



Tactical Aircraft Costs Limit Broader DoD Modernization

As the U.S. defense establishment designs the military for the 21st century, there seems to be general agreement that, although the situations in which U.S. military forces might be committed are highly uncertain, there is very little possibility that the United States will face an adversary with comparable air weapons during the next 10 to 15 years. Why, then, is the Department of Defense investing so much to improve our tactical air forces, an area where the U.S. military overmatches all potential adversaries? No one argues that air superiority and air-to-ground strikes are not critical to achieve military victory with minimal U.S. losses. However, few outside the Air Force suggest that our capability to achieve this is threatened now or in the foreseeable future. Yet the most costly weapons being developed during the next 10 to 15 years are new tactical fighters. Approximately 37 percent of the funding allocated to the top 20 DoD programs during the next 15 years is dedicated to three new air superiority and strike aircraft: the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF), the F-22, and the F/A-18E/F.

The defense budget has been slashed by more than one-third during this decade and will likely be reduced further as the government attempts to balance the budget and still provide the social programs the country has come to expect. In an era of tight defense budgets and demanding social programs, can we afford these high dollar aircraft programs? Now is the time to decide at what point "enough is enough." In answering, consider that the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Navy air forces are nearly the largest and, without question, the most modern and best trained air forces in the world. Only China and Russia have aircraft inventories even close to that of the United States; in terms of quality and modernization their air

forces are no match for the United States. Almost all U.S. aircraft are fourth- or fifth-generation (F-16, F-15 and F-117) while less than one percent of the Chinese aircraft and one-third of the Russian aircraft are that modern.

The Army, on the other hand, although well trained and highly effective, is only the eighth largest in the world. The countries of China, India, North Korea, South Korea, Turkey, Pakistan, and Vietnam all have active armies larger than that of the United States. While we currently have one of the world's most modern armies, many countries are aggressively procuring modern, ground-based weapons that are much more affordable than modern tactical aircraft.

There is a fundamental anomaly in the Defense Department's modernization program: the Air Force and Navy have three new aircraft under development for their already dominant air forces, while the Army and Marines struggle to modernize the nation's ground forces to maintain a dominant capability. More than \$350 billion will be needed to purchase these new aircraft, and more than that will be needed to operate and maintain them.

The point here is not to disparage the value of the U.S. air forces' contribution to national security — about which there is no argument. Without question, the United States should maintain the largest and strongest air arm in the world. There is a question, however, whether all three very expensive new aircraft are needed to do this. The U.S. Air Force, for example, spends more on research and development alone than the Army spends on research, development *and* procurement. Of the funding allocated to develop and procure the 20 most expensive programs, for example, the Army's share is only eight percent. Because of the Army's and Marine Corps'

more . . .

austere acquisition budgets, it takes more than a decade to buy and distribute modern weapons (armored vehicles, artillery, helicopters, new munitions, etc.); the quantity purchased usually equips less than one-half the force.

DoD is banking on the ability of future U.S. air forces to achieve air supremacy and to inflict major losses on the enemy forces. Hopefully, proponents of the capability of air power to defeat enemy ground forces will finally be correct; its claimed effectiveness has not yet materialized. It is likely that our Army and Marine ground forces will be significantly outnumbered in any future major regional conflict, and they will need all the assistance they can get to overcome their quantitative deficiency. It is also clear, even if air power is as effective as currently claimed by its advocates, a small (five-division) deployed Army in a single major regional conflict may be right on the margin of being able to achieve an overwhelming victory with reasonable risk.

It is critical that we take all necessary actions to keep our air forces the best in the world. However, we need to ask ourselves, "How much overmatch in air capability can the United States afford?" In other words, we must be sure that the U.S. citizens get the best return from their tax dollars allocated to defense. Investments should be made to ensure that future military forces can dominate over the full spectrum of possible situations instead of having excess capability in a few areas at the expense of insufficient critical warfighting capabilities in others.

Some of the \$350 billion dollars being devoured by new tactical air programs are desperately needed to modernize other equally important areas of our armed forces. By funding only two of the three new tactical air programs, enough money can be reallocated to accomplish other modernization needs and ensure that U.S. armed forces stay dominant over land sea, and air through the year 2020.

###