

Zoomie in charge; A long road back; Chinese stealth; Not the one, but the many

APRIL 10, 2017

WILSON'S POINTS

Heather A. Wilson, president of the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology and a former New Mexico congresswoman, is likely to be confirmed as the new Secretary of the Air Force, succeeding Deborah Lee James. Her nomination was approved by the Senate Armed Services Committee by a 22-to-five vote on April 5 and referred to the full Senate, where it was expected to pass without further debate, although no vote had been scheduled by press time.

President Trump nominated Wilson on Jan. 23, and she is the only one of his three initial service Secretary nominations to advance to the confirmation process. Vincent Viola and Philip Bilden, his first choices for Army and Navy Secretary, respectively, withdrew from their nominations over issues related to divestment of their financial holdings.

At her March 30 confirmation hearing, Wilson promised to push for a larger Air Force end strength, manage tightly a large bow wave of USAF modernization programs, and remain open to new contracting mechanisms and innovative schemes to develop combat capability quickly and at the lowest possible cost. She argued for repeal of the Budget Control Act (BCA) and its attending military sequester, saying the law is “hurting the Air Force and our ability to defend ourselves.”

She tallied the long list of modernization programs the Air Force must carry out in the next decade if it is to reverse the increasing age of its equipment, now standing at an average age of 27 years for aircraft. SASC Chairman Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) warned Wilson that if she were to be confirmed, the committee would not be patient with overly rosy reports on the health of acquisition programs and said flatly that if the BCA is not repealed, the Air Force won't be able to afford all the equipment it now plans to buy.

Wilson deflected comments on reported Air Force plans to retire the F-15C/D fleet, saying the service is properly looking at all its what-if options. However, she would be willing to consider a restart of the F-22 production line as a potential offset or competitor to the F-35. Top Air Force leaders have said that while they would like to have more F-22s, increasing the buy rate on the F-35 to replace aging fighters is a higher priority and would yield more overall combat power.

Both McCain and Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) raised an ethics question for Wilson. Almost immediately after leaving her House seat in January 2009, she took consultancy work with Sandia National Laboratories—then managed by Lockheed Martin—but according to a 2013 Department of Energy inspector general report, on an invoice she did not detail the work she performed, and the lab was criticized for keeping sloppy records.

“I did the work. I complied with the contract. ... The review found ... no fault with me, and the DOE auditors never even bothered ... to talk to me,” she said.

Wilson told McCain she did the consulting work for 18 months and acknowledged she directed Lockheed's effort to get its Sandia contract renewed without an open competition, but said she did not lobby any members of Congress in this regard. Sandia ultimately reimbursed the government \$442,877 paid to Wilson. At Sandia, Oak Ridge, and other nuclear labs, “I helped them, I think, a great deal with respect to strategic planning on nonproliferation and their nonproliferation advisory board with respect to nuclear materials, did numerous program reviews, helped with cyber security,” she told McCain. She promised him she would promote open competition on Air Force programs, but only where appropriate.

A-10 AGAIN

Asked by Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) whether the A-10 is the ideal platform for fighting ISIS and “other asymmetrical threats,” Wilson answered obliquely that “40,000 munitions have been put on the ISIS target since 2014; 90 percent of them have been delivered by the United States Air Force. It's an air commander who has to decide at the moment what platform he needs to do a particular job in a particular place. Whether that's an F-16, or ... [an] F-18, or an A-10 just ... depends on the job.”

Though she did not address the A-10 retirement question directly, she said that fourth generation aircraft will be “around for a long time” and added, “it's really important to get capabilities from the drawing board to the flight line faster. The cycle of innovation has to be faster.” With regard to an ongoing evaluation of the F-35 vs. the F/A-18, however, she said, “I don't see how we can stop modernizing and expect to win a near-peer fight. And I'd rather have that fight be unfair and on our side.” She told Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) she would put fresh priority on funding for basic and applied research.

About the Air Force's readiness crisis—with a lack of pilots and maintainers as symptoms—Wilson told McCain, “I think we all know we're not going to get out of this in a single year.”

Wilson would be the first graduate of the Air Force Academy and the third woman to hold the service's top position. She graduated from the academy in 1982 and, as a Rhodes scholar, continued her studies in England, receiving a master's and doctorate in international relations from Oxford University by 1985. Oxford published a book by Wilson, titled *International Law and the Use of Force*

by *National Liberation Movements*. She served on Active Duty seven years, as a host-country negotiator in the UK and then as a NATO defense planning officer, where she was also involved in arms control negotiations.

After the Air Force, Wilson worked for two years on the National Security staff in the George H. W. Bush White House, as director for Defense Policy and Arms Control. Afterward, in 1991, she founded Keystone International, Inc., in New Mexico, promoting scientific business development in the US and Russia.

