

Disappearing fighter fleet; No rescue from a sixth gen fighter; Uptick in attack helos; Retirement plans

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DOWN THE FIGHTER HOLE

Pssst: Don't tell Russia or China, but the US isn't going to have enough fighters for a major war six years from now.

The bad news was contained in the Pentagon's latest 30-year "Annual Aviation Inventory and Funding Plan," which is supposed to come out with the annual defense budget request in January but is always a couple of months late. This year it didn't become public until late May.

Summed up, the report says the services just can't field the number of fighters Congress told them to with the dollars they expect to have. That puts them in the unsavory situation of spending scarce dollars fixing up obsolete jets to try to make the required inventory levels—and still fall short of Congress' directive—or put all their money toward new jets, and be even further short.

"The Air Force has insufficient resources to maintain the FY 2016 [National Defense Authorization Act] mandated number of fighter aircraft," 1,900, beyond the 2017-21 Future Years Defense Program, according to the report. At current funding levels, the need to retire aircraft nearing or already beyond their planned service lives outpaces procurement of new fighters, and USAF's fighter inventory keeps falling until bottoming out in 2031.

Just six years ago, USAF said 2,100 was the rock-bottom number of fighters it could field among its three components—Active, Guard, and Reserve—and still meet national strategy requirements, which have not changed. The report says, though, that the force structure envisioned "meets the national security strategy of the United States," without explaining how.

Last year, Congress asked the services for a re-evaluation of the planned F-35 buy in light of Russia's adventurism in Eastern Europe, China's belligerent island-building campaign in the South China Sea and ongoing air combat in Syria and Iraq, all of which erupted after the services set their buy objectives for the F-35. The services have dodged the question, though,

and have declined to boost their planned F-35 inventory goals, saying the planned numbers accounted for unexpected changes in the world situation.

The report didn't break out specific service inventories of fighters year-by-year, but taken as a whole—Air Force and Navy/Marine Corps—the total US fighter jet inventory will decline from 3,479 in Fiscal 2017 to 2,981 in Fiscal 2026 and will keep falling after that.

FUTURE AIR DOMINANCE

For the next 10 years, USAF will keep improving the F-22 so it remains "fully effective against the most challenging air-to-air and surface-to air threats" and will buy 243 more F-35As through 2021, the report continues. But the Air Force plans to retire A-10s during that same period and will have a net fewer fighters every year. Some older F-15s and F-16s will have to be upgraded and service structural life extended "to meet capacity demands" while research and development will focus on enhancing the fifth generation F-22 and F-35 and starting work on the "next generation air dominance" airplane.

The Air Force said in April it has abandoned the notion of looking to a future sixth generation fighter to rescue it from the rapid advance of world adversaries and will instead rely on quicker solutions to achieving air superiority in 2030. It will still aim for a sixth gen fighter, but on a longer timescale.

The Navy is in the same boat, the report says. The service "remains challenged" with retiring its F/A-18C/D 1980s-technology Hornet fighters because it's coming to the end of the production run of their successor, the F/A-18E/F SuperHornet, and "Strike Fighter Inventory Management (SFIM) risk remains high." The Navy will fly some stored aircraft to spread the pain and plans to simply fly the Super Hornets less to conserve their service lives. Even so, the Navy/Marine Corps will be 193 Super Hornets

USAF photo by SrA. Krystal Andrey



A fighter deficit is on the horizon.

short in 2026, and it will have fewer EA-18G electronic warfare jets than needed because the “demand signal exceeds current proposed force structure capacity.”

The Navy has a notional “F/A-XX” on the books, but it’s still in early stages of development. Service and Pentagon leaders have said they won’t attempt another joint fighter like the F-35 program—in which each service uses a variant of the same basic airframe—but will seek commonalities on components such as engines and software.

In all services, the plan had been to bring on F-35 fighters both earlier and faster, but delays in the program and lower budgets sharply reduced the originally planned annual buys.

The Air Force initially intended to buy 110 F-35s annually. That target declined to 80, then 60, and most recently to 48, though Air Combat Command chief Gen. Herbert J. “Hawk” Carlisle has

said that 60 remains a goal. At 48 a year, the Air Force doesn’t buy out its planned inventory of 1,763 jets until the 2040s.

The rest of the aircraft plan looks pretty benign, however. The Army and Marine Corps attack helicopter fleet is actually slated to grow about 20 percent through 2026, while most other categories—utility helicopters, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance aircraft, air refueling, etc.—all largely hover at current levels.

BOMBERS AND OTHER NEW AIRCRAFT

Tellingly, the “Long Range Strike” fleet stays locked at 157 aircraft through 2026, when the first examples of the Air Force’s B-21 bomber are supposed to be rolling off the production line. The report—which does not chart inventories 30 years away, despite the name—does not divulge whether the B-21 will be additive to the existing bomber fleet, or whether it will replace the B-52, the Air Force’s youngest model of which will be 63 years old in 2026.

In the same vein, though USAF will be nearly finished buying the planned 179 new KC-46 tankers in 2026, the report notes that “continued procurement of KC-46s beyond FY 2027 or the acquisition of a new tanker will be necessary beginning in FY 2028,” because the KC-135s still in the inventory then will be in excess of 70 years old. The KC-135s will need capability enhancement and structural help in the meantime, it says.

The T-X trainer is slated to start entering the inventory in 2024, and USAF plans to buy 350 through the mid-2030s, according to the report.

Though rebuffed from an earlier attempt to retire the U-2, USAF plans to divest the aircraft in the year between Fiscal 2019 and 2020, shifting to the RQ-4 Global Hawk for high-altitude reconnaissance. Similarly, the MQ-1 Predator, several times saved from retirement, goes away in 2018 in favor of an all-MQ-9 fleet in the medium-altitude remotely piloted aircraft regime, if USAF’s plan as stated in the report comes to fruition.

The 17 E-8C Joint STARS aircraft are to be replaced by a new aircraft starting in 2024, USAF said, but the service will hang on to the RC-135 fleet of Rivet Joint, Combat Sent, and Cobra Ball aircraft indefinitely. Funding for a replacement of the E-4B National Airborne Operations Center is in the Fiscal 2017 budget request, but USAF plans to keep upgrading the EC-130H Compass Call electronic warfare airplane through the “midterm.”

The Air Force buys its 51st and last CV-22 in Fiscal 2016; the last aircraft was an attrition reserve airplane provided by Congress. 



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