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# The Silent Dogfight: Inside the Battle That Is Shaping the Future of U.S. Airpower in the Pacific

Ajay Patel  
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# The Silent Dogfight: Inside the Battle That Is Shaping the Future of U.S. Airpower in the Pacific

*For more than a decade, a quiet but consequential rivalry has played out inside the Pentagon, one that could shape the future of American airpower and the strategic balance in the Indo-Pacific.*

## The Fork in the Skies: How Two Programs Emerged

What began as a unified vision for a 6th Generation fighter, initially seeded by DARPA-led studies and early joint concepts, evolved into two distinct paths. By 2018, as requirements solidified, the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Navy began to recognize fundamental mission divergence. Defense planners concluded that a single airframe could not satisfy the different mission requirements of the services.

The Air Force faces the challenge of penetrating deeply contested A2/AD regions defended by layered air defenses, long-range missiles, and advanced sensors across vast distances. To meet this, it committed to the Next Generation Air Dominance (NGAD) program—a system of systems built around a manned fighter. The Navy, facing its own future at sea, moved forward with F/A-XX, a replacement for the Super Hornet designed for distributed maritime operations and the unforgiving environment of carrier-based aviation. While the F-35 provided a generational leap in stealth and sensor fusion, it lacked the range, survivability, capacity, and adaptability required for the high-end threats and mission tempos projected in the Indo-Pacific battlespace.

Each program evolved to meet fundamentally different operational imperatives. The Air Force's NGAD emphasized long-range deep strike, persistent Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) coordination, and air dominance over vast land-based theaters. In contrast, the Navy's F/A-XX prioritized rapid-launch responsiveness from carrier decks, survivability in harsh maritime conditions, and the ability to execute compressed kill chains against airborne threats near naval forces, where seconds, not minutes, determine success.

Much of the strategic separation between the two programs was shaped by hard lessons from the F-35 program. While the F-35 was designed as a tri-service solution, its joint nature led to significant design compromises, weight growth, and integration delays especially for the Navy's carrier-

based F-35C variant. The experience underscored that forcing commonality across services with vastly different operating environments often results in suboptimal outcomes. As a result, both the Air Force and Navy insisted on retaining design independence for their next-generation platforms, while still seeking interoperability through modular systems and shared technologies.

## A Decade of Development: The Path to Competition

The split between NGAD and F/A-XX did not materialize overnight. In the fifteen years leading to 2025, the Department of Defense made significant investments to explore advanced technologies for both programs, including adaptive-cycle engines, low-observable materials, digital engineering environments, autonomy-enabling architectures, and other innovations. These initiatives were supported through service-level efforts and cross-cutting programs, including the Air Force's Next-Generation Air Dominance (NGAD) Technology Maturation effort and the Navy's family-of-systems R&D line for Next-Generation Air Dominance. They were further bolstered by the Adaptive Aerospace Innovation (AAI) initiative launched under then Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics Frank Kendall, which invested over \$1 billion with funding from the Air Force, Navy, and DARPA to build and fly 6th-generation demonstrators.

At the same time, industry partners made their own substantial investments, anticipating the scale and strategic significance of these next-generation platforms. Boeing, Northrop Grumman, and Lockheed Martin each allocated billions of dollars in internal research and development to design test articles, experiment with manned-unmanned teaming, and develop model-based systems engineering tools to compress development timelines and reduce risk.

By early 2024, both Lockheed Martin and Boeing submitted formal proposals for the Air Force's NGAD program, following several years of classified concept development and early prototyping<sup>1</sup>. The competition for this land-based 6th Generation platform was already well advanced and receiving senior-level attention.

## The Silent Dogfight: Inside the Battle That Is Shaping the Future of U.S. Airpower in the Pacific

In a surprising turn, Secretary of the Air Force Frank Kendall began expressing skepticism about the Next Generation Air Dominance (NGAD) program in late July. That caution culminated in early September, when he formally demurred on advancing NGAD into the Engineering and Manufacturing Development (EMD) phase and making a final source selection between Lockheed Martin and Boeing. Two specific concerns drove this hesitation: 1) uncertainty about the Air Force's operational concept for Manned Unmanned Teaming (MUM-T) with the evolving threat in the Indo-Pacific theater and 2) projected flyaway costs of \$250M to \$350M per aircraft, raising questions about long-term affordability. This momentary pause created widespread uncertainty. In early Fall 2024, Secretary Kendall commissioned an independent blue-ribbon panel to reassess the Air Force's need for a sixth-generation fighter and to inform the President's Budget request for 2026.<sup>2</sup> Even after the panel affirmed the requirement in December (but urged caution on affordability, design maturity, and alignment with strategic doctrine), Kendall withheld a final decision, choosing to defer until the incoming Trump administration was in place. Progress remained stalled until events in early 2025 removed that ambiguity entirely.

