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Meeting the US Military's Manpower Challenges

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ABSTRACT: Concerns raised over the impact of changing demographics, domestic polarization, and the return of near-peer competition on US military manpower challenges are overstated. Drawing on open-source materials and interviews, this article discusses factors often neglected in conversations on this topic and provides leadership and policymakers with a scholarly overview of an important yet understudied issue facing the US armed forces.

Keywords: manpower, demographic change, domestic polarization, near-peer competition, US armed forces

The question of whether the manpower needs of the Armed Forces might be solved with volunteers has been debated since the draft was abolished and the all-volunteer force (AVF) introduced as US operations in Vietnam began winding down in the early 1970s. The Gates Commission, which examined the implications of moving to an all-volunteer force, raised concerns about ending the draft. Would a career military become increasingly isolated from the rest of US society? Would this isolation lead to a military unrepresentative of the US population in terms of class and race? Consequentially, would the broader public become less interested in US foreign and security affairs?¹ Moreover, Samuel Huntington famously argued that civilian control would be harder to assert if a military organization is not representative of its population.² Over the years, experts and pundits have addressed these concerns by arguing that reinstating the draft is the best way to meet future manpower needs.³ Doing so is unpopular and unlikely to happen.

Nevertheless, manpower remains a central issue for the US military. In 2018, the Army failed to meet its recruitment target for the first time since 2005, when the Iraq War was at its peak, and there was widespread talk of an emerging “manpower crisis” in the Army and the military at large. Unlike strategy and weapon systems

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1. President's Commission on an All-Volunteer Armed Force, *The Report of the President's Commission on an All-Volunteer Armed Force* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Office, 1970), <https://www.nixonfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/The-Report-Of-The-Presidents-Commission-On-An-All-Volunteer-Armed-Force.pdf>.

2. Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1957).

3. See Thomas E. Ricks, “Let's Draft Our Kids,” *New York Times*, July 9, 2012; and David Barno and Nora Bensahel, “Why We Still Need the Draft,” *War on the Rocks* (website), February 23, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/02/why-we-still-need-the-draft/>.

questions, manpower issues remain understudied in the scholarly community. This article examines the current manpower challenges in the US military within the context of changing demographics, increased domestic polarization, and a change in strategic focus to near-peer competition. It argues that the long-term manpower supply is not the crisis others have made it out to be despite the issues first raised in 2018 and the additional problems arising from an increasingly polarized public. The projected 2050 recruitment pool is sufficient to meet the Army's needs, and the Army should focus on modernization and investment in high-end technologies to meet the challenges posed by near-peer competition with China and Russia.

This article examines the main factors influencing recruitment and retention numbers, the changing demographic facing the US military, the significance of domestic polarization, and the manpower challenges caused by the strategic shift to near-peer competition. The final section summarizes the main findings.

Recruitment and Retention

Recruitment and retention are core concerns for staffing organizations, including militaries. Much of the discussion of manpower challenges facing the US military focuses on recruitment rather than retention. In the last few years, retention goals have mostly been met or exceeded, and retaining personnel is, therefore, usually considered less of an issue than recruitment—except for female retention, which is considerably lower than male retention.⁴

Applicant numbers increased dramatically following 9/11, and the 2008 economic recession further bolstered these numbers. Then, combat operations were gradually cut back in Iraq and then Afghanistan, reducing the number of recruits needed.⁵ In 2018, however, the Army failed to meet its recruitment target for the first time since 2005, when the Iraq War was at its peak, and there was widespread talk of an emerging “manpower crisis” in the Army.⁶ This failure, which likely resulted from the booming US economy at the time, provoked debate within the Army about future recruitment efforts. While all service branches reached their 2020 and 2021 targets, many believe this achievement was due to the weak

4. Ben Werner, “GAO: Women 28 Percent More Likely to Leave Military Service than Men,” *USNI News* (website), May 20, 2020, <https://news.usni.org/2020/05/20/gao-women-28-percent-more-likely-to-leave-military-service-than-men>.

5. Meghann Myers, “The Army Needs to Attract Gen Z’s Best and Brightest, So It’s Working on Its Sales Pitch,” *Army Times* (website), November 14, 2018, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2018/11/14/the-army-needs-to-attract-gen-zs-best-and-brightest-so-its-working-on-its-sales-pitch/>.

