

FY2025 NDAA: Active Component End-Strength

October 21, 2024

Background

Under [10 U.S.C. §115\(f\)](#), Congress sets the maximum size of the active component of the Armed Forces each year, typically in the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). The active component comprises the full-time personnel of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and Space Force. Congress also appropriates funds for the pay and benefits of these personnel.

End-strength specifically refers to the actual number of personnel in a branch on the last day of the fiscal year (i.e., September 30). The proposed end-strength figures in FY2025 NDAA would be for September 30, 2025. Congress also periodically sets minimum end strength levels for the Armed Forces, that may be identical to or lower than the authorized end strength. While Congress authorizes minimum and maximum end-strengths, each military service manages its force, through recruiting and retention efforts, to achieve an actual end-strength.

Typically, this actual end-strength falls within the congressionally authorized minimum and maximum end-strengths. However, there are circumstances in which the actual end-strength may fall outside the authorized range. For example, under [10 U.S.C. §115\(c\)](#), the Secretary of Defense may increase the end-strength of any of the services above the authorized end-strength by up to two percent. Recruiting and retention shortfalls may cause one or more of the services to fall below their minimum authorized strength.

The Secretary of Defense is required by law ([10 U.S.C. §113a\(b\)\(2\)](#)) to submit end-strength requests for all branches of the active component in an annual request to Congress. Congress is not bound by these requests; since FY2009, Congress has not authorized an end-strength that differed from the DoD request by more than 7%. Authorized end-strengths have differed from the Secretary of Defense's requests by an average of 0.8% over this period.

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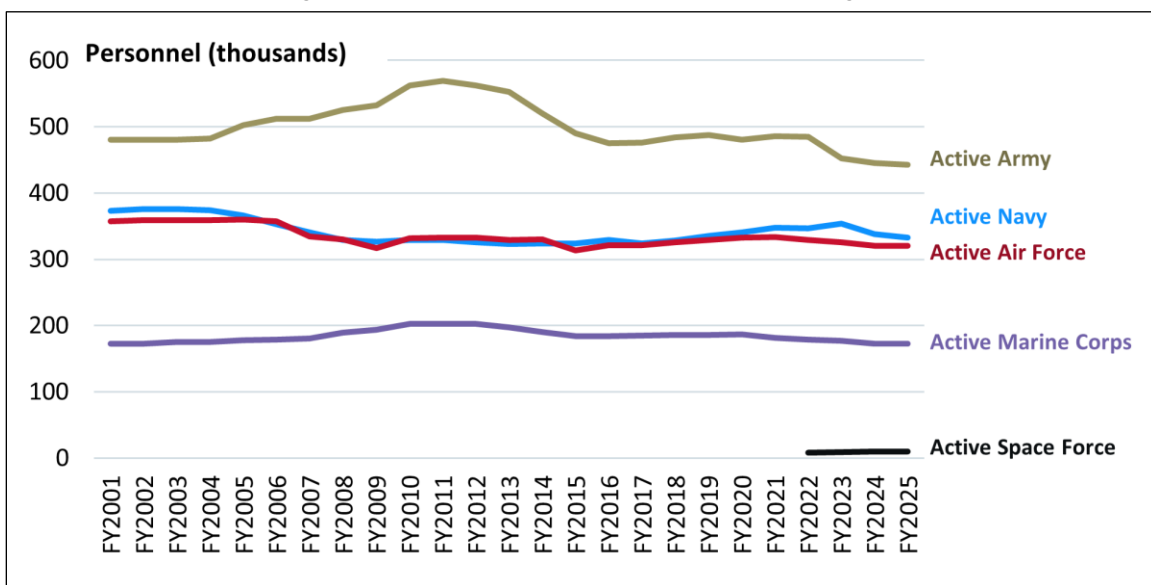
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Recent Trends

Congress varies the authorized end-strengths over time in response to factors such as national security priorities, budget constraints, and recruitment challenges. In enacting the 2008 NDAA, Congress authorized reduced Navy and Air Force end strengths while expressing concern as the services retired legacy platforms and transferred many roles to civilians. The FY2009 NDAA Senate report (S.Rept. 110-335) expressed support for fully staffing existing units for the Iraq and Afghan Wars. In the late 2010s and early 2020s, as U.S. commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan diminished, Congress cut the Army's end-strength and increased that of the Navy. In FY2022, Congress began authorizing end-strength for the Space Force, whose personnel came largely from the Air Force (See **Figure 1**).

