Defense Matters

The Times They are A-Changin'

Is PNT at a Crossroads?

As of early May 2025, the new administration has not directly addressed positioning, navigation, and timing (PNT) capabilities for the warfighter in its public defense policy statements.

Additionally, the President's budget submission for fiscal year 2026 does not explicitly prioritize PNT investments. This absence raises concerns about the future direction and prioritization of this critical enabler across all domains of military operations.

Meanwhile, global developments are eroding the long-held assumption of U.S. dominance in PNT. Adversaries have made significant progress in developing and deploying robust PNT systems, to support both military operations and civil infrastructure, while simultaneously promoting international dependence on their services. These advancements threaten to undermine U.S. strategic and operational advantages in contested environments.

Recent policy shifts and investment patterns suggest a broader strategic realignment that could weaken the foundation of resilient PNT access for U.S. forces. If left unaddressed, this trend may have serious long-term implications for mission assurance and operational effectiveness across the Department of Defense (DoD).

The reality is clear: fielding resilient PNT capabilities can no longer be approached as business as usual. Given that nearly every modern military mission depends on assured PNT, any ambiguity in its prioritization must be viewed as a potential risk to national security.

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National Defense Strategy

On May 1st the Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) issued guidance directing the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy to begin drafting the *2025 National Defense Strategy (NDS).*

This document, due by August 31, 2025, is described as the single most important guide to align the DoD with President Trump's imperatives of "America First" and "Peace Through Strength."

While it is yet to be seen if the strategy will make direct reference to PNT, its formulation offers a critical opportunity to reaffirm—or potentially neglect—the importance of resilient PNT capabilities for the warfighter.

Reforming Oversight

In April 2025, the SECDEF launched a sweeping reform of the Department's advisory infrastructure, following a comprehensive 45-day review. The result was the dismissal of members from numerous advisory bodies, including key organizations like the Defense Policy Board and the Defense Science Board (DSB).

Historically, the DSB has been a consistent advocate for robust GPS support for military operations. Their absence raises valid concerns: will PNT maintain the institutional support needed to drive innovation and defend against emerging threats?

MGUE Inc 2 Management

Further changes came in April, when the Space Force transferred management of the Military GPS User Equipment Increment 2 (MGUE Inc 2) program back to the Air Force, specifically to the Program Executive Officer (PEO) for Electronic Systems at Hanscom Air Force Base, MA, and reclassified MGUE Inc 2 as a non-space program. The action combined Inc 2 and its follow-ons with MGUE Inc 1 follow-on efforts within a new M-Code Aviation Receiver Enterprise (MARE) Program Office.

This transition is presented as part of a broader strategy to consolidate PNT programs, enhance oversight, and improve operational efficiency. However, it may have just the opposite effect.

Hanscom's well-established role in electronic defense technology and acquisition may partially explain its selection as the location for the MGUE Inc 2 and the broader MARE Program. However, this transfer highlights a continued fragmentation of the GPS enterprise—once unified under the GPS Joint Program Office (JPO), which became the GPS Directorate in 2006 and was later integrated into SMC 2.0 in 2019.

It is not an overstatement to say that the GPS Program owes its success to the leadership that established and maintained the GPS Joint Program

Office for decades. Those management teams established a common sense of purpose that enabled development and fielding of revolutionary GPS technology throughout the DoD, with our allies, and with civil and scientific users around the world.

Now, just as the GPS and the broader PNT Enterprise are facing both acquisition and operational challenges, these decisions appear to portend a new, more disjointed approach to PNT oversight and program management. It is vital that these developments must be highlighted to leadership and closely monitored to ensure our warfighters are not left without the reliable and resilient PNT capabilities needed to conduct operations in ever more challenging NAVWAR environments. That task belongs with the PNT Oversight Council.

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The PNT Oversight Council

The PNT Oversight Council, established under U.S. Code, is tri-chaired by the Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering, the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment, and the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Its mission is to ensure the integrity, performance, and survivability of PNT capabilities across the DoD.

One of the Council's primary objectives is to enhance the resilience and interoperability of critical navigation and timing systems. However, recent structural realignments—such as those described above—highlight the inherent risks such a fragmentation of program responsibility and authority poses for technologies such as GPS and PNT, for which continuity and interoperability across Services and platforms are essential for their success.

While intended to streamline oversight and accelerate delivery, these changes may inadvertently dilute accountability or reduce the strategic visibility of PNT across the military Services and impact the ability of warfighters to execute their missions.

In April 2023, leadership changes were approved to strengthen the Council's effectiveness and responsiveness. These adjustments reflected growing recognition of evolving threats to GPS and other PNT systems. Further, they underscore the urgent need to develop alternative PNT architectures, conduct robust performance assessments, and address systemic vulnerabilities.

Yet structural reform alone is insufficient if it is not implemented with purpose by those who are responsible for improved outcomes. The Council's success going forward will ultimately depend on sustained leadership commitment, adequate resourcing, and continued coordination across the Department. Without these, the risk only increases that the warfighter could face degraded or denied access to reliable PNT, which is one of the most foundational enablers of modern military operations.

Strategic Implications

The reforms initiated by Secretary Hegseth reflect a Department seeking greater agility and integration in the face of evolving threats.

There is logic behind consolidating program management and reevaluating advisory boards. However, there is also a clear risk that these well-intentioned changes may inadvertently weaken institutional focus on the DoD PNT Enterprise at a time when adversaries are investing heavily in GPS denial technologies and cyber-disruption tools.

We must ask the right questions: Is the DoD maintaining sufficient visibility and advocacy for PNT capabilities? Are program transitions being executed with strategic continuity in mind? Is the restructured advisory framework equipped to provide the depth of expertise needed to guide critical technologies like PNT?

Looking Ahead

The DoD is undergoing significant restructuring, with potentially far-reaching implications for PNT systems and warfighter access to these essential capabilities. While efforts to modernize and streamline the force are commendable, such reforms must not come at the expense of foundational warfighting enablers like PNT.

Sustaining and protecting investments in military GPS and the national timing infrastructure demand constant vigilance, cross-Service coordination, and unwavering commitment from leadership at all levels.

The forthcoming National Defense Strategy offers a timely opportunity to reaffirm PNT as a strategic priority. Active engagement from government, industry, and military stakeholders will be essential to ensure that ongoing realignments strengthen—and not inadvertently undermine—U.S. dominance in this critical domain.