Washington Watch

By John A. Tirpak, Executive Editor

Next, the Unmanned Bomber?; Getting Congress To Go Along; To Organize, Train, and ... and ....

Long-Range Strike: The Future

With its Fiscal 2007 budget proposal, the Air Force embraces a dramatically new approach to long-range strike.

The Air Force is to launch a new, possibly unmanned, bomber program far earlier than planned, moving the in-service year from 2037 to 2018. Air Force documents refer to the system as the Next Generation Long-Range Strike Aircraft program.

To pay for part of it, USAF would sharply reduce today's bomber inventory, freeing money that would otherwise be spent on updates and maintenance. That won't be easy (see next item).

Word of the new LRS program leaked to the press in January. The project supplants the Air Force version of the Joint Unmanned Combat Air System—which is slated for termination—with a larger, faster unmanned bomber.

The aircraft would have to cover very long distances and be able to loiter in the target area with a good-size bomb load.

The Air Force's bomber roadmap has long held that the service doesn't really need to replace any parts of its bomber fleet until 2037, though USAF has been contemplating an "interim" capability that would begin production around 2014.

However, because the due date for the new system would be 2018, it would evidently eliminate the interim step.

At the behest of Congress, the Air Force considered various long-range strike options and seemed to be promoting a two-seat, enlarged version of the F-22 fighter, called the FB-22, for this purpose. (See "The Raptor as Bomber," January 2005, p. 28.) The FB-22 now seems dead in the water.

The Air Force has been tasked by the Office of the Secretary of Defense to study various approaches to an unmanned bomber and launch a program in next year's budget.

In recent years, the Air Force has said its next long-range strike system must provide a quantum leap ahead in capability but that technologies such as hypersonics have not yet reached the necessary level of maturity.

However, the qualities USAF wanted in a next generation aircraft have been taking it toward a larger platform, equipped with a sizable bomb load and the ability to loiter in enemy territory for long periods, with periodic refuelings from a tanker. The size of the objective Air Force version of J-UCAS had been upped several times and likely would have been enlarged again.

USAF photo by MSgt. Michael A. Kaplan

Cutting the B-52H fleet will reap $600 million through 2011.

Boeing photo

J-UCAS is no longer in USAF's long-range strike future.

Also influencing the Air Force move is a push by the Air Force Research Lab to investigate hypersonic vehicles. A joint USAF-NASA project now in the works is expected to yield vehicles that can sustain speeds of Mach 10. First applications of the technology probably will appear in air-launched missiles.

The Air Force has considered converting some of its Minuteman ICBMs into conventional weapons that could put destructive power on a target anywhere in the world within 20 minutes. In studies conducted for USAF by industry two years ago, the "conventional ICBM" was deemed the nearest term and lowest cost solution to obtaining a rapid global strike capability.

Congress balked at the notion, however, as it worried that launch of a conventional ICBM would be indistinguishable from the start of a nuclear attack. Still, the Navy is requesting money in the Fiscal 2007 budget to explore converting some of its Trident submarine-launched ballistic missiles as conventional weapons.

Long-Range Strike: The Present

If the past is any guide—and it is—the Air Force will have great difficulty cajoling Congress to support its LRS plan.

The program probably will be unaffordable unless service officials can persuade Congress to drop its refusal to permit the retirement of "old iron." In the past, Congress has not shown a willingness to go along with that. The plan calls for a sharp reduction in old bombers.

Topping the list of Air Force proposals is a move to significantly reduce its inventory of B-52H bombers. Plans call for whittling the fleet from 94 to 56 aircraft, a move that officials say would save some $600 million through 2011, not including the cost of future enhancements.

AD SPACE

The Air Force has long wanted to reduce the fleet of B-52s, the youngest of which was built in 1962. All are now well more than 40 years old. Eighteen of the aircraft have lingered on the books in a twilight zone status of "attrition reserve."

USAF wants to retire the most problem-prone of the aircraft and use the savings to upgrade the remainder with new weapons and capabilities.

However, when this was tried before, USAF took a beating. In 2001, the service asked Congress for permission to retire a third of its B-1B bombers so as to save money on chronically problem-prone airplanes and improve the rest of the fleet. After heated discussion and Capitol Hill battles, USAF got its way, but was forced to bring some of the retired aircraft out of mothballs a couple of years later. Legislators didn't like removing aircraft that employed many Guard and Reserve members, especially in the run-up to the Base Realignment and Closure process.

Congress also has refused so far to allow the Air Force to retire some of its oldest KC-135E tankers, despite corrosion and other age-related problems that have caused maintenance costs to skyrocket and safety issues to be raised.

