Sidar Aslanoglu

Pivot to Asia: (Lack of) Reflections in the Military Budget

Intended audience: War on the Rocks–style defense analysts and practitioners.

The United States has long enjoyed what Barry Posen refers to as the command of the commons in sea, air, and space, enabling it to move forces, sustain allies, and underwrite an open global trading system. Over the past decade, however, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has emerged as the principal challenger to this position, especially in the Western Pacific. U.S. strategy documents now routinely frame China as the "pacing challenge" and emphasize the need for maritime and air-centric forces ideal for high intensity combat in the Indo-Pacific.

A natural expectation follows: if Washington is serious about preparing for a China contingency, the defense budget should gradually tilt toward the services most relevant for major maritime and aerospace operations - principally the Navy and, to a lesser degree, the Air Force - relative to the Army. Yet it is not obvious from public debate whether this strategic rhetoric has been matched by sustained changes in service budgets and force structure.

This paper asks whether U.S. defense resources and "force mass" have shifted in a way consistent with the proclaimed pivot to Asia. Using an analytical exhibit that pairs Army, Navy, and Air Force budgets with their main force metrics over time, it assesses the degree to which U.S. resource allocation has realigned or failed to realign with a China-focused strategy.

Data Collection

The time series runs from FY2001 through FY2025. Starting in 2001 captures the post-9/11 buildup and Army-heavy Global War on Terror, the subsequent drawdown and sequestration period, and then the shift toward great-power competition with China, including the 2012 "rebalance to Asia" and the 2018 National Defense Strategy. Ending in FY2025 incorporates the most recent budget data and yields roughly a quarter-century of observations, enough to show whether the United States has actually shifted money and force structure toward maritime and air forces, as the strategy rhetoric implies.

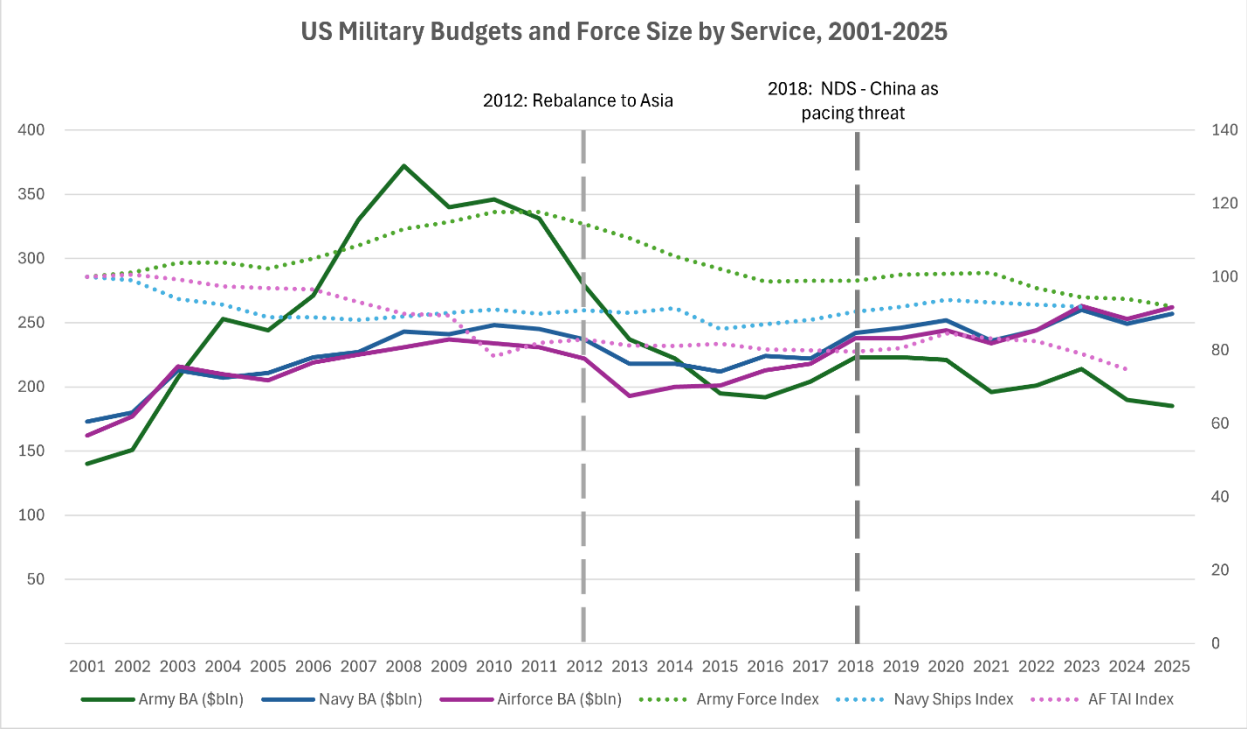
In the chart that follows, I treat budget authority as the main metric and express all figures in constant FY2025 dollars, collecting data from the *National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2025.*[i] Budget authority is the cleanest signal of what Congress decides to give each service in a given year; it captures new money heading out the door and matches how most practitioners talk about the Army, Navy, and Air Force toplines. Converting those series into constant FY2025 dollars strips out inflation and lets trends from FY2001 to FY2025 be compared on equal terms, with FY2025 as the natural anchor.

