

China's military planners move faster than Pentagon bureaucrats, official says
Joel Gehrke - Washington Examiner

Chinese defense strategists are making “very creative” efforts to develop a military that can defeat American forces, and they are hastened by regime policymakers who move faster than Washington bureaucracies, according to the U.S. Air Force’s top civilian.



Patrick Semansky/AP

Secretary of the Air Force Frank Kendall III acknowledged that Chinese officials can make a decision in three days that might take Washington policymakers three years to evaluate.

“They do seem to be very creative and innovative,” Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall III told the Senate Armed Services Committee in a Tuesday hearing.

“They are studying how we fight, what we depend upon to project power, in particular, and designing systems that are intended to defeat us.”

China’s defense industry is “actually not faster in engineering” than its American rivals, he clarified, but their decision-making process moves more quickly than Congress and the Pentagon bureaucracy have matched.

“They have made decisions quickly,” Kendall continued in an exchange with Sen. Joni Ernst (R-IA).

“They can do a decision in three days, and we take three years to [make] a decision, and then get money. It takes us time to get money and start because of the process that we go through here.”

That dynamic puts additional pressure on U.S. officials tasked with modernizing the American military on a budget strained by inflation and past mistakes in the acquisition of major weapons systems, such as the F-22 Raptor — a vaunted stealth fighter jet fleet set to shrink by 33 warplanes under an Air Force budget proposal to retire the jets decades ahead of schedule.

“The ones we’re retiring are less capable, and they were the first ones we bought, and they didn’t have the full combat capability,” Kendall said before acknowledging that the Pentagon has “a similar problem” with its other fifth-generation fighter jet.

“We have a similar problem with the F-35, where a lot of our earlier aircraft need a lot of modifications.”

Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) attributed the problem to placing orders for the planes “before we had uncovered all the design deficiencies and capability shortfalls” uncovered by subsequent testing.

Kendall pointed to a mix of “acquisition malpractice,” the kind of premature purchasing that Warren protested, and the need for rapid roll-out of new systems.

“There's always this tension, senator, between people who are really, really anxious to get the new product ... and they don't want to wait another two or three years to have you finish the design and then put on it the upgrades that are coming,” he said.

“The other factor that comes into it is that almost all of our aircraft evolve over time to respond to the threat ... And part of this is that the threat keeps changing. And part of it is, the technology keeps changing.”

The acknowledged mistakes could set the stage for a high-stakes debate over how to proceed with the Pentagon’s mysterious “next-generation air dominance program,” a sixth-generation program that another Air Force official has described as a “truly magical” technological achievement.

“I just want to make a point about this program: It's largely classified, and that may be necessary, but it also means there's going to be even less oversight over this program,” Warren said.

“No public reports, less public scrutiny from [U.S. government watchdog agencies] and from the press. And this lack of transparency means the process that we've already seen fail us becomes an even riskier process.”

Warren’s proposal to expose at least some additional aspects of the program to public scrutiny drew sharp opposition from a senior Republican on the panel.

“Some of these are extremely sensitive programs, and if the Chinese or the Russians were to understand these capabilities, it would put all of our troops and our nation at graver risk in the future,” Sen. Tom Cotton (R-AR) responded.

“Senator Warren said that we need to have more opportunity for oversight and transparency, and she cited NGOs and the press. That’s what we’re here for, though ... It is this institution and in particular this committee to oversee these programs, and that’s exactly what we do, even if they are highly classified.”

Chinese officials, meanwhile, are racing to capitalize on their ability to watch the U.S. military in action over the last 30 years.

“They are — they are studying how we fight, what we depend upon to project power, in particular, and designing systems that are intended to defeat us,” Kendall told Sen. Ernst.

“They're looking at how we fight, what we depend upon, and they're being very creative about the things that they're buying to come after us.”