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Defense Primer: U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM)

U.S. Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM or STRATCOM) is a Department of Defense (DOD) functional (as opposed to geographic) combatant command (CCMD) responsible for deterring “strategic attack through a safe, secure, effective, and credible, global combat capability” and “when directed, is ready to prevail in conflict.” DOD’s 2024 Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States defined “strategic attack” as any nuclear attack or a “significant, high-consequence non-nuclear attack” with “strategic-level effect.”

In various parts of the DOD budget, Congress authorizes and appropriates funding for personnel, operations, and capabilities provided by the military services for STRATCOM to execute its mission. Such capabilities include the U.S. nuclear triad, which consists of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) on ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), and bomber aircraft capable of delivering nuclear weapons. The Senate has confirmed individuals appointed to the grade of general or admiral and assigned to the position of STRATCOM commander under 10 U.S.C. §601.

Background

STRATCOM history dates back to the U.S. Air Force’s Strategic Air Command (SAC), created in 1946. SAC was responsible for managing two of three legs of the nuclear triad—bombers and ICBMs—while the U.S. Navy was responsible for managing SSBNs. In the 1950s, the Navy began the deployment of Polaris SLBMs, prompting Navy and Air Force leaders to create a Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff (JSTPS). In 1961, the JSTPS produced the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP), a master plan that integrated the services’ plans and capabilities against a target set.

STRATCOM was originally created in 1992 when SAC was deactivated after the end of the Cold War. As part of this new arrangement that emphasized jointness and centralized command and control over U.S. strategic nuclear forces, an Air Force general or a Navy admiral alternated in leading the new command.

In 2002, DOD reorganized STRATCOM to incorporate the missions and responsibilities of what is now the U.S. Space Command (SPACECOM). In Section 1601 of the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 (NDAA; P.L. 115-232), Congress authorized SPACECOM’s reconstitution as a subordinate command under STRATCOM. In 2018, the Trump Administration established SPACECOM as a unified CCMD, independent

of STRATCOM. Between 2009 and 2017, U.S. Cyber Command (CYBERCOM) also operated as a subordinate command of STRATCOM until President Trump elevated CYBERCOM to unified CCMD status.

Mission

According to STRATCOM, the CCMD’s mission set involves U.S. “Strategic Deterrence, Nuclear Operations; Nuclear Command, Control, and Communications (NC3); Joint Electromagnetic Spectrum Operations; Global Strike; and Missile Threat Assessment.” STRATCOM also develops and exercises new operational concepts for the employment of capabilities in support of its mission set.

The STRATCOM commander develops operational and planning requirements for U.S. nuclear forces and the NC3 system. The commander also is an essential participant in U.S. nuclear command and control and a member of the Nuclear Weapons Council, a joint DOD-Department of Energy body that facilitates interagency coordination on nuclear weapons issues. The current STRATCOM Commander is U.S. Air Force General Anthony Cotton, who is in his third year of service in this role and has announced plans to retire.

Staffing and Organization

STRATCOM is headquartered at Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska. It is staffed by 41,000 uniformed and civilian personnel, of which 65% are civilians, according to General Cotton. The CCMD is organized into two functional component commands and three service component commands. The functional component commands are responsible for the daily execution of the STRATCOM mission. The service component commands are responsible for organizing, training, and equipping forces that are presented to the CCMD for use.

- The Joint Forces Air Component Command (JFACC), located at Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana, is a functional component responsible for delivering nuclear and conventional strikes and nonkinetic effects. Air Force Global Strike Command (AFGSC) is a service component responsible for providing bomber and ICBM forces, and NC3 elements. The Senate-confirmed AFGSC commander also serves (i.e., is “dual-hatted”) as the JFACC commander.
- The Joint Force Maritime Component Command (JFMCC), located at Naval Station Norfolk, Virginia, is a functional component responsible for executing maritime aspects of strategic deterrence. U.S. Fleet Forces Command (USFFC) is a service component that provides naval forces.

- According to STRATCOM, the 2022 Unified Command Plan (UCP) directed the transfer of the Joint Functional Component Command for Integrated Missile Defense (JFCC IMD) from STRATCOM to SPACECOM. The U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command (USASMDC) remains a service component to STRATCOM.
- The U.S. Marine Corps is represented by a Marine Liaison Element that advises the STRATCOM commander.

