



Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

STUDIES

Matching Resources with Requirements: Options for Modernizing the US Air Force

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The US Air Force, like the Department of Defense (DoD) more generally, appears to face a significant mismatch between the cost of its plans and the level of funding likely to be available to pay for those plans over the long run. This mismatch is one of the central national security issues that policymakers will have to confront, manage and resolve in coming years. Fortunately, there are a range of alternative options for the Air Force that would be significantly more affordable than the current plan and might still meet US national security requirements.

AIR FORCE PLANS FOR 2005-22

Over the next two decades, the Air Force plans to retain essentially the same force structure it has today and to continue to keep its forces at high states of readiness—measured in terms of personnel quality, training, and equipment maintenance and repair. Under current plans, the area of greatest change will be in the development and production of new aircraft and other weapon systems. The Air Force's long-term plans are in some respects unclear and, in others, unsettled. However, the following list provides a reasonable estimate of the quantities and types of major weapons platforms the Air Force would like to acquire between 2005 and 2022:

- 1,575 next-generation F/A-22 and F-35 fighters, and some 200 new “regional” bombers;
- 300 unmanned combat air systems (UCAS);

- 84 C-17 strategic transports and 145 tactical transport aircraft;
- 280 new tanker aircraft;
- 48 CV-22 tilt-rotor aircraft for Air Force special operations forces; and
- 200 new intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).

While Air Force plans call for buying over 2,000 new next generation manned combat aircraft and UCAS over the next two decades, under current plans the Air Force appears unlikely to buy any new long-range bombers or alternative long-range strike systems until after 2022.

Although most of the detailed discussion in this report focuses on major weapons platforms, it is important to note that, over the next two decades, the Air Force also plans to modernize extensively its intelligence, communications, sensor, and space capabilities, and buy a variety of different trainer, reconnaissance and other support aircraft, as well precision-guided munitions (PGMs).