Wilson served in the cabinet of New Mexico Gov. Gary Johnson from 1995 to 1998, as secretary for the New Mexico Children, Youth, and Families Department, a state agency overseeing the juvenile justice system and child welfare.

She quit her post to run for Congress from New Mexico's 1st District in 1998, winning a special election. She became the first woman veteran to serve in Congress, and after winning the general election later that year, served in the House for five more terms. Wilson served on the committees on Armed Services, Intelligence, and Energy and Commerce and chaired the Intelligence subcommittee on technical and tactical intelligence.

Wilson made two unsuccessful bids for the Senate from New Mexico, in 2008 and 2012. She took up the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology job in 2013.

DRAGON RACES

One of the Air Force's persistent nightmares came true in March when China, with little fanfare, declared its first stealth fighter operational. The prospect of USAF potentially confronting another air force armed with stealth aircraft, once unthinkable, is now a reality.

The dozen or so J-20 "Mighty Dragons"—announced by Chinese state television as operational on March 9—are more likely than not simply entering a period of operational test and evaluation. Their deployment at Dingxin air base in north-central China probably signals the start of exploring concepts of operation and working out how the Dragon will be integrated with other types of Chinese aircraft. From their initial perch, they pose little immediate threat to US forces in the Pacific region.

That they are there at all, however, is evidence of what former Air Combat Command chief Gen. Herbert J. "Hawk" Carlisle told *Air Force Magazine* in a recent interview: The Chinese are moving "faster than we expected" with regard to modernizing the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF).

Low-rate production of the J-20 seems to have begun in 2014, and in addition to the dozen aircraft at Dingxin, there are about eight other prototypes in various configurations that continue to be used for missile tests and other evaluations. The J-20, like the stealthy, supercruising American F-22 Raptor, can carry six missiles internally, and both air-to-air and air-to-ground ordnance have been seen in its weapon bays. Although the growth in China's defense spending has slowed in the last two years, the J-20 is said to be a high priority, conferring prestige on the PLAAF and enhancing its conventional deterrent capabilities. The production rate can be expected to increase as Chengdu, the

Chinese outfit that builds the J-20, beats down the learning curve, which has been high.

The Pentagon's 2016 Annual Report to Congress about China's military capabilities states that the country sees stealth aircraft as providing an "offensive operational advantage that denies an adversary the time to mobilize and to conduct defensive operations." Observers of the PLAAF say the J-20 seems optimized to make high-speed, stealthy hit-and-run attacks on ships and air bases and to attack critical airborne enablers, such as AWACS and tankers, rather than dogfighting.

SURPRISE, SURPRISE

The J-20 was revealed in 2011, when images of a prototype circulated on the internet. Then-Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates was visiting China at the time, and the revelation was clearly meant to embarrass him. He had famously predicted that Chinese stealth fighters would not even appear until the late 2010s and not enter operational service until the 2020s. Based on that prediction, Gates terminated production of the F-22 at less than half the required inventory—a move USAF leaders have lamented since. The F-22 has proved a prodigy in combat, but the 100 or so deployable aircraft simply aren't enough to cover all the Air Force's air superiority obligations.

Two J-20s made the type's air show premiere at Zhuhai, China, in November 2016, and China-watchers speculated correctly at the time that their appearance indicated operational service was imminent.

The J-20 bears a family resemblance to the F-22 and F-35, and US leaders have said in so many words that this is because of a successful Chinese cyber espionage campaign against the US defense industry since the late 1990s. Carlisle showed a split-screen image of the Chinese J-31 and US F-35 at AFA's Air Warfare Symposium in March, and it was hard to tell the difference between them. The J-20 sports a chin-mounted electro-optical targeting system externally identical to that on the F-35.

Outwardly, the Air Force doesn't express too much concern about the J-20. At a state of the Air Force press briefing last August, USAF Chief of Staff Gen. David L. Goldfein said comparing the F-22 and F-35 against the J-20 and J-31 is "almost an irrelevant comparison" because the US has a decided advantage when it comes to networking its systems to provide an unmatched picture of the battlespace to combat pilots and operational commanders alike. At a February speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Goldfein said, "It's not about what the F-35, or the J-20, or the F-22, or the J-31 can actually do ... one-versus-one." While that's an "interesting" discussion, he said, "it's actually not very compelling because we're not going to ever have an F-35 in there by itself, ever. We do 'family of systems.'"

Privately, though, senior USAF leaders say the introduction of a stealthy adversary sharply complicates the air battle. "We've known this was coming a long time, and we've prepared," said one, "but it means we're going to have to do things [differently], and we knew we would have a harder time on the front end" of any potential conflict with China or a Chinese-supplied client. ★