

Competing airpower priorities; Fuzzy Math in Congress; Will LRS-B become a bill payer? Playing games with the budget

CAN THE LRS-B GET THROUGH ... TO CONGRESS?

Now that the Air Force has done the heavy lifting of holding a competition to design and develop the Long-Range Strike Bomber, can it now get Congress to fund building it? Maybe, but USAF will have to do a lot explaining about the program that, so far, it hasn't seemed willing to do.

At an Air Force Association Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies seminar on "What's Next for the Long-Range Strike Bomber?" airpower experts said they worry about persuading Congress that the bomber is really needed and that the new jet may not be able to compete successfully against other USAF priorities.

"Congress doesn't perceive it and Congress doesn't believe it" when the Air Force argues that the LRS-B is critical to penetrating modern and future anti-access, area-denial (A2/AD) systems, according to Mackenzie Eaglen of the American Enterprise Institute. She said Congress is used to the Air Force prevailing quickly and decisively in air combat anywhere in the world, and if there is no glaring reason to doubt that will continue, no solution is really needed. Members and their staffs tend to roll their eyes when USAF explains that near-peer adversaries like China and Russia have gone to school on the Air Force's capabilities and prepared countermeasures that will be tough to overcome, she said.

To many members, the fact that USAF faced no air threat in Afghanistan and Iraq over the last 15 years means there's no credible challenge anywhere else, either, Eaglen said. To them, China is still a military backwater and Russia's still suffering from post-Cold War economic paralysis, when in reality both countries—and others, like Iran—have built up modern air defenses and modern fighter aircraft that could hold all current US bombers but the B-2 at bay.

"That question will plague this program," she warned.

Moreover, she said the Air Force has presented the LRS-B poorly so far. Stating a "range" of 80 to 100 LRS-Bs as the required buy is "squishy," she said, suggesting that USAF has not done the required analysis to establish a firm figure. Congress will "automatically" revert to the lower figure of 80, when the actual need is probably closer to 175, she predicted. In addition, USAF has set a cost cap on the program, "tying one hand behind its back." Cost caps invariably are broken—hurting USAF's cred-

ibility—and if the bomber must be given substantial new, unplanned capabilities to keep up with a rapidly evolving threat, the money won't be there.

"The cost cap is going to be a huge problem," she asserted.

The Air Force budget is "not equipped" to handle the LRS-B anyway, Eaglen said, because the service already has more "priority" programs than it has money to buy. The bomber will be competing with the F-35 fighter,



USAF photo by A1C Joel Pfister

How many LRS-Bs does the Air Force need? More than the tiny B-2 fleet.

the KC-46 tanker, and new starts like the T-X trainer, a JSTARS ground radar airplane, and the new Combat Rescue Helicopter.

Given that their purchase periods perfectly overlap, "the bomber will compete with the F-35 forever," she said.

Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter said at AFA's Air & Space Conference in September that he won't entertain the notion, put forward by USAF Secretary Deborah Lee James, of creating a set-aside account, over and above the regular procurement accounts, to modernize the nuclear triad.

"You don't get money by relabeling it," Carter said, insisting that funds for a new bomber and Air Force ICBM will have to come out of the same pot that funds the many new, needed conventional programs.

A STANDOFFISH ATTITUDE

Retired Lt. Gen. David A. Deptula, dean of the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies, made the point that Congress will also likely revert to fuzzy math in its deliberations about the bomber.

Congress, he said, will look at the cost of stealthy standoff weapons that could be hung on old warhorses like the B-52 and reason that it's cheaper to buy the missiles than a new bomber.

That math holds for a campaign lasting less than a couple of weeks, he said. But in a major theater war—“and who thinks we’re done with those?” he asked rhetorically—cheap direct-attack munitions carried by a stealthy penetrating bomber is a “far more cost-effective” way to go. In 1991’s Gulf War, there were “40,000 to 50,000 aimpoints” that had to be hit, he said. That would be “prohibitive” if conducted with stealth cruise missiles costing \$1 million apiece, versus satellite guided bombs costing \$16,000 each.

Not only that, but the Air Force has failed to explain to Congress that the bomber does more than simply haul bombs. Operating deep behind enemy lines, it will be a “long-range sensor-shooter” that collects vast amounts of information about the enemy, serving as a communications node and dramatically enhancing the capabilities of all the other systems in the fight, providing a degree of interoperability among allies never previously possible, he said.

Deptula argued that the LRS-B and other new systems are “the baseline of the ‘Third Offset’ strategy”—the Pentagon’s shorthand for a rapidly evolving technology base that stays at least one step ahead of the competition.

Without the Air Force explaining that the new aircraft is far more than just a truck, to Congress it will just be “the latest version of the P-47,” Deptula said.

