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OPINIONCOMMENTARY

The U.S. Isn't Ready to Face China on the Battlefield

The invasion of Ukraine has exacerbated critical deficiencies in America's defense industrial base.

. Jones

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Javelin anti-tank missiles at a Lockheed Martin facility in Troy, Ala., May 3.

PHOTO: NICHOLAS KAMM/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

The Biden administration is doubling down on its recognition of China as America's main competitor. The recently released National Security Strategy and the soon-to-be-released National Defense Strategy—Congress has already received a version of the latter—conclude that China poses the most significant threat to the U.S. What administration officials haven't said, however, is that the U.S. isn't fully prepared to fight a major war against China.

The war in Ukraine has exposed deficiencies in America's defense industrial base that could jeopardize the ability to fight a war with China. The capabilities for fighting are also essential for deterring China. Washington's assistance to Ukraine has depleted U.S. stocks of some weapons systems and munitions, such as Stinger surface-to-air missile systems, M777 howitzers, 155mm ammunition, and Javelin antitank missile systems.

These challenges highlight an even more serious concern: The U.S. defense industrial base is inadequately prepared for the wartime environment that now exists. It is operating in a peacetime environment. In a major regional conflict—such as a war with China in the Taiwan Strait—U.S. munitions needs likely would exceed Pentagon plans and stockpiles.

In nearly two dozen iterations of a Center for Strategic and International Studies war game that examined a U.S.-China war in the Taiwan Strait, the U.S. expended all its joint air-to-surface standoff missiles and long-range precision-guided antiship missiles within the first week of the conflict. These missiles are critical because of their ability to strike Chinese naval forces from outside Chinese defenses.

The U.S. is not the only country facing this challenge. In a recent war game involving U.S., U.K. and French forces, the U.K.'s Third Division exhausted national stockpiles of critical munitions in just over a week.

Solving these problems will take time.

Defense companies are generally unwilling to take financial risks without contracts in place, including multiyear contracts. While the U.S. Defense Department signs multiyear contracts for ships and airplanes, it generally does not sign multiyear contracts for munitions. This risk aversion is compounded if companies have to make additional capital investments, especially brick-and-mortar ones.

There are also workforce and supply-chain constraints on increased demand for weapons systems and munitions required for one or more major wars. Companies need to hire, train, and retain workers. Supply chains for the U.S. defense sector are also not as secure as they should be, with some businesses shutting down or moving supply chains overseas—sometimes to unfriendly countries.

In other cases, there aren't alternative sources for key weapons systems and munitions. The Javelin, for instance, relies on a rocket motor without a major secondary option. There are also significant vulnerabilities with some rare-earth metals, on which China has a near monopoly; other elements such as titanium and aluminum; semiconductors and other microelectronics.

Finally, time is a major constraint. It can take roughly two years to produce some types of missiles and systems, such as the Patriot Advanced Capability PAC-2/PAC-3 air- and missile-defense system, Tomahawk V, air-launched cruise missile, and long-range precision strike missile. These lead times are generally to deliver the first missiles—not the last ones. Filling inventories requires sustained multiyear investment. Brick-and-mortar investments for factories take even longer.

These challenges don't have quick or easy solutions. That means we have to begin now. One step is for the Pentagon to reassess total munition requirements for one or more major wars. This might include modeling the expenditure rates of critical guided munitions among land, naval and air forces in a major conflict at various levels of intensity.

The Pentagon also needs to focus on targeted investments in key munitions and weapons systems, such as long-range precision strike and integrated air and missile defenses. These investments should include signing multiyear contracts.

During World War II, U.S. and allied defense industrial production was essential to defeating both Germany and Japan. But it didn't happen overnight. If the U.S. is serious about competing with China, it needs to put its money where its mouth is. The defense industrial base is a critical place to start.

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