

Larger, More Capable Navy Needed, SECDEF Says



Defense Secretary Mark Esper prepares to participate in a Brookings Institution webinar on May 4. Defense Department/Marvin Lynchard

ARLINGTON, Va. – The nation's top defense official said the U.S. armed forces need to shed some legacy forces for a more modern force, one that includes more modern naval forces.

“We need a larger, more capable Navy that can implement distributed lethality across the seven seas,” Defense Secretary Mark Esper said, speaking May 4 in a webcast hosted by the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank. “The Marines are doing some really innovative things with regard to how they are adjusting their force.”

Esper said the Defense Department needs 3% to 5% annual real growth year-over-year in the budget topline to increase readiness and support the National Defense Strategy.

Noting the probability of flat defense budgets and given the national debt and COVID-19 virus effects on the gross domestic product, Esper said he is worried that the “massive infusion of dollars into the economy ... may throw us off that course ... and lead to smaller defense budgets in the future.”

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He said that the Defense Department is at a critical juncture with the “Great Power Competition” against China and Russia.

“That means shedding the legacy force and moving to a more modern force,” Esper said, noting that a modern force would include completely revitalized strategic forces – including all three legs of the nuclear triad (bombers, intercontinental ballistic missiles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles) – “but also investing a lot of money into [artificial intelligence], into hypersonics, into our space capabilities, cyber, into directed energy.”

He said that the Air-Land Battle Concept has been replaced by the Joint Warfighting Concept “that will make sure we’re fighting in all domains as a coherent, cohesive joint force. We have new plans to reach out to our allies and partners and make sure they are well-integrated into all of our efforts.”

The secretary emphasized readiness concepts underway, including immediate-reaction forces and contingency-reaction forces as well as dynamic force employment and “moving toward operational deployments rather than permanently deployed forces.”

“That said, we do need that topline growth, and if we don’t [get it], we’re just going to have to accelerate that shedding of the legacy force and turning those dollars back into building the force we need in the future.”