6. James Long, “It’s Not the Economy: Why the Army Missed Its Recruitment Goals and What to Do about It,” Modern War Institute at West Point (website), February 14, 2019, <https://mwi.usma.edu/not-economy-army-missed-recruitment-goals/>; and Dennis Laich, “Commentary: Recruiting’s Slippery Slope,” *Army Times* (website), July 27, 2018, <https://www.armytimes.com/opinion/commentary/2018/07/28/recruittings-slippery-slope/>.

COVID-19 afflicted economy.⁷ In the competitive 2022 job market, all service branches experienced difficulties meeting recruitment targets, raising alarms about the challenges of maintaining a large enough force.⁸

From the quality of applicants to the state of the economy, many factors impact recruitment numbers. First, scholars have observed a strong correlation between unemployment and higher recruitment and retention. In a strong economy, there are naturally more options for people considering leaving the armed forces.⁹ Hence, some analysts believe the uncertain post-COVID-19 economy may provide fertile ground for military recruiters.¹⁰ Second, the total pool the military recruits from is small. Moreover, awareness of what a military career entails among youth is limited; 50 percent of youth claim to “know little” about serving in the US military.¹¹ Studies have shown that approximately 136,000 individuals of the 33-million Americans between 17 and 24 meet the minimum enlistment standards *and* express a willingness to serve. According to 2017 Pentagon data, over 70 percent of Americans between 17 and 24 are ineligible to serve in the military—meaning 24 million individuals from the 33-million pool do not meet minimum enlistment requirements.¹² A 2018 Heritage Foundation report described these numbers as an “alarming situation which threatens the country’s fundamental national security.”¹³ The main reasons for ineligibility were lack of education, previous criminal records, and obesity.

Many eligible recruits are from military families, which opponents of the all-volunteer force feared would happen. They believe this tendency led to the

7. Guest Editorial, “US Military Needs Recruits,” *Day* (website), July 15, 2021, <https://www.theday.com/article/20210715/OP01/210719637>; and Ellie Kaufmann, “US Military Struggled to Attract National Guard and Reserve Troops but Met Targets for Full-time Recruits in 2021 Fiscal Year,” *CNN* (website), January 19, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/14/politics/military-recruitment-numbers-2021/index.html>.

8. Courtney Kube and Molly Boignon, “Every Branch of the Military Is Struggling to Make Its 2022 Recruiting Goals, Officials Say,” *NBC News* (website), June 27, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/every-branch-us-military-struggling-meet-2022-recruiting-goals-officials-rcna35078>; and Thomas Spoehr, “Military Recruiting Faces Its Biggest Challenges in Years,” May 13, 2022, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/commentary/military-recruiting-faces-its-biggest-challenge-year>.

9. John T. Warner, “The Effect of the Civilian Economy on Recruiting and Retention,” in *Report of the Eleventh Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation: Supporting Research Papers* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2012), [https://militarypay.defense.gov/Portals/3/Documents/Reports/11th_QRMC_Supporting_Research_Papers_\(932pp\)_Linked.pdf](https://militarypay.defense.gov/Portals/3/Documents/Reports/11th_QRMC_Supporting_Research_Papers_(932pp)_Linked.pdf).

10. Meghann Myers, “In Uncertain Economic Times, Some of the Services Are Upping Their Recruiting Goals,” *Military Times* (website), February 2, 2021, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2021/02/02/in-uncertain-economic-times-some-of-the-services-are-upping-their-recruiting-goals/>.

11. US Army Public Affairs, “Recruiting Facts and Figures,” US Army Recruiting Command (website), n.d., https://recruiting.army.mil/pao/facts_figures/.

12. Meghann Myers, “Top Recruiter: Just 136,000 Out of 33 Million Young Americans Would Join the Army,” *Army Times* (website), October 12, 2017, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2017/10/12/top-recruiter-just-136000-out-of-33-million-young-americans-would-join-the-army/>.

13. Thomas Spoehr and Bridget Handy, “The Looming National Security Crisis: Young Americans Unable to Serve in the Military,” Heritage Foundation (website), February 13, 2018, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/the-looming-national-security-crisis-young-americans-unable-serve-the-military>.

unintended creation of an American “warrior caste.”¹⁴ So-called “professional inheritance” is not exclusive to the military. Many occupations display similar tendencies, such as US police forces. However, 2015 Department of Defense data indicated that over 25 percent of new recruits have a parent who previously served in the military.¹⁵ In itself, professional inheritance is not a problem, but it could become one if the appearance of a “family business” impedes efforts to reach new demographics.

