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Guns and Butter: An Analysis of the Strategic Shift in the U.S. Federal Budget Since the Trump Administration Took Office

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Abstract. The U.S. federal budget proposal for Fiscal Year 2027 marks a clear "military-first" shift: defense spending reaches $1.45 trillion, accounting for about 67% of discretionary outlays, while non-defense agencies such as the EPA, Education, and HHS face deep cuts. This paper examines the internal and external drivers of this shift, including strategic anxiety over China, inefficiencies in the defense industrial base, and domestic political demands. It argues that despite the rhetoric of "peace through strength," the budget exacerbates fiscal debt and social welfare erosion, potentially fueling political violence and international intervention risks. Rather than a simple military expansion, the proposal signals structural decline and strategic contraction of U.S. hegemony.

Keywords: U.S. federal budget, China strategy, defense industrial base

1. Introduction

On April 3, 2026, the White House Office of Management and Budget officially released the federal government budget proposal for fiscal year 2027. This 81-page budget request presents a clear trend of resource redistribution: federal fiscal resources are flowing to the military sector at an unprecedented pace since the end of the Cold War, while spending on domestic livelihood programs and global governance, continuing the trend from fiscal year 2026, has become the main target of cuts. The proposal plans to cut $73 billion from domestic programs, including initiatives to tackle climate change and promote renewable energy, as well as a series of programs to ensure equity and accessibility in housing, education and health care. Funding for refugee resettlement and assistance programs is also scheduled for reduction [1]. Russell Vought, Director of the White House Office of Management and Budget, told a congressional hearing on April 15: "The administration will raise defense spending from nearly $1 trillion this fiscal year to nearly $1.5 trillion in fiscal year 2027, while cutting around 10% of the budget for medical research, heating assistance and dozens of other domestic programs. These cuts do not cover mandatory spending such as Social Security and Medicare" [2]. In the Department of War budget document, the Trump administration states that the increased spending "advances President Trump's commitment to peace through strength by reinvesting in the foundation of U.S. military power."

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2. Structural shift in budget data: the establishment of military priority

According to the budget document, the base discretionary spending proposed by the White House for fiscal year 2027 stands at around $2.16 trillion, up nearly $400 billion or almost 22% from fiscal year 2026. Among this, the budget for the Department of Defense (labeled as the "Department of War" in the document) hits $1.45 trillion, an increase of $440.9 billion or 43.7% year on year. This growth rate far exceeds the range of regular annual adjustments. The total defense budget of $1.5 trillion will surpass that of fiscal year 2026 and become "the largest military budget in U.S. history" [3]. To support this scale of military expansion, the Trump administration has compressed budgets for a large number of non-defense federal departments. The two departments with the deepest cuts are the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Small Business Administration (SBA), down 55.2% and 67.1% year on year respectively. Meanwhile, departments related to defense and security have received certain budget increases: for example, the Department of Energy sees a 1.8% year-on-year rise, and the Department of Veterans Affairs grows by 8.7% year on year.

Similarly, in the fiscal year 2026 budget request, the Trump administration cut non-defense spending by 22% while raising defense spending sharply by 18.7%, making defense outlays account for 56% of total federal departmental spending. This is a stark contrast to the 48%-50% share of defense spending in total federal departmental expenditure during the Biden administration [4]. The contrast between the rise and fall makes the Trump administration's strategic preference in resource allocation very clear.

3. Internal and external drivers of the budget shift

3.1. The return of the "Department of War" and strategic anxiety toward China

Historically, the name "Department of War" was abolished in 1947 and replaced by the Department of Defense. The revival of this term in the budget document carries a symbolic tone of political nostalgia, and also reflects the current administration's logic of redefining federal resource allocation through a military lens. With a $1.45 trillion budget, the Department of War takes up about 67% of federal discretionary spending. For reference, Russia, which is currently engaged in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, spends around 38% of its federal budget on defense [5]. The United States, however, is not involved in a high-intensity conflict of similar scale (its military operations in the Middle East in early 2026 did not threaten homeland security, and no large-scale ground troop deployment has taken place). Such a high share of military spending therefore exposes the Trump administration's tendency toward military expansion in foreign and security policy, as well as its deep anxiety over the unfavorable shift in the international strategic landscape.

