

STARS AND STRIPES[®]

Volume 17 Edition 30

©SS 2025

U.S. EDITION

[stripes.com](https://www.stripes.com)

FRIDAY, JULY 4, 2025

Little but lethal

Army tests small drone that can drop grenades in preparation for 'next fight' **Page 2**

U.S. soldiers watch a Skydio X10D drone take flight at Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany, during the inaugural test of the drone's ability to drop M67 grenades.

LYDIA GORDON/Stars and Stripes

COVER STORY

Soldiers test killer drones with grenades

Army applies lessons from war in Ukraine for 'the next fight'

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

GRAFENWOEHR, Germany — The U.S. Army recently took a step toward integrating killer drones into its battlefield tactics after it dropped live grenades from the air at a training area in Germany.

Members of the 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment of the Tennessee Army National Guard on June 25 became the first conventional soldiers to detonate an M67 fragmentation grenade from a drone-borne dropper, Army officials on site said.

The plastic device, known as Audible, was attached to the undercarriage of a Skydio X10D drone that attacked a simulated vehicle convoy at the Grafenwoehr Training Area.

At Grafenwoehr, 1st Lt. David Baker checked Audible's dropper device. He then attached a hand grenade, making sure the pin was in the correct position to be pulled. He removed the safety clip and the drone was airborne.

Maj. Phillip Draper watched from a television screen in a nearby control tower as the drone flew toward three simulated stationary vehicles.

The falling grenade struck right next to the lead vehicle's passenger side.

"It was a successful test," Draper said. "Hopefully we can build on this and make it better and then get those results to the warfighter."

After that test, though, the Audible cracked in a hard landing and a 3D-printed version made by soldiers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade filled in with inert rounds for additional drone test flights.

The successes and failures each provide valuable data. Within a couple of hours of the test and crash-landing, the Combat Capabilities Development Command at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Md., had been notified and seven more devices were on the way.

"We're dropping a regular ordnance that every soldier would carry in combat," said civilian David Oeschger, deputy of operations for the 7th Army Training Command, which hosted the



PHOTOS BY LYDIA GORDON/Stars and Stripes

U.S. soldiers prepare to launch a Skydio X10D drone fixed with a dummy M67 grenade at Grafenwoehr Training Area in Germany on June 25.



Spc. Michael Fish, an unmanned aerial systems operator with 1st Squadron, 91st Cavalry Regiment, attaches a 3D-printed munitions dropper to a Skydio X10D drone at Grafenwoehr.

test. "We've learned well from the Ukrainians and the Russians on how we are going to use this system in the next fight."

Dropping grenades with drone-mounted devices like Audible will become a part of normal Army training within months, Oeschger said.

The U.S. Army, which trains Ukrainian soldiers at locations including Grafenwoehr, updated its fighting doctrine last year due to lessons learned in Ukraine. The service now seeks to constantly evolve and leverage mobility, speed, deception and technology.



Fish controls a Skydio X10D drone outfitted with an M67 dummy grenade.

The ability of small, off-the-shelf drones to carry munitions to strike personnel, armor and command posts has dramatically changed military strategy and tactics.

More tests are planned for the Audible, which was developed by the Maryland-based command.

This "really expands the arsenal, being able to go out and reach targets beyond the front line of troops and putting that at the lowest level," Baker said.

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MILITARY

Insights gained from Black Sea combat

Ukrainian operations against Russia shape Navy, NATO thinking

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — Ukraine's Black Sea operations against Russia are shaping U.S. Navy and NATO thinking on the future of drones, mines and missile tactics in global maritime warfare, one of the service's top leaders in Europe and Africa said.

The Navy is focusing on tools to deny opponents the ability to go on offense, Rear Adm. Michael Mattis, the commander of Task Force 66 and director of strategic effects for U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa, said in a recent interview.

Mattis said insights from the service's Black Sea Battle Lab apply to the Baltic and eastern Mediterranean seas. But they could just as easily relate to the Indo-Pacific, including the archipelago waterways near Japan, Taiwan and the northern Philippines — areas where China contests territory held by American partners and allies.

The Navy applied some of those lessons during the recent multinational U.S. 6th Fleet-led BALTOPS exercise, when it used surface drones to simulate attacks on 6th Fleet flagship USS Mount Whitney and the destroyer USS Paul Ignatius.

Service members also used underwater drones to identify sea mines, a concern in the Baltic due to potentially tens of thousands of underwater explosives left behind after two world wars.