When assessing the current state of recruitment, military leadership should consider trends likely to impact the recruiting pool in the medium- to long-term future. First, there does not seem to be much cause for alarm regarding high-school completion rates, and there are few reasons to believe the situation will deteriorate further. The National Center for Education Statistics reports the graduation rate for public high-school students in 2018 was 85 percent—the highest rate since it was first measured in 2010–11.¹⁶ Although the federal government has a limited role in the education system, the Biden-Harris administration invests heavily in school districts with a higher proportion of low-income students, which should encourage the positive trend in high-school graduation rates.¹⁷

Second, the number of Americans with criminal records is high—as many as one in three US adults is estimated to have a criminal record.¹⁸ The service branches often grant waivers for minor offenses, and over time, the percentage of waivers has closely reflected recruitment needs.

Third, unlike education and criminal records, obesity is not improving, particularly in the southern United States, which provides a disproportionately large number of recruits.¹⁹ There are strategies, however, to help potential recruits deal with obesity. Local recruitment offices often run informal fitness camps to

14. Amy Schafer, “Generations of War: The Rise of the Warrior Caste and the All-Volunteer Force,” Center for a New American Security (website), May 8, 2017, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/generations-of-war>.

15. Kristy N. Kamarck, *Diversity, Inclusion, and Equal Opportunity in the Armed Services: Background and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report R44321 (Washington, DC: CRS, June 5, 2019), 58.

16. “Public High School Graduation Rates,” National Center for Education Statistics (website), May 2021, <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/coi/high-school-graduation-rates>.

17. Nicholas Tampio, “How Biden’s Request for More Education Funding Would Shift More Power to the Federal Government,” *Conversation* (website), April 26, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/how-bidens-request-for-more-education-funding-would-shift-more-power-to-the-federal-government-159489>.

18. Rebecca Vallas, Sharon Dietrich, and Beth Avery, “A Criminal Record Shouldn’t Be a Life Sentence to Poverty,” Center for American Progress (website), May 28, 2021, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/criminal-record-shouldnt-life-sentence-poverty-2/>.

19. Craig M. Hales, Margaret D. Carroll, Cheryl D. Fryar, and Cynthia L. Ogden, “Prevalence of Obesity and Severe Obesity among Adults: United States, 2017–2018,” National Center for Health Statistics Data Brief No. 1, National Center for Health Statistics (website), February 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db360.htm>.

get potential recruits in good enough physical shape to enlist.²⁰ Current recruiting and retention have challenges and problem areas, but there are many ways to work around these issues.

Shifting Demographics and Manpower Challenges

Although the military has found ways to address current challenges, the United States is experiencing rapid demographic shifts that will raise new issues. The US Census Bureau projects that the United States will become “minority white” around 2045, meaning the white population will constitute less than 50 percent of the total population.²¹ As a result, future military ranks will be more racially and ethnically diverse. In response to these projections, the Department of Defense implemented various diversity initiatives that have been debated for decades. Addressing diversity and inclusivity within the armed forces is “a strategic imperative,” with implications for the future ability to carry out grand strategy.²² A growing emphasis on diversity in all US sectors has also impacted the armed forces.

The military has made significant progress in diversifying its workforce overall, and the composition of all active-duty personnel closely reflects the ethnic/racial composition of the US population.²³ The senior officer corps, however, is still significantly less diverse than the US population. Moreover, the majority of recruits come from middle-class backgrounds, and are not disproportionately recruited among poor Americans, as observers critical of US foreign policy sometimes claim.²⁴ Women remain underrepresented at all levels (around 16 percent), and ethnic and racial minorities are underrepresented at higher ranks.²⁵ As of May 2018, Black Americans made up 16.8 percent of active-duty personnel, with a total share of 13.7 percent of the US resident

20. Yuki Noguchi, “Fighting Weight: How Military Recruiters Take on Obesity, Case by Case,” National Public Radio (website), May 17, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/05/17/994241471/fighting-weight-how-military-recruiters-take-on-obesity-case-by-case?t=1652777676533>.

21. William H. Frey, “The US Will Become ‘Minority White’ in 2045, Census Projects: Youthful Minorities Are the Engines of Future Growth,” Brookings Institution, *Avenue* (blog), March 14, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/03/14/the-us-will-become-minority-white-in-2045-census-projects/>. At the same time, what might happen is more Hispanics will start self-identifying as whites. See Ezra Klein, *Why We’re Polarized* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020), 106.