In March 2021, Admiral Philip Davidson, then Commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, told a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing that the Chinese mainland might take military action against Taiwan around 2027, and the U.S. military must prepare in advance. This assessment has since been referred to by the U.S. strategic community as the "Davidson Window" or the "2027 Window Thesis". In recent years, however, the state of the U.S. defense industry has been unsatisfactory. From the forced decommissioning of the amphibious assault ship "USS Bonhomme Richard" in 2021 after severe fire damage, to major delays in the development of next-generation hypersonic weapons such as ARRW and HALO, to the F-35 Block4 fighter jet having to use counterweights instead of actual equipment due to insufficient advanced radar production, and the eventual cancellation of follow-up orders for the Constellation-class frigate in 2025 due to serious construction delays — all these signs show that years of rising U.S. military spending since 2021

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have not delivered the expected wave of technological and equipment innovation. Instead, they have further driven up equipment procurement costs. Take the new FF(X) frigate program in the fiscal year 2027 budget as an example: the first ship costs $1.67 billion, and the second unit costs as much as $1.94 billion. The total projected cost for all 22 frigates is around $36 billion, with an average unit cost of $1.636 billion. For comparison, the unit cost of the most advanced Arleigh Burke-class Flight III destroyer in the U.S. military is about $2.7 billion. It is clear that the new frigate does not have a significant cost-performance advantage.

The Trump administration is deeply dissatisfied with the low efficiency of U.S. defense manufacturing. Trump himself has repeatedly criticized defense contractors and demanded higher production capacity. Especially since Trump launched the "Epic Wrath" operation against Iran, the U.S. military has depleted large stocks of key ammunition and faces difficulties in replenishing them in the short term [6, 7].

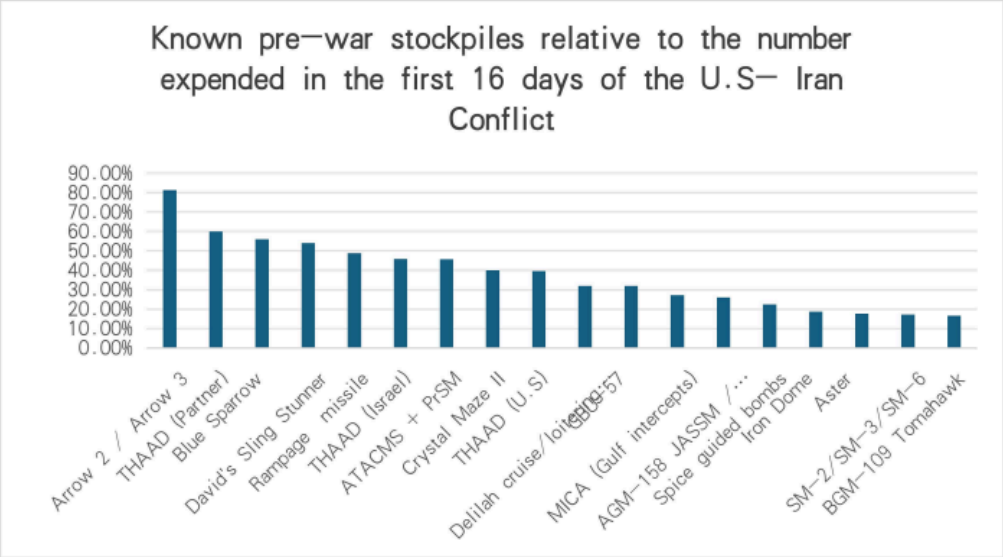


Figure 1. Western ammunition stockpile consumption in the first 16 days of the U.S.-Israel-Iran conflict

[Compiled by the author based on relevant RUSI data]

This situation is clearly unfavorable to the Trump administration's goal of strengthening military deterrence against China in the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. strategic community expects that a potential conflict with China in the Indo-Pacific will rely heavily on long-range precision strike weapons such as long-range anti-ship missiles, joint air-to-surface standoff missiles and Tomahawk cruise missiles. Yet current U.S. defense manufacturing capacity for these weapons is severely insufficient. For this reason, after conducting a series of wargames in 2023, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) concluded that in the event of a Taiwan Strait conflict, U.S. missile stocks would run out within the first few days, and joint air-to-surface standoff missiles would also fall into shortage by the third or fourth week of the war. Today's U.S. defense industrial system, in terms of infrastructure, key supply chains and skilled workforce, is not capable of supporting rapid replenishment of these weapon systems to meet wartime needs [8]. This conclusion has since been accepted by U.S. policy elites, and think tanks across the U.S. political spectrum have held extensive discussions on China's huge industrial capacity, especially its shipbuilding output [9, 10].

