

Will the F-35 Remain Joint?

The Senate Armed Services Committee wants to abolish the F-35 strike fighter program office, transferring oversight of the massive, multiservice program to the Navy and Air Force in approximately three years. The SASC proposes this in the hope of cutting overhead costs and improving management of the most expensive weapons system in Pentagon history.

Tucked in the panel's 1,600-page Fiscal 2017 defense authorization bill is a provision that would require the Defense Secretary to stand down the program office, currently led by Air Force Lt. Gen. Christopher C. Bogdan, within six months of the Milestone C production decision scheduled for April 2019.

The Air Force and Navy would then create separate program offices to manage the production, sustainment, and management of their respective jets. The Navy would oversee production of both the F-35B and F-35C variants, while the Air Force would be charged with the F-35A.

"The committee believes that the current consensus-driven management structure of the [F-35] program is ill-suited to what are in essence three separate aircraft programs, has led to aircraft that do not fully meet its customers' needs, and stifles the proper alignment of responsibility and accountability," according to the committee's report accompanying the bill.

In the report, the committee charged that commonality among the three variants—once a major selling feature of the joint program—never fully materialized. The program originally set out to share between 70 percent and 90 percent of its parts and technology among the variants.

In reality, the airplanes probably only have between 20 and 25 percent commonality, and that is mostly in their cockpits, the report stated, citing Bogdan as the source for those figures.

During an April hearing before his committee, Armed Services Chairman John McCain said the program merely created an "illusion of jointness," for both airplanes manufactured for the US military and those being sold to allies. The Arizona Republican has long been a critic of the program, calling it a "scandal and a tragedy with respect to cost, schedule, and performance."

"The Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps each fly primarily a single variant and have different roles and missions, concepts of operations, and deployment requirements, all leading to highly different priorities for F-35 capabilities, capacity, maintainability, and follow-on modernization," the report states, adding that "international partners have needs and priorities that differ even further."

Those differences led the committee to conclude that a joint program office was not only unnecessary, it is also overly cumbersome and impedes accountability on the individual variants within the Defense Department.

But while the committee is seeking to stand down the joint program office, it also is directing the Navy and the Air Force to figure out a way to coordinate on issues where there is commonality among the jets.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon is still paying a premium for the joint office, which employs about 2,590 (including the testing workforce) and has overhead costs totaling \$70 million a year, a figure confirmed by Bogdan at the hearing.

That price tag understates the true overhead costs of the program office, given the sheer number of people who work under Bogdan, and McCain called it "pretty disturbing." Bogdan acknowledged he didn't know whether the size of his workforce was correct or not, according to the committee report.

To boost its own ability to oversee the program, the committee also drafted a provision that would require the Defense Department to treat the follow-on modernization effort for the F-35 as its own major defense acquisition program.

The reporting and oversight mechanisms required of a so-called MDAP, which includes a business-case analysis and cost, schedule, and performance reporting, would give Congress and international partners better insight into the modernization effort. The cost of the F-35's first block upgrade alone, dubbed Block 4, is estimated to top \$8 billion.

The Block 4 program involves a long list of upgrades to the baseline Block 3F version of software and weapons that all F-35s are to have by 2018. The Block 4 improvements, coming into service every other year or so through the 2020s, include new weapons, new electronic warfare systems, and connectivity enhancements. A later Block 5 effort could feature a new engine and increased range.

At the April hearing, McCain called the plan to keep block upgrades within the F-35's master program "incredible, given the department's dismal track record on these upgrade programs."

Pentagon acquisition chief Frank Kendall said the MDAP label essentially buys a lot of statutory oversight. The department, he told the committee at the hearing, is planning to account for the upgrades separately, including an independent cost estimate. 🌟

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Critics say the F-35's joint program office is unnecessary.



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