

Manpower deficits; Air supremacy up for grabs; Visions of JSTARS; Pick two on space launch

QUIET CRISIS

The Air Force has been hit with heavy demands and insufficient resources for so long that there are no easy solutions to its manpower problems. At the same time, the service finds itself challenged to perform one of its top core functions: gaining air superiority in any conflict, said Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh III in an address to the Atlantic Council in December.

Speaking as the Defense Department puts the finishing touches on its Fiscal 2017 spending plan—the last Air Force budget Welsh will have a hand in, as he likely retires next summer—Welsh also wondered out loud where the money's going to come from to modernize the antiquated elements of USAF's nuclear deterrent. He also warned that the nation shouldn't put too much reliance on allies to share the military burden.

The nature of airpower has changed considerably in a short period of time, Welsh said. The “variety” of threats “is exploding on us, [and] the cost of everything is up significantly.” Meanwhile, “the size of the Air Force is down.”

Over the last 25 years, during which USAF was constantly involved in combat, “we have cut 200,000 airmen from our Active Duty Air Force,” Welsh said. “That is 40 percent of the force gone. There is no excess capacity. You can't take people from one mission area and throw them at a problem in another one anymore.”

In intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, for which combatant commanders have an unquenchable thirst, Welsh said, “We have built a 35,000-person ISR enterprise over the last 10 years or so,” even as “we have cut the Air Force [by] 50,000 people, which is essentially an 85,000-person cut to the rest of the mission areas” in the service.

“We're at 82 to 85 percent manning levels in virtually every mission area,” he acknowledged, and there seem to be no higher levels coming. While there is heavy effort being applied to figuring out “different ways of using our people in a more efficient way,” he also admitted that failure to do so “will wear them out.”

He added that “if we lose them, we lose everything. We just can't afford to let that happen.”

While Welsh said he hopes the damage to morale and capability is not “irreversible,” he warned that manning “certainly is not going to reverse and go back to where it was before. We are not adding 200,000 airmen in the foreseeable future.”

Welsh himself pushed hard for personnel cuts in 2013, when sequester forced USAF to ground more than a dozen squadrons of aircraft, and sequester seemed here to stay. At the time, though, it was thought there would be a reset period after large-scale withdrawals from Afghanistan and a reduction, particularly, in the need to maintain high rates of remotely piloted aircraft combat air patrols. The reset never came; the anti-ISIS fight—conducted almost exclusively from the air—began before the largest groups of combat troops came out of Afghanistan.

Even as manpower levels have dwindled, “our Air Force systems and infrastructure have aged ... dramatically,” Welsh said. And while that has been happening, adversaries around the world have stepped up their technological capability.

“It's important for us to understand” in any discussion of the “Force of the Future” that “the capability gap” between the US and its adversaries “is closing, and it is closing fast. If we don't pay attention to this, airpower will no longer be an asymmetric advantage for the US military. The impact of that,” he warned, “could be catastrophic.”

The other services depend on the Air Force to control the sky to allow them “freedom to maneuver, freedom from attack,” Welsh said. If USAF can't do that, “the US way of war will have to be adjusted.”

“One of the real truisms of modern warfare is that without airpower, you will lose, and losing is not an option for us.”

THE GHOST OF GATES

Keeping air supremacy is “the biggest concern that we have,” he explained. “We have to at least be able to provide local air superiority,” he asserted, meaning an ability “to take apart new and integrated air defense systems that are much more capable than they had been in the past.” While this could be done with old equipment, “it would ... cost us a lot more in terms of blood, sweat, and tears to get it done.” USAF shouldn't get to that point, he said.

Welsh said the Air Force doesn't have “enough F-22s to provide air superiority in a theater of operations.” The decision by former Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates to end F-22 production of the Raptor buy at 187 aircraft “took away our ability to do” theater-wide air superiority with the F-22, “which had been the plan. And so we have to augment the F-22 ... with something else.” The other services don't have enough fighters to lend the Air Force for this mission, so it means USAF must upgrade the F-15C and keep it in service well past its planned retirement. That's not a free option, though: Without AESA radars, new weapons, and other improvements—funding for which is iffy—the F-15C, as it is now, “will not be competitive in another three to five years,” Welsh asserted.

The F-35, which is stealthy and in production, wasn't designed for air superiority, but “we're going to have to use it for that,” Welsh said. The F-35 was meant to be “a data integration platform that was multipurpose, ... able to do the precision work against integrated air defense systems and keep targets at risk and be a jack-of-all trades.” Now it will have to be an air superiority machine as a primary mission, likely replacing the F-15C in that role eventually, Welsh said.

He acknowledged that with the Pacific Pivot, the US “took our eye off the ball for a while” with regard to Russia, saying now that Russia is “refocused” and improving its military capabilities, the US must move quickly to stay ahead.

