

***WINNING THE NEXT WAR:***



***OVERCOMING THE U.S. AIR FORCE'S  
CAPACITY, CAPABILITY, AND READINESS CRISIS***

*JV Venable (Colonel, USAF Ret.)  
Senior Fellow, Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies*

4 September 2025



# Overview

- *Measuring Viable Combat Airpower*
- *Cold War Predicate – 1987 U.S. vs Soviet Air Forces*
- *The Peace Dividend – A Banquet of Consequences*
- *The U.S. Air Force in 2025*
- *The Peoples Liberation Army Air Force*
- *The Airpower Differential*
- *Recommendations – Rebuild Now or Risk Defeat*

**Deterrence – Capability, Credibility, Willingness to Talk about it**



# *Measuring Viable Combat Power*

## Capacity

- Total Number of Operationally Relevant Aircraft

## Capability

- Generation (Technical/Maneuvering System Dominance)
- Age

## Readiness

- Aircraft Mission-Capable Rates
- Aircrew Proficiency
- Formal Evaluations
- Posture



---

# *Cold War Predicate*

## *U.S. Air Force vs Soviet Air Force*



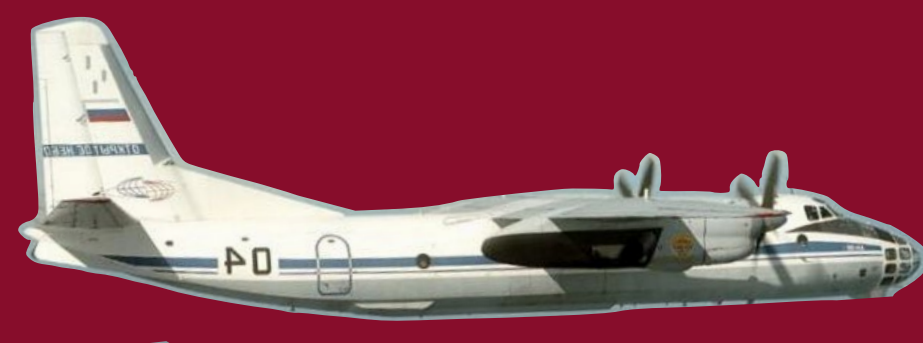
# *USSR Capacity 1987*



4,567 CC Fighters



413 CC Bombers



406 CC ISR Platforms



# USSR Capability 1987

## Average Age/Generation

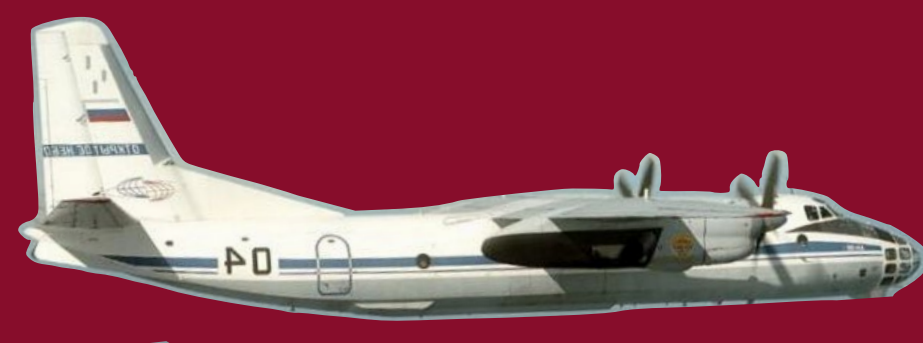


13%

14 Years



26 Years



12 Years



# USSR Readiness 1987

## Average Age/Generation



13%

**70%** - 3,196 of 4,567 Fighters



**70%** - 289 of 413 Bombers



**70%** - 284 of 406 ISR Platforms



# *USSR Readiness 1987*

## *Aircrew Training*

---

	<i>Fighter Pilots</i>	<i>Bomber Pilots</i>
<b>Actual Flying Hours/Year</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>Unk</b>