The Air Force shouldn't expect any easier ride on the B-52 request.

"Radical" Acquisition Ideas

If the Pentagon goes ahead and adopts a controversial new acquisition proposal, the services could be limited to manning and training functions and be forced to give up the "equipping" part of their traditional roles.

Findings of the Defense Acquisition Performance Assessment, a 10-month study headed by retired Air Force Lt. Gen. Ronald T. Kadish, include turning over the job of setting requirements to the regional combatant commanders. A Pentagon senior leadership board would in turn select a service to develop the capabilities requested by the COCOMs.

That's different from today's system, wherein the regional commanders can offer lists of desired capabilities, but depend on the service leadership to get those items funded and developed.

The move would tend to focus on near-term requirements necessary for fighting the wars at hand, at the likely expense of developing long-term capabilities, but, in concert with other suggestions for change, would have the benefit of reducing the time and cost needed to field new systems. The study participants believed that DOD needs far more flexibility and speed in developing new weapons for unanticipated circumstances. They also said that the nature of warfare, once predictable in type and pace, has become thoroughly unstable, with new threats and challenges emerging every day.

The existing acquisition process is still based on the old, predictable model of the Cold War, which was why Kadish said "radical" change is needed.

The "organize, train, and equip" function is given to the services by law, and legislation would be necessary to alter it.

Deputy Defense Secretary Gordon England said the study would be incorporated into final Quadrennial Defense Review deliberations conducted late last year. They may have played a significant role in shaping program decisions attending the Fiscal Year 2007 budget proposal.

The DAPA panel suggested breaking out the R&D and procurement accounts from the rest of the Pentagon budget; defense leaders couldn't raid the modernization accounts to pay for contingencies, which has been the case for the last few years.

Walling off the modernization accounts would save money, though, because the panel determined that for every dollar subtracted from a program—either to slow it down to add capabilities, or simply because the funds are needed for more immediate needs—four dollars have to be spent later.

The aim of the suggestions was to create more stability in programs. Other DAPA recommendations would rule out changing requirements after a program was launched and add improvements to later versions—what has become known as "spiral development." There also would be strict timetables for introducing a system, so that it became available during the precise window when it offers a "useful" capability.

This last characteristic would trump operational suitability or operational effectiveness in justifying new programs. It also would be easier to get rid of projects that have outlived their usefulness or that have been superseded by other technologies or capabilities. Testing would be changed to reflect the shift in emphasis.

The change also might save money by eliminating requirements that are added for the purpose of making the whole system easier to test.

In another significant shift, the DAPA study suggested that contractors be selected on the basis of offering the lowest-risk solution to a requirement, rather than "best value." The lowest-risk solution also presumably would be the most predictable, and contractors could be rewarded for making the system available at the called-for time, rather than meeting benchmarks that don't necessarily have anything to do with operational utility.

Other recommendations echoed those of previous acquisition process studies. One was that DOD must take more specific actions to build a professional corps of acquisition specialists, both uniformed and military. Another was to build more formal and informal ties to industry, to keep industry aware of what capabilities the Pentagon needs and what capabilities are no longer wanted. Finally, the report recommended restructuring the system from one of mistrust and oversight to one of direct accountability.

Affording the F-22

The Air Force will part with some significant systems—the U-2 spyplane, a new standoff jammer project, and the F-117 stealth attack aircraft, among other cuts—to extend its F-22 fighter program, according to budget documents.

Program Budget Decision 720, dated Dec. 20, 2005, showed that the Air Force was willing to retire older aircraft aggressively to extend production of the F-22 an extra two years, to 2010. The move adds only four new Raptors, but does bridge production of the F-22 to the start of production of the F-35. Senior USAF leaders have said that it's essential to keep a modern fighter assembly line warm. (See "Washington Watch: Clipping the Raptor," February, p. 14.)

USAF photo by TSgt. Ben Bloker

New plan cuts some programs to bolster the Raptor.

The move also extended the end of F-22 production into a new Presidential Administration, keeping open the possibility that the Air Force would be granted permission to keep producing the fighter. Under current plans, only 183 Raptors would be built, versus USAF's long-stated requirement for 381.

The retirements had the blessing of the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

"The Air Force proposes to realign resources so that it can transform to a more lethal, more agile, streamlined force with an increased emphasis on the warfighter," according to the document. It noted that the program "efficiencies" were meant to offset the costs of extending the F-22 line by two years.