In parallel with the Air Force development of the NGAD Program, the Navy launched its own effort for F/A-XX—a carrier-based 6th Generation fighter—with initial proposals solicited in early 2023. Boeing and Northrop Grumman submitted final proposals for F/A-XX at the end of 2024<sup>3</sup>, and the decision to proceed into the Engineering and Manufacturing Development (EMD) phase with a source selection was approved in January 2025 with minimal public attention. However, a formal announcement and implementation were deferred pending the confirmation of the incoming Secretary of the Navy. The deferred contract award announcement was expected before mid-spring. But even as the Navy moved toward a contract award, its efforts would soon be politically and publicly overshadowed by a high-profile announcement surrounding the Air Force's NGAD selection.

### Seizing the Moment: How the Air Force Played Its Trump Card in 2025

On **March 21, 2025**, in a surprise Oval Office announcement, **President Donald Trump** declared that **Boeing had been awarded the NGAD Engineering Manufacturing and Development (EMD) contract**, unveiling the aircraft now designated **F-47** as already having flown secretly for nearly five years.

This public announcement was far more than a routine contract decision. It was a decisive political and strategic maneuver by the Air Force. By elevating NGAD into the public spotlight with full presidential backing, the Air Force effectively locked in institutional momentum and swept away lingering indecision. Flanked by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David Allvin, Trump's announcement was calculated to rally congressional support, galvanize the defense industrial base, and push the program past its final go/no-go threshold. With Secretary Kendall out of office and no nominee yet named to lead the Department of the Air Force, top leadership remained in flux when the announcement was made. Deputy Secretary of Defense Steve Feinberg had only recently been confirmed and had not yet asserted control over major acquisition decisions. In that window, General Allvin saw a clear opportunity to secure NGAD's future — and he took it. It was, in effect, the Air Force's 'Trump card.' The decision came with a strong rollout: a clear narrative around the need for deep strike and MUM-T, signals of presidential engagement, and backing from the Blue Ribbon Panel review in late 2024.

Some first-hand accounts indicated that the White House appeared unaware of the Navy's 6th Gen program, even though the Trump transition team had been briefed on F/A-XX. Multiple credible media outlets reported that the Air Force and Navy briefed President Trump in early March<sup>4</sup>, though the depth of engagement likely varied significantly. While the President was almost certainly personally engaged in the Air Force NGAD briefing, it remains unclear whether he received more than a cursory overview of the Navy's F/A-XX program from a member of his White House staff.

## The Silent Dogfight: Inside the Battle That Is Shaping the Future of U.S. Airpower in the Pacific

When the Air Force made its play, both SECNAV and CNO roles were in transition or only just assumed, leaving the Navy without stable, empowered leadership able to orchestrate a high-profile advocacy effort. John Phelan had been in office as Secretary of the Navy less than a week when the F-47 was unveiled. Admiral James Kilby, as Acting CNO, lacked both the full authority and a unified institutional mandate to champion F/A-XX directly to the White House, and may not have held a deeply rooted conviction about the program's necessity, given the Navy's intensifying struggle to secure funding for its shipbuilding priorities. In this vacuum, the PEO for F/A-XX was left without the top cover or political capital needed to elevate the program's case. With no unified message from Navy leadership and no credible institutional push to counter emerging skepticism inside the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), the F/A-XX effort stalled, reduced to isolated staff-level engagements rather than a coordinated campaign capable of competing with the Air Force's momentum.

We surmise that NGAD had the clearer story, the tighter alignment, and the stronger internal advocates. F/A-XX, by contrast, likely suffered from a fragmented internal narrative and a lack of unified advocacy between the Navy and OSD, leaving the program vulnerable to external skepticism and budgetary sidelining. The result: a public story dominated by the Air Force, while F/A-XX fell into a strategic messaging void the Navy was ill-prepared to fill. Absent equivalent presidential visibility or internal clarity, the Navy program was marginalized and risked being portrayed as redundant or nonessential. Given this context, it remains unclear whether the formal decision on F/A-XX was ever explicitly presented to the President, or if the program simply failed to reach the threshold of engagement required to compete for his attention.

### Dogfight in the Pentagon: The Battle Over F/A-XX

The announcement caught the Navy off guard. Just days after the F-47 was unveiled, the Navy was expected to announce its selection for the F/A-XX program, choosing between competing Boeing and Northrop Grumman proposals. Industry and the media were primed for a decision, but none came. Weeks passed with no update, leaving Boeing,

Northrop, and observers in limbo as expectations gradually faded.

At the time of the Air Force's public rollout, the Navy was still working through critical elements of its concept of operations, particularly how F/A-XX would integrate with uncrewed systems, contributing to its slower narrative and programmatic posture. Compounding this, Navy leaders were likely unaware of the growing resistance within OSD, where skepticism about carrier-based platforms and budgetary redundancy was rapidly hardening into opposition.

As the dust settled from the Air Force's public victory lap on NGAD, the Navy finally regrouped, but belatedly. Senior leadership moved to reassert the importance of F/A-XX and clarify its distinct operational needs. However, when the Navy began making its case internally in the Pentagon, it met stiff resistance from OSD. This wasn't a tactical fight between platforms. It was a gritty, bureaucratic struggle, fought in back rooms, hearings, and policy memos, as Navy advocates clashed with OSD leadership over the very future of sea-based airpower.

