

US military worries about losing hi-tech edge

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The US military is in danger of losing its technological advantage unless it invests in research and finds ways to build innovative weapons much faster, top officials said Thursday.

The Pentagon unveiled an initiative to streamline its bureaucracy and tap into technological breakthroughs in the private sector amid growing anxiety that American forces' longtime hi-tech edge is slipping away.

The measures reflected "an overriding concern that our technological superiority is at risk," Frank Kendall, the Pentagon's chief weapons buyer, wrote in a report.

"Potential adversaries are challenging the US lead in conventional military capability in ways not seen since the Cold War," wrote Kendall, who has dubbed the initiative "Better Buying Power 3.0."

The challenge stemmed from the nature of new technologies such as drones or micro-computing, which are much more accessible and available to other countries than in the past, officials said.

Officials this week described a future battlefield in which potential adversaries could counter America's traditional advantages in air or sea power.

US commanders are already worried about sophisticated air defenses and anti-ship missiles. But officials said other countries are devoting efforts to creating precision-guided rockets and artillery that could

possibly target biometric signatures, massive cyber warfare and systems that link soldiers with various robotic weaponry.

Gone are the days when a single innovation could allow the US force to be dominant in the skies or at sea for decades, Deputy Defense Secretary Robert Work told a press conference.

"So we're going to have to be able to integrate commercial technology faster, absolutely," he said.

The reform initiative called for scaling back bureaucratic rules, attracting technically-savvy workers to oversee programs and designing weapons so that technological advances can be quickly added, according to Kendall.

That will mean building more "modular" or plug-and-play systems that are ready to accept new elements, including new sensors or other improved equipment, he said.

Although the reform initiative will help, Kendall said the key to maintaining the US military's dominance was spending more money on research and development and attracting talented workers to oversee weapons programs.

"But at the end of the day, the fundamental driver on how fast we can modernize is how much money we spend and on the quality of the people out there doing the work . . .," he said.

And if the government failed to adequately fund research and development, "you will not have a future weapons system."

Potential automatic budget cuts, which Congress has imposed on the entire federal budget, could severely undermine vital research and the

time lost carried its own cost, Kendall said.

In the meantime, adversaries were investing in new weapons.

"Time is not recoverable. And if I don't do research, I have to do it later and take the time to do it," he said.

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