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At the hearing titled "Rebuilding the Arsenal of Democracy: The Imperative to Strengthen America's Defense Industrial Base and Workforce" held on December 5, 2024, John Moolenaar, Chairman of the House Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party, explicitly stated that the U.S. defense industrial base lacks sufficient production capacity to cope with a conflict with a major power like China [11]. At a congressional hearing on April 30, 2026, Secretary of War Hegseth reiterated that the United States will "contain China's regional influence with strength, not confrontation" in the Indo-Pacific, and stressed that "China must see the undisputed military power of the United States in the region" [12]. Hegseth attended hearings on the 29th and 30th primarily to defend the $1.5 trillion defense budget for fiscal year 2027. In his written testimony, he listed four priorities to be delivered by the budget, among which "containing China's influence in the Indo-Pacific" ranks second, only behind protecting the U.S. homeland. This is consistent with the content of the 2026 *National Defense Strategy Report* issued by the Department of War.

The Trump administration's fiscal year 2027 budget request focuses on three pillars: "Restoring Martial Spirit", "Rebuilding the U.S. Military" and "Rebuilding Deterrence". The areas related to deterring China fall under the latter two pillars.

Under the "Rebuilding Deterrence" framework, the fiscal year 2027 budget request supports the long-running U.S. nuclear modernization program and the "Golden Dome" missile defense system prioritized by Trump. The latter, with a single budget of nearly $18 billion, is described as a Manhattan Project-level "system of systems" integrating land-based, sea-based and space-based interceptors. Beyond strategic weapons, the new budget also emphasizes expanded equipment procurement, including key ammunition and the F-47 fighter program, both identified as critical to "deterring aggression" [13].

Under the "Rebuilding the U.S. Military" framework, the Trump administration links the increased procurement funding in the budget request to revitalizing the U.S. defense industrial base, supported by other administrative and reform measures. One example is Executive Order 14265 on streamlining procurement processes. The order emphasizes the priority of new equipment procurement, and clearly states that retaining "outdated military capabilities" is the main barrier crowding out new system acquisition [14]. In a speech last November, Hegseth said: "Defense firms must use capital expenditure to upgrade facilities, upskill their workforce and expand capacity. If they fail to do so, the Department of War stands ready to make full use of the President's authorities to ensure we get everything we need from industry to win the nation's wars." "The Department of War has no objection to companies making profits, but if they do not invest in expanding production, those big firms will go under" [15].

Against this backdrop, the Trump administration has sharply raised procurement funding in its fiscal year 2027 budget request: missile procurement spending is up 188% — Tomahawk cruise missile output rises from 55 units in fiscal year 2026 to 785 units, and the Patriot missile procurement budget jumps from $1.6 billion in fiscal year 2026 to $12 billion in fiscal year 2027. In addition, the budget request triples U.S. spending on unmanned aerial systems to more than $74 billion.

These examples demonstrate that the current surge in U.S. military spending stems to a large extent from U.S. policy elites' concerns over "failing deterrence against China", as well as the long-standing cost inflation problem in the U.S. defense procurement system. To maintain the current pace of equipment renewal, a substantial increase in the total budget has become necessary.

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3.2. Domestic political demands and public opinion foundation

The Trump administration has drastically cut livelihood spending while ramping up defense spending. This seems counterintuitive in a midterm election year — Trump won the 2024 presidential election by capitalizing on the decline in living standards under four years of the Biden administration, so there is no reason for him to ignore that lesson. Yet a closer look reveals the logic behind this seemingly abnormal move.

First, according to a Pew Research Center poll released in April 2026, Republicans hold a more positive view of Trump's foreign policy performance than Democrats. 71% of Republicans approve of his China policy; 66% and 74% approve of his tariff and trade policies respectively; and 56% of Republicans say they support all or most of Trump's policies. This indicates that most of the Republican base still backs Trump's policies — they take a positive view of the series of aggressive foreign policies and military actions he has taken this year, which provides public support for the administration's massive defense spending increase.