### Fumbled Advocacy at the Moment of Decision

Within weeks of these events, Rear Admiral Michael Donnelly (Director, Air Warfare Division, N98, Office of the Chief of Naval Operations) outlined the envisioned capabilities of F/A-XX during the April 2025 Sea-Air-Space Conference. Instead of using the public forum to strongly advocate for F/A-XX's role as the Navy's "first-look, first-shot, first-kill" platform in the maritime kill chain, he offered a broad description lacking programmatic clarity. Moreover, at the same conference, Acting CNO Admiral Kilby acknowledged that the fate of the program rested not with Navy leadership, but with OSD, stating: "*It's a decision at the secretary-level and above, and they're working that now.*"<sup>5</sup>

The Navy's acquiescence appeared to signal internal hesitation, perhaps stemming from institutional fatigue, a reluctance by recently confirmed Secretary Phelan and Admiral Kilby to politically engage or challenge their OSD superiors, or a desire to avoid further scrutiny during a sensitive budget cycle. Whatever the cause, the lack of vocal advocacy from Navy leadership at the

# The Silent Dogfight: Inside the Battle That Is Shaping the Future of U.S. Airpower in the Pacific

moment of decision only degraded the perceived importance of F/A-XX and amplified the view that the service had lost control of its own future in the 6th Gen dogfight.

## Caught in the Crosshairs: F/A-XX and the FY26 Budget Kill Chain

April and May marked the most consequential phase of the President's FY26 budget deliberations. Senior defense leaders, particularly newly appointed Deputy Secretary of Defense Steve Feinberg, faced mounting pressure to reconcile the Department's aggressive modernization ambitions with tightening budget ceilings. Internal budget drills and Program Budget Review (PBR) rounds forced prioritization across competing modernization accounts. It was during this window that resistance to F/A-XX intensified. Conversations inside OSD, including influential voices from CAPE, began to frame F/A-XX as duplicative, unaffordable, or misaligned with future warfare concepts. With F-47 now validated and accelerating, F/A-XX appeared less essential.

On May 14, 2025, reports<sup>6</sup> emerged of growing tensions between senior Pentagon officials and key members of Congress over the future of the Navy's sixth-generation fighter. According to Reuters, Congress was battling with OSD and the Trump administration to keep moving forward with a contract award for F/A-XX, with lawmakers warning defense leaders, "Don't you dare do this." While the reports did not quote Deputy Secretary Feinberg directly, he was likely engaged in those conversations personally given the intensity of congressional concern and the seniority of those involved. The substance of the discussions reflected mounting skepticism within OSD about the need for a separate Navy fighter, echoing DoD's Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation Office (CAPE's) framing of the program as redundant and fiscally unsustainable in light of the Air Force's F-47 selection.

By the end of May, though final budget decisions were still in flux, the window to rally support was closing. While the Air Force was implementing execution plans for F-47 EMD, the Navy remained in a reactive posture. At this stage, the draft FY26 budget request began to reflect a significant reduction in F/A-XX investment, leaving it funded

only at levels sufficient for minimal studies and design work consistent with reports of a three-year delay, effectively placing it on hold<sup>7</sup>. Though never officially canceled, the program was effectively confined to pre-EMD activity, continuing only limited design studies and analysis, with no clear path toward development.

During these months, the Navy had multiple opportunities to clarify its message, strengthen its advocacy, and articulate a compelling Indo-Pacific strategy that demanded a purpose-built, carrier-based sixth-generation fighter. However, in the absence of a coherent and timely response, set against growing skepticism within OSD and the strategic momentum behind F-47, the window to reframe the debate quickly closed. What might have been an informed, coordinated discussion about future force design devolved into a fragmented budgetary brawl.

## CAPE's Quiet War on Naval Airpower

While no formal directive was issued, evidence suggests that the CAPE office has long harbored skepticism toward the Navy's carrier-centric force structure, particularly as it pertains to Indo-Pacific deterrence<sup>8</sup>. As part of the Department of Defense's 2021 Global Posture Review (GPR)—which focused on adapting U.S. force posture for the Indo-Pacific—the Navy and CAPE conducted supporting force-structure assessments to shape future investment priorities. Although the detailed findings remain classified, subsequent budget signals and strategic debates suggest the reviews exposed a fundamental divergence. CAPE appeared to favor a leaner, more distributed force posture centered on land-based assets positioned across Japan, the Philippines, Guam, and austere sites in the First and Second Island Chains. This approach emphasizes persistent presence, operational agility, and logistical sustainability—reducing reliance on large maritime platforms like carrier strike groups, which CAPE and like-minded strategists may view as increasingly vulnerable to Chinese anti-ship missile threats. The Navy, by contrast, continued to prioritize carrier strike groups as essential for sea control and expeditionary power projection. This quiet but consequential doctrinal rift continues to shape the debate around programs like F/A-XX.