Welsh warned against putting too much reliance on partnering with allies and asking them to share the burden. Some—he

mentioned Denmark—are “completely dependable, incredibly capable,” but can only contribute “a four-ship a day.” They “can’t bring the capacity they would like to bring and that’s what the US Air Force tends to bring to an air campaign.” And some true-blue friends simply won’t “go globally with us. It’s just not in their national interest. ... We [have] got to be careful about the idea that we can always have a partner plug in.” The Air Force must always have the ability to go where it needs to, in numbers, whether there’s a friendly host country in the neighborhood or not, Welsh argued.

Asked about USAF’s new cruise missile, the Long-Range Standoff weapon (LRSO), Welsh said the service is not yet discussing it “out loud.” But he took the opportunity to point out that US Strategic Command, not the Air Force, sets requirements and numbers for things like nuclear bombers and missiles, both ground-based and air launched. Adm. Cecil D. Haney, STRATCOM chief, puts “a very high priority” on the LRSO and Welsh said USAF and STRATCOM will likely jointly “keep options open” about whether LRSO will yield a conventional as well as a nuclear variant.

More broadly, Welsh said it’s “a lot of money to do everything” necessary to modernize the Air Force and Navy nuclear deterrent. It’ll likely be the Secretary of Defense, after several years of debate, who decides “the priorities” among a long list of needed items, such as “nuclear submarines, long-range strike bombers, LRSO, tail kits, B61s,” and recapitalization of the nuclear infrastructure, such as bomb making and testing facilities.

“We’re talking a lot of cabbage,” he said.

NOT SO FAST ON JSTARS

While the Air Force fully understands what it wants and needs in a replacement for the E-8 JSTARS fleet—the service’s No. 4 acquisition priority—the Pentagon in November was still vigorously debating how the program should go forward. Senior leaders hinted it might not get into the Fiscal 2017 budget request.

William A. LaPlante, who left the job of USAF’s top acquisition executive in November, said that in the run-up to the 2017 budget choices, which are usually resolved around Christmas, there was still argument “outside the Air Force on whether you do this or you do other things.”

Speaking with reporters on the eve of his departure from the job, which he’d held for three years, LaPlante said the Air Force “is completely set on the requirement” for JSTARS recapitalization, which it determined, through a series of analyses of alternatives, to be a business jet-size aircraft with an

under-fuselage radar. That vision is one shared by combatant commanders, LaPlante said.

“The Air Force, and most of the classic warfighters, ... see it as a [battle] management platform—command and control,” but in other specialties, such as the Intelligence Community, “there are people who want to trade it for [the] unmanned Global Hawk, as a sensor,” or for other applications more finely tuned to “their kind” of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.

LaPlante said, “Those debates keep happening in a tough budget environment,” and he suggested the argument might not end in time for the budget call. He insisted, though, that the senior Pentagon leadership and Congress have provided “bipartisan” support for JSTARS recap.

Industry has also pressed the Air Force, saying the project can move faster than it has, but the delay is “not us,” LaPlante said. “We are all in.”

Welsh, speaking to the Atlantic Council, said the COCOMs have set “a real clear requirement” for JSTARS recap as a battle management platform and “want the capability to continue to be available to them in some way.”

If the issue is not resolved in time for the 2017 budget, he said, “we will keep the idea in the budget so that the idea doesn’t go away, because that’s what the combatant commanders want us to do.”

TWO OUT OF THREE

LaPlante, asked to give his assessment of the state of Air Force acquisition, said the enterprise is “in good shape,” having exploited acquisition reforms and “cost realism” efforts that have saved “billions” of dollars, which were returned to various portfolios to buy, for instance, more munitions.

The latest effort, “should schedule,” is seeking to tighten up time frames—again, with the goal of spending less money. Part of the problem is that if programs go faster, there’s no money in earlier budgets to conduct them. Planners expected to spend those funds several years later, leaving them scrambling to find cash if the project goes quicker. USAF will “incentivize” speedier programs and leave budget flexibility to accommodate them, he said.

LaPlante also expressed skepticism that the Air Force will be able to accommodate demands from Congress to find new launch services that increase competition, “get us off” the RD-180 Russian-made rocket engine, and ensure two independent ways to get payloads to orbit.

“We’re struggling” to fulfill the law that mandates this approach, LaPlante said. He’s gotten “emotional” about the issue in explaining the situation to Congress “over and over,” saying it takes time to have competitions, certify new entrants, and get them on contract. In the meantime, few realistic RD-180 alternatives are available.

“I don’t think you can do all three in the next four or five years,” LaPlante said. “You’re going to have to pick two of those three.”

LaPlante said he was leaving because of a promise to his family that he would only do the job for three years, and he even overstayed that limit a bit to make sure the Long-Range Strike Bomber contract was awarded. He told *Air Force Magazine* he’s confident the award to Northrop Grumman will stand up against Boeing’s protest because during the last few months before the award, “we made sure every question they had was answered, and that every answer was documented. ... We took the time to make sure it was done right.”

USAF photo by Scott M. Ash



USAF is keeping mum on the Long-Range Standoff Weapon.