22. Department of Defense (DoD), *Department of Defense Board on Diversity and Inclusion Report: Recommendations to Improve Racial and Ethnic Diversity and Inclusion in the U.S. Military* (Washington, DC: DoD, December 18, 2020) 43, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Dec/18/2002554852/-1/-1/0/DOD-DIVERSITY-AND-INCLUSION-FINAL-BOARD-REPORT.PDF>.

23. Helene Cooper, “African-Americans Are Highly Visible in the Military, but Almost Invisible at the Top,” *New York Times* (website), May 20 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/25/us/politics/military-minorities-leadership.html>.

24. Andrea Asoni, Andrea Gilli, Mauro Gilli, and Tino Sanandaji, “A Mercenary Army of the Poor? Technological Change and the Demographic Composition of the Post-9/11 U.S. Military,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 45, no. 4 (January 30, 2020): 568–614, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1692660>.

25. Lori Robinson and Michael E. O’Hanlon, “Women Warriors: The Ongoing Story of Integrating and Diversifying the American Armed Forces,” Brookings (website), May 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/essay/women-warriors-the-ongoing-story-of-integrating-and-diversifying-the-armed-forces>.

population ages 18 to 64.²⁶ In the officer corps only, Black representation decreases to 8.1 percent. Within the top echelons of the armed forces (generals/flag officers), Black representation amounts to 8 percent. When examining the top 41 most senior commanders (four-star ranking) in 2021, two are Black, and one is a woman.²⁷ Under Joe Biden's presidency, the Department of Defense has prioritized diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives to ensure the military remains an attractive career choice for minorities.²⁸ When it comes to female retention, momentum is building in Congress to change how the military deals with sexual violence within the services. These potential changes may facilitate the retention and recruitment of women. Whether such efforts will yield tangible results remains to be seen.

Domestic Polarization and Manpower Challenges

A tendency toward polarization may be understood as foundational to the US political system, which combines a majoritarian electoral system with strong support for minority interests. To fully comprehend the challenges of a rapidly diversifying population, one needs to examine how the military has been impacted by increased domestic polarization in recent decades. Many Democratic voters moved to the left. In what a *Vox* journalist called “a Great Awakening,” White Democrats have changed their political preferences to the left over the last few years, especially in terms of social justice issues such as race.²⁹ Political scientist Lilliana Mason has shown how a variety of social, economic, religious, and racial cleavages have aligned themselves into a simple binary—Republican or Democrat. She argues Donald Trump's election may be understood as “the culmination of a long process by which the American electorate has become deeply divided along partisan lines.”³⁰ By the end of Trump's presidency, analysts at the Pew Research Center concluded “Americans have rarely been as polarized as they are today.”³¹

The controversies surrounding the military's diversity initiatives must be understood within the context of an increasingly polarized society. The most

26. Numbers are taken from Kamarck, *Diversity, Inclusion, and Equal Opportunity*.

27. Robert Burns and Lolita C. Baldor, “Top US General Urges Greater Racial Diversity in Military,” Associated Press (website), May 5, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/race-and-ethnicity-government-and-politics-1deffc0efb652716aa44dab756b614d1>.

28. Terri Moon Cronk, “Austin Speaks Out on Importance of Diversity in White House Roundtable,” DoD (website), February 10, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2930883/austin-speaks-out-on-importance-of-diversity-in-white-house-roundtable/>.

29. Matthew Yglesias, “The Great Awakening,” *Vox* (website), April 1, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/3/22/18259865/great-awakening-white-liberals-race-polling-trump-2020>.

30. Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 3.

31. Michael Dimock and Richard Wike, “America Is Exceptional in the Nature of Its Political Divide,” Pew Research Center (website), November 13, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/13/america-is-exceptional-in-the-nature-of-its-political-divide/>.

controversial parts of diversity initiatives are wholly or partly based on critical race theory (CRT).³² A slide with information on “white privilege,” a key concept within critical race theory, was included in a 2015 diversity training session at Fort Gordon, Georgia, drawing criticism. An Army spokesperson immediately backtracked and said that the slide’s content was not authorized.³³ The Trump administration banned federal diversity training based on CRT precepts in September 2020, and the service branches then canceled contracts with contractors who provided diversity training based on critical race theory.