## The Silent Dogfight: Inside the Battle That Is Shaping the Future of U.S. Airpower in the Pacific

Yet this logic presents a strategic inconsistency: while CAPE discounts the survivability of maneuvering aircraft carriers, it simultaneously assumes that distributed land-based operations under the Air Force's Agile Combat Employment (ACE) concept offer a more resilient foundation for forward presence. This assumption, however, remains unproven. Fixed and geolocated sites, even when dispersed, are still within range of China's expanding inventory of long-range precision missiles and could face significant targeting pressure in a high-end conflict.

CAPE's underlying beliefs shaped internal analyses and likely influenced early 2025 guidance that deprioritized the Navy's 6th Generation fighter. In this context, CAPE's longstanding preference for smaller-footprint, cost-effective systems likely informed its internal guidance to senior leaders. As Deputy Secretary Feinberg and his team began shaping the FY 2026 budget, CAPE's influence likely played a pivotal role in deprioritizing the Navy's sixth-generation ambitions.

In June, internal Pentagon briefings solidified the split: the Air Force would move into full-scale NGAD execution; the Navy's F/A-XX would not. No visible counteroffensive emerged from Navy leadership or its industrial partners to reverse the momentum. And by early July, the final contours of the FY26 President's Budget were effectively locked in, confirming F/A-XX's relegation to a placeholder status or worse. The reductions were further codified in the reconciliation bill, signaling a shift in OSD's priorities and leaving the Navy without a credible roadmap to field a 6th Generation carrier-based fighter on its own terms. By the time senior Navy leaders fully recognized the program's peril, the bureaucratic machinery had already moved on.

### The Convenient Excuse: Industry Capacity as Cover Story

An emerging OSD narrative pointed to concerns over the defense industrial base's capacity to simultaneously execute two major sixth-generation aircraft programs, each requiring unique engineering, prototyping, and production lines. Officials suggested that prioritizing F-47 would streamline resources and reduce schedule and cost risks, framing the Navy's F/A-XX as a duplicative effort that could be avoided by simply adapting the

Air Force's NGAD for carrier operations<sup>9</sup>. However, this perspective was not universally shared. Industry leaders communicated directly with senior defense officials, asserting that the industrial base could support both programs concurrently and backed their position with detailed, well-substantiated arguments.

While industrial base strain was the official justification, it is reasonable to question whether this rationale served as a convenient pretext that masked deeper institutional preferences within OSD. There is no evidence that CAPE or the DoD Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Industrial Base Policy conducted a rigorous industrial base study. There have been no reports of collaboration between the Air Force and Navy in sharing detailed supply chain readiness evaluations for their 6<sup>th</sup> Generation fighters. Instead, the decision appeared to be shaped more by internal bias and alignment with CAPE's techno-futurist preferences, rather than by transparent cross-service planning. The industrial base argument, while not entirely baseless, was selectively elevated to rationalize a predetermined policy direction—one in which F-47 would proceed unimpeded, while F/A-XX was effectively shot down.

### The Techno-Futurist Narrative: Beneath F/A-XX's Collapse Lies a Deeper Strategic Rift

Behind the Navy's apparent loss of momentum on F/A-XX lies a deeper tension, one not merely of budget math or inter-service rivalry, but of competing visions for the future of warfare. In recent years, a powerful narrative has taken hold in Washington, championed by a new class of Silicon Valley-backed defense firms like Anduril, SHIELD AI, and Palantir. Their view is seductive: wars of the future will not be won by exquisite manned systems but by swarms of autonomous, attritable platforms that are fast, cheap, AI-enabled, and deployed at scale. That narrative has been bolstered by the effectiveness of drone warfare in the Ukraine conflict. This worldview has found fertile ground in the Pentagon, particularly within CAPE, whose analytical DNA is rooted in affordability, rapid fielding, and operational efficiency. To CAPE and its allies, carrier-based fighters like F/A-XX represent an aging paradigm—expensive, slow to iterate, and



# The Silent Dogfight: Inside the Battle That Is Shaping the Future of U.S. Airpower in the Pacific

## 1. Launch and Recovery Requirements

Naval carrier aviation imposes strict requirements on how aircraft launch and land. Unlike their land-based counterparts, carrier-based aircraft must survive catapult launches, arrested landings, and limited deck space while maintaining combat readiness. This has direct implications on structural reinforcements, wing design, and landing systems.

Feature	F-47	F/A-XX
Takeoff/Landing	Long runways; unrestricted land-based operation	Catapult launch, arrested recovery (CATOBAR)
Structural Design	Optimized for weight and stealth	Heavier landing gear, tailhook, reinforced airframe
Wing Design	Fixed high-aspect or delta for efficiency	Folding wings to fit carrier deck elevators & hangars

Carrier operations demand structural resilience and compactness incompatible with high-efficiency land-based designs.