The diving drones also would be useful in tracking and addressing suspected Russian activities, such as anchor dragging incidents that have targeted communication cables and other undersea infrastructure, Mattis said.

It "should have a very good deterrent effect and ensure that Russia understands that NATO is preparing and prepared to defend and deter here in the Baltic," he said.

The Black Sea combat also is teaching the Navy about how a nation like Ukraine, which had few ships and no blue-water presence, could devastate a technologically superior foe — and how to counter such attacks.



CHRISTINE MONTGOMERY/U.S. Navy

The British navy patrol vessel HMS Pursuer conducts operations in the Baltic Sea with an autonomous reconnaissance craft from Task Force 66 during the BALTOPS exercise on June 12.

Early on, Ukraine targeted Russian ports and moved on to attacking ships in the Black Sea, without much success in sinking them. They didn't have enough drones and lacked air, cyber and space support.

In early 2024, Ukraine had the drones and other needed capabilities, ultimately sinking three Russian ships from January to March of that year, according to the Navy.

Overall, Ukraine has disabled about 40% of the Russian Black Sea Fleet and denied its ships access to a sizable portion of the sea, Mattis said.

Russia responded to Ukrainian attacks with fighter jets, surveillance planes, aerial drones and other aircraft. That response was answered by Ukrainian air-to-air missiles launched from surface drones that took down a Russian helicopter in December and a fighter jet early in May.

The Black Sea battle demonstrates that there is no perfect technology, capability, tactic or procedure in the future of warfare. Rather, it's about innovating and training to stay ahead of the adversary and generate surprise, Mattis said.

The aim is to integrate cruise missiles, surface and aerial drones, deception mechanisms and other tools to

create "dilemmas where the adversary is only going to have so much defensive capability and something will get through to generate the effect," he said.

That won't work in places such as the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, however, because the large number of drones needed in such vast expanses wouldn't be efficient or cost-effective, Mattis cautioned.

Lessons gleaned "are not perfect translations of what we're going to need to use in the Pacific, but there's certainly insights of what the future fight with unmanned and robotic and autonomous systems might look like," Mattis said.

Also, the type of asymmetry created by Ukraine challenged the Navy's conventional capabilities in the recent battles with Iran-backed Houthi militants in the Red Sea, Mattis said.

The group began attacking commercial and military ships with drones and missiles in November 2023. In response, the U.S. formed Operation Prosperity Guardian in December 2023 to protect vessels in the Red Sea, ultimately launching an aggressive airstrike campaign in March aimed at stopping Houthi attacks.

In declaring a ceasefire on May 6, President Donald Trump said the

Houthis didn't want to fight anymore and had agreed to stop attacking ships in the vital waterway.

As of January, U.S. forces had fired more than 200 missiles costing millions of dollars each to defend against the militants' drone and missile attacks, Vice Adm. Brendan McLane, commander of Naval Surface Forces, said the same month.

But U.S. forces adapted and were able to detect Houthi assaults more quickly.

That allowed 5-inch guns and air defenses from U.S. aircraft carriers to address threats more efficiently and cost-effectively, Mattis said.

Further innovation could see cheaper Hellfire or VAMPIRE missiles used in defending against Houthi attacks. The U.S. has supported Ukraine with those counter-air capabilities against Russia, he added.

"We have a much more effective understanding of the environment because we've tuned our radars with software and because we've been able to build standoff from that," Mattis said. "That asymmetry is coming in line."

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MILITARY

DOD seeks \$961B budget for 'China fight'

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
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WASHINGTON — The Defense Department last week called for a \$961.6 billion budget for fiscal 2026 that gives troops a pay raise and reallocates \$30 billion in savings from cuts to the civilian workforce, Ukraine assistance and diversity and climate programs to higher priorities.

Pentagon officials touted the spending plan as a \$1 trillion investment oriented to counter China, but that amount combines a proposed base budget of \$848.3 billion with \$113.3 billion that the White House is seeking through a massive tax cut and spending bill yet to be passed by Congress.

The legislation provides \$150 billion for the Pentagon to spend in the next 10 years and is part of a politically divisive domestic policy mega-bill that Republi-

cans are hoping to enact over the objection of Democrats through a process called reconciliation.

Total spending on defense, including certain nuclear programs run by the Department of Energy, would total \$892 billion without the reconciliation bill. Fiscal 2026 begins Oct. 1.