# *US Air Force Capacity 1987*

---



3,294 CC Fighters



325 CC Bombers



307 CC ISR Platforms



# US Air Force Capability 1987

## Average Age/Generation



51%

14 Years



21 Years



17 Years



# US Air Force Readiness 1987

## Combat Coded Aircraft Mission Capable Rates



81% - 2,668 of 3,294 Fighters



77% - 250 of 325 Bombers



72% - 221 of 307 ISR



# Readiness 1987

## Aircrew Training

### *Ready Aircrew Program (RAP)\**

	<i>Experienced Fighter Pilot</i>	<i>Inexperienced Fighter Pilot</i>	<i>Experienced Bomber Pilot</i>	<i>Inexperienced Bomber Pilot</i>
RAP Minimum Sorties/Month	8	9	3	4
Actual Sorties/Month	16	15	5	4
Actual Flying Hours/Year	220	206	250-415	220-415

\*In 1987, Sortie requirements were dictated by the service's Graduated Combat Capability (GCC) program.



# *Readiness 1987*

## *Exercises and Evaluations*

---

### *Operational Readiness Exercises (OREs)*

- *Wing Led and Evaluated*
- *Conducted Quarterly, Exercising:*
- *Wing Mobilization/Generation/Deployment, Employment*

### *Operational Readiness Inspections (ORIs)*

- *Implemented and Evaluated by Independent ORI Teams*
- *Conducted Every Two Years, Exercising:*
- *Wing Mobilization/Generation/Deployment, and Employment*

# Readiness 1987

## Air Force Posture

### PACAF

- 14 Fighter Sq
- 347 CC Fighters

### USAFE

- 29 Fighter Sq
- 702 CC Fighters

- 2,245 CC Fighters
- 325 CC Bombers



# ***Cold War Predicate – 1987***

## ***U.S. vs Soviet Air Forces***

	1987 Cold War U.S./Allies			1987 Cold War Soviet		
In-Theater Force	Fighters	Bombers	Recce	Fighters	Bombers	Reece
Theater Based	702	0	21	4,567	413	406
Allies	1,220	0	172			
Total combat coded	1,922	0	193	4,567	413	406
MC aircraft	1,423	0	136	3,197	289	284
Total sorties/day	7,113	0	643	15,985	578	1,421

# Readiness 1987

## Air Force Posture

### PACAF

- 14 Fighter Sq
- 347 CC Fighters

- 1,096 Deployable MC Fighters
- 211 Employable MC Bombers

### USAFE

- 29 Fighter Sq
- 702 MC Fighters

- 2,245 CC Fighters
- 325 CC Bombers



# Cold War Predicate – 1987

## U.S. vs Soviet Air Forces

	1987 Cold War U.S./Allies			1987 Cold War Soviet		
In-Theater Force	Fighters	Bombers	Recce	Fighters	Bombers	Reece
Theater Based	702	0	21	4,567	413	406
Allies	1,220	0	172			
Total combat coded	1,922	0	193	4,567	413	406
MC aircraft	1,423	0	136	3,197	289	284
Total sorties/day	7,113	0	643	15,985	578	1,421
+ U.S. Deployable Reserves						
Deployable U.S. CC fleet	1,096	228	179			
MC rate	0.79	0.77	0.74			
MC aircraft	866	175	132			
Total MC ATO jets 1	2,288	175	268			
Total ATO sorties/day	11,442	219	1,123	15,985	578	1,421



# *Overcoming Capacity Shortfall in 1987*

With Capability and Readiness

US Fighter Pilots  
200+ Hours/Year



Soviet Fighter Pilots  
120 Hours/Year



Technologically Superior Jets



# *Peace Dividend and Beyond*

## *A Banquet of Consequences*

### *Post Cold War Downsizing*

- *AF Procurement Budget Reduced by 50% (Army 36%/Navy 32%)*

### *9/11 2001 - GWOT*

- *Continual Air Force Deployment Cycle Intensifies*

### *2007 Obama Administration Domestic Focus/DoD Budget Cuts*

- *Flying Hour Program Becomes a Bill Payer*
- *F-22 Production Terminated at 187 Jets*
- *“Divest to Invest” Became a Debilitating Service Mantra*