Teal Group analyst Richard L. Aboulafia pointed out that while Congress likes to think of technologies in the lab as technologies deployed, this is false. “Technological superiority,” he said, “really comes down to individual programs, and unless they work out, we really don’t have any.” Failing to build the bomber will mean the US will have to limp along on, at best, the 1980s-era technology of the B-2. The B-52 and B-1 have long since been relegated to standoff or low-threat missions.

Aboulafia also noted that the Air Force’s resolute silence on any details of the program—who Northrop Grumman’s teammates are, where the components will be built, what congressional districts will benefit—hobbles the program and puts it at a distinct disadvantage compared to competing programs like the KC-46 or F-35. Without that information, there will be no advocates, no “champions” for the bomber besides the Air Force, he said. This is a recipe for cancellation or, as Deptula said, “another fiasco” like the B-2, of which only 21 were built.

Aboulafia sketched out four LRS-B outcomes. In the first case, “the budget topline grows,” allowing for more programs like the bomber. In the second, the KC-46, F-35, C-130, and other programs “are stretched out to make more room for the bomber.” In the third, the bomber is identified as “a national budget priority, ... and that’s not going to happen,” Aboulafia asserted, and in the fourth, “the LRS-B becomes a bill payer” for other defense programs. Because it speaks more to future needs—like the ability to strike worldwide while operating from home base—“the only one that makes sense is that the F-35 gets squeezed,” Aboulafia said.

BUDGET BADMINTON

President Obama signed a two-year, bipartisan omnibus budget agreement with Congress Nov. 2, allowing a degree of planning in military spending that the Pentagon hasn’t had since the 2011 Budget Control Act. The separate National Defense Authorization Act, however, turned out to be a game of political badminton, with each side finding reasons to whack the spending plan back over the net.

The overall budget deal “should finally free us from the cycle of shutdown threats and last-minute fixes. It allows us to ... plan for the future,” Obama said before signing

the bill, which averted the danger of a national default. It did so by lifting the debt ceiling, and freed the Pentagon from having to contend with another ruinous imposition of budget sequester for two years.

The budget impasse has effectively been kicked down the road until after the 2016 elections.

Obama vetoed the first version of the NDAA sent to him, however, because he objected to certain provisions. The spending plan—authorizing but not appropriating funding, and more of a policy document—provided the military almost exactly the amount of money proposed by Obama, but by funding a large number of “base budget” items in the Overseas Contingency Operations section. The OCO is supposed to pay for beans-and-bullets needs in operations such as Afghanistan and in the air war against ISIS, not for staples like new equipment and training.

Obama also objected to conditions preventing him from closing the Guantanamo Bay prison camp and a requirement that he provide lethal aid to Ukraine, among other problematic items.

Congress created the BCA in 2011 as a stick to get itself to agree on a budget, a feat that partisanship had made impossible. It held hostage the social programs favored by Democrats and defense programs favored by Republicans, inflicting steep, automatic cuts across the board if no proper budget agreement could be reached. The BCA didn’t work—principally because some Republicans felt they could live with defense cuts if it meant lowering the federal deficit.

The resultant sequester was grossly inefficient, breaking some programs—many that had to be renegotiated at higher cost—and causing maintenance and training backlogs that have still not been worked off. The Air Force had to ground 17 squadrons when sequester hit hard in 2013.

The omnibus deal raised federal budget caps by \$50 billion in 2016 and \$30 billion in FY 2017. Under the NDAA, the Pentagon would see a \$25 billion increase over BCA levels; OCO would have increased by \$38 billion.

Obama called for Congress to get rid of the BCA, calling the work-around of using the OCO “gimmicks.”

“Let’s do this right,” he said. “Let’s have a budget that properly funds our national security as well as economic security. Let’s ... reform our military spending to make it sustainable over the long term.”

In mid-November, as the Senate passed an altered NDAA, informed by the two-year omnibus budget bill, that put less funding in the OCO and trimmed \$5 billion from elsewhere in military accounts.

Sen. Jack Reed (D-R.I.), ranking member on the SASC, said the revised bill “responsibly provides the military with the resources and clarity it needs without an overreliance on OCO.”

Obama had to accept some things he didn’t like, though. The bill prohibited the Air Force from prematurely retiring the A-10 fleet and seven EC-130H Compass Call electronic warfare aircraft. The bill also expressed the sense of Congress that it remains skeptical of the value of base closings—a key request of the Pentagon—and wants more comprehensive studying of the effect of base closings on their surrounding communities. The Air Force, in particular, has pleaded to close bases, saying it has cut force structure by almost half since the early 1990s, but as only been allowed to close 20 percent of its bases over the same period. The money saved by closing the bases could be applied to increasing force structure and making better use of remaining infrastructure, the service says.

The NDAA cut \$230 million from the Air Force’s Long-Range Strike Bomber program, but without prejudice. The Air Force said it agreed with the mark because it was unable to spend that amount on the program in FY 2016. ★