Lexington Institute

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SIX FORMER SENIOR COMMANDERS ENDORSE JSTARS RECAPITALIZATION

Attached is a letter to Secretary of Defense James Mattis on E-8C JSTARS recapitalization, signed by six former senior commanders in the U.S. military.

JSTARS is a unique ground moving-target tracking capability that can monitor up to 600 targets simultaneously, day or night, through dust, clouds or haze. The planes and their radars generate pinpoint reports of enemy locations and vehicle movements for U.S. and allied forces. They have been used with great effect in the Iraq and Serbian wars, as well as to provide close surveillance of tense arenas in Eastern Europe and on the Korean peninsula.

The Air Force had a plan to modernize the 16 JSTARS aircraft in the fleet, but backed off this effort last summer to advance a more futuristic, networked plan that would unfold in the next decade. Many in Congress and the broader defense community are skeptical of this new proposal. The attached joint letter reflects some of their key concerns.

The letter is signed by:

General John Craddock, former Supreme Allied Commander, Europe

General Michael Loh, former commander, Air Combat Command

General Thomas A. Schwartz, former commander, U.S. Forces Korea

General Walter Sharp, former commander, U.S. Forces Korea

General James (JD) Thurman, former commander, U.S. Forces Korea

Admiral Robert F. Willard, former commander, Pacific Command

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Former Senior Commanders' Statement on JSTARS Recapitalization

January 23, 2018

The Honorable James Mattis
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Mattis:

We are writing today to express our concern about the uncertain future of the Air Force's E-8C Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System (JSTARS). The ground moving-target tracking capability of JSTARS is unique in the world, but belated efforts to rethink recapitalization of the current fleet raise the specter of a gap in joint reconnaissance that could persist for many years. This is a chance that we should not be taking.

There is little doubt that something must be done to replace the planes in the current fleet. The previously-owned Boeing 707s on which JSTARS radars are hosted exhibit numerous symptoms of advanced age, including corrosion, metal fatigue and technical obsolescence. Until recently, it was widely assumed there would be a one-for-one replacement of existing airframes incorporating better radars and advanced on-board battle management functions.

It now seems that due to concerns about survivability in contested air space, other options are being considered. All of the alternatives involve networking of diverse sensors potentially applicable to the tracking of mobile surface targets. We do not propose to challenge ongoing technical analyses, but simple prudence dictates that we not assume the networking of disparate sensors can be accomplished quickly. That caution is reinforced by the fact that no system currently exists for remotely processing ground moving-target indications or managing battles based on what those indications reflect.

For the sake of our warfighters and those of allied nations, the safest path forward is to proceed with the development of a next-generation radar plane that can take the place of E-8 aircraft while continuing to investigate the potential of a networked solution. It would be exceedingly dangerous to simply assume that a networked solution is feasible within the brief timeframe available, and therefore forego the currently planned recapitalization. We have waited too long to commence recapitalization, and therefore face a shortfall in vital tactical reconnaissance if yet another detour is taken away from the one plan that we know will work.

General John Craddock

General Walter Sharp (Ret)

General Thomas A. Schwartz

General James (JD) Thurman (Retired)

General John Michael Loh

Admiral Robert F. Willard