

by Mackenzie Eaglen

In today's rapidly evolving threat environment, America's ability to secure its vital national security interests will continue to rely upon a superior military. This includes the U.S. Air Force's ability to sustain a world-class fighter fleet--in both quality and quantity--characterized by unrivaled firepower and unmatched global mobility. The Air Force has served as a joint enabler in current operations and provided the underpinning of American national defense since the end of World War II. In addition to delivering immense payloads, the United States Air Force is the fastest transporter and facilitator of military power in the world. In addition to its ability to move military hardware and people around the globe and secure access to space and cyberspace, the Air Force maintains a unique capacity for joint warfighting.

President Obama's fiscal year 2010 defense budget request, however, threatens the Air Force's ability to continue to meet the nation's requirements. Over the past several years, flat and declining Air Force budgets have only increased the average age of tanker, fighter, and bomber aircraft. While unmanned systems and fifth-generation capabilities are critical, efforts to acquire these capabilities must not come at the expense of modernization. Congress must provide adequate funding to maintain the long-term tactical and strategic strength of the U.S. Air Force. Members must reverse the proposals to cut or delay Air Force modernization, particularly those ending the F-22 production at just 186 aircraft and delaying the next-generation bomber development. Congress must also reverse the looming Air Force tactical fighter gap by purchasing additional fourth-generation aircraft above the President's budget request for fiscal year 2010 or risk damaging the Air National Guard's air sovereignty mission.

Aging Aircraft Are Only Getting Older Faster

Often overlooked, the Air Force has been operating at a wartime pace since Operation Desert Shield in 1991, flying an average 2.3 million flight hours per year with 2,500 fewer aircraft.[1] In addition to Operation Desert Storm and other missions throughout the 1990s in Bosnia and Kosovo, Air Force pilots enforced no-fly zones for 17 years in the skies over Iraq right up until 2003, when its obligations were again dramatically elevated.

Since 2003, the Air Force has taken on new responsibilities on the ground in both Afghanistan and Iraq, in many cases serving in lieu of soldiers to relieve the strain on the U.S. Army. According to the Congressional Research Service, there were 13,800 Air Force personnel on the ground in Afghanistan in 2008, nearly on par with Army troop levels and more than 3.5 times the number of Marines.[2] In addition, there were 9,000 airmen on the ground in Iraq, just under half the number of deployed Marines.[3]

All the services are under stress, wearing out equipment much more quickly, and experiencing reduced readiness levels across the board. The Air Force and the Navy, however, have had to

live with flat or declining budgets for the past several years. As a result, modernization is the primary budget casualty. Gradually falling budgets have led Air Force leaders to sign up for a future fighter fleet that will force those in uniform to bear increased risk.

In The Washington Post earlier this year, Air Force Chief of Staff General Norton Schwartz, along with Air Force Secretary Michael Donley, wrote that "within a fixed Air Force and overall Defense Department budget, our challenge is to decide among many competing needs. Buying more F-22s means doing less of something else." [4]

With so many aircraft approaching retirement and the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter not yet fully operational, the need for additional fighters is immediate. According to the Congressional Budget Office, fiscal year 2009 Navy and Air Force plans show a fighter gap stretching out 25 years as old planes retire in droves and the new F-35s trickle into operation. [5] Capping F-22 production at 186 aircraft is a move that will undoubtedly undermine the mainstay of American military preponderance that has existed for the last 70 years. [6]

The F-22 is not the only Air Force program hostage to budget constraints. Most of the Air Force's fighter, bomber, and tanker aircraft fleets are older than their pilots. Indeed, the average age of the B-52 bomber is 31 years old and "designed to handle air defenses that today are considered museum pieces." [7] Other average ages of critical aircraft include:

- * B-1 Lancer bomber: 20 years;
- * C-5 Galaxy transport: 21 years old;
- * KC-135 tanker: 44 years old.

Yet President Obama has proposed delaying the Air Force's plans for a next-generation bomber, claiming that the requirement and technology need to be better understood, even though there is little serious debate about either issue. In order to effectively meet national security needs--and more specifically to ensure that this leg of the triad remains a credible nuclear deterrent--the Air Force requires a bomber fleet that is on par with the realities of modern-day air defenses.

Defense Budget Cuts While Domestic Spending Explodes Puts America at Risk

Strategy always changes faster than force structure. Accurately predicting national security threats and requirements 20 years from now is not only difficult but also something America has repeatedly failed to do well in the past. Building a force that maintains essential and enduring core military capabilities allows the U.S. armed forces to respond to both expected and unexpected scenarios or threats. Unfortunately, budget restraints are driving Air Force policy decisions as opposed to genuine national defense requirements.

Winning America's wars is a primary national security priority. Maintaining counterinsurgency and counterterrorism capabilities after Iraq and Afghanistan is simply smart policy. But funding for today's operations does not have to come at the expense of investment in tomorrow's troops

and equipment. America can afford to invest in the present and the future U.S. military.

Congress should provide additional modernization funds to the U.S. Air Force in the fiscal year 2010 defense authorization and appropriations bills to purchase more F-22s, begin research and development on the next-generation bomber program, and acquire more aircraft to address the looming fighter gap's dramatic impact on the Air National Guard. Giving the Air Force adequate resources will demonstrate Congress' commitment to the Air Force and acknowledge its critical role as both an enabler and facilitator of American military power and a strong national defense.

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