A senior defense official speaking on condition of anonymity said the Pentagon's budget request calls for \$25 billion for President Donald Trump's "Golden Dome" missile defense shield, and \$5 billion for military operations on the U.S.-Mexico border, but both of those priorities are part of the pending reconciliation legislation.

The Senate Armed Services Committee released an updated version of the bill that slashes the \$3.3 billion that senators had initially allocated for the border mission to \$1 billion. House

Republicans had approved \$5 billion for border operations in their version of the legislation.

The Pentagon's budget request solidifies nearly \$30 billion in "efficiencies and reductions" identified by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency team, the senior defense official said.

A large portion of those cuts — \$13.8 billion — comes from reducing the civilian workforce and contracts and cutting travel costs. The remainder is from the elimination of "wasteful and unnecessary" spending on climate change and diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives and "misaligned" security assistance programs, the official said.

One of the affected programs is the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative,

which for years allowed Ukraine to purchase goods directly from the defense industry.

The official declined to explain the rationale for targeting the program but said Pentagon officials conducted a review of foreign assistance programs to determine which ones were "no longer aligned with this administration."

The \$30 billion in total cuts would instead be redirected into "high-priority programs increasing lethality and readiness," the official said.

A senior military official said the Pentagon plans to earmark the money for the Golden Dome and munitions investments as well as unaccompanied housing and other programs "taking care of our force."

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Army requesting funds for soldier pay, barracks

BY MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Army will increase pay for soldiers and spend more on barracks projects in its fiscal 2026 budget with a focus on initiatives that execute the service's new force restructuring plan.

"Our Army must transform now to a leaner, more lethal force by infusing technology, cutting obsolete systems and reducing overhead to defeat any adversary," Army Secretary Dan Driscoll said in recently released budget documents.

The proposed budget of \$197.4 billion is a 6.9% increase from the budget enacted for fiscal 2025, which ends Sept. 30. The Pentagon rolled out a budget of \$848.3 billion for the Pentagon's discretionary budget, with an additional \$113.3 billion proposed in a reconciliation bill now in Congress. The combination would bring the total defense budget to \$961.6 billion.

The Army's budget increase factors in \$5.4 billion from the reconciliation bill for items such as integrated air and missile defense, as well as munitions and its supply chain.

"We made some tough choices to

shed outdated systems and programs that no longer meet our demands for the modern battlefield," said a senior Army official who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The service has come under scrutiny on Capitol Hill for its lack of details in the plan. Driscoll recently told a sub-panel on the Senate Appropriations Committee that more information was forthcoming on the service's new force restructuring plan.

"What we hope you see in 10 days as we explain our changes and the recycling of this \$48 billion, this was not intended to simply be a cost-cutting exercise," Driscoll said June 18. "Every dollar is intended to help us innovate and move forward to face threats around the world."

The restructuring effort called the Army Transformation Initiative announced in May aims at eliminating outdated equipment and shrinking the staffs of unit and command headquarters. The plan was announced in part as a response to Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's orders for the military services to cut their budgets by 8% and eliminate dozens of general officer positions.



NICHOLAS GOODMAN/U.S. Army

Army Spc. Justice Adams conducts preventive maintenance on an M1A3 Abrams tank at Fort Cavazos, Texas, on Jan. 15.

The Army budget plans to divest \$4.9 billion in old equipment and reduce ineffective programs, as well as combining some large commands. Some of the cuts in the budget include the decades-old Humvee and the 2-year-old M10 Booker light tank-like armored vehicle.

The service will invest \$8.9 billion in developing warfighting capabilities. This includes \$1.25 billion for Future Long-Range Assault Aircraft and \$723.5 million for up to four prototypes of the next generation Abrams tanks.

Here are some Army priorities from the service's budget request for fiscal 2026:

■ \$76.6 billion in military personnel funding to account for increases in basic pay, housing and subsistence.

■ \$2.1 billion for barracks facilities sustainment, restoration and modernization.

■ \$1.9 billion in bonuses and incentive pay.

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MILITARY

Air Force focuses on new bomber, fighter

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

A new strategic stealth bomber, modernized ICBM missiles, and a sixth-generation fighter are President Donald Trump's top priorities in the Air Force budget proposal for fiscal 2026 released by the Pentagon on June 26.

The Air Force requests Congress spend \$209.6 billion — a 13.5% increase from fiscal 2025, which ends Sept. 30. It includes \$184.9 billion in the annual defense budget, supplemented with another \$24.9 billion in one-time spending included in legislation now before Congress.

