

Trump Seeks Sharp Funding Increase For Next-Gen Fighter

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President Donald Trump is seeking a steep increase in funding this year to develop the U.S. Air Force's next-generation fighter.

The request is part of the White House's supplemental budget plan for fiscal 2017, which seeks to boost the Obama administration's fiscal 2017 defense spending plan by \$30 billion overall.

The full supplemental request is very unlikely to pass Congress because it is primarily funded through the base budget, which is subject to Budget Control Act (BCA) caps. Lifting the caps would require 60 votes in the Senate, which the White House is not likely to get.

Still, the proposed investment in the Air Force's sixth-generation fighter signals the administration's seriousness about moving quickly to modernize the service's tactical fighter fleet beyond the stealthy F-35.

The supplemental request, unveiled March 16, includes a significant spike in research and development funding for "Next Generation Air Dominance" (NGAD), now known as Penetrating Counterair (PCA), the new air superiority fighter planned to follow the F-22 Raptor. President Obama's fiscal 2017 budget request funded NGAD at just \$21 million out of the research, development, test and evaluation (RDT&E) account.

Trump's supplemental request increases that funding eight-fold, to \$168 million.

The funding spike in the supplemental indicates the Air Force may be looking to move more quickly than planned into the technology development phase for the next-generation fighter. The additional funds allow the Air Force to keep PCA on track as outlined in the Air Superiority 2030 study, released in April 2016.

"To stay on the timeline that was laid out in Air Superiority 2030, that money was always necessary," explained spokeswoman Ann Stefanek. "If we don't get additional money we may start to fall behind the original timeline."

The service recently kicked off an analysis of alternatives for PCA, which is expected to last between one year and 18 months. PCA will be a family of systems, with many capabilities likely disaggregated onto different platforms, but will likely include some kind of next-generation stealth fighter. This platform will operate alongside and eventually replace Lockheed Martin's F-22s and F-35s.

The effort to accelerate development of the sixth-generation fighter appears to have a powerful ally on Capitol Hill. Rep. Mac Thornberry, (R-Texas), chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, is urging the Pentagon to "hurry" in developing new technology to counter emerging capabilities being fielded by potential adversaries.

"It's not just a question of the money being available; it's also a question of how fast you can get technology from the laboratory into the hands of the warfighter," Thornberry said March 16. "Not only are the threats moving quickly, technology is advancing quickly, particularly when you start looking at key peer competitors like Russia and China it becomes somewhat scary."

The budget documents do not include a similar increase in funding for the U.S. Navy's next-generation fighter, also known as F/A-XX. RDT&E funding for the project remains flat at \$1.2 million.