



Unexpected FY2022 Air Force Program Announcements

January 7, 2022

Since June 2021, elements of the United States Air Force have announced intentions to pursue several new major programs. Each of the programs would likely be of congressional interest on their own, but they are more unusual in aggregate, for at least three reasons:

- The programs were announced outside the usual cycle, not as part of a budget submission, and after the relevant committees had substantially completed work on the FY2022 defense authorization and appropriations bills.
- Two of the three had not appeared in previous budget documents and had no identified sources of funding, while the third represented an acceleration of an existing program that would require relatively large shifts of funds to earlier years than programmed.
- The Air Force is already facing a significant modernization bill for a variety of systems. Advancing any of the newly proposed programs could potentially force slowdowns in existing efforts that Congress has authorized and appropriated.

The programs are described below.

Advanced Tactical Trainer

On October 12, 2021, the Air Force issued a request for information (RFI), seeking industry input on the acquisition of at least 100 [Advanced Tactical Trainer](#) (ATT) jets. In FY2021, the Air Force had begun acquiring 351 T-7A jet trainers (discussed in CRS Report R44856, *Air Force T-7A Red Hawk Trainer*). Both the ATT and the T-7A were intended to replace existing T-38 Talon trainers, but in different roles. The T-7A would be used to get future fighter pilots accustomed to jet aircraft, while the ATT, according to the RFI, would be for more advanced courses like fighter combat training and simulating adversary aircraft for training engagements. Commentators noted that the ATT would have more aspects of a modern fighter, including an integrated cockpit and afterburning engines.

The Air Force has not explained the reason requirements unique to the ATT were not included in the solicitation that resulted in the T-7A. Much of the advocacy for T-7A centered on its modern, reconfigurable cockpit. As the Boeing design that became T-7A was created from scratch, arguably

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IN11837

advanced training requirements could have been included in that program, obviating the need for a separate ATT.

The Air Force did not identify any source of funding related to the ATT RFI, and the ATT program had not appeared in previous Air Force budgets.

Bridge Tanker

As discussed in CRS Insight IN11537, *Air Force Tanker Strategy Changes*, the Air Force released a “sources sought” notice on June 16, 2021, and a [request for information](#) on July 20, 2021, seeking a commercial derivative tanker aircraft. The Air Force refers to this prospective procurement as a “Bridge Tanker,” to fill in between the current KC-46A and scheduled future Advanced Air Refueling Tanker programs.

Since beginning its tanker replacement program in 2010, the Air Force intended to follow its acquisition of 179 KC-46As with a program called KC-Y, expected to be procurement of 179 more KC-46As. By initiating a Bridge Tanker program when 48 of the 179 KC-46s have been delivered (leaving 131, or more than eight years’ production remaining), the Air Force appears to be effectively moving KC-Y several years earlier in its plans—without identifying funding to do so.

E-3 Replacement

On September 20, 2021, Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall and Air Combat Command Chief of Staff General Mark Kelly both advocated replacing the [E-3 Sentry](#) airborne warning and control system (AWACS) aircraft with a new platform, both going so far as to specify a particular desired replacement.

E-3s are based on the KC-135/Boeing 707 airframe from the 1960s. They use a large radar to detect airborne threats, coordinate responses, and perform battle management. Since at least 1997, the Air Force has been looking at replacing all of its aircraft that use that particular airframe; replacement of KC-135 tankers by the KC-46A is just one of part of that program. (For more information on this entire endeavor, see CRS Report R44108, *U.S. Command and Control and Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Aircraft*, and CRS Report R46389, *Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Design for Great Power Competition*.) The Air Force has discussed its Advanced Battle Management System as taking over functions of the E-3, but had not previously programmed a successor aircraft.

The possible replacement specified by Secretary Kendall and General Kelly (and, earlier in the year, Pacific Air Forces commander General Kenneth Wilsbach) is the E-7, known as the “Wedgetail,” a surveillance and command and control aircraft built by Boeing currently in service with Australia and the United Kingdom.

Part of the interest in the E-7 stems from the fact that it is in current production, although the line is coming to an end. The Air Force may see an opportunity to save money by capitalizing on that existing production, although that may overlook the effort required to tailor the E-7’s systems to U.S. requirements and the fact that no budget line exists for AWACS replacement.

Status of the Programs

P.L. 117-81, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022, included language restricting funds for the Bridge Tanker until the Air Force submits a list of requirements and an acquisition plan. The other two programs were not mentioned. The FY2023 budget submission, expected in February 2022, may provide further clarity.

Author Information

Jeremiah Gertler
Specialist in Military Aviation

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