



Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

STUDIES

Living Within One's Means: Revisiting Defense Acquisition and Affordability

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Future Vertical Lift (FVL) is a force structure recapitalization effort to design and procure a family of rotary-wing platforms capable of operations in future highly contested environments. The Army's FVL is the leading edge of an effort that has identified the need for a rotary-wing Family of Systems that can deliver five capability sets for joint use across the Services. Due to budgetary limitations and force modernization priorities, the Army is currently pursuing only two of these capability sets, but they still represent a significant effort for the Army, as they are the first new helicopters designed since the mid-1980s. As the Army considers candidates for these new helicopters, it is carefully considering both near-term and long-term challenges from adversaries, as well as the perennial aspect of affordability.

In *Living within One's Means*, authors Christopher Bassler, Matthew McCarton, Travis Sharp, and Josh Chang analyze past vertical lift acquisition programs, current acquisition trends, and new acquisition methods in the digital age to apply all three to the FVL effort. Drawing upon these analyses and the results of a CSBA workshop (held under the Chatham House rule), the authors find that while past attempts to enhance affordability have been unsuccessful, new digital approaches, such as the Modular Open Systems Architecture (MOSA), may hold costs down while diversifying opportunities for new technologies and subsystem solutions. The authors also discuss the risks of deferring or cutting new helicopter designs, both in the face of adversaries and the technological limitations of current rotary-wing designs.

The FVL effort may face roadblocks, but it also could be one of the first major programs to drive an open ecosystem of affordable designs. If the Army can live within well-estimated means, stick to its plan, and pace advancing threats, FVL could become one of the most successful defense acquisition programs of the 21st Century.