To fund its priorities, the Air Force will reduce its planned purchase of F-35A Lightning II fighters by 24 planes.

The budget also calls for retiring all 162 of its remaining A-10 Thunderbolt II ground attack aircraft by the end of 2027 instead of the previously planned phase-out over three years.

The budget was rolled out last week during an appearance by top Air Force officials at a congressional hearing.

The budget calls for \$10.3 billion to fund the B-21 Raider, now undergoing final flight testing, which will become the Air Force's key manned bomber.

The budget also calls for modernization to keep B-52 Stratofortress bombers — originally designed in the 1940s — for launching long-range cruise missiles.



JUAN FEMATH/U.S. Air Force

A B-21 Raider lands during flight testing at Edwards Air Force Base, Calif., in September.

Plans call for the eventual retirement of two other Air Force bombers — the B-1 Lancer and B-2 Spirit.

The Air Force is requesting \$4.2 billion to continue replacing the LGM-30 Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile with the LGM-35A Sentinel ICBM.

Cutting F-35A Lightning II fighter purchases will allow the Air Force to shift \$3.5 billion in funds to develop the sixth-generation F-47 stealth fighter, announced in March by Trump. The development of small drones, which proved effective in attacks during the Russia-Ukraine war, will also see a boost in development funding.

The budget also calls for \$3.1 billion to continue buying 21 F-15EX Eagle II interceptors.

The money from the F-35A cuts will also go toward increased funding for the Long-Range Anti-Ship Missile and

an extended-range version of the Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile. The Air Force officials said that the weapons are crucial to maintain air superiority in the vast regions of the Indo-Pacific, where China is rapidly building its forces.

Another proposed budget victim is the Boeing E-7 Wedgetail surveillance aircraft. The Air Force cited cost overruns and questions about its survivability in combat zones.

The Air Force had planned to buy 26 of the aircraft to replace older E-3 AWACs aircraft, but said at the briefing it would shift its surveillance emphasis to space-based satellites.

The service also plans to spend \$39.8 billion on active-duty personnel, with an additional \$2.75 billion for the Air Force Reserve and \$5.6 billion for the Air National Guard.

Military construction for the Air

Force is budgeted at \$3.8 billion, with an additional \$634 million allocated for family housing — the largest expenditure slated for any branch of the armed services.

At the congressional hearing Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., praised the Air Force for the recent long-range bombing of Iranian nuclear facilities.

"At the end of the day, nobody in the world but the U.S. Air Force can do what you did," he said. "... America's ability to project power globally is unparalleled."

But McConnell said the "two bills, one budget" approach to the defense budget is gambling the future of key military weapons programs by betting Congress would approve the one-time funding that requires only a majority vote in each chamber.

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Space Force requests \$39.9B, with funds for 'Golden Dome'

BY ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

The Space Force released the largest funding request in its six-year history last week, asking Congress to approve \$39.9 billion to spend next year as the service takes on new mission requirements including a massive "Golden Dome" missile defense shield.

It is a 30% increase in spending from fiscal 2025, according to the Defense Department.

"To be successful in our expanding mission portfolio, we must be able to control the space domain — protecting our capabilities in space while denying an adversary the opportunity to use

space against us," Gen. Chance Saltzman, chief of space operations, told members of the Senate Committee on Appropriations' subpanel on defense.

Space Force accounts for about 3% of the \$961.6 billion requested for the Defense Department for fiscal 2026, which begins Oct. 1, according to a briefing with defense officials. With about 9,400 guardians, its personnel are less than 1% of all service members.

The Space Force budget includes \$26.1 billion in discretionary spending and \$13.8 billion for mandatory spending, according to the Air Force, which oversees the Space Force.

A defense official who spoke on condition of anonymity said the service requested funds that will go toward capabilities that support the Golden Dome, though the person declined to say how much.

The Golden Dome is budgeted for a \$25 billion initial investment within a separate spending proposal pending in Congress.

President Donald Trump campaigned on building the missile defense dome, which is envisioned as a ground- and space-based system that can detect and destroy missiles fired at the United States.

More details about Space Force's

role in the Golden Dome will be available once Gen. Michael Guetlein, vice chief of space operations, is approved by the Senate to run the program, according to defense officials.

Other increases in Space Force spending come from the expansion of satellites expected in the next three years. The service protects "dozens" of satellites that enable communications, missile warnings, civilian internet access, and GPS navigation and timing that are key to economic and financial infrastructure, Saltzman told senators.

