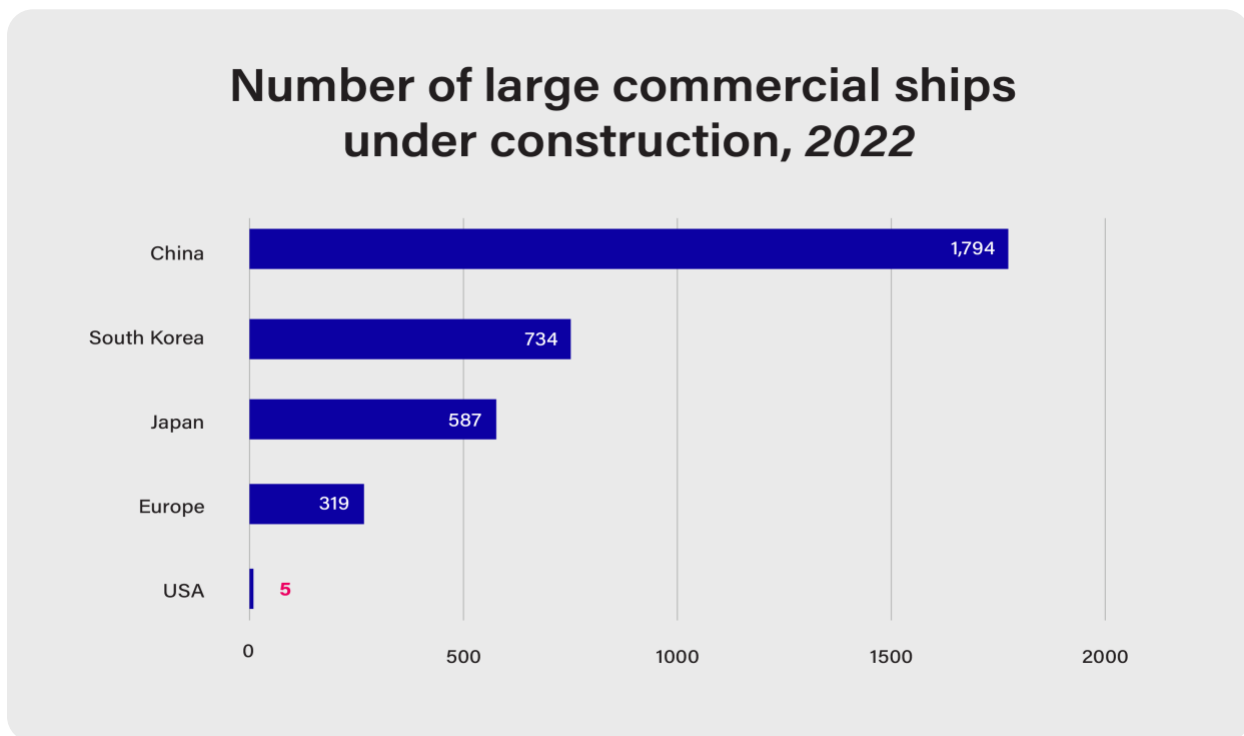
## USAFacts

It could get even worse. In 2023, the U.S. military missed its recruiting goals by [41,000 recruits](#), the largest shortfall in 50 years. The Army, for example, was supposed to enlist 65,000 new soldiers but only managed to get 50,000.

At the same time, America faces a challenge in building the supplies our military needs. The “defense industrial base” – the companies that manufacture weapons and military vehicles – is [shrinking](#): over 17,000 defense companies closed between 2017 and 2021.

Shipbuilding for the Navy is a particular vulnerability. In 2003, the Navy’s [fleet size](#) dropped below 300 ships for the first time since 1930. It has stayed below that threshold ever since, despite [repeated attempts](#) to boost the fleet to 355 ships. While an individual ship today is bigger and stronger than one in the past, the Navy is far short of its peak of more than 6,750 ships in 1945.

This is emblematic of a larger manufacturing problem that impacts the private sector as well. The U.S. barely builds any large commercial ships (cargo ships, oil tankers, cruise ships, etc.), either. In 2022, there were only [five](#) commercial ships under construction in American shipyards; at the same time, China had 1,794 in the works. South Korea, Japan, and Europe also had many more under construction than the U.S. As a result, our military must buy cargo ships and oil tankers built in China.