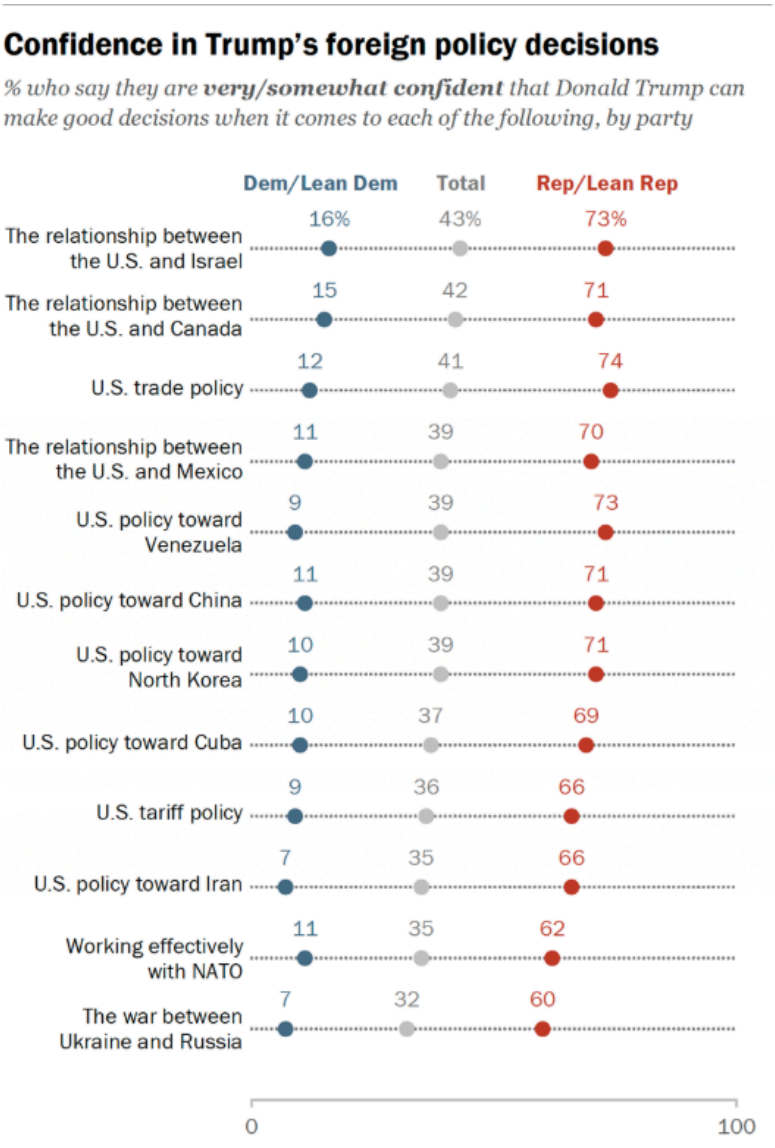


Figure 2. Americans' confidence in Trump's foreign policy

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[Chart sourced from Pew Research Center data] [16]

Second, as a president elected on the core slogan of "peace through strength", increasing military spending aligns with Trump's consistent tough image. Raising military benefits can also help reverse the drop in veteran support caused by the military parade Trump held on his birthday in 2025. Meanwhile, as a president with close ties to Silicon Valley's tech right, huge defense budgets make it easier for his Silicon Valley right-wing donors to enter the defense sector. Emerging Silicon Valley defense contractors such as Anduril and Palantir have won large numbers of orders from the Department of War since Trump took office. In addition, the massive defense spending increase will strengthen Trump's ties with the traditional military-industrial complex — for instance, Boeing leads the F-47 fighter program, while Raytheon and Lockheed Martin have received more missile orders from the government.

Third, the huge defense spending increase also supports Trump's manufacturing revitalization agenda. According to reports, the Trump administration has reached out to U.S. automakers to discuss whether they can take on the production of some defense industry components. This will give a much-needed boost to U.S. traditional manufacturing, which has remained sluggish since the pandemic [17]. In the fiscal year 2027 budget request, the U.S. Department of War emphasizes priority support for areas such as restoring U.S. maritime superiority, strengthening U.S. shipbuilding and securing access to critical minerals.

At a press briefing on the fiscal year 2027 defense budget, the U.S. Department of War stated that "the defense budget increase will expand production of major weapon systems, strengthen the U.S. defense industrial base and related supply chains, and support tens of thousands of small and medium-sized enterprises." Specific measures include "expanding multi-year contracts to ensure supply chain stability and incentivize long-term investment, and providing support for small and medium-sized suppliers to large enterprises to develop and scale up production" [18].