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MILITARY

Navy plan calls for purchase of 19 ships

By CAITLYN BURCHETT
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Navy is relying on the combination of the annual defense budget and supplemental legislation to buy 19 new ships in 2026, an increase from the five ships purchased in 2025 and eight ships purchased in 2024, service officials said.

The purchase of the 19 ships is outlined in the sea service's budget documents released last week. The Navy's fiscal 2026 budget request for the sea service and the Marine Corps totals \$292.2 billion of which \$47.3 billion would go to building new ships. In comparison, the Navy spent \$28 billion in 2024 and \$39 billion in 2025 on shipbuilding.

The Navy's budget combines a \$248.9 billion base spending plan with an additional \$43.3 billion from a reconciliation bill moving through Congress that is expected to provide \$113.3 billion for the Defense Department's efforts to bolster shipbuilding, a layered missile defense shield and other defense priorities.

Overall, the Defense Department budget is expected to total \$961.6 billion across the Navy, Marine Corps, Army, Air Force and Space Force.

The Navy's base budget outlines the procurement of three warships, with the separate funds supporting the purchase of 16 additional ships.

"I think for all of us, it is helpful to

talk about these together because I think it does confuse the industry when we talk about what is in this bill or that bill. This is our [proposed budget]," a Navy official said.

Lawmakers in recent weeks have criticized Navy officials for trying to "game the system" by not including large shipbuilding investments in the base budget.

Navy Secretary John Phelan told lawmakers that the budget would reflect a commitment to bolstering the shipbuilding industry.

The Navy's base budget will seek one Columbia-class submarine, one Virginia-class submarine and one ocean surveillance ship.

An additional Virginia submarine and two surveillance ships would be purchased with reconciliation funds.

The reconciliation funds would also purchase two destroyers, one amphibious transport dock and one amphibious assault ship.

The service is also requesting \$1.96 billion to purchase nine new medium landing ships used to transport Marines in 2026, an aggressive change to a previous plan to purchase the ships one or two at a time in the next four years.

The ships are meant to carry small Marine Corps units armed with anti-ship or anti-air missiles.

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HEATHER WILBURN/Fleet Readiness Center East

A CH-53K King Stallion arrives for routine maintenance on April 4 at Marine Corps Air Station New River, N.C.

Marines seek billions for aircraft, new tech

By CAITLYN BURCHETT
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Marine Corps' 2026 budget proposes spending billions of dollars in upgrades for new aircraft, new technology and improved housing facilities, continuing the service's multiyear modernization effort.

The service's \$57.2 billion budget request is part of the Navy's \$292.2 billion overall proposed spending plan for fiscal 2026, which begins Oct. 1. The budget request reflects a more than 6% increase from the 2025 request.

"These efforts ensure that the Marine Corps is prepared to operate inside actively contested maritime spaces in support of fleet and joint force operations," according to the Navy budget documents released last week.

The request builds on the prior year by continuing to prioritize the Marines' Force Design 2030 program, a long-term plan for the service to modernize and adapt for future warfare environments.

The overall Navy budget proposes \$17.1 billion for 43 new aircraft, 28 of which will go to the Marine Corps. One dozen CH-53K heavy-lift helicopters and 15 F-35 fighter jets are planned for the Marines, according to the budget documents. Additionally, the service is asking for one utility aircraft used to transport passengers and cargo.

The proposed budget also includes

\$3.8 billion for amphibious combat vehicles, tactical vehicles and medium range intercept capability systems. The Navy further supported the needs of the Marine Corps by including a request to purchase nine new medium landing ships meant to transport Marines and their equipment in 2026, a change to a previous plan to purchase the ships one or two at a time in the next four years.

"Ongoing efforts to create and sustain warfighting advantage over the long term will ensure the fleet Marine force remains organized, trained and equipped to succeed in an ever-evolving operational environment, regardless of time or place, maintaining its role as America's premier expeditionary force-in-readiness, deterring adversaries and responding to crises globally," the budget document read.

The Marine Corps also plans to direct a substantial amount of funding to personnel issues, and the budget proposes a 3.8% raise for service members across the Navy and Marine Corps.

Another \$3.4 billion is requested for the restoration and modernization of facilities as part of the Marine Corps' Barracks 2030 initiative, a quality-of-life effort in which the service is inspecting every barracks facility in its inventory and hopes to bring them all up to standard by 2030. The funding includes \$495 million for the demolition of failing facilities.

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