"The Air Force proposal ramps down U-2 operations beginning in FY 2007 and retires the final elements of the fleet throughout FY 2011," according to the document. The last 10 U-2s would retire in 2011, about four years earlier than planned, and be replaced by the Global Hawk unmanned reconnaissance aircraft.

Global Hawk provides "near-real-time, high-resolution, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance imagery" to combatant commanders, the Air Force said, noting that within the year 2005, the system had provided 15,000 images during more than 50 missions and 1,000 combat hours in Operation Enduring Freedom.

The Air Force had planned to transition more gradually to the Global Hawk, preferring not to let go of a proven capability before a new one was in hand. (See "ISR Miracles, at a Reasonable Price," February, p. 43.)

The F-117, USAF's first operational stealth attack aircraft, would retire in Fiscal 2008 instead of Fiscal 2011. Ten would come out of service in Fiscal 2007 and the last 42 the following year.

"There are other, more capable Air Force assets that can provide low observable, precision penetrating weapons capability," including the B-2, F-22, and the Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile, the service noted.

Another program to be terminated would be the B-52 Standoff Jammer. This was a program to equip a number of B-52s with giant electronic warfare pods on the outer wings. Since the retirement of the EF-111 and the F-4G, the Air Force hasn't had a dedicated airborne electronic attack platform of its own, depending instead on jamming provided by the Navy's EA-6B Prowler and, in a few years, the EF-18G Growler.

In PBD 720, the Air Force said it "assumes risk" by killing the SOJ, "mitigated by other components" in the portfolio of DOD's electronic attack capabilities "until transformational capability, not reliant on the B-52 legacy platform, is identified."

The Air Force also wants to retire 38 of its 76 C-21A executive transports, as well as 38 of its B-52H bombers (See "Long-Range Strike: The Present," above.)

The document described the additional cost of extending the F-22 line by two years as $1.05 billion, assuming a three-year multiyear contract with Lockheed Martin to build 20 a year in Fiscal 2009-11.

Save the Industrial Base

Concerns for the continued modernization of the military were running high on the eve of the Fiscal 2007 defense budget's release. A group of Republican Senators, including the chairman of the Armed Services Committee, asked President Bush to keep Pentagon procurement and research levels at previously requested levels, lest the whole of the military suffer seriously from aging, obsolescent, and worn-out equipment.

They also challenged the Administration's practice of cutting weapons procurement in wartime for purely financial reasons that are unsupported by military analysis.

Citing news reports that defense research and procurement accounts were to be reduced by $7.5 billion in Fiscal 2007 and $32.1 billion over the future years defense program, the six Senators, headed by Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John W. Warner (R-Va.), asked Bush in December not to backtrack on equipment modernization.

"We urge you, at the very minimum, to recommend a funding level for procurement and research and development for Fiscal Year 2007 of no less than the previously planned $158.3 billion, and $443.1 billion for the entire Department of Defense, excluding supplemental funding," the group said.

The reductions described would "disproportionately cut weapons system development and procurement and would break the five-year trend of modest, but sustained, real growth needed to make up for the 'procurement holiday' in the 1990s," the Senators asserted.

"Failure to continue this growth would impair our ability to replace the existing inventory as required by wartime stress and would jeopardize procurement of new systems, which the department has declared for years are necessary to protect America against current and future challenges."

AP photo by J. Scott Applewhite

Warner and other Republican Senators made their case.

The actual budget request, released in February, came in at $439.3 billion, of which $157.4 billion was targeted at modernization projects. The latter figure, while still an increase from last year, was less than what the Senators wanted and less than the Pentagon itself planned in its previous budget.

While the group acknowledged the many constraints on the budget, "we remain a nation at war," they said. The budget level presented last year was agreed to be "the minimum which the Department believed it needed" for future requirements.

In their letter, the Senators chided Bush for last-minute budget changes that ignore real requirements or strategy.

"We do not believe it would be responsible to reduce (spending levels) at the 11th hour, especially for budgetary reasons obviously unrelated to any analysis of military necessity."

This last comment was at least in part a reference to treatment of the F-22 program, which in 2004 was slashed from 270 aircraft to 180 on the eve of the budget's release, without any analytical reason given.

The letter was signed by Warner and five other Republicans: Jim Talent (R-Mo.), Saxby Chambliss (R-Ga.), Elizabeth Dole (R-N.C.), Olympia J. Snowe (R-Maine), and Susan M. Collins (R-Maine).

Constituency was clearly a factor for some of the signatories; the F-22 is built in Chambliss' state, Navy F/A-18 and Air Force F-15 fighters are built in Talent's state, and Snowe and Collins have shipbuilding facilities in their state. ■