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Congress of the United States
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COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
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NATO PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY
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November 4, 2022

Secretary Frank Kendall
1670 Air Force Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20330

Dear Secretary Kendall:

Thank you for your October 19th response regarding rebasing the F-35A or F-15EX fighter aircraft at the 144th Fighter Wing in Fresno. I understand from your letter that the Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 budget request process is underway, and that a decision on aircraft for the 144th has been postponed until the budget request is finalized. In order to meet the needs of the 144th Fighter Wing, I urge you to include the largest possible request for F-35A aircraft in the FY 2024 budget request.

As you know, the Air Force budget request for FY 2023 included thirty-three F-35A aircraft. From FY 2019 to FY 2022, the F-35A budget request was for forty-eight aircraft, making the FY 2023 request the lowest request since 2014. I'm also concerned that the Department's aircraft procurement plan indicates that the FY 2024's budget request is expected to be for just twenty-nine F-35A aircraft.¹

I understand this is due to the U.S. Services' interest in acquiring aircraft with Block 4 technology, and I appreciate the importance of these capabilities. However, decreasing the size of the F-35A program could also have significant national security risks. As a fifth-generation aircraft, the F-35A outpaces the F-15 and F-16 fourth generation technology in stealth, air superiority, surveillance, and electronic warfare. Fifth-generation technology represents the future of the mission, and the Air Force has indicated that the F-15s might be unable to effectively operate close to enemy airspace after 2028².

Fresno's 144th Fighter Wing is one of four bases being considered for a fleet of F-35A or F15EX aircraft to replace the F-15C mission. The 144th is the only west coast base in the running that doesn't yet operate an F-35A mission, and its proximity to the Indo-Pacific theater makes it the most strategic of these four locations. As you finalize the FY 2024 budget request, I urge you to include the highest possible funding for the F-35A and prioritize the 144th Fighter Wing in Fresno as a new home for these aircraft.

Thank you for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to reach out in order to discuss this further.

Sincerely,

Jim Costa
Member of Congress

¹ [Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Estimates: Justification Book](#) (Volume 1 of 2). Department of Defense, April 2022.

² [F-15EX vs. F-35A](#). Air Force Magazine, *John A. Tirpak*.