

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

April 30, 2025

The Honorable Pete Hegseth
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301-1000

Dear Mr. Secretary,

We are writing you today to reiterate a concern we raised with Secretary of Defense Austin last year. Airborne Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) is being scaled back at a rate that leaves the Combatant Commanders accepting greater risk and civilian policy makers with less input to inform their decisions. In the pursuit of other modernization efforts beyond ISR, and possibly an overly-optimistic prediction of what space can quickly execute, the Air Force is aggressively retiring its current inventory of airborne ISR platforms without investing in replacement capabilities. At the current rate of investment and divestment, the Air Force will eventually have more lethal tools, but they leave the military with fewer tools to know what they are striking and fewer tools for policy makers to know if they should be striking something at all.

The importance of ISR cannot be overstated. Whether it's getting President Kennedy the information necessary during the Cuban missile crisis, getting our allies and partners what they need to maintain the peace of the Camp David Accords, or feeding and completing the kill chain against near peer adversaries and Violent Extremist Organizations (VEO), ISR provides the information necessary for the decision makers at every level. It is no accident ISR is listed as one of the Air Force's Core Functions.

Despite this, we are concerned the Air Force remains unabashedly committed to divesting its airborne ISR capabilities. The evidence ranges from senior Air Force officials saying "We are clearly moving away from airborne ISR assets and moving into space" to budget cut drills offering the entire MQ-9 fleet as an offset to other priorities. These examples match their actions of retiring the MC-12 Liberty, MQ-1 Predator, E-8C Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System (JSTARS), the RQ-4 Global Hawk Block 20s and 30s, and the MQ-9 Block 1. The Air Force has stopped procuring the MQ-9As even though the attrition rate over the last year has been over 15 aircraft and the Total Aircraft Inventory (TAI) is now below the requirement. The Air Force also announced the retirement of the U-2 Dragon Lady and began shutting down the U-2 training pipeline. Despite all of these cuts to airborne ISR platforms, there has been no new procurement or announced development of new or modernized ISR platforms to fill the gap. To successfully address our near peer threats and Combatant Commanders' mission needs, investments in *both* air and space capability is necessary.

While the Air Force divests airborne ISR, the Combatant Commanders have repeatedly warned Congress they are not receiving enough ISR. As General Cavoli stated in the FY24 European Command Posture Hearing, "There is a demand for ISR, both manned and unmanned, aerial ISR, that far exceeds the supply across the Department of Defense, and we are grateful when we get our share of it." When Admiral Paparo, Commander of U.S. Pacific Fleet, was asked during his confirmation process if he thought the future of ISR in INDOPACOM can be handled entirely from space, he responded "No sir. The Joint Force requires persistent, redundant, resilient, and reliable ISR that is best provided through a multi-domain approach." More recently, during a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, General Kurilla, Commander of U.S. Central Command, acknowledged ISR assets were stretched thin after the October 7th attacks in Israel and had to be diverted from their mission in Afghanistan to other threats in the region. Admissions like this from top commanders in theater illustrate the concern is not theoretical. There are real-world gaps that must be addressed.

Adding to these gaps is the increased use of airborne ISR on our Southern border. NORTHCOM has asked for and received MQ-9, RQ-4 and U-2 flights to support their efforts, and these are having to come at the expense of other missions and COCOMs.

Given the actions and the rhetoric of the Air Force in contrast with the needs of the Combatant Commanders, we are requesting a relook and updated answers to the following questions:

1. Does the Air Force still have a requirement to provide airborne ISR capability to the Combatant Commands with sufficient capacity and operational flexibility to meet mission needs?
2. If other Services are buying their own ISR platforms (Army HADES, Army MQ-1 Gray Eagles, Marine MQ-9A Reapers) to cover what the Air Force is dropping, will the Air Force's Total Obligational Authority (TOA) reflect that drop?
3. In your professional military opinion, is it in our best interest to vacate the airborne ISR domain and rely solely on space-based assets?

The Air Force has a history of cutting ISR in order to meet other aspirations. Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates highlighted this exact problem during a speech to cadets at Maxwell AFB in 2008: "My concern is that our services are still not moving aggressively in wartime to provide resources needed now on the battlefield. I've been wrestling for months to get more intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets into the theater. Because people were stuck in old ways of doing business, it's been like pulling teeth." Seventeen years later, the concerns of Secretary Gates have only increased in magnitude and risk. We look forward to your candid assessment of the responsibility the U.S. Air Force has to provide ISR capabilities, and we remain ready to contribute to a meaningful solution.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kevin Cramer".

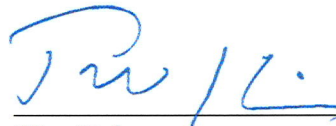
Kevin Cramer
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jeanne Shaheen".

Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Deb Fischer".

Deb Fischer
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Tim Kaine".

Tim Kaine
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark Kelly".

Mark Kelly
United States Senator