For the Navy, I use the annual number of battle force ships as reported in Naval History and Heritage Command online publications for 2001-2021 and the Congressional Research Service's reports on the Navy's shipbuilding plans for 2023 and 2024. [ii] [iii] Battle force ships are the standard metric used in congressional and Pentagon debates over fleet size and include

commissioned warships capable of contributing to combat operations. This measure excludes non-battle-force auxiliaries and therefore understates total hulls.

For the Army, I use active-duty end strength (full-time equivalents) as the main measure of force size. [iv] End strength is consistently reported over time and directly linked to budget fights on the Hill. End strength offers a simple, comparable way to capture how much "people power" the Army has been funded to maintain each year, which is what matters when asking whether resources and force mass have actually shifted away from soldiers and toward ships and aircraft.

For the Air Force, I use total aircraft inventory obtained from the Air & Space Forces Magazine for 2016-2023 and the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studes for 2001-2016. [v] [vi] TAI is the grand total number of aircraft across the active force, Air National Guard, and Air Force Reserve. This counts the tails available to the Air Force for operations and training rather than just squadrons. TAI is consistently reported over time and can be reconstructed from existing inventory tables.



To make the force-size lines comparable on a single axis, I convert each service's force metric into an index with FY2001 set to 100. For the Army, I start with active-duty end strength; for the Navy, the annual count of battle force ships; and for the Air Force, the total aircraft inventory across the active force, Air National Guard, and Air Force Reserve. Each series is then rescaled so that its 2001 value equals 100, and subsequent years show percent change relative to that baseline (for example, an index value of 80 indicates a 20 percent decline since 2001, while 120 indicates a 20 percent increase).

The chart plots these three indexed force series on the secondary Y-axis, which is labeled "Force Size Index (2001 = 100)." This indexing removes the misleading effect of different units and it highlights what matters for the argument: whether each service's "force mass" has grown or shrunk over the past quarter century, rather than the precise level in any given year. The budget lines remain on the primary axis in constant FY2025 dollars, so the reader can see how changes in money line up with changes in indexed force size.

The Results

The chart tells a clear story: the United States has moved away from an Army-heavy posture since the height of the post-9/11 wars, but that shift has produced more money for sea and air forces rather than clearly more ships and aircraft.

On the budget side, the Army is the big winner in the 2000s and the big loser afterward. In real FY2025 dollars, its budget more than doubles between 2001 and 2011, while Navy and Air Force funding grow more modestly. Around the first pivot marker in 2012, the Army accounts for roughly 40 percent of the three-service topline; by 2018, and even more so by 2025, its share has fallen into the mid-20s. Over the same period, Navy and Air Force budgets both climb above their 2001 baselines and converge in the mid-30s as a share of the total. In other words, as China becomes the pacing threat, air and sea services jointly displace the Army at the top of the budget hierarchy, rather than one of them emerging as a clear hegemon.

The indexed force-size series are more sobering. Army end strength peaks about 15-20 percent above its 2001 level during the Iraq and Afghanistan years, then declines back to slightly below the 2001 baseline by the mid-2020s. That is consistent with a deliberate decision to shrink ground force after the GWOT. But the Navy's ship index drifts downward from 2001 into the mid-2010s and only partially recovers; by 2023 the fleet is still smaller in hulls than it was at the start of the period. The Air Force's total aircraft inventory drops even more, ending roughly a quarter below its 2001 level despite a significantly higher budget.

Taken together, the data only partly vindicate a command of the commons expectation. Since the rebalance and especially after the 2018 NDS, the United States clearly devotes a larger share of the military to the Navy and Air Force and less to the Army, that is the pivot in money. But the force size indexes show no corresponding surge: the Navy operates fewer ships than in 2001, and the Air Force fewer tails. The pivot to Asia, as reflected in this exhibit, is a joint shift of resources away from ground forces toward more expensive maritime and air capabilities, not a decisive naval buildup that would make command of the Indo-Pacific commons look secure on its own.

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[i] Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), *National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2025* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, April 2024), https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2025/fy25_Green_Book.pdf.

[ii] Ronald O'Rourke, *Navy Force Structure and Shipbuilding Plans: Background and Issues for Congress*, CRS Report RL32665 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, March 31, 2025), https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL32665

[iii] Naval History and Heritage Command, "U.S. Ship Force Levels, 1886–Present," last updated November 17, 2017, https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/us-ship-force-levels.html.

[iv] Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), *National Defense Budget Estimates for FY 2025* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, April 2024), https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2025/fy25_Green_Book.pdf.

[v] Air & Space Forces Magazine, "2025 USAF & USSF Almanac: Equipment," June 20, 2025, accessed December 7, 2025, https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/2025-usaf-ussf-almanac-equipment/.

[vi] James C. Ruehrmund Jr. and Christopher J. Bowie, *Arsenal of Airpower: USAF Aircraft Inventory 1950–2016* (Arlington, VA: Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, 2018), accessed December 7, 2025, https://www.mitchellaerospacepower.org/arsenal-of-airpower-usaf-aircraft-inventory-1950-2016/.