Part of the problem is that Congress’s flawed budget process makes it difficult for the military to plan and make essential long-term investments. When Congress fails to pass a budget by the end-of-year deadline, they must rely on a “continuing resolution” to keep the government open. A continuing resolution (CR) is a short-term funding bill that gives each department a similar amount of money as the previous year, even if needs have changed.

The Department of Defense has been under a CR for an [average](#) of four months per year since 2011. This makes procurement difficult: defense manufacturers often have to stop

their work until cash flows resume. This uncertainty drives up costs and can affect the retention of highly skilled workers, which further worsens delays. Furthermore, according to the [Government Accountability Office](#), every CR since 2010 has included provisions to prevent DoD from entering multi-year contracts that save money by buying in bulk. In 2024, a DoD spokesperson [said](#) “Continuously living under a [continuing resolution] is asking us to try and fight with one hand tied behind our back.”

No Labels’ most recent discussion guide on [The Budget Process](#) explores deeper the federal government’s budget flaws and what can be done to fix them. The current global military situation adds a sense of urgency to the reforms No Labels proposes: budget reform is not just about lowering the debt or keeping programs funded, it is a matter of national security.

## GLOBAL THREATS

---

### China, Russia, and Iran

America’s adversaries are taking advantage of our weaknesses.

China now has the [largest](#) army and navy in the world, and their fighter jets [trespassed](#) in Taiwan’s airspace more than a thousand times last year.

Russia has invaded two of its neighbors – Ukraine and Georgia – in recent years to prevent them from getting closer with NATO and the European Union, and Vladimir Putin has [repeatedly threatened](#) war against the U.S. and Europe for supporting Ukraine.

Iran’s [military](#) boasts 230,000 troops, and its [proxies](#) across the Middle East – including Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen – make up another 180–315,000 fighters. Iran has thousands of long-range [missiles](#), and they have enough uranium to build “several nuclear weapons” according to [U.S. intelligence](#).

## SOLUTIONS

---

### What Needs to Be Done

#### Key issues:

- Military spending is down, and recruitment is at a 50-year low
- Our defense manufacturing industry, especially Navy shipbuilding, is disappearing
- China, Russia, and Iran are getting stronger and more aggressive by the day

To fix these issues, No Labels is calling on Congress to take several critical steps:

**1. Increase oversight of defense spending**

The Pentagon has never passed an independent audit, and waste is rampant. Congress [must pass](#) the bipartisan “Audit the Pentagon Act of 2023” to ensure that every dollar is spent efficiently.

**2. Strengthen our alliances**

Working with NATO, Israel, Japan, and other allies is critical. Congress has already approved \$95 billion in aid to Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan this year, but more must be done. Problem Solver Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick introduced [bipartisan legislation](#) last year to give Congress more control over America’s membership in NATO and make it harder for the U.S. to leave the alliance.

**3. Reverse declining recruitment**

The U.S. needs a robust strategy to rebuild its forces, focusing on both attracting new recruits and retaining skilled personnel. The military must also adjust personnel requirements to account for new technologies that could require little or no human interaction.

**4. Authorize long-term defense investments**

Congress must approve long-term funding for defense manufacturers to prevent disruptions in military procurement and ensure our defense industrial base can keep pace with global threats. Congress must also allow the military branches to replace older, costly equipment with more modern technologies.

---

**Discussion Questions**

- What concerns you most about the current state of U.S. military readiness?
- How should Congress balance defense spending with other budgetary priorities?
- Do you think the U.S. is doing enough to strengthen alliances with NATO and other key partners?
- Would you support reforms to increase Pentagon oversight and eliminate wasteful spending?
- What can be done to fix the military's recruiting problems and get more people to join?



- How can we improve the production of military equipment so our troops have what they need?
- What changes should Congress make to ensure the military gets the funding it needs without delays?
- How can the U.S. balance having a strong military with avoiding conflicts through diplomacy?
- What would be the consequences if America fails to respond to today's global threats?
- How do both parties have to change to respond to today's global threats?