

## More Mission, Less Air Force

JUST last year, there was hope among senior Air Force officials that drawdowns in Iraq and Afghanistan would allow USAF to catch its breath and rebuild its force. That has not panned out. The Air Force finds itself as busy and globally engaged today as ever.

At the start of 2014, few predicted the rise of the ISIS extremists in Syria and Iraq; President Obama himself referred to ISIS as “JV jihadists.” Aircraft as diverse as the A-10 and F-22 have since gone to war to prevent ISIS fighters from sweeping almost unchecked through huge portions of the Middle East.

Meanwhile, during Fiscal 2014, the Air Force budget declined by 9 percent from the previous year.

More recently, USAF quickly responded with medical and disaster relief after devastating earthquakes in Nepal in April and May. “This was not what we originally came here to do,” said TSgt. Honorata Fernandez, a medical technician, in a release about emergency medical relief missions. “I wasn’t expecting another earthquake to hit after we got here.”

The missions to Kathmandu and against ISIS prove the expression that flexibility is the key to airpower. But the Air Force is in danger of losing its ability to provide the very flexibility that makes it such a responsive asset for the nation and world.

USAF is dealing with familiar problems. “With the oldest inventory in history, battered by 17 years of continuous combat, the Air Force’s ability to fulfill its missions is already being tested,” wrote then-Chief of Staff Gen. T. Michael Moseley in a 2007 white paper.

The Air Force is still at war, now for 24 straight years. All the while, the force has gotten smaller, the inventory older still, and budgets are down significantly from eight years ago. What has not decreased is demand for Air Force airpower.

“Would-be adversaries ... find maneuver space and sanctuary in dense urban areas, ungoverned hinterlands, and loosely regulated information and social networks,” Moseley wrote in words that also fit ISIS. “Their operations are difficult to constrain with traditional force-on-force approaches.”

And in a description applicable to China or Russia today, Moseley noted,

“ascendant powers—flush with new wealth and hungry for resources and status—are posturing to contest US superiority.”

Two Chiefs of Staff later, these challenges persist. Indeed, if they were easy to solve, they wouldn’t be problems in the first place. But with a shrinking force, if the nation is called to fight a new war, it will be forced to pull combat forces from frontline operations somewhere else, as USAF has little in reserve. In 2004, the Air Force had 376,000 Active

### **USAF cannot succeed in ever-expanding missions with fewer airmen, less equipment, older airplanes, and curtailed training.**

Duty airmen. By 2014, a force at war had declined 17 percent, losing 60,000 airmen. Plans called for the service to go down to 310,000 airmen.

“People are worn down,” said Gen. Larry O. Spencer, vice chief of staff, in May. “We were getting too small, so the Air Force set a new target for an Active Duty force of 317,000 airmen in 2016. This will allow the service to increase manning in priority areas such as cyber, maintenance, ISR, security forces, and nuclear operations.”

The service has also cut aircraft. Across the Total Force, USAF today is flying 550 fewer airplanes than a decade ago. While the Air Force was busy buying Reapers for use in low-threat conflicts, it shed more than 500 fighters and manned attack aircraft.

There is a fundamental disconnect between the service’s missions and the resources USAF is provided to perform those missions. Funding has not kept up with requirements, and this has compelled the Air Force to focus on the here-and-now.

The funding gap may get significantly worse. Adjusted for inflation, Budget Control Act funding for future years is still higher than the post-World War II average. In other words, the cuts may keep on coming.

For the Air Force, the drawdown was not preceded by a major modernization and the funding increases of the 2000s

went directly to war expenses. Further, USAF cannot anticipate a peace dividend or lower future requirements.

What is the way out of this jam? There are three obvious ways to begin to balance requirements and resources, but none of them are without risk or controversy.

First, the nation could withdraw from some commitments. For example, the nation is fighting a very cautious and constrained war against ISIS. The US could decide ISIS is just not worth it, and cease that fight.

A second route is to increase resources. The Budget Control Act sets arbitrary spending limits that disproportionately affect DOD. The nation could, and should, repeal the BCA and properly fund defense.

A third option is for Congress to grant DOD greater flexibility. Personnel costs take an ever-larger share of defense spending—52 percent and rising—so compensation reform would help. USAF has far too much basing infrastructure, so a new base closure round is needed. And lawmakers continue to micromanage USAF’s aircraft fleets, preventing the service from retiring lower-priority systems.

As Spencer noted, the US Air Force was the best in the world 10 years ago, and it is the best in the world today. The gap with other nations is closing however, and if the mismatch between missions and money is not fixed, the US will no longer have the Air Force it demands.

If nothing changes, what happens when requirements continue to outpace resources?

Look no further than to what happened during sequestration in 2013. Key training and development programs such as Red Flag and the Weapons School were shut down, eroding USAF’s skill advantage over the rest of the world. International cooperation was curtailed. Seventeen Air Force combat squadrons were grounded, 10 more went to a bare-bones readiness status, and readiness plummeted.

Two years later, the Air Force still does not have enough units ready for full-spectrum combat operations. This is the Air Force the nation is paying for. It does not have to be this way. ❖