Critical race theory, however, continued to gain traction in an increasingly polarized domestic setting. On his first day in office, Biden rescinded the ban, and Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III issued a memo instructing the armed forces to resume CRT-based diversity training.³⁴ Scattered reports of pushback started to appear shortly after the memo’s release. For instance, a high-profile incident erupted around the incorporation of critical race theory in workshops on equity, diversity, and inclusion conducted at the United States Military Academy. In April 2021, Congressman Mike Waltz (Florida Sixth Congressional District) sent a letter to Lieutenant General Darryl A. Williams, superintendent of the United States Military Academy, characterizing this training as “inflammatory” and “detrimental to the mission and morale of the U.S. Army.”³⁵ Some commentators and members of Congress have gone so far as to speak of a “woke military.”³⁶

The high degree of contestation surrounding military diversity initiatives presents challenges for recruitment efforts. The military needs to remain an attractive career choice for minorities since the US population is rapidly diversifying. Therefore, recruiters are actively attempting to attract minorities. Although recent data on political preference within the military is lacking, available research suggests conservatives are overrepresented within the military, particularly among officers.³⁷ Given the polarized public, one may suspect some

32. See John McWhorter, “John McWhorter on How Critical Race Theory Poorly Serves Its Intended Beneficiaries,” *Economist* (website), May 24, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2021/05/24/john-mcwhorter-on-how-critical-race-theory-poorly-serves-its-intended-beneficiaries>; and Jason Stanley “Jason Stanley on Critical Race Theory and Why It Matters,” *Economist* (website), May 24, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2021/05/24/jason-stanley-on-critical-race-theory-and-why-it-matters>.

33. Tom Vanden Brook, “Army Says Diversity Training Sent Wrong Signal,” *USA Today* (website), April 3, 2015, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/04/03/army-diversity-training/25250733/>.

34. Stephen Losey, “The Military Is Resuming the Diversity Training That Trump Banned,” *Military* (website), March 8, 2021, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/03/08/military-resuming-diversity-training-trump-banned.html>.

35. “Press Release: Waltz Requests Critical Race Theory Materials & Presentations from West Point,” Mike Waltz (website), April 8, 2021, <https://waltz.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=486>.

36. Konstantin Toropin, “Top Leaders Again Reject Claims That Military Is Becoming Too ‘Woke,’” *Military* (website), July 1, 2021, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/07/01/top-leaders-again-reject-claims-military-becoming-too-woke.html>.

37. Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, eds., *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001); and Leo Shane III, “Troops See Rising Political Tension in the Ranks, Poll Shows,” *Military Times* (website), October 17, 2018, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2018/10/17/troops-see-rising-political-tension-in-the-ranks-poll-shows/>.

officers are put off by too strident a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion, as seen in recent controversies surrounding diversity training based on critical race theory, which some observers believe could be harmful to military effectiveness.³⁸ Others are concerned diversity initiatives, to the extent that they involve informal quotas or “soft” affirmative-action programs, would undermine the military’s strict meritocratic system.³⁹ The military will need to balance the appeal to ethnic and racial minorities while not alienating rural Southern and more conservative Americans who have traditionally been its largest recruiting pool.

Near-Peer Competition

The shift from focusing on anti-terrorist operations and counterinsurgency (COIN) to near-peer competition with China and Russia raises new manpower challenges. As the *2018 National Defense Strategy* observed: “[i]nter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.”⁴⁰ This concern remains in the *2021 Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* and the *2022 National Defense Strategy*. China and Russia, however, are struggling with low birth rates that will affect their projected pool of recruits in 2050. In 2050, the United States will have an estimated total recruitment pool (ages 15 to 24) of 44 million people, compared to 138 million in China and 14.6 million in Russia.⁴¹ Given the total size of the US military has remained stable since the end of the Cold War, these numbers, while important to monitor carefully, should not cause concern.⁴²

Further, the strategic focus on near-peer competition with China calls for investment in expensive technologies rather than expanding conventional armies.⁴³ With Russia, though, strategists see the need for retaining large conventional armies. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, some observers argued for an increased permanent presence of US troops in Eastern Europe.⁴⁴ As Mark Cancian pointed out, the scenarios considered most likely in great-power conflict do not require large conventional ground forces. The Pacific

38. Kamarck, *Diversity, Inclusion, and Equal Opportunity*, 59–60; and Conner Bolanos and Thomas Spoehr, “Military Readiness Takes Back Seat to Wokeness at the Pentagon,” *Daily Signal* (website), June 21, 2022, <https://www.dailysignal.com/2022/06/21/military-readiness-takes-back-seat-to-wokeness-at-the-pentagon>.