Budget

DOD budget documentation does not generally delineate total funding by CCMD. Forces and operations assigned to the commands are, in general, funded by the military departments. CCMD funding is, with certain exceptions, limited to Operation and Maintenance (O&M) accounts for headquarters and mission support activities. In the case of STRATCOM, in its FY2026 budget request, the Department of the Air Force requested \$593.5 million for STRATCOM headquarters operations, an increase from the FY2025 request of \$524.1 million. Other parts of the FY2026 DOD budget requested funding for nuclear and other capabilities operated at the service levels on behalf of STRATCOM (see “CRS Products” below).

Potential Issues for Congress

Nuclear Modernization

The United States is in the process of modernizing its nuclear forces. In March 2025 testimony, General Cotton stated that he was concerned about the potential impact of delays on the “credibility of the [U.S.] deterrent” and was active in mitigating the risks of transition from legacy platforms to new ones. In this regard, he indicated support for “efforts to reduce” the new ICBM’s “cost and schedule risk” and also stated that STRATCOM was “working on risk reduction options” that would “provide margin and SSBN operational readiness” in case the new SSBN was delayed. Congress may continue to authorize and appropriate funding as well as oversee executive branch efforts to modernize U.S. nuclear forces and the NC3 system.

Future Deterrence Requirements

The 2023 report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States argued that the United States will soon enter a world with two nuclear peers, Russia and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). DOD’s 2024 Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States stated that the United States “confronts multiple nuclear competitors” and required that planning account for “new deterrence challenges.” In March 2025 testimony, General Cotton discussed threats from Russia, the PRC, Iran, and North Korea, and the challenge posed by the growing “transactional relationships” between them.

General Cotton has also argued for a greater number of U.S. nuclear delivery vehicles, such as the B-21 bomber, to meet potential changes in requirements based on shifts in the

threat environment. He has also supported the nuclear sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) program, mandated by Congress in Section 1640 of the FY2024 NDAA (P.L. 118-31). Congress may continue to track evolving requirements for STRATCOM capabilities and the implications of such requirements for the evolution of U.S. nuclear modernization plans.

Implementation of Operational Plans

Some Members of Congress have expressed concerns about potential U.S. military organizational changes that could affect how the STRATCOM Commander implements the nuclear mission. In Section 1631 of the FY2025 NDAA (P.L. 118-159), Congress prohibited the use of funds for a potential Air Force reorganization that could take operational control of nuclear bombers away from AFGSC. In an answer to a Member question during a March 2025 hearing, General Cotton suggested that such a reorganization could complicate how he interacts with the U.S. Air Force in commanding nuclear forces and NC3.

Some Members of Congress have raised concerns over a reported Trump Administration proposal to restructure COCOMs in part by having the head of U.S. European Command (EUCOM) relinquish the position of NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), and the implications of this potential change for control of U.S. nuclear weapons that are part of the U.S. extended deterrence commitment to NATO. In March 2025 testimony, General Cotton suggested that the STRATCOM commander’s relationship with SACEUR is “important in the execution of operational plans” and would “change ... if that commander was not a U.S. commander.” The current SACEUR and Commander of U.S. European Command, U.S. Army General Christopher Cavoli, stated in April 2025 testimony that such a change would affect how nuclear plans are implemented. Congress may continue to monitor the evolution of this issue.

CRS Products

CRS In Focus IF10519, *Defense Primer: Strategic Nuclear Forces*
 CRS In Focus IF11697, *Defense Primer: Nuclear Command, Control, and Communications (NC3)*
 CRS In Focus IF12735, *U.S. Extended Deterrence and Regional Nuclear Capabilities*
 CRS In Focus IF11681, *Defense Primer: LGM-35A Sentinel Intercontinental Ballistic Missile*
 CRS In Focus IF12945, *U.S. Strategic Bombers*
 CRS Report R41129, *Navy Columbia (SSBN-826) Class Ballistic Missile Submarine Program: Background and Issues for Congress*
 CRS In Focus IF12084, *Nuclear-Armed Sea-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM-N)*

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