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STUDIES

US Fighter Modernization Plans: Near-Term Choices

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This report explores the near-term modernization choices now facing the Department of Defense (DoD) in fixed-wing air power. Presently, the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) program is the largest programmatic element in the Pentagon's plans for modernizing US air power.

At \$242 billion (fiscal year 2008 dollars) for 2,443 aircraft, the F-35 program, if executed as currently constituted, would be the most costly single aircraft program in DoD history. As such, the focus of this report is on the need for and affordability of the three JSF variants now planned:

1. a conventional take-off landing (CTOL) variant (the F-35A) for the Air Force;
2. a short take-off, vertical-landing (STOVL) variant (F-35B) for the Marine Corps; and
3. the F-35C carrier variant (CV) for the Navy's aircraft carriers.

From the standpoint of military necessity, a major concern is that DoD's current air power modernization plans may be unbalanced in favor of fighters, vice longer-range strike aircraft. In future wars, US aircraft may have to operate at far greater distances than they have in the recent past. In particular, US air forces operating in Asia and the Pacific might well have to travel several times farther than US air forces typically had to during the Cold War. There also appears to be a growing need for aircraft that can loiter over the battlefield long enough to find emerging, fleeting or otherwise time-sensitive targets.

In recognition of the importance of these evolving requirements, the 2005-2006 Quadrennial Defense Review directed the US Air Force to field an air-breathing follow-on to the B-2 by 2018. But it is unclear how committed the Air Force is to this program, and there is reason to worry that the JSF's funding requirements will crowd out future investment in long-range strike capabilities.