39. Kamarck, *Diversity, Inclusion, and Equal Opportunity*, 59–60.

40. James N. Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: DoD, 2018), 1, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

41. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division, *World Population Prospects 2019: Demographic Profiles*, vol. 2 (New York: United Nations, 2019), https://population.un.org/wpp/publications/Files/WPP2019_Volume-II-Demographic-Profiles.pdf.

42. Mark F. Cancian, discussion with author, September 2021.

43. Mark F. Cancian, “U.S. Military Forces in FY 2020: Army,” Center for Strategic and International Studies (website), October 15, 2019, 4, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-military-forces-fy-2020-army>.

44. Michael E. O’Hanlon, “Strengthening the US and NATO Defense Postures in Europe after Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” Brookings (website), June 21, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/strengthening-the-us-and-nato-defense-postures-in-europe-after-russias-invasion-of-ukraine>.

theater consists mostly of oceans, and the geographical features involved in an attack on the Baltic countries would make it difficult to deploy large numbers of US ground forces.⁴⁵ In addition, many US strategists believe Europeans should assume more responsibility for their defense, freeing up American resources for Asia.

To pay for expensive technologies, many strategists favor a reduction in force size.⁴⁶ In light of the strategic focus on China, the different service branches are adopting their own approaches. Since the Navy and Air Force are likely to play the most important roles in a conflict with China, the Army is likely to shrink. The Army, however, would play a critical role in a conflict with Russia. At the same time, it is trying to develop capabilities that will also be useful in the Pacific theater, such as long-range anti-ship missiles.⁴⁷ Even when large numbers of ground combat troops are not needed, the Army has historically provided large numbers of troops to support other services.

The Air Force will likely cut its force to finance modernization efforts. The Marine Corps is currently restructuring its forces (Force Design 2030) for the Pacific theater.⁴⁸ It plans to shrink to pre-Iraq and pre-Afghanistan levels to pay for long-range precision weapons and unmanned aerial vehicles.⁴⁹ The Navy, for some time, has been perceived as an outlier because it plans to grow its force structure and increase its fleet considerably, though its earlier goal of reaching a 355-ship fleet collapsed due to staggering costs.⁵⁰ Although Russia's invasion of Ukraine may delay the long overdue pivot to Asia, the future focus on China will require modernization and investment in high-end technologies rather than large numbers of troops.

Analysts agree the biggest challenge for the armed forces in an age of near-peer competition is the *quality* rather than the quantity of servicemembers.⁵¹ Recruiting and retaining personnel with high-end technical and cyber skills, (since the cyber domain is projected to increase rapidly) must be a priority. The *2018 National Defense Strategy* highlights the necessity to modernize professional

45. Mark F. Cancian, "U.S. Military Forces in FY 2020: The Struggle to Align Forces with Strategy," Center for Strategic and International Studies (website), November 8, 2019, 17, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-military-forces-fy-2020-struggle-align-forces-strategy-1>.

46. Mark F. Cancian, "U.S. Military Forces in FY 2021: The Last Year of Growth?," Center for Strategic and International Studies (website), March 18, 2021, vii, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-military-forces-fy-2021-last-year-growth>.

47. Cancian, "Last Year of Growth?."

48. David Barno and Nora Bensahel, "A Striking New Vision for the Marines, and a Wakeup Call for the Other Services," War on the Rocks (website), October 1, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/10/a-striking-new-vision-for-the-marines-and-a-wakeup-call-for-the-other-services/>.

49. Cancian, "Last Year of Growth?," 62.

50. Cancian, "Last Year of Growth?," 38.

51. Michael E. O'Hanlon and James N. Miller, "Focusing on Quality over Quantity in the US Military Budget," Brookings 2020 Big Policy (website), December 2, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/policy2020/bigideas/focusing-on-quality-over-quantity-in-the-us-military-budget/>.

military education (PME), implement improved talent management, and better utilize civilian workforce expertise.⁵² In May 2020 the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued a vision and guidance for professional military education and talent management, noting “[t]he return of great power competition raises the stakes for readiness and for innovation.”⁵³ The document acknowledges the US military must prepare for facing adversaries, which may outnumber US forces and possess technologies equal to the United States, and provides a vision for a continuous PME and talent management system that produces leaders who “achieve intellectual overmatch against adversaries.”⁵⁴