## 2. Corrosion and Environmental Resilience

Operating from the sea exposes aircraft to intense environmental stressors that land-based jets simply do not face. Salt corrosion, humidity, and constant motion from the sea all require hardened designs and specialized materials to maintain operational longevity.

Feature	F-47	F/A-XX
Environmental Factors	Dry land base, controlled maintenance	Saltwater, humidity, sea spray, pitch/roll dynamics
Coatings and Materials	Conventional LO coatings	Specialized anti-corrosion materials and coatings

Long-term survivability and maintainability aboard carriers requires unique maritime hardening.

## 3. Sensor Employment and Kill Chain Role

F/A-XX and F-47 differ not only in physical design but also in how they fight. The Navy’s concept demands rapid, self-contained kill chains to defend naval forces without relying on external ISR, whereas the

F-47 can exploit deep ISR networks and collaborative engagements.

Feature	F-47	F/A-XX
ISR Dependency	Can rely on CCAs, AWACS, space assets	Often must operate without external ISR support
Sensor Architecture	Deep penetration sensors, long-range EW	360° maritime ISR, fast-reacting sensor fusion
Mission Logic	Long kill chains with redundancy	Compressed kill chains; first-look/first-kill imperative

The F/A-XX must act as its own sensor-shooter, closing kill chains rapidly inside contested maritime zones.

## 4. Mission Profile and Maneuverability

The two fighters serve different types of missions: F-47 for long-range strike into enemy territory and F/A-XX for high-agility, short-duration engagements near carrier strike groups. These roles demand radically different kinematic profiles and turn performance.

Feature	F-47	F/A-XX
Flight Profile	High-speed, long-range strikes with limited loiter; aggressive in contested airspace	Quick-launch, short-to-medium radius CAP and intercept missions, designed for repeat sortie <sup>11</sup> s
Maneuverability	Speed, stealth, and burst for penetration into contested airspace	Optimized for sustained agility in dense maritime and littoral environments
Combat Radius	Extended via ACE basing and tankers	Moderate integrated with carrier logistics

A land-optimized airframe can’t deliver the burst-response agility needed in carrier air wing combat scenarios.

## 5. Logistics, Sortie Rate, and Maintainability

Naval carrier operations place unique stress on maintenance cycles and sortie generation. The tempo aboard carriers requires rugged systems, rapid turnaround, and fewer support personnel—all baked into the design from the start.

# The Silent Dogfight: Inside the Battle That Is Shaping the Future of U.S. Airpower in the Pacific

Feature	F-47	F/A-XX
Support Model	Extensive airbase infrastructure	Constrained space and manpower aboard carriers
Sortie Tempo <sup>9</sup>	Optimized for campaign bursts	High-tempo cyclic ops in 24/7 maritime patrol posture

Naval aircraft must be designed for brutal, space-constrained sortie generation cycles.

## 6. Interoperability with Carrier-Based Systems

Beyond physical integration, carrier-based aircraft must function as part of a tightly networked naval system interfacing seamlessly with shipborne sensors, weapons, and logistics.

Feature	F-47	F/A-XX
Comms Integration	Joint land-based C2 networks	Naval C2 networks (CEC, NIFC-CA, CMV-22 logistics)
Weapons Configuration	Larger weapons bays	Tailored for maritime weapons mix (e.g., naval AAMs, antiship missiles)

Seamless integration with carrier group systems and doctrine requires platform-specific design choices.

## 7. Thrust, G-Load Maneuverability, and Airframe Geometry

At a fundamental level, the physics of naval combat demands a different thrust-to-weight balance and g-load survivability. F/A-XX needs greater instantaneous performance and structural durability, especially for carrier operations and close-quarters dogfights.

Feature	F-47	F/A-XX
Engine Type	Adaptive-cycle (e.g., XA100) for range + cruise efficiency	Navalized twin-engine for short bursts, high agility
Thrust-to-Weight Ratio	Balanced for range + payload	Maximized for agility + launch dynamics
G-Load Requirements	7.5–9 G max, emphasis on rapid ingress / egress	9+ G turns required for intercepts
Turn Rate / Angle of Attack	Stable, long-range design	High instantaneous

Feature	F-47	F/A-XX
		turn and Angle of Attack
Airframe Size	Large (~50,000 lbs empty)	Medium-heavy, foldable
Structural Features	Conventional stealth airframe for land ops	Reinforced for CATOBAR, salt hardening, deck impacts

F/A-XX must withstand carrier punishment and maneuver like a knife fighter; F-47 does not.

## 8. Stealth and Maritime Electromagnetic/Infrared (EM/IR) Survivability

While both aircraft require low observability, F/A-XX must be optimized to evade and survive in unique maritime electromagnetic and infrared environments where sea clutter and thermal contrast differ dramatically from land warfare.

Feature	F-47	F/A-XX
Radar Cross Section	Land-optimized stealth shaping/coatings	Stealth against sea-skimming and maritime radar clutter
IR Signature	Cooled with space, airflow	Suppressed for ocean-surface IR contrast

The F/A-XX must manage unique maritime EM/IR survivability challenges.