### *Budget Control Act 2011 - Readiness Spiral Intensifiers*

### *SECAF Priorities – Unfunded 6,000 Mx Personnel Billets*



# Cold War Dividend and Beyond

## Fighter Pilot Training Sorties/Month

20.

Series 1

16.

Peer War Ready

12.

RAP  
Min CMR

8.

RAP

Basic Mission Capable

4.

0.

1987-1999

2014

2015

2016

2017

2018

2019

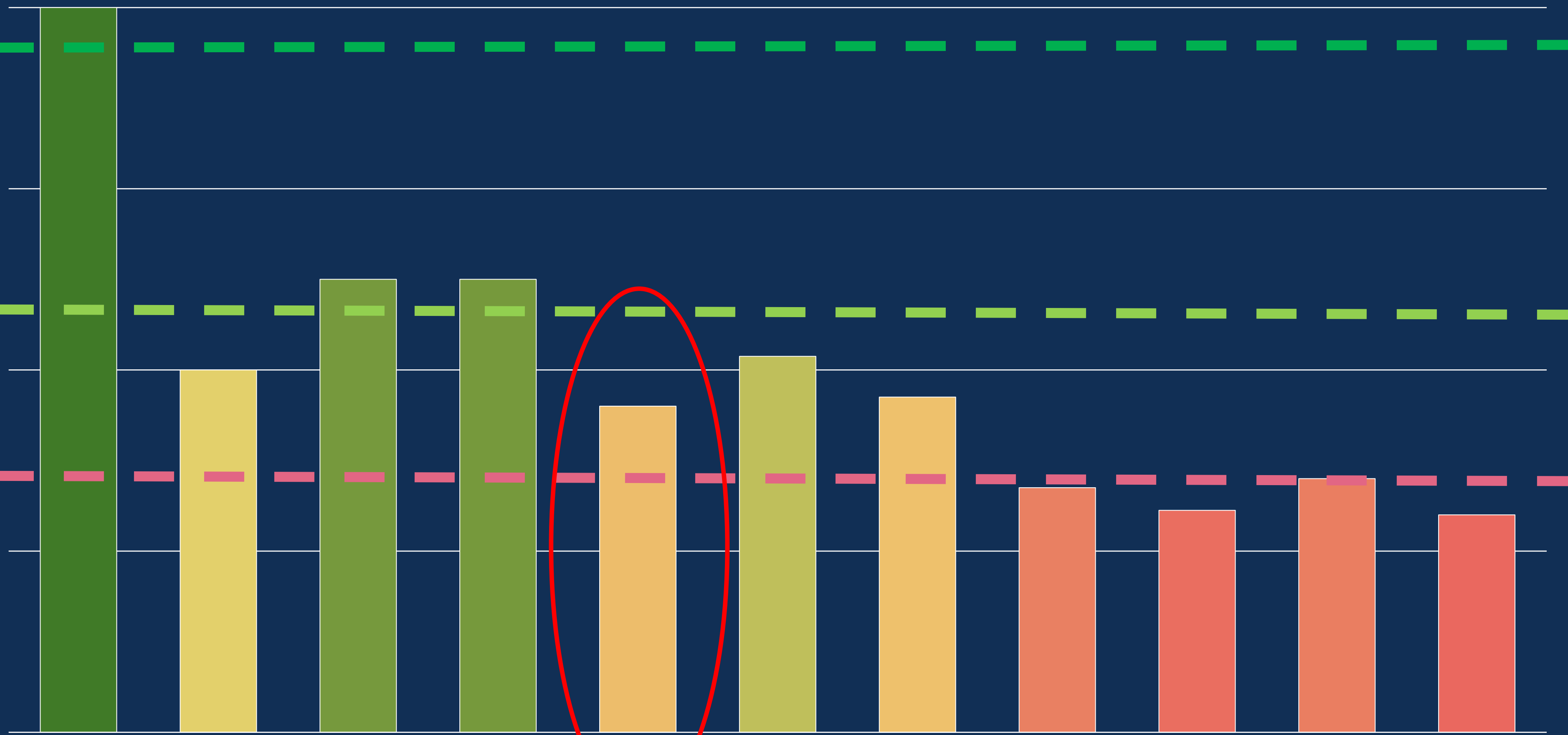
2020

2021

2022

1st Qtr 2023

20





# Cold War Dividend and Beyond

## 2017 CSAF Readiness Revelation

SORTS Score	Resource/Training Level Score	Mission Capability	Air Force Active Duty Units Meeting Capability Threshold
C1	90-100%	Can Execute all wartime missions	4 (of 36)
C2	70-89%	Can Execute most Wartime missions	Less than 18 of 36
C3	55-69%	Can Execute Portions of Wartime Mission	Up to 32 of 36
C4	0-54%	Needs more resources before it can execute its mission	Up to 32 of 36



# *US Air Force Capacity 2025*



750 CC Fighters



121 CC Bombers



292 CC ISR Platforms



# US Air Force Capability 2025

Generation/Average Age



24%

26 Years



17%

48 Years



19 Years



# *US Air Force Readiness 2025*

## Aircraft Mission Capable Rates



59% - 442 of 750 Fighters



52% - 63 of 121 Bombers



80% - 233 of 292 ISR Platforms



# Readiness 2023

## Aircrew Training

### *Ready Aircrew Program (RAP)\**

	<i>Fighter Pilot</i>	<i>Experienced Bomber Pilot</i>
RAP Minimum Sorties/Month	8	4
Actual Sorties/Month	5.3	2-3
Actual Flying Hours/Year	108	165

\*In 1987, Sortie requirements were dictated by the service's Graduated Combat Capability (GCC) program.



# *Readiness 2025*

## *Exercises and Evaluations*

---

### *Operational Readiness Exercises (OREs)*

- *Wing Led and Evaluated*
- *Conducted Quarterly, Exercising:*
- ***Squadron** Mobilization/Generation/Deployment, Employment*

### *Operational Readiness Inspections (ORIs)*

- ***Implemented and Evaluated by Wing Staff***
- *Conducted Every Two Years, Exercising:*
- ***Squadron** Mobilization/Generation/Deployment, and Employment*

