

## Air Force tanker faces more delays

By: Jen DiMascio  
January 20, 2010 01:44 PM EST

The third iteration of the Air Force aerial refueling tanker program is facing yet another delay.

The Pentagon had expected to release its final specifications last November, but Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz told reporters Wednesday that the release will be "within a month" of President Barack Obama's budget submission on Feb. 1.

And the final version will contain "modest" changes to the program's requirements — "some adjustments that I think will lessen the financial risk to whoever might offer on the program," Schwartz said at a conference on air, space and cyberspace. "But I do believe that we had the requirements right to start with."

One of the two teams vying for the tanker contract worth up to \$35 billion — an alliance of Northrop Grumman and the European Aeronautic Defence and Space Co. — has threatened to withdraw, saying the initial draft specifications indicated a preference for a smaller tanker — more akin to the one being developed by its competitor, the Boeing Co.

Boeing and its supporters have argued that Northrop and EADS, the parent company of the aerospace-giant Airbus, have an advantage because of unfair subsidies received in developing the A330 aircraft, from which the Northrop tanker is derived.

On Capitol Hill, Rep. Todd Tiahrt (R-Kan.),

in whose district Boeing would do tanker work, estimates Northrop and EADS have thereby received a benefit that amounts to \$5 million per aircraft. "That would be a significant advantage to one aircraft over another," Tiahrt told POLITICO recently.

Schwartz talked with reporters at a conference sponsored by the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis. And his comments came amid reports that the Air Force's largest weapons system — the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program — would be costly to operate and is behind schedule on testing.

But even with costs on the \$300 billion program predicted to increase, Schwartz said he did not expect they were so extreme that Congress would have to be notified. "I don't think we've reached that threshold yet," he said. "And I'm not forecasting that that's in the cards."

Despite the difficulties, Schwartz said the F-35 need not be viewed as a troubled program.



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"My sense is this program is far better off than was the case at a similar time for the F-22," Schwartz said. "Nonetheless, there were concerns about how much risk we were taking."

As a result, the Air Force is making changes to the testing schedule and to the program to lessen the risks. And Schwartz said he's still verifying the report questioning the cost of operations.

"The bottom line is that the F-35 is essential to our air force," he concluded.



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