

New Long-Range Bomber On Horizon For 2018

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A new bomber scheduled for operation as early as 2018 will enhance America's long-range strike capabilities, according to Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. T. Michael Moseley in a recent Armed Services Committee speech.

In a step to develop future long-range strike capabilities, Air Combat Command is conducting a study that is looking at aircraft platforms and weapon improvements. Air Force leaders will use the study to decide the best pathway for providing long-range strike capabilities for the future Air Force. This process normally takes about two years, but the 2018 target requires accelerated efforts.

The new bomber is necessary to recapitalize the Air Force's fleet of B-52 and B-1 "legacy bombers," and to counter advanced anti-access systems of America's enemies, said Lt. Col. Kevin Shorb, chief of Air Combat Command's Next Generation Long Range Strike Division. Modern enemy anti-access systems, such as surface-to-air missiles and enemy aircraft, are emerging and becoming common, he added.

In the March speech, General Moseley said the current bomber fleet is adequate to meet America's needs today, despite its age - but that's likely to change in the future without a new platform.

The B-52 and B-1 are not expected to engage a target in guarded enemy territory without the help of advanced airframes like the stealthy F-22A, according to Lt. Col. Tony Siler, ACC chief of the Ground Dominance

Capability Team.

"We refer to it as, 'Kick down the door,'" said Colonel Siler. "Taking down a portion of the enemy's air defense is the initial part of air warfare."

A B-1 or B-52 can't penetrate guarded territory on its own - but the new bomber could be expected to kick down the door, engage, and return without any help.

Colonel Shorb said the platform should also meet the needs of a leaner Air Force by reducing aircraft, sorties and fuel needed to put bombs on target.

Fuel efficiency and longer range are important features, according to Colonel Siler because it reduces dependency on the Air Force's in-flight refueling tankers - most of which are approaching 50 years in service. Also, because bomber forces aren't typically based in theater, long-range bombers fly long distances to deliver their weapons and thus face much longer flying hours.

This new endeavor comes at a time when the Air Force budget is strained, 40,000 Airmen are on their way out the door, and remaining Airmen are tightening the belt. Yet a stealthy, long-range bomber is needed more than ever - the average age of the force's aircraft is 23.5 years. It's the oldest inventory the Air Force has operated since its beginning in 1947.

The first B-52 rolled off the assembly line February 1955 and the 51-year old aircraft design makes up more than half of the Air Force's bomber inventory. That's equivalent to a police department using a 1955 Dodge Monaco for its patrol car. The B-52 will be more than 90 years old before it retires.

Furthermore, the increasing age of Air Force aircraft require more dollars invested to modernize their capabilities. Quite simply, "Old aircraft strain the budget," said Colonel Shorb. "The critical nature of current funding impacts the ability to modernize and sustain current fleets."

"The Air Force budget must balance our resources, support a lean, ready force and meet current and future joint warfighting requirements," said Maj. Brenda Campbell, secretary of the Air Force spokesperson. "The way we fight wars is changing - we must ensure our force is structured to meet future emerging threats."

But the major also said shortfalls in the budget could prevent the Air Force from providing the air and space capabilities America needs.

During OIF, bombers delivered two thirds of the total Air Force tonnage while flying roughly five percent of all Air Force strike sorties, said Colonel Shorb. These bombs were dropped against an enemy without anti-access systems; so essentially, the door didn't need to be kicked down. The same accomplishments would've been thorny had Iraq's anti-access system been developed.

Air Force leadership said long-range bombers have become the foundation of what makes up a lethal Air Force. Because of this, the new bomber planned for 2018 won't be the end of long-range strike technological investment.

"Transformational technology thrust for a future long-range strike capability is planned for deployment in the 2035 plus timeframe," said Colonel Shorb. He added these investments will likely go to platforms with hypersonic technology - that's Mach 6-plus capabilities. Nonetheless, the challenge herein doesn't involve developing the technology, but financing it during a funding drought.

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