# Readiness

## Air Force Posture

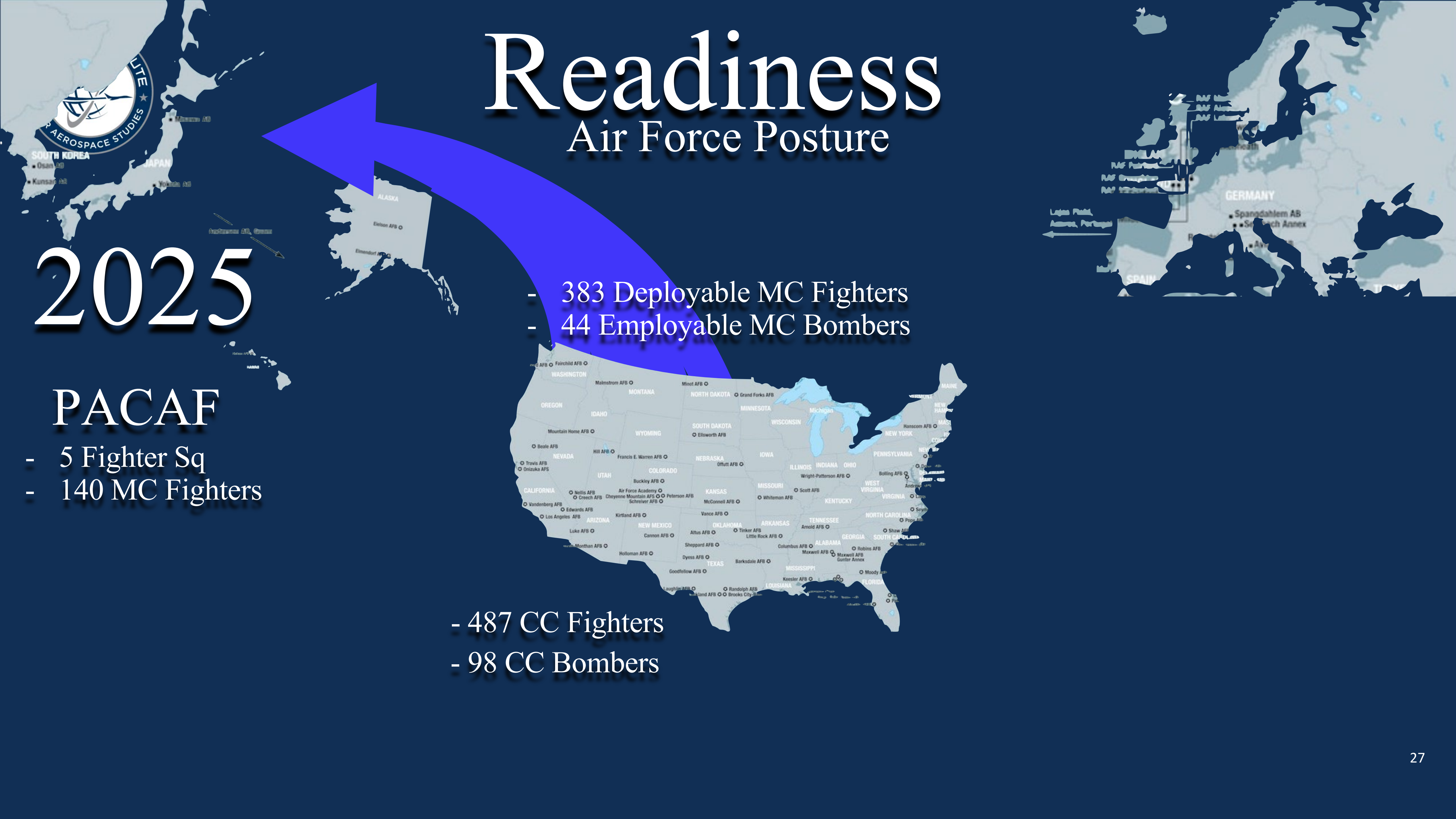
2025

PACAF

- 5 Fighter Sq
- 140 MC Fighters

- 383 Deployable MC Fighters
- 44 Employable MC Bombers

- 487 CC Fighters
- 98 CC Bombers





# *PLAAF Capacity 2025*

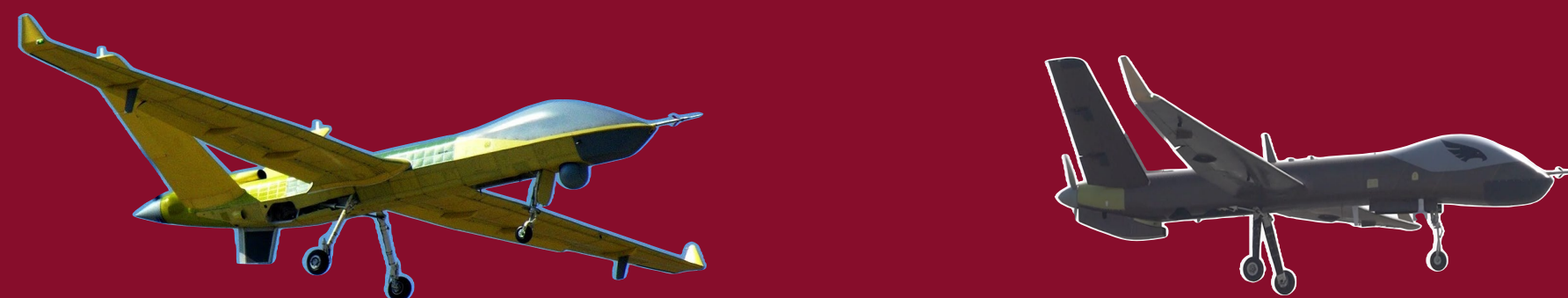
---



1,142 CC Fighters



197 CC Bombers



ISR Platforms Unassessable



# *PLAAF Capability 2025*

Generation/Average Age



20%

1,142 CC Fighters - 8.6 Years



197 CC Bombers - 35 Years



# *PLAAF Readiness 2025*

## Aircraft Mission Capable Rates





# *PLAAF Readiness 1987*

## *Aircrew Training*

	<i>Experienced Fighter Pilot</i>	<i>Experienced Bomber Pilot</i>
<b>Actual Sorties/Month</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>Unk</b>
<b>Actual Flying Hours/Year</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>Unk</b>

\*In 1987, Sortie requirements were dictated by the service's Graduated Combat Capability (GCC) program.



# 2025 Comparison of the US Air Force and PLAAF

	U.S./Allies 2nd Island Chain			PLAAF		
In-Theater Force	Fighters	Bombers	Recce	Fighters	Bombers	Reece
Theater based	140	0	2	1,142	197	*
Allies	114	0	0	0	0	*
Total combat coded	254	0	2	1,142	197	*
MC aircraft	162	0	1	700	130	*
Total sorties/day	564	0	2	3,997	648	*
+ U.S. Deployable Reserves						
Deployable U.S. CC fleet	383	98	290	0	0	0
MC rate	0.59	0.52	0.80	0	0	0
MC aircraft	226	51	233	0	0	0
Total MC ATO jets 1	226	51	237	700	130	*
Total ATO sorties/day	1,016	33	211	3,997	648	*