Figure 1. Active Component Authorized End-Strength FY2001–FY2025 Request

Figure is interactive in the HTML version of this Insight.



Source: CRS analysis of Congress.gov data and President's Budget Request—from Department of Defense Office of the Comptroller.

Notes: FY2001-FY2024 data comprise authorized end-strengths from NDAAs. FY2025 data are from President's Budget Request. Space Force end-strength from FY2020 and FY2021 is included in the Air Force line.

The requested FY2025 end-strengths of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force are lower than the authorized end-strengths of FY2001. The Navy would see the greatest decline, while the Marine Corps would see the smallest. The Space Force, created in 2019, was initially staffed under Air Force end-strength authority. Starting in FY2022 Congress authorized its end-strength as a separate branch. It is the only Service's end-strength that grew during this period.

FY2025 NDAAs

The Department of Defense reduced its FY2025 end-strength requests from FY2024 levels (see **Table 1**)—a decision for which it has offered several explanations. At a March 2024 [press conference](#), a Pentagon spokesperson stated that recruitment challenges stemming from a tight labor market shaped FY2025 end-strength requests. The Services also claimed that budget issues—a '[constrained topline](#)' in the Navy's phrase—limited their ability to expand recruiting. The Army specifically [cited](#) fiscal uncertainty from continuing resolutions. In addition, while not referring explicitly to end-strength

requests, DoD's [FY2025 defense budget overview](#) stated that in light of the [Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023](#), which caps the annual defense budget for FY2024 and FY2025 at \$886.35 billion and \$895.21 billion respectively, the department “made difficult, but responsible, decisions that focus on maintaining our military’s readiness and taking care of our people.”

The House has passed a version and the Senate is considering a version of an FY2025 National Defense Authorization Act (H.R. 8070 and S. 4638 respectively). Both bills propose active component end-strengths identical to those requested by the Secretary of Defense.

Table 1. Proposed FY2025 Active Component End-Strengths

Service	House-passed H.R. 8070	Senate Armed Services- reported S. 4638	FY2025 President's Budget Request	FY2024 Enacted End- Strength	Change from FY24- FY25 Request
Army	442,300	442,300	442,300	445,000	-2,700
Navy	332,300	332,300	332,300	337,800	-5,500
Marine Corps	172,300	172,300	172,300	172,300	0
Air Force	320,000	320,000	320,000	320,000	0
Space Force	9,800	9,800	9,800	9,400	+400
Total	1,276,700	1,276,700	1,276,700	1,284,500	-7,800

Source: Congress.gov; Department of Defense Office of the Comptroller

Issues for Congress

Congress may consider several actions:

- **Absolute Increase:** Congress could assess whether present and future security challenges require a larger active force, and consider whether or not to authorize an absolute increase in the number of active component personnel. Such an action may increase the Armed Forces' operational capacity, with potentially higher costs.
- **Absolute Decrease:** Congress could assess whether the security environment justifies an active force of the present size, and consider whether or not to authorize a reduction in the absolute number of active component personnel. Such a reduction may reduce costs, but may also reduce the Armed Forces' operational capacity.
- **Shift Active End-Strength to Reserve Component:** Congress could assess whether U.S. security objectives would be better served by a larger reserve component and could consider whether or not to shift end-strength from the active to the reserve component. Such a shift could create a force that may cost less to maintain, but also may be slower to deploy. Such an approach may also reduce the readiness of the active component.
- **Shift Reserve End-Strength to Active Component:** Congress could assess whether U.S. security objectives would be better served by a larger active component and could consider whether or not to shift end-strength from the reserve to the active component. Such a shift could create a force that may cost more to maintain, but also may be quicker to deploy.
- **Maintain Current End-Strength:** Congress may assess that current end-strength meets U.S. security objectives and make no changes.

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