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Fixing the Fighter Gap Facing the U.S. Navy, Air Force, and Air National Guard

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Since World War II, the U.S. military has used air power to dramatically increase the effectiveness of all other forces. In fact, American ground forces have not come under attack from enemy air forces since the Korean War.¹ Yet the ability of America's Air Force to dominate the skies is under attack from a different kind of enemy: a long-standing and widening fighter aircraft gap, which President Obama's fiscal year (FY) 2010 defense budget fails to remedy.

The President's budget request continues the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) program but would end production of the F-22A Raptor at 186 fighters while retiring 250 legacy fighters.² These changes will result in what is essentially a deficit between the services' fighter aircraft inventories and their operational requirements based on emerging and possible air threats to U.S. security. Finally, the budget request will have a disproportionately negative effect on the Air National Guard—particularly its ability to continue air sovereignty alert missions. As the U.S. Senate prepares to debate the FY 2010 defense authorization bill, Congress must put the military's requirements first and override the President's budget request by:

- Authorizing a multi-year procurement for additional fourth-generation fighters (either F-15, F-16, or F-18 or a combination thereof) for the Air National Guard;
- Purchasing additional F-22s;
- Encouraging sales of an F-22 allied variant to Japan and Australia; and
- Researching the viability of building a strike variant of F-22.

Budget Restrictions Driving Air Force Plans.

Members of Congress and numerous military and defense officials have warned for years of an impending "fighter gap" and its implications to U.S. national security. In April 2008, Lieutenant General Daniel Darnell testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee that the Air Force could have a requirement gap of over 800 fighters by 2024.³ During the same hearing, Rear Admiral Allen Myers projected a "most-optimistic" deficit of 125 strike fighters for the Navy, including 69 aircraft for the Navy and 56 for the Marine Corps.⁴

A Congressional Research Service (CRS) report in April unveiled a potentially larger gap, citing a briefing to House Armed Service Committee staffers in which the Navy projected that its strike fighter shortfall could grow to 50 aircraft by FY 2010 and 243 by FY 2018 (129 Navy and 114 Marine Corps fighters).⁵

However, after release of the President's FY 2010 budget request, Air Force leaders announced a combat Air Force restructuring plan to "eliminate excessive overmatch in our tactical fighter force and consider alternatives in our capabilities."⁶ The Air Force believes that retiring over 250 legacy fighters can save \$3.5 billion over the next five years, funds

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that can then be reinvested to reduce current capability gaps elsewhere. Yet Air Force leaders have made it clear to Congress that budgetary restrictions—*not a changing threat environment*—are driving this fundamental shift in security policy.

While both Republican and Democratic Members of Congress have expressed concern about projected gaps in America's strike fighter inventory, the Obama Administration has thus far deemphasized the relevance of these gaps by insisting that a smaller, more capable force with "limited resources" can remain effective and continue to meet services requirements.⁷ The requirements for, and analysis of, U.S. fighter forces did not change between April 2008 and April 2009, but the Pentagon is now dangerously altering its policy as though they had. The long-standing requirements for fighter fleets have been laid out, but rather than take the necessary steps to alleviate the strain, the Pentagon is scaling back the requirements in order to meet present capability levels.

This move reflects Secretary of Defense Robert Gates's desire to "reform" and "balance" Pentagon priorities by accepting more risk in the conventional military sphere. Although the upcoming Quadrennial Defense Review may reduce Air Force and Navy strike fighter requirements, both services will experience significant shortages for the coming decade under the current procurement program. But with General Darnell and Admiral Myers publicly affirming the trou-

bling data identified by the CRS, Congress should act to mitigate and correct the fighter gap that is already hobbling the American military.

Unless Congress Acts, the Fighter Gap Will Only Get Worse. After proposing to end production of the F-22, Gates announced that he was prepared to recommend to the President procurement of 2,443 F-35s, including 513 frames in the next five years. However, this will leave the U.S. without adequate numbers of fighters designed specifically for achieving air superiority. While peer competitor states like Russia and China bolster their air superiority fighter capabilities, the U.S. is not allocating resources to sustain its own. For example:

Navy. Since the end of the Cold War, the Navy has reduced both the number of aircraft carriers and the number and quality of its sea-based air superiority fighter force. Between 1991 and 1999, the Navy's air superiority fighter force was reduced by nearly 40 percent and the carrier force was effectively reduced by one-third.⁸ The Navy is scheduled to order 25 carrier-versions of the F-35 each year for the next 10 years, but this is still not enough to address the Navy's air superiority fighter shortfalls. The Navy F/A-18E/F was designed more as a bomber, and the F-35 was designed "to be the world's premier strike aircraft through 2040" with an emphasis in internal payloads and greater internal fuel capacity to maintain radar stealth.⁹ Both the F/A-18 and F-35 will have difficulty engaging the

