

Testimony of Christian Brose
To the House Armed Services Committee
Subcommittee on Cyber, Information Technologies, and Innovation
The Future of War: Is the Pentagon Prepared to Deter and Defeat America's Adversaries

Chairman Gallagher, Ranking Member Khanna, Members of the Subcommittee: It is an honor to have the opportunity to testify before you today on the future of warfare.

Often, when this topic is discussed in U.S. defense circles, it is treated as a future problem, something coming in the 2030s or 2040s, something we have time to get ready for. This is wrong, dangerously wrong. If you take nothing else from my testimony today, let it be this: the future of warfare is here. It is a present problem. And America is largely being ambushed by it.

The U.S. military and our entire way of war are being disrupted, and this has been happening for the past 25 years. Our idea of national defense is largely based on the ability to project military power across the globe using small numbers of large, expensive, exquisite, heavily manned, and hard to replace vehicles, aircraft, ships, and other platforms—all of which depend for their effectiveness upon access to forward land and sea bases, logistics, communications, intelligence, space, the electromagnetic spectrum, and other critical enabling capabilities that we have largely assumed would operate safely, in sanctuary, beyond the operational reach of any adversary.

The Chinese Communist Party knows this. And it has been working diligently since the end of the Cold War to field massive arsenals of modern military capabilities to disrupt our ways and means of war—primarily long-range precision strike weapons and advanced sensors to target them. This is all focused on executing what Chinese doctrine refers to as “systems destruction warfare”—the ability not just to degrade and destroy America’s small numbers of large, expensive military things, but to render U.S. forces deaf, dumb, and blind and unable to fight.

At the same time, our defense enterprise is also being disrupted by new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, robotics, ubiquitous sensors, and low-cost access to space. Technologies such as these are changing the character of war. This, too, is happening now. In the recent Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, in the continued fighting in the Middle East, and in the ongoing war in Ukraine, we are seeing how low-cost robotic vehicles, AI-enabled loitering munitions, digital targeting systems, cyber weapons, persistent communications and surveillance satellites, and other advanced capabilities—especially when paired with large volumes of more traditional weapons—are transforming the modern battlefield. Dare I say, what China recently demonstrated it can do with thousands of dollars of plastic and helium is another example of how low-cost, commercially available technologies are altering the character of military competition.

Some lessons are emerging from these recent experiences: On the current and future battlefield, moving and communicating is highly contested. Hiding is nearly impossible. And once detected, surviving is just as difficult. This means that a correctly armed and ready defender can make life hell for an opponent seeking to project power and conduct offensive operations. This is bad news for more traditional militaries that have been optimized for decades, and at great cost, for long-distance power projection and a largely offensive way of war—militaries such as our own.

These dual disruptions of threat and technology have been underway for years, but for many reasons having largely to do with our own politics and bureaucracy, the United States has been too slow to respond. As a result, we are entering what the Chairman has called the “window of maximum danger,” a period over the coming years when the Chinese Communist Party, feeling undeterred by the United States military, may seek to fundamentally remake the status quo in the Asia-Pacific region through the unilateral use of military force, for instance by invading Taiwan. None of us wants that to happen, nor can we predict whether it will. All we can do is ensure that we are ready if, God forbid, deterrence fails and U.S. forces are called to maintain the peace.

This responsibility falls most heavily on you and your colleagues in the 118th Congress. In recent years, some positive steps have been taken to better prepare U.S. forces for the future of war, but many of them will not meaningfully materialize, if they ever do, until the next decade, which may be too late. At the same time, the plethora of new initiatives and organizations started in the past several years to advance defense “innovation” have largely become theater: They appear real, but they are not delivering the large-scale production of disruptive military capabilities. As a result, if U.S. forces were called to fight a major war in the coming years, they would largely do so with the same traditional systems they have had for decades. This is a recipe for disaster.

It does not have to be this way. Nothing you do in this Congress will make larger numbers of traditional ships, aircraft, and other platforms materialize over the next several years. And even if you could, it would not be the right answer: Spending ever more money on multibillion-dollar capabilities that China can overwhelm with multimillion-dollar weapons is a losing game.

It is possible, however, to generate an arsenal of alternative military capabilities that could be delivered to U.S. forces in large enough quantities within the next few years to make a decisive difference. Those decisions could all be taken by this Congress. The goal would be to rapidly field what I have referred to as a Moneyball Military—one that is achievable, affordable, and capable of winning. Such a military would be composed not of small quantities of large, exquisite, expensive things, but rather large quantities of smaller, lower-cost, more autonomous, and consumable things and, most importantly, the digital means of integrating them.

These kinds of alternative capabilities exist now or could be rapidly matured and fielded, in massive quantities, within the window of maximum danger. You could set this motion in the next two years. The goal would be more about defense than offense, more about countering power projection than projecting it ourselves. It would be to demonstrate that the United States, together with our allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific region, could do to a Chinese offensive what the Ukrainians, with our support, have thus far been able to do to their Russian invaders: Degrade and deny the ability of a great power to accomplish its objectives through the unilateral exercise of violence. This is all about deterrence, for the best way to prevent war is by demonstrating to our adversaries that they would be unlikely to achieve their goals through war.

Our current and future challenges are not beyond our ability to influence. If we make better decisions now, we can push this looming period of vulnerability further into the future. This will mostly be up to you. If these decisions are left even to the next Congress, they may be too late.

Let no one tell you this is impossible. We have the money: Low-cost alternative military capabilities could be purchased in large numbers for less than one percent of our annual defense budget. We also have the technology: We are not talking about photon torpedoes and cloaking devices here, but rather the large-scale fielding of existing capabilities, many of which have already been proven in combat. Nor do we need yet another round of “reform”: Thanks to the good work that Congress has done in recent years, the Department of Defense has the authority it needs to buy and field capabilities that can restore deterrence. The question is whether it will use those authorities to do different things, and whether Congress will demand it.

Ultimately, this comes down to one thing and one thing only—whether or not we are serious. For too long, I would submit that we have not been serious. We have said many of the right things but failed to do them. We have watched threats gather but been too slow to respond. We have watched as new technologies have demonstrated their potential to transform how militaries could be built and wars could be fought, but we have been unwilling to truly embrace them. Now the bill has come due. Our margin for error is gone. It is time to get serious. And if we do, we can be confident that, while the choices we make now and in the years to come will have an outsized impact on America’s security and prosperity, they will not be in vain, for we still have every opportunity and ability to prepare for the future of war, and in so doing, to prevent it.