

**Opening Statement (as Prepared)**

**Ranking Member Joe Courtney**

**Seapower and Projection Forces Subcommittee Hearing:**

**“Air Force Projection Forces Aviation Programs and Capabilities Related to  
the President’s 2023 Budget Request”**

**April 18, 2023**

Good afternoon.

The programs under our subcommittee’s jurisdiction provide the Department of Defense with capabilities to project power and support operations around the globe. Investing in procurement, research and development, and modernization of our bombers, tankers, and airlift aircraft supports implementation of the National Defense Strategy, fielding systems and technology necessary to deter our adversaries and support the international rules-based order.

As our subcommittee continues to move forward on the next NDAA, we – like we have done in past budgets – will make the necessary adjustments on a bipartisan basis and ensure we are investing in the right efforts to sustain our technological supremacy and unmatched logistical advantage.

Just this last December, the Air Force unveiled the B-21 Raider in Palmdale, a monumental occasion after a 7-year effort of development and eventual procurement of this long strike capability. I commend you for your efforts in ensuring the program's success and look forward to the many future milestones, including the first flight expected later this year, and full rate production in the future.

In this year’s budget request, the Air Force invests another \$5.3 billion for the B-21, supporting low-rate initial production, advance procurement of long lead items and research and development for capability modernization ensuring we maintain scheduled delivery for their fielding timeline. The Air Force continues to significantly invest in modernization efforts to upgrade the capabilities of the bomber fleet to maintain air superiority against our adversaries and outpace their rapidly developing and increasingly capable forces, we must not cede our advantage. These upgrades will complement new families-of-systems, like the B-

21 which emerges as the worlds most advanced long-range bomber and continues to uphold U.S superiority in this essential domain.

The Air Force continues to invest in the KC-46 Pegasus and requests 15 aircraft for FY24 – as well as procurement of long lead items in support of future year aircraft production. These investments protect our refueling capabilities and ensure their future roles supporting next generation aircraft across the Joint Force. The Department and industry have worked collaboratively in finding a solution to concerns regarding the aircrafts remote visual system – now dubbed RVS 2.0 - to provide high-definition cameras and provide operators a full-color, sharp image as they conduct air refueling operations once kits are installed in 2026.

To that end, I welcome the Air Force’s recent decision on a path forward for a tanker roadmap – launching early analysis of alternatives for the Next-Generation Air Refueling System (NGAS), eyeing an initial capability in 2040. I hope the witnesses will address this today.

Finally, the issue of the Air Force’s plans to sustain the tactical airlift fleet for the National Guard has been a long-standing concern for this subcommittee. In the past, it has been the job of Congress to direct spending for the procurement of additional C-130Js and investments in upgrades to in-service aircraft. Just last year, it was Congress that added 16 J-models for the Air National Guard and 4 J-models for the Air Force Reserve, while also leading – again – the effort to procure propeller and engine enhancement packages. This effort’s importance is highlighted no better than the decision to ground C-130H models due to cracked propeller blades and the industrial base capacity to retrofit modernized propellers. I remain frustrated by the lack of a path forward on this issue that doesn’t rely on annual congressional plus-ups for additional aircraft and upgraded propellers.

With that, I yield back.