1. Air Force Association, "Threats to Air Supremacy," at http://www.afa.org/MPEG/Air_Supremacy.asp (June 24, 2009).
2. Robert M. Gates, "Defense Budget Recommendation Statement," U.S. Department of Defense April 6, 2009, at <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1341> (June 15, 2009).
3. Hearings, *Hearing to Receive Testimony on Navy and Air Force Aviation in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2009 and the Future Years Defense Program*, Subcommittee on Air and Land, Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate, 111th Cong., 1st Sess., p. 16, at http://www.senate.gov/~armed_services/Transcripts/2008/04%20April/Airland/08-36%20-%204-9-08.pdf (June 4, 2009).
4. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
5. Christopher Bolkcom, "Navy-Marine Corps Strike-Fighter Shortfall: Background and Options for Congress," Congressional Research Service, April 10, 2009, at http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/RS22875_20090410.pdf (June 12, 2009).
6. Michael B. Donley and General Norton A. Schwartz, "Fiscal Year 2010 Air Force Posture Statement," presentation to the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate, May 21, 2009, at <http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2009/May/Donley-Schwartz%2005-21-09.pdf> (June 12, 2009).
7. *Ibid.*
8. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Military Balance 2009* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 34.
9. Jim Garamone, "Lockheed-Martin Team Wins Joint Strike Fighter Competition," *DefenseLink News*, October 26, 2001, at <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=44605> (June 24, 2009).

high-performance, air-superiority fighters both Russia and China are building.

Air Force. The F-15 and F-16 have been the backbone of the Air Force's fighter fleet for the past 30 years. However, modern fighter technologies have surpassed these planes and the current fleet is insufficient to meet the possible challenge from fifth-generation foreign fighters. The service life of the F-15 has also been extended from 8,000 to 10,000 hours, resulting in increased structural failures. The Air Force grounded over 300 of the aged fighters after an F-15 "broke in half" during a November 2007 training mission in St. Louis, Missouri.¹⁰

President Obama's decision to cap F-22 production at 187 will also negatively impact the Air Force. According to Air Combat Command General John Corley, a fleet of only 187 F-22s places the "execution of our current national military strategy at high risk in the near to mid term."¹¹

Air National Guard. In 1999, the Air National Guard had nine F-15 squadrons; in 2009, it has only five squadrons.¹² This constitutes a 44 percent reduction in critical air sovereignty aircraft, which serve the vital mission of patrolling the homeland. Further planned reductions of the F-15 would mean the phasing out of all F-15A/Bs, including those attached to the Air National Guard. This will leave the Guard with only 48 F-15C/Ds for air sovereignty missions until 2025 unless F-22 fighters are assigned to the Guard or additional fourth-generation fighters are purchased.

Congress Must Remedy the Fighter Gap.

Thankfully, there has been a strong show of bipartisan support in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committees for closing the fighter gap, despite the troubling opposition from Gates and Obama.

In response to the President's veto threat concerning F-22 funds, Representative Neil Abercrombie (D-HI) responded that such a veto "would be overridden in a nanosecond."¹³ Accordingly, H.R. 2647, the FY 2010 National Defense Authorization Act, approves a multi-year procurement contract for additional F/A-18E/F and EA-18G aircraft and advanced procurement funds for 12 F-22s in 2011.

The Senate Armed Services Committee's draft authorization bill provides \$560 million for 18 more F/A-18s for the Navy¹⁴ and allocates \$1.7 billion for the purchase of seven more F-22s in 2010. The Senate version also takes the right steps to begin exploring the possibility of exporting a modified version of the F-22 to allies, which, if successful, would ensure that the production line remains open.

Congress should continue its commitment to closing the fighter gap for the Navy and Air Force, including the Air National Guard. In the final FY 2010 defense authorization bill, Congress should:

- Fully fund 20 F-22s;
- Waive the Obey amendment to explore the viability of an F-22 allied variant; and
- Ensure the F-18 funds stay in the final bill for the Navy and authorize a multi-year procurement for additional fourth-generation fighters (either F-15, F-16, F-18 or a combination thereof) for the Air National Guard.

Otherwise, America's military—as well as the National Guard—will be unable to complete their mission: protecting America.

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10. Associated Press, "Missouri Air National Guard Pilot Sues Over F-15 Crash," KY3.com, May 25, 2008, at <http://www.ky3.com/news/local/16986821.html> (July 6, 2009).

11. Gordon Lubold, "U.S. Needs More F-22 Fighters than Gates Wants, Says an Air Force Commander," *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 18, 2009, at <http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0618/p02s09-usmi.html> (July 8, 2009).

12. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Military Balance 2009*, p. 39.

13. William Matthews, "F-22 Fight Divides Gates, U.S. Lawmakers," *Defense News*, June 18, 2009, at <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=4146850> (July 6, 2009).

14. Press release, "Senate Armed Services Committee Completes Markup of National Defense Authorization Bill for Fiscal Year 2010," Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate, June 26, 2009, at <http://armed-services.senate.gov/press/10mark.pdf> (July 6, 2009).