The House Armed Services Committee’s Future of Defense Task Force's 2020 final report says the military should cut back on expensive obsolete weapons programs and accelerate innovation in emerging technologies like artificial intelligence.
The report builds on the 2018 National Defense Strategy’s focus on staying technologically ahead of Russia and China, finding that the U.S. risks falling behind these adversaries if it does not decommission legacy weapons systems and invest in leading the world in technology and future weapons systems. The task force overall makes 14 recommendations to help the Defense Department meet this goal.

Of the recommendations, however, the task force emphasizes AI most. More specifically, it recommends a “Manhattan Project” scale of work in order for the Defense Department to remain competitive in global AI.

“We need greater innovation in artificial intelligence — AI in the air and at sea, surface, underwater, space,” Task Force Co-Chair Rep. Jim Banks said during Wednesday’s Brookings Institution event. “What we’ve heard over and over and over again from our partners and from the private sector is that the barriers to innovation at the Pentagon prevent the same type of innovation occurring in the United States that’s occurring in China, Russia and elsewhere.”

To overcome the barriers to advancing AI at DOD, the task force calls for reform across the military acquisition system in the following recommendations:

- Require every major defense acquisition program to evaluate at least one AI or autonomous alternative prior to funding.
- Require all new major defense acquisition programs to be AI-ready and nest with existing and planned joint all-domain command and control networks.
- Expand DOD's authorities and abilities to evaluate high technology readiness level items and technologies that satisfy defense requirements to reduce risk for major acquisition programs, lower procurement costs and accelerate the fielding of critical capabilities.

While the report calls upon DOD to increase investments in AI, it aims to keep the defense budget level by calling upon the military to decommission and divest from legacy systems and outdated weaponry.
“Part of what we need to do is divest of old, expensive, heavy legacy weapons systems, and only by doing that can we have the budgetary freedom to invest in these new technologies,” said task force Co-Chair Rep. Seth Moulton. “That’s just going to be all the more necessary as we are facing the kinds of deficits of this economic downturn because of [COVID-19].”

To supply future technologies like AI effectively, the task force further calls for the director of national intelligence to form and monitor a National Supply Chain Intelligence Center to monitor and protect American supply chain interests to foster resiliency across both military and civilian sectors. The report also calls for the expansion of the Department of Homeland Security’s Information and Communications Technology Supply Chain Risk Management Task Force.

As DOD divests from legacy weapons systems, the task force recommends that DOD increase funding in science and technology to total 3.4% of the overall defense budget, per the recommendation of the Defense Science Board. Some of these funding increases, the report states, should go toward the Defense Innovation Unit, AFWERX, Army Futures Command and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency.

Beyond this domestic work, the report also calls for the U.S. to lead a global treaty on AI “in the vein of the Geneva Conventions” to form guardrails for both military and civilian use of AI. International work should also include global partnerships in advancing ethical and new technologies, the report finds.

Other than AI, the task force strongly highlights the need to protect against cyberwarfare and cyberattacks, calling upon DOD to bolster its own cyber capabilities through the U.S. Cyber Command and the development of stronger tactical operational forces across the services. The task force also points to the need to partner with other agencies, such as DHS’s Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, and the private sector to maximize cybersecurity resources and expertise.

To meet the technological needs of the future, the task force calls for greater investment in and resources for STEM education and strengthening DOD’s relationship with technological hubs like Silicon Valley.
The 87-page report marks the completed work of the Future of Defense Task Force, which launched in October 2019.