## 9. Deep Strike vs. Fast Strike: Tempo and Kill Chain Dynamics

Perhaps the most defining divergence is their role in the kill chain. F-47 is a deep strike aircraft, launched from remote land bases to penetrate deep into enemy territory with persistence. F/A-XX is a fast strike, carrier-launched platform meant to respond in seconds to emerging threats.

Feature	F-47	F/A-XX
Mission Model	Long-duration, deep penetration strike	Rapid-response, fleet defense and air dominance in maritime battlespace
Target Types	Fixed/semi-fixed deep inland targets	Dynamic airborne threats near fleet
Time Sensitivity	Minutes-to-hours	Seconds-to-minutes intercept timelines

# The Silent Dogfight: Inside the Battle That Is Shaping the Future of U.S. Airpower in the Pacific



Feature	F-47	F/A-XX
	engagement windows	
Fuel Capacity	~20,000 lbs internal	Smaller loadout optimized for speed, sortie rate
Payload Configuration	Long-range standoff munitions	Agile AAMs, defensive/offensive naval munitions
Sensor Strategy	Wide-area coordination, CCA-led	Compressed kill loop, solo detect-track-intercept
Basing	ACE-enabled land bases	Organic to carrier air wings
Sortie Rhythm	1–2/day, long-cycle	3–6/day, high ops tempo

The distinct operational requirements of the F/A-XX and F-47 make clear that they are not interchangeable variants of a shared design, but purpose-built platforms tailored to fundamentally different missions together forming the cornerstone of U.S. air dominance in the Indo-Pacific. The Navy’s F/A-XX must achieve rapid response, high maneuverability, and maritime survivability to intercept threats just minutes from the fleet. The Air Force’s F-47 must execute deep-penetration, long-range strikes from dispersed land bases across island chains, evading detection over thousands of miles. Suggesting one could evolve from the other misunderstands both the technical requirements and the strategic stakes.

This is not about industrial convenience, it’s about warfighting necessity. The United States cannot prevail in the Indo-Pacific with just one of these aircraft, nor with a compromised hybrid that dilutes their unique advantages. Preserving divergence in airframe and mission design—while converging where it counts in autonomy, digital architecture, sustainment, and command-and-control—is the only path to fielding a sixth-generation force that wins.

## Friday, July 18: 2026 Budget Stand-off

Regardless of Pentagon attempts to reduce or pause F/A-XX funding, Congress has consistently restored or enhanced appropriations, reflecting bipartisan recognition that the operational realities of the Indo-Pacific theater demand both the F-47 and F/A-XX to ensure air and maritime dominance. On June 10th, the House Defense Appropriations

Subcommittee formally signaled its support for the F/A-XX by adding \$972 million to the Navy’s FY 2026 budget, significantly exceeding the Department of Defense’s request of \$74 million. The Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) also addressed the future of F/A-XX during its markup of the FY 2026 National Defense Authorization Act. On July 9, 2025, the Committee advanced its version of the NDAA by a decisive 26–1 vote. In its report, SASC voiced concern over a potential delay to the Navy’s sixth-generation fighter program and urged continued development, directly countering the positions taken by the OSD and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

In an extraordinary move on July 15, the White House—not the Pentagon—warned Congress that funding the Navy’s F/A-XX could imperil the more mature Air Force F-47 program. The Administration’s Statement of Administration Policy (SAP) issued by OMB bluntly stated that awarding F/A-XX “as written” risked delaying F-47’s fielding, citing industrial base strain and questioning the Navy fighter’s added value.<sup>12</sup> It is highly unusual for the Executive Office to so explicitly and directly oppose a specific defense program by name, particularly in the absence of any formal statement from OSD. Yet in the case of F/A-XX, the Administration made its position unmistakably clear, casting the program as a flashpoint and effectively placing it on hold, unwilling to support its advancement alongside the Air Force’s F-47.

On July 18, the full House ignited the flashpoint by passing the FY 2026 Defense Appropriations Act (H.R. 4016), explicitly endorsing both 6<sup>th</sup> Generation Fighters by adding \$972 million for F/A-XX with a vote of 221-209.

We now face the aerial equivalent of a Mexican standoff, an unresolved budget impasse that imperils America’s ability to maintain peace and uphold internationally recognized sovereignty in the Indo-Pacific

## The Industrial Base: Decades of Investment Have Built the Capacity for Both

Over the past decade, both the F-47 and F/A-XX programs have been maturing under separate but parallel development tracks—each with dedicated technology maturation, industry engagement, and

# The Silent Dogfight: Inside the Battle That Is Shaping the Future of U.S. Airpower in the Pacific

subsystem innovation efforts. Since the early 2010s, the Department of Defense has invested in Next Generation Air Dominance (NGAD) family-of-systems concepts for the Air Force and Navy, with shared focus areas such as advanced sensors, propulsion systems, autonomy, and digital engineering. Throughout this period, prime contractors Boeing and Northrop Grumman (and their Tier 2 and Tier 3 suppliers) have consistently aligned their technology roadmaps, supplier base development, and integration timelines with the understanding that both aircraft would be required. This synchronized development has already addressed potential industrial base chokepoints—including in propulsion, stealth materials, and mission systems, thereby reducing any real risk of capacity shortfall. In fact, both contractors have conveyed to their respective services and OSD that they are ready to proceed without mutual interference, and that simultaneous execution is not only feasible but strategically advantageous.

