

Lawmakers, Advisers Discuss How to Boost Weapons Production to Counter China

At a Dec. 5 congressional hearing, Rep. John Moolenaar warned the current U.S. arms output wouldn't deter or win a fight with China.

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The Virginia-class attack submarine Minnesota (SSN 783) under construction at Huntington Ingalls Newport News Shipbuilding in 2012. Joshua Karsten/U.S. Navy



By Ryan Morgan

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Lawmakers, arms industry executives, and policy analysts met on Capitol Hill on Dec. 5 to discuss the U.S. military's model for acquiring new weapons systems in an era of growing competition with powerful nation-state actors.

The House Select Committee on Strategic Competition with the Chinese Communist Party called the hearing to raise particular concerns about the U.S. military's ability to keep pace with the People's Republic of China (PRC).

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In his opening remarks, Committee Chairman John Moolenaar (R-Mich.) said he hoped to highlight “that our defense industrial base lacks the capacity to deter and win a fight with the PRC, is unable to



innovate quickly or at scale, and its supply chains are vulnerable to manipulation and economic coercion at the hands of the PRC.”



Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi (D-Ill.), the ranking member on the committee, noted a correlation between the United States getting



involved in armed conflicts and periods of declining U.S. arms industry output.

“The lesson of this history is this: We cannot invest in our defense industrial base only after a conflict begins,” Krishnamoorthi said. “Dictators notice when our industrial base weakens. That’s when bad things happen.”

Irreplaceable Weapons

Lawmakers, foreign policy think tanks, and military planners have repeatedly gamed out hypothetical armed confrontations with China, and consistently found such a fight to be a costly endeavor for the United States.

“Years of war games, including those overseen by this committee, suggest we would run out of critical munitions in less than one week of a war with China,” Chris Brose, the chief strategy officer for arms-maker Anduril Industries, told the committee.

Beyond hypothetical conflicts with China, Brose pointed to the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war as a sobering moment for the U.S. arms production industry, stating Ukraine had used up a decade’s worth of the United States’ weapons output in a matter of months fighting Russia.

Brose, whose company has emphasized the rapid development and production of autonomous weapons, said a defining flaw in the current U.S. government’s method for developing and fielding weapons has been its emphasis on “exquisite” systems that can’t quickly be produced and replaced.

“We designed military capabilities that were effectively irreplaceable, forces so exquisite, so allegedly capable and survivable that they would never need to be mass-produced. Our industrial base is struggling to produce these weapons and vehicles because they were never designed to be mass-producible,” Brose said.

Brose said another challenge is that because development of any U.S. weapons system can take several years, many attempts to modernize and replace existing weapons systems become complicated with expansive lists of requirements.

“Government feels compelled to add every conceivable requirement to them, lest they miss a generational chance to do so,” he wrote in a prepared [statement](#) for the committee.

Brose said the focus on building such high-end weapons systems has reached a point where the U.S. military is retiring old systems at a faster rate than the defense industry is able to replace them, causing the the military arsenal to shrink even as military planners have articulated goals to expand.

“Under no realistic budget projection will the Navy achieve its stated objective, 355 ships over the next 30 years? Meanwhile, China already has a battle fleet of 400 ships and counting,” he said.

Brose positioned his company as a model for how to improve arms production. He noted Anduril funds research and development for new weapons, independent of any government contracts. He also said Anduril is preparing to launch a new production facility that will be able to produce tens of thousands of autonomous vehicles and weapons annually.

Slowing Innovation

William Greenwalt, a defense policy analyst and nonresident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, said the weapons development method the United States used during World War II and the early parts of the Cold War is exemplary of the type of innovation the United States should return to. He noted this World War II-era model was time-constrained and based on a sense of urgency.

Greenwalt said the average time it took to decide to start a new military program has grown from about one year in the 1950s to about nine years currently, and that the average time for bringing a program from concept to initial operational capability has grown from about four years in the 1950s to between 10 and 20 years today.

“We will not win with this system,” Greenwalt said.

Greenwalt added that the World War II-era model for arms production also saw greater interplay between the the military production base and industries typically geared toward producing consumer products.

“The lesson that we’ve forgotten from this period is that the U.S. Defense industrial base is only fully capable when it is integrated with the underlying commercial industrial base, innovation and ideas flow both ways—from defense to commercial, and from commercial to

defense. Solving extremely difficult national security problems drives underlying innovation and economic advances,” he said.

Greenwalt said government could help incentivize arms industry innovation by granting tax credits for research and development. He said government could also use tax credits to incentivize commercial industrial companies to retool for defense production tasks.

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Ryan Morgan

Author

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