



U.S. Air Force Seeks Largest Expansion Since Cold War

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The U.S. Air Force has determined it will need a nearly 25 percent boost in combat squadrons in order to support a major war with another great power such as China or Russia, signaling the largest potential increase in air power for the United States since the end of the Cold War.

Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson said the service wants to grow to 386 operational squadrons by around 2025-2030, compared with the 312 it has today. The rise would support Defense Secretary James Mattis's shift in focus from the fight against terrorism in the Middle East to potential conflicts with near-peer competitors.

Wilson laid out the new road map during a keynote address at the Air Force Association's annual Air, Space & Cyber Conference in National Harbor, Maryland, on Monday. Foreign Policy obtained exclusive details about the makeup of the 74 additional combat squadrons.

Russia and China have spent the last several decades studying U.S. military strategy and investing in ways that would take away its advantage, according to Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David Goldfein. The new force structure is designed to counter new defensive and offensive capabilities that Russia and China are developing, such as long-range aircraft and nuclear weapons, he said.

"This is about how do we stay out in front of them based on the best assessment that the Joint Staff and the intelligence [agencies have] put together on where we think our adversaries are headed," Goldfein said.

Under the plan, the Air Force would add tens of thousands of airmen and a range of sophisticated aircraft and other capabilities that will likely cost U.S. taxpayers tens of billions of dollars over the next decade, if not more.

Officials declined to put a price tag on the increase but said it would include more bombers, refueling tankers, fighter jets, and drones, as well as airlift, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, and special operations aircraft. In addition, the Air Force would boost the number of combat squadrons focused on space and cybersecurity. The overall increase could also

include a new light attack fleet, which the Air Force believes provides a cheaper way to fight militants in the Middle East.

Increasing the number of squadrons by about 25 percent would require roughly 40,000 additional airmen, for a total force of about 717,000, Wilson said.

Todd Harrison, a budget expert with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, estimated that this increase in manpower would likely add \$13 billion a year to operating costs. The Air Force currently spends about \$53 billion per year on aircraft operations, training, and recruiting, he noted.

One source with knowledge of the discussions stressed that the Air Force may not be able to afford the full increase.

For years, the U.S. military secretly flew Russian aircraft. Now it needs a cheaper option.

“In many ways, this is like the Navy saying they need 355 ships, even though they don’t have that funded,” the source said. “It shows the gap between fiscal reality and the security requirement goal.”

Wilson acknowledged that paying for the additional aircraft could be tricky.

“We are not naive about the budget realities,” she said. “At the same time, we think we owe our countrymen an honest answer on what is required to protect the vital, national interests of this country under the strategy we have been given, and so we believe this is, if not the perfect answer, it is an honest answer to that question: What is the Air Force we need?”

“If we can’t give the country that answer, who can?”

Under the proposal, bomber squadrons would get the biggest boost, growing from nine to 14, Wilson said.

The increase would likely involve purchasing more Northrop Grumman next-generation B-21 stealth bombers than planned, said one Air Force official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

An increased bomber presence is particularly important in the Pacific, where China is building islands, stationing military forces in the South China Sea and Spratly Islands, and practicing long-range bomber strikes “at distances that are intended to potentially hit the United States,” Wilson said. China is also rapidly growing its own force of bombers and aerial refueling tankers, she added.

The number of fighter jets would also get a boost. The Air Force wants to grow from 55 to 62 fighter squadrons, the Air Force official said. This increase likely won’t include additional legacy aircraft such as Boeing F-15s or Lockheed Martin F-16s, which first entered service in the 1970s, as they are not stealthy and therefore vulnerable to sophisticated Russian and Chinese

anti-aircraft systems, according to the official. Instead, the plan would add “high-end capability” potentially by buying Lockheed’s F-35 at a faster rate.

“We need to flip the [squadron] mix to predominantly fifth-generation aircraft,” the official said. “The mix we are driving toward is about 100 F-35s a year.”

Special operations squadrons would grow from 20 to 27, and airlift squadrons would increase from 53 to 54, the official said. The number of missile squadrons will not change because the Air Force is currently converting much of its communication forces to cyberforces.

Meanwhile, the Air Force’s space forces would grow from 16 to 23 operational squadrons, the official said. This increase will come as the Defense Department works to stand up a unified combatant command for space and President Donald Trump’s new Space Force, however the efforts are unrelated.

Wilson said additional tankers are also critical to extending the range of the Air Force’s fighters and bombers in case of a war in the Pacific. Under the proposal, the number of tanker squadrons would grow from 40 to 54, she said.

The number of remotely piloted aircraft squadrons would increase from 25 to 27, she added.

An internal Air Force team spent the last six months completing a comprehensive analysis of the projected threat in the 2025-2030 time frame and the demands of the combatant commanders, Wilson said.

“We took those assumptions and parameters and ran simulations and war games and about 2,000 different excursions to try to see what really would be required,” she said.

Over the next five or six months, the Air Force will continue conducting analysis ahead of a final report that is due to Congress in March. Two federally funded research and development centers were also tasked to do similar analysis and submit reports to Congress.

Christopher Preble, the vice president for defense and foreign-policy studies at the Cato Institute, argued that the Pentagon needs a new strategy, not additional dollars.

“We’re borrowing money to fund our military from the country that we’re supposed to be defending against,” Preble said, referring to China.

But Wilson stressed that there would be serious national security consequences for the United States if the Air Force does not get this increase.

“It means that the gap between us and a major adversary will start to close, it means that in a crisis there will be fewer options for the president of the United States, and it means there are higher risks that we will not be able to accomplish the objectives that the National Defense Strategy has set out for us,” she said.