The White House's concern, as outlined in the July 15, 2025 Statement of Administration Policy on H.R. 4016, presumes industrial fragility that no longer exists. If anything, the decade of joint investment and co-development has strengthened the industrial base's ability to manage both programs. This is a moment to capitalize on that resilience. Investing in both sixth-generation platforms now sends a strong signal of national resolve, fuels innovation across the defense industrial base, and preserves the U.S. ability to maintain both air and maritime superiority in the most consequential theater of the 21st century.

## The Right Path: Fully Fund F/A-XX, Preserve Divergence, Enable Convergence

This is not a case of either/or. The Indo-Pacific fight requires both aircraft. The F-47 and F/A-XX are complementary, not redundant, with each designed for distinct operational environments and mission demands. Suggesting that one can replace the other is a strategic misjudgment and a technical fallacy. Adapting the F-47 for carrier operations is not a viable solution. The differences in design, mission profile, and operational tempo are too significant. Attempting convergence would compromise critical naval requirements in pursuit of a misguided sense

of jointness, ultimately weakening deterrence in the region.

This position is not a rejection of jointness. True convergence (at the network, sensor, and kill chain level) depends on preserving diversity at the platform level. A carrier-based fighter designed for naval realities does not duplicate the role of a land-based counterpart; rather, the two are built to complement each other. Resilient joint warfighting requires interoperable systems with domain-specific advantages, not cookie-cutter airframes. Each platform extends the operational reach of the other—without F/A-XX, the carrier strike group loses its edge; without F-47, forward land-based operations lose survivability and effectiveness.

The right decision is not just about aircraft, it's about who wins the next war in the Pacific. The Navy's ability to conduct high-end carrier operations is indispensable to U.S. deterrence, presence, and escalation control in the Indo-Pacific. If F/A-XX is canceled or diluted into a compromised derivative of F-47, the decision jeopardizes far more than freedom of navigation in the Western Pacific and South China Sea, it risks tipping the balance in a future confrontation with China.

**The Department of the Navy must urgently restore momentum behind F/A-XX to preserve U.S. combat credibility in the Indo-Pacific.** That means recommitting to a platform purpose-built for carrier operations, with the agility, durability, and mission flexibility needed to fight and survive in a contested maritime domain. It also means reclaiming the narrative, not just in budget drills, but in the broader debate about how the U.S. will project power in the era of great power rivalry.

**Congress must not acquiesce to policy arguments forged in backroom meetings or driven by short-term budgetary convenience.** Legislators should demand clarity of purpose, technical rigor, and a force design grounded in operational realism, not fiscal abstraction. The Indo-Pacific theater demands capabilities shaped by the fight, not the funding line or abstract theories of future warfare divorced from operational reality.

There is still time to correct the course. Ensuring that F/A-XX receives sufficient funding to enter the Engineering and Manufacturing Development phase

# The Silent Dogfight: Inside the Battle That Is Shaping the Future of U.S. Airpower in the Pacific

will require congressional resolve, institutional leadership, and a willingness to challenge flawed narratives.

*F/A-XX is not just a Navy fighter—it is a test of whether the United States is serious about maritime power in a world of rising peer threats. The time to act is now.*

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This article was authored by **Ajay Patel**, CEO of SMA, with valuable contributions from Alan Berman, Jacque Keats, Gary Kessler, J. David Patterson, and Elizabeth Stillman.

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### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> During a second-quarter 2023 earnings call on July 27, 2023, Northrop Grumman CEO Kathy Warden stated: "We have notified the U.S. Air Force that we're not planning to respond to the NGAD RFP as a prime."; Stephen Losey, "Northrop Grumman won't bid on Air Force's NGAD fighter," Defense News, July 27, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> John A. Tirpak, "Kendall: USAF Can't Afford Next-Gen Fighter, Tanker, and Wingman Drones All at Once," Air&Space Forces Magazine, November 5, 2024

<sup>3</sup> Reports from reputable media outlets indicate that Lockheed Martin was dropped from the F/A-XX down-select before Boeing and Northrop Grumman submitted their final EMD proposals.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Everstine, U.S. Air Force, "Navy Brief Trump on Future Fighter Plans," Aerospace Daily and Defense Report, March 18, 2025.

<sup>5</sup> Lee Ferran, "Secretary-level and above' officials 'working' F/A-XX fighter decision: Acting CNO," Breaking Defense, April 7, 2025

<sup>6</sup> Mike Stone, "US Navy's new fighter jet threatened by funding dispute, sources say," Reuters, May 14, 2025.

