

With A-10 End In Sight, U.S. And Allies Eye Light-Attack Fleet

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For the U.S. Air Force, the appeal of a so-called OA-X fleet for counterterrorism is clear. The high-end fighters currently helping the venerable A-10 Warthog provide close-air support (CAS) for troops in the Middle East are worn out from decades of war. A new fleet of about 300 affordable, off-the-shelf aircraft would ease the burden on the F-15s, F-16s and others, freeing those platforms up for the high-end missions they were designed to fly. Additionally, an OA-X fleet would provide much-needed seats for pilot training as the Air Force struggles with retention challenges.

“If we’re going to be in this fight against violent extremism for some number of years ahead, then is there a different way we ought to look at getting after this in the future?” Goldfein posited in a wide-ranging interview aboard an Air Force C-40 over the Atlantic. “Does this light-attack capability contribute in new ways [that] allow me to start improving readiness on the high-end part of my fleet, to be able to ensure that we are even more ready and more lethal against China, Russia, Iran, North Korea?”

For international partners, the experiment—and potentially a U.S. program of record down the road—could present an opportunity to procure a needed capability in a more affordable way, Goldfein says. All three aircraft participating in the OA-X demo are much cheaper to buy and operate than the fighters currently flying in the Middle East—Sierra Nevada has boasted “well under \$1,000 per hour” for the A-29, compared to about \$18,000 for the A-10C and \$34,000 for the F-15C.

“Does this open up some opportunities for an increased number of allies and partners who might be able to get into a weapons system that is less expensive not only to procure, but also to fly?” Goldfein asks.



The US Air Force will fly the A-10 Warthog into the mid-2020s, but does not yet have concrete plans for a replacement. Credit: Airman 1st Class Skylia Child/U.S. Air Force

An Air Force spokeswoman declined to name any nations participating in the demo. The OA-X effort is in the experimentation phase, and no program of record has been initiated, Goldfein stresses. The next phase, if the Air Force chooses to proceed, would be a combat demonstration.

Moving into a program of record will be contingent not only on the demo outcome, but also on getting additional funding from Congress. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), has advocated giving the Air Force \$1.2 billion to begin buying OA-X, but it remains to be seen whether lawmakers will appropriate those funds in a bipartisan spending bill for fiscal 2018.

The key to a decision on buying a new light-attack fleet will be affordability, notes Goldfein.

“What I’ve told industry is I’m not interested in a single dollar for research and development,” he says. “This is: What do you have that’s shovel-ready, that I could put into this fight?”



Sierra Nevada Corp. is offering its A-29 Super Tucano, already in service with the Afghan Air Force, for the OA-X light attack demonstration. Credit: Tech. Sgt. Zachary Wolf/U.S. Air Force

If the Air Force chooses to move forward with a program of record, the OA-X would not be a replacement for the A-10, the Air Force's CAS workhorse, but instead would augment the capability the U.S. already has in the Middle East. However, the Warthog will reach the end of its service life eventually—the Air Force currently projects sometime in the mid-2020s—begging the question: What comes next?

The service has for years contemplated building a follow-on, dedicated CAS platform to replace the A-10, even drafting a requirements document for an "A-X" in 2016, but that effort now appears to have stalled. When asked whether the service is taking steps to develop a single-role A-X, Goldfein says: "not yet."

So does that mean a single-mission CAS platform will eventually go away? "Maybe," he answers.

"I don't disagree that a single-role platform sets an incredibly high bar for the rest of the force," Goldfein says. "But remember, [combatant commanders] have the entire spectrum of conflict that I've got to support—from the highest end, the lowest end and everything in between—and I've got a certain amount of money that I've got to use, to build the best Air Force money can buy."

Already, the Air Force relies on a family of systems, not just the A-10, to provide CAS, Goldfein says. As an air component commander in Afghanistan, the Warthog was not always his first choice to protect soldiers in battle. In the mountainous east, the MQ-9 Reaper was better at quickly navigating the peaks and valleys; in the volatile west, where operations could

quickly take a turn for the worse, the multirole F-15E provided maximum agility; for the north, a B-1B bomber—with its endurance and large payload—worked best.



Textron Aviation's AT-6 Wolverine will also participate in the OA-X demonstration. The AT-6 is a low-cost turboprop based on Beechcraft's T-6 Texan trainer. Credit: Textron Aviation

"If we can start having a conversation about that family of systems, and not which one weapon system is the most important, we're going to actually have a 21st-century close-air-support discussion," Goldfein says. "There are very few mission sets that we have where I'm throwing a single bullet at it."

The question of whether the Air Force will ultimately build a direct A-10 replacement hangs on adequate funding and stable budgets, Goldfein notes. Sequestration and budget uncertainty—including year after year of continuing resolutions—have wreaked havoc on the military's ability to plan, he says.

"It's impossible to predict where I would go with that kind of a strategic trade relative to the amount of topline I have and where it fits," he says. "Nothing comes for free."

Before making a decision, Goldfein will consult the CAS community on what the mission's future looks like, because it may not look like the past. Experts argue the A-10 performs well in environments of total air dominance—such as Iraq and Afghanistan—but as advanced anti-

air weapons and surface-to-air missiles proliferate, it becomes more and more dangerous to fly a bulky, unstealthy Warthog into battle.



Textron Aviation is offering its Scorpion jet, which made its first flight in 2013 but has yet to sign its first customer. Credit: Textron Aviation

“Before we have any conversation about replacements . . . we want to make sure that anything we talk about is moving us forward into new ways of doing business,” Goldfein says.