In a press release on April 29 this year, Kelly Loeffler, Administrator of the U.S. Small Business Administration, said that "every dollar invested by the Department of War generates a 22-to-1 return on investment... The Department of War generates roughly $121 billion in revenue and 1.5 million jobs" [19]. The Department of War itself projects that the military expansion will create more than 800,000 new manufacturing jobs [20]. These new jobs from massive defense spending can clearly serve as a tool for Trump to boost his standing ahead of the midterm elections. It is evident that the Trump administration's large defense budget is closely tied to its manufacturing revitalization plan and rhetoric — the Department of War has directly provided subsidies to enterprises in key industrial chains since 2025.

Finally, the massive defense spending increase is also linked to Trump's political reform agenda. Over the past year, the Trump administration has launched a sweeping reform campaign at home, seeking to overhaul the federal government and address illegal immigration. As of May this year, however, with the departure of Musk and the resignation of Homeland Security Secretary Pam Bondi, Trump's federal government reform and illegal immigration deportation efforts have suffered heavy setbacks. At present, the only federal department that can still effectively advance Trump's election agenda is the Department of War under Hegseth. Since taking office, Hegseth has carried out a major purge of the military, firing senior officials including Army Chief of Staff Randy George and Secretary of the Navy Feren, and pushed forward a new procurement process and the Army Transformation Initiative (ATI). A former Fox News host, Hegseth only served at junior and mid-level ranks in the National Guard and has no established power base in the military, making him more dependent on Trump's personal support. With many of the administration's reform agendas stalled or abandoned, the Department of War under Hegseth has become the main lever for the

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Trump administration to continue advancing its political agenda. The department's budget proposal does include many of Trump's priority political initiatives — making shipbuilding great again, securing U.S. critical mineral supply chains, and more. By allocating a huge budget to the Department of War, the Trump administration can attempt to advance parts of its domestic agenda through the department.

4. Limits of congressional checks and balances: budget trends under bipartisan consensus

Notably, while the White House's budget proposal is highly aggressive, the U.S. Congress typically moderates extreme proposals during annual budget deliberations. For example, during the fiscal year 2026 budget review, the Trump administration requested a 55% cut to the EPA budget from fiscal year 2025 levels, but Congress only approved a 3.4% cut. This shows that there is usually a large gap between the executive branch's extreme budget requests and final legislation. That said, two consecutive years of proposals for deep non-defense cuts are enough to demonstrate the current administration's "military-first" orientation. On the other hand, for fiscal year 2026, the White House proposed a $113 billion increase to the $851.7 billion defense budget approved in 2025, bringing the total to $964.7 billion. Congress ultimately approved a $901 billion defense budget, roughly $60 billion less than the White House request. When the $150 billion supplement in the *Beautiful and Great Act* is included, however, actual annual military spending reaches around $1.05 trillion.

It can be seen that on defense budget issues, the gap between Congress's final approval and the executive branch's request is relatively small. Against the backdrop of great power competition becoming a bipartisan consensus in the United States, it is unlikely that Congress will make major revisions to the $1.5 trillion military budget for fiscal year 2027.

5. Impacts of the budget shift

5.1. The paradox of "Guns and Butter": debt expansion and livelihood squeeze

The Trump administration has put forward an aggressive budget proposal with defense spending accounting for as much as 67%. Yet more noteworthy than the huge military spending itself is the inherent structural paradox of the budget: one of Trump's core 2024 campaign promises was to balance the budget by cutting federal spending and prioritize domestic livelihood issues. The actual direction of the fiscal year 2027 budget shows that this promise has been replaced by "military priority", even at the cost of massive debt expansion. Statistics show that total U.S. national debt grew by about $4.7 trillion during Biden's term; in just over a year of the Trump administration, the national debt has already increased by more than $2.7 trillion. Further growth in military spending will intensify federal fiscal pressure, while deep cuts to domestic livelihood spending will worsen living standards for ordinary Americans, trapping the country in a vicious cycle where military spending crowds out livelihood investment.

5.2. Dual risks of domestic rifts and international intervention

Overall, the Trump administration has clearly chosen "guns" over "butter". This choice will have far-reaching impacts on U.S. domestic politics and the global order.