<sup>7</sup> The three-year delay referenced in May 2025 is in addition to an earlier three-year delay and \$1B funding reduction imposed during the FY 2025 budget cycle due to spending caps imposed by the 2023 Fiscal Responsibility Act; Mikayla Easley, "DoD's 2026 budget puts Air Force's F-47 on fast track, Navy's F/A-XX on ice," DefenseScoop, June 27, 2025.

<sup>8</sup> The Indo-Pacific Theater includes key U.S. interests and potential conflict zones separated by thousands of miles of open ocean. Unlike Europe or the Middle East, where large, well-established forward bases allow for rapid deployment and resupply, the Indo-Pacific offers limited basing access, longer transit times, and greater logistical strain. These operational realities make deterrence uniquely challenging: it requires not only credible capability but also the ability to be present quickly and persistently across a dispersed maritime battlespace. In this environment, mobile sea-based forces such as carrier strike groups offer strategic flexibility and forward reach that land-based systems alone may not be able to provide. Some analysts argue that over-reliance on fixed land bases in the region underestimates their vulnerability to long-range precision strikes and political access constraints.

<sup>9</sup> The F/A-XX as a derivative of the F-47 Airframe is a superficially appealing notion that ignores decades of design, mission, and operational realities. As early as 2018, internal DoD studies had already examined this very possibility for the 6<sup>th</sup> generation fighter and concluded that a joint solution was unworkable. The Air Force and Navy formally diverged paths at that time,

# The Silent Dogfight: Inside the Battle That Is Shaping the Future of U.S. Airpower in the Pacific

launching two distinct sixth-generation development efforts in recognition of their fundamentally different operational needs. The following section lays out, in no uncertain terms, why F/A-XX and F-47 are not interchangeable and why conflating the two risks strategic failure in the Indo-Pacific.

The failed F-111 program is perhaps the most cited cautionary tale. Originally conceived as a joint solution for the Air Force and Navy in the 1960s, the F-111A was built around Air Force requirements for long-range strike, while the Navy version (F-111B) attempted to adapt the design for carrier-based fleet defense. The aircraft proved too heavy, underpowered for air combat maneuvering, and unsuitable for carrier operations. The Navy abandoned the F-111B, instead pivoting to the development of the highly successful F-14 Tomcat, while the Air Force was left with a costly and narrowly tailored asset.

Fast forward to the F-35 program, and the promise of a tri-service stealth fighter was ultimately realized, with three operational variants: the F-35A for the Air Force, the F-35B for the Marine Corps with short takeoff and vertical landing capability, and the F-35C for carrier-based Navy missions. The F-35C required structural reinforcements, different landing gear, larger wings, and tailhook modifications, which added weight and complexity and significantly delayed its initial operational capability. However, as a multi-role platform designed to satisfy broad joint requirements, the F-35C was not purpose-built for high-end air dominance missions in the Indo-Pacific.

These experiences demonstrate that while shared software and mission systems can offer convergence benefits, forcing physical airframe commonality almost always breaks under the weight of real-world operational demands, especially when carrier suitability is involved.

There are technical reasons why this occurs:

- Carrier operations require heavier landing gear, tailhooks, folding wings, and corrosion-resistant coatings, which directly conflict with stealth

shaping and weight targets prioritized by land-based aircraft.

- Maritime survivability profiles, including extended loitering over water and proximity to enemy shore-based threats, demand different radar and electronic warfare configurations.
- Deck logistics, including aircraft footprint, maintainability, and sortie generation rates<sup>8</sup>, are governed by entirely different operational constraints than forward-deployed land bases.

Trying to design one platform that meets all these requirements results in tradeoffs that hurt both services. Worse, it stifles innovation because neither service gets a clean-sheet design optimized for their evolving mission realities. A notable exception is the Navy's F-4 Phantom II, the most-produced American supersonic military aircraft in history. This fighter was a Cold War-era long-range supersonic jet interceptor and fighter-bomber developed by McDonnell Aircraft for the United States Navy and later, somewhat ironically, successfully adopted by the Air Force and Marine Corps.

<sup>10</sup> The comparative design and operational parameters in this section are drawn from a synthesis of publicly available sources, including U.S. Department of Defense acquisition reports, GAO assessments, service-level aviation doctrine, technical publications from the Air Force and Navy, independent think tank studies (e.g., Mitchell Institute, Hudson Institute, CSBA), and industry disclosures from aerospace primes. These sources, while open-source, provide a robust and well-documented foundation for illustrating the distinct mission requirements and design imperatives of land-based versus carrier-based sixth-generation fighters.

<sup>11</sup> A sortie is a single operational flight by one military aircraft from takeoff to landing, typically to carry out a specific mission such as combat, patrol, or reconnaissance.

<sup>12</sup> "STATEMENT OF ADMINISTRATION POLICY, H.R. 4016 — Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2026," Executive Office of the President, Office of Management and Budget. July 15, 2025.