

Statement of Chairman Adam Smith
House Armed Services Committee Hearing on:
“Fiscal Year 2024 Department of Air Force Hearing”
April 27, 2022

The President’s fiscal year (FY) 2024 defense budget request reflects the Administration’s continued emphasis on the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as the pacing challenge, maintaining the ability to address the acute threat of Russia as it conducts an unlawful and immoral war in Ukraine, while continuing to deter across the broad spectrum of threats the US faces in each Combatant Commander’s area of responsibility. Within the request, the Department of the Air Force has prioritized core missions across both air superiority and space domains to address the need for next-generation systems by increasing their research and development efforts in critical areas, such as tactical and strategic aircraft, joint all domain command and control (JAD-C2), intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, satellite communications, missile warning and track, and ground infrastructure to support the future space architecture.

To begin, while the Air Force continues to increase retention bonuses for pilots, a critical shortage remains, especially in the fighter community. Increased retention rates have helped stabilize the force, but airline industry’s hiring and salaries continue to outpace the Air Force’s efforts. I’m eager to hear what is being done differently to recruit, train, and retain more pilots.

I understand the need and have generally supported requests to retire older systems that are less relevant to the modern operational environment, and it appears that the Air Force is making sound decisions with its plan this year to retire A-10s and F-15Cs. What’s equally important, however, is that the Air Force replaces these aircraft with systems that are relevant in a highly contested environment. I am pleased to see that the Air Force budget request includes consistent F-35 procurement numbers over the next 5-years at 48 aircraft per year, especially since we may finally deliver the long-awaited Block 4 capabilities. However, the Air Force’s plan for F-15EX continues to fluctuate from year to year. Last year, the Air Force planned to stop procurement of F-15EX at 80-aircraft. Now, the Air Force plans to stop procurement at 104 aircraft, which would be 40-aircraft short of the initial requirement. I’d like to know from our witnesses today what’s changed over the last year regarding this aircraft.

Further, the FY2024 budget request continues to make multi-billion-dollar investments in the air and land legs of the nuclear triad. Across the Sentinel intercontinental ballistic missile, B-21 bomber, and Long-Range Standoff (LRSO) cruise missile programs, which are all scheduled to complete development and enter into production in the next few years, it is imperative that the Air Force effectively manage cost and schedule on these efforts. To that end, it is concerning to me that the Air Force is already experiencing issues and delays on the Sentinel program. On top of its own programs, the Air Force’s nuclear modernization relies heavily on the National Nuclear Security Administration to execute several technically challenging warhead development programs that are facing equally concerning delays and cost increases. In the late 2020s and 2030s, the Air Force will face an extremely difficult task of transitioning bomber bases and silo fields while operating both simultaneously for several years. I look forward to hearing how the Air Force plans to manage these parallel efforts, their transition, and ways that the Air Force can reduce costs across the lifecycle of these programs.

As we turn to space, two years ago, the Administration made a significant shift to a proliferated, low earth orbit constellation to meet a more resilient and robust space architecture. And just a few weeks ago, the first 10 satellites were launched 31 months after contract award. While I know there will be cases in which large, exquisite satellites that require a more “traditional” approach to acquisition are still needed, the example the Space Development Agency has set is proof that DoD can move fast to deliver capability. I look forward to hearing from the Space Force on how they are looking to continue the transition to a more resilient architecture across their various mission areas, including how they intend to protect our on-orbit systems today. I am also interested in hearing about how the future National Security Space Launch Phase 3 strategy is going to fully leverage commercial capabilities and increase competition to drive down launch costs while maintaining assured access to space.

Lastly, the Air Force is being spread thin as it focuses on modernization and recapitalization while dealing with an aging fleet and pilot and workforce shortages. It is important that the Air Force maintains the right balance between addressing current readiness shortfalls and generating future readiness to meet our pacing challenge with the PRC. Over the last several years, we have seen a decrease in flying hours, parts wearing out sooner than expected leading to more depot level maintenance, and increased sustainment costs to maintain legacy platforms. In addition, the Air Force is losing experienced maintainers to the airlines who are hiring at levels that haven't been seen in decades. I look forward to hearing how the Air Force will balance the apparent readiness gaps between current versus future needs.

Thank you, and I look forward to receiving today's testimony on all of these issues.

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