At the domestic level, large cuts to low-income family assistance, unemployment benefits and medical research funding, paired with a sharp increase in military spending, may further widen

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existing rifts in American society. Since the Butler shooting in 2024, there have been three attempted assassinations against Trump in less than two years, with attackers ranging from socially marginalized groups to highly educated middle-class individuals. While political violence cannot be directly blamed on budget cuts, the squeeze on livelihood programs in the proposal will undoubtedly deepen economic hardship and resentment among some groups, creating fertile ground for political extremism. As history has repeatedly shown, when a country diverts too many resources to the military at the expense of people's livelihood, social tensions tend to rise.

At the international level, cutting the State Department's budget by 30% and slashing $2.7 billion in contributions to international organizations including the United Nations mean the United States is voluntarily retreating from some areas of global governance. The simultaneous push of "withdrawing funds" and "expanding military force" essentially reshapes the U.S. model of global presence: it reduces soft power investment channeled through multilateral institutions and relies more on hard power in the form of military deterrence and armed intervention. This is an extremely dangerous signal. When a hegemonic power begins to favor arms races and the use of force as primary tools of international relations, the basic stability framework of the existing world order will be fundamentally eroded. Since early 2026, the Trump administration has launched three military operations — arresting Maduro, tightening the blockade on Cuba, and launching airstrikes on Iran. These actions have already dealt a heavy blow to world order, and confirm the severe consequences of a hegemonic power shifting toward a military-centric logic.

5.3. A precursor to hegemonic contraction

From a longer-term perspective, the fiscal year 2027 budget reflects a misjudgment by current U.S. decision-makers of the post-Cold War global order: the Trump administration appears to believe that military superiority can offset the structural hegemonic decline caused by neglecting investment in livelihoods, basic education and global multilateral governance. The danger of this mindset lies not only in its wrong direction, but also in its potential to create a self-reinforcing cycle — the more is invested in military spending, the more external threats are needed to justify that investment.

The crowding out of livelihood spending by expanding military budgets, and the resulting deterioration in living standards, will in turn drive hegemonic decline through three institutional pathways. First, when ordinary Americans bear the cost of falling living standards for a long time while elites profit from military expansion, the social contract inside the hegemonic state will break down. Domestic political instability, declining social trust and rising political violence will weaken the coherence and sustainability of the country's external actions. A divided United States will find it harder to sustain global leadership over time.

Second, deep cuts to soft power tools such as foreign aid, multilateral institution contributions and cultural exchange programs will further damage the United States' moral standing and leadership credibility, already battered by the global tariff war and the airstrikes on Iran. Declining trust among allies and growing centrifugal forces will weaken the cohesion of the U.S.-led alliance system.

Third, over-reliance on debt to fund military expansion will crowd out productive investment in infrastructure, education and research and development. According to a March 2026 report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), U.S. federal R&D spending as a share of GDP fell from 1.86% in 1964 to 0.66% in 2021. The Trump administration's restrictions on research institutions, international cooperation and foreign talent have further eroded the openness and attractiveness of the U.S. research system. Surveys show that around 75% of U.S. researchers are considering leaving the country. In the long run, this will undermine economic

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growth potential and weaken the material foundation of national power. Without a strong economy and research base, military superiority will ultimately become unsustainable.

These three pathways interact and push the hegemony into a vicious cycle of "contraction — imbalance — further contraction". This unprecedented fiscal year 2027 budget request is therefore not the opening chapter of U.S. military expansion, but a precursor to the structural decline of U.S. hegemony and global strategic contraction. The structural decline of U.S. global soft power is what gave rise to the military-first logic. This decline in turn stems from the failure to fairly distribute the benefits of U.S. hegemony domestically, which fueled the rise of populist politics in the country — and the anti-globalization and extremist tendencies of that populism have further accelerated the decline of U.S. influence across all fields.

6. Conclusion

The fiscal year 2027 federal budget marks the full establishment of the Trump administration's "military-first" strategy. Behind the $1.45 trillion defense budget is a comprehensive response from U.S. decision-makers to defense industry inefficiencies, anxiety over deterrence against China, and domestic political needs. Yet this path, pursued at the cost of debt expansion and livelihood squeeze, carries dual risks of deepening social rifts and increasing the tendency toward external military intervention.

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