Prioritizing talent management is essential from a manpower perspective since it makes the military a more attractive employer and helps recruitment and retention. For some years, a better talent management system has been discussed.⁵⁵ Essentially, the armed forces face the problem of moving from an industrial-era model for labor force management, where individuals are interchangeable, to a talent management model, where management must consider the particular skills and knowledge of each individual.⁵⁶ The Army has been using an online marketplace—the Army Talent Alignment Process (ATAP)—for several years. Officers may easily see available assignments for which they are qualified, rank-order their preferences, and upload their CVs. The system gives users recruiting and designing PME programs a better overview of needed skills.⁵⁷ While more work is needed to improve talent management, its higher prioritization may enhance personnel retention.

Conclusion

In 2018, analysts sounded the alarm when Army recruitment numbers were not met for the first time in over a decade. On closer inspection, it turned out 71 percent of American youth did not meet minimum enlistment standards due to obesity, previous criminal records, and lack of education. Recruitment and retention numbers for all services recovered in the following years, and the services met their fiscal year 2021 goals. In 2022, however, all service branches are

52. Mattis, *Summary of 2018 National Defense Strategy*, 1.

53. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), *Developing Today's Joint Officers for Tomorrow's Ways of War: The Joint Chiefs of Staff Vision and Guidance for Professional Military Education & Talent Management* (Washington, DC: JCS, May 1, 2020), 2, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/education/jcs_pme_tm_vision.pdf?ver=2020-05-15-102429-817.

54. JCS, *Developing Today's Joint Officers*.

55. See Brennan Randel, “The Army Has a Revolutionary New Talent Management System. Now We Have to Make It Work,” Modern War Institute at West Point (website), December 23, 2019, <https://mwi.usma.edu/army-revolutionary-new-talent-management-system-now-make-work/>.

56. Kate Kuzminski (Center for a New American Security), discussion with author, September 2021.

57. Duane A. Gamble, “Talent Management: Enabling Total Army Readiness,” US Army (website), February 16, 2021, https://www.army.mil/article/242952/talent_management_enabling_total_army_readiness.

struggling to meet recruitment targets, most likely due to the highly competitive civilian US job market.

While acknowledging that manpower supply is a serious concern, this article has argued that the notion of a “manpower crisis” needs to be nuanced. Although the relatively small recruitment pool of qualified youth remains a serious challenge for the armed forces, the underlying issues of obesity, previous criminal records, and lack of education may, to various degrees, be worked around. Nor do all of these issues trend in the wrong direction, particularly when it comes to the educational attainment of young Americans.

The Department of Defense has historically found ways to overcome manpower shortfalls.⁵⁸ First, the Armed forces have used more contractors at home and abroad. Contractors are less expensive and easier to recruit and terminate. The US military has adopted a practice employed by private companies for a long time—outsourcing certain activities that do not need a highly skilled workforce. Outsourcing is problematic since the practice makes the military dependent on a private sector driven by different incentives than the public sector. Second, reservists have been used more efficiently—and could be used even more efficiently if appropriately managed.

Third, the number of Department of Defense civilians has increased. Over time, the military has shifted active-duty personnel functions to other workforces to overcome recruitment and retention problems because active-duty servicemembers are expensive. Although much of the discussion focuses on recruitment, some analysts think retention is a more significant concern since it is easier for the military to mask the numbers. Some believe the most talented people tend to leave and continue their careers elsewhere.⁵⁹

Finally, in light of the Biden-Harris administration’s prevailing focus on China, there is pressure to prioritize technological modernization over a force structure increase. Russia’s war in Ukraine may delay but will not fundamentally change the long overdue pivot to Asia. The Marine Corps has led the way in this respect and adopted a future vision based on a conflict scenario in the South China Sea. Additionally, US leadership needs to focus on implementing better talent management systems within the military that bolster the quality rather than quantity of servicemembers. Although these actions are necessary for improvement, in comparison to Russia and China, the future US recruitment pool in the long-term looks good. While complacency about manpower challenges is never

58. Cancian, discussion with the author.

59. Anthony Cordesman, discussion with author, September 2021.

a virtue, there should be no significant problems recruiting a sufficiently large force in the medium- to long-term.

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