**Allied Sorties Over Taiwan Just 23% of PLAAF Capes**



# Capacity Shortfall in 2025

## US Fighter Pilots

108 Hours/Year



F-35A

Technological Edge

## Chinese Fighter Pilots

200 Hours/Year



J-20

Technologically Competitive  
Mass and Proximity

# Readiness

## Air Force Posture

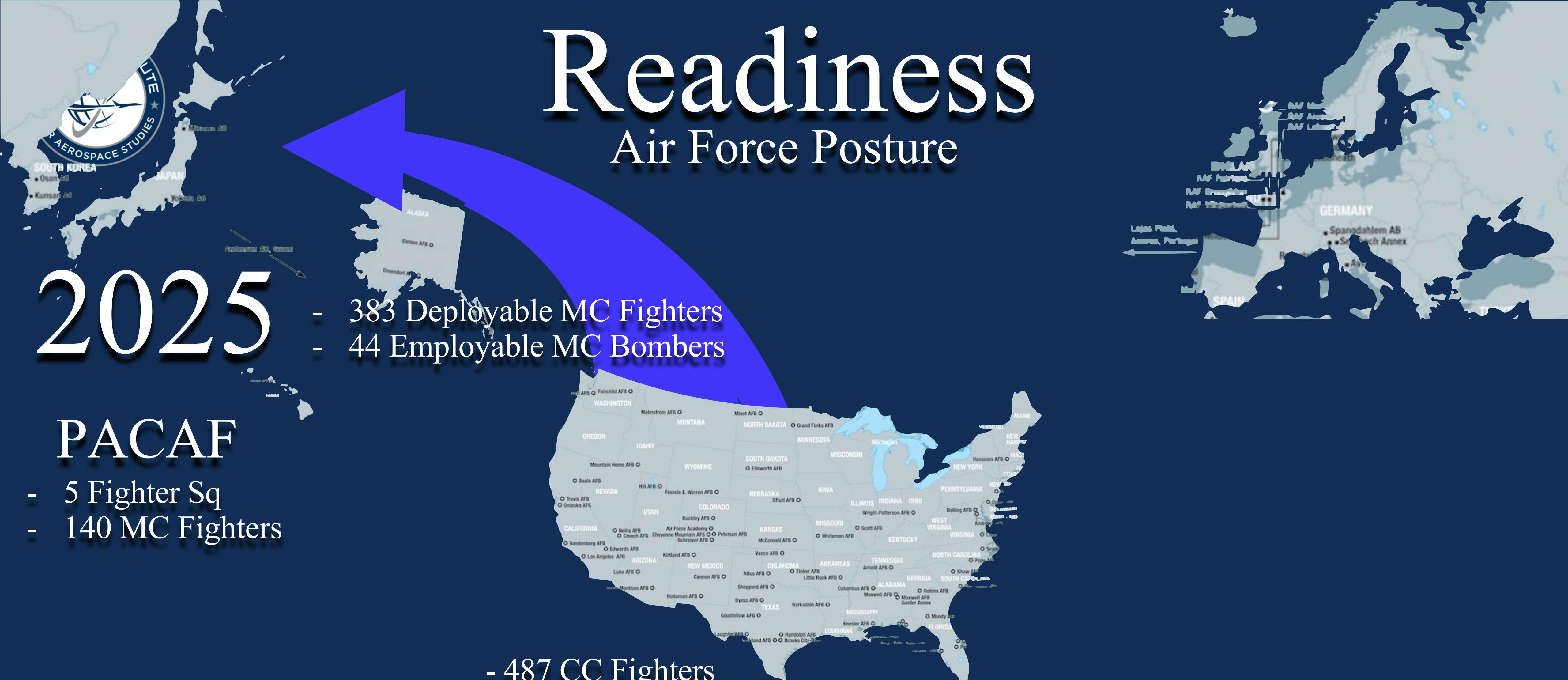
2025

- 383 Deployable MC Fighters
- 44 Employable MC Bombers

PACAF

- 5 Fighter Sq
- 140 MC Fighters

- 487 CC Fighters
- 98 CC Bombers



# Readiness

## Air Force Posture

2025

- 383 Deployable MC Fighters
- 44 Employable MC Bombers

PACAF

- 5 Fighter Sq
- 140 MC Fighters

1987

- 1,096 Deployable MC Fighters
- 211 Employable MC Bombers

USAFE

- 29 Fighter Sq
- 702 MC Fighters

- 487 CC Fighters
- 98 CC Bombers

- 2,245 CC Fighters
- 325 CC Bombers

Four Major Global Threats

One Major Global Threat



# *The Airpower Differential*

- Battle for the Atlantic
- D-Day (Operation Point Blank)
- The Six Day War (Israel vs Arab States 1967)
- Desert Storm
- World War I
- The War in Ukraine
- A War With China



# *Recommendations – Rebuild Now or Risk Defeat*

## Capacity and Capability

- Halt All Viable Combat Aircraft Retirements
- Increase Procurement: F-35 to 72, B-21 to 20 & F-15EX to 24 jets a year
- Maintain the CCA objectives

## Readiness

- Increase Flying Hours - 10% in 2027, 15% in 2028 and 20% in 2029
- Institute Flying Hour Contracts with Wings
- Increase/Sustain WSS Funding to 100% of Flying Hour Requirement
- Fully Fund Maintenance Personnel Billets
- Restore Independent Operational Readiness Inspection (ORI) Team(s)



“The United States Air Force is the smallest, oldest  
and least ready in its history.”

Lt Gen Dave Deptula, USAF (Ret)  
Dean of the Mitchell Institute