

## Newsletters

# 'Just in time' F-35 supply chain too risky for next war, general says

By [Stephen Losey](#)

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Members of the Oklahoma City Air Logistics Complex Heavy Maintenance Center get an up close look at an Air Force F-35 Lightning II Demonstration Team aircraft at Tinker Air Force Base, Oklahoma, May 25, 2021. The HMC sustains the F135 jet engine, which powers the F-35. Some members of the HMC had never seen an F-35 in person prior to this visit. (Paul Shirk/Air Force)

NATIONAL HARBOR, Maryland – The [F-35 Joint Strike Fighter](#) will need a more resilient supply chain to ensure the military can keep it flying in a future, highly contested war, the Air Force officer in charge of the program said Monday.

The [F-35 program was set up](#) with a “just in time” supply chain, where parts arrive right before they’re needed and little inventory is stockpiled, [Lt. Gen. Michael Schmidt](#), the program executive officer, said during a panel discussion at the Navy League’s Sea Air Space conference being held this week in National Harbor, Maryland.

In the private sector, Schmidt said, that kind of efficient supply chain works well for keeping costs low. But in a future war involving highly contested environments, it could lead to disaster, he said.

“When you have that [just-in-time] mentality, a hiccup in the supply chain, whether it be a strike … or a quality issue, becomes your single point of failure,” Schmidt said. “We need to look at, what does ‘right’ look like in the future, to give us more resilience in a combat environment.”

Bridget Lauderdale, vice president and general manager of the F-35 program for the aircraft’s main manufacturer, Lockheed Martin, said the company has focused more on trying to forecast the demand cycle, so it can better predict when it will need parts.

“A lot of those materials take lead time to prepare, even when you do have funding and even when you have repair capacity,” Lauderdale said.

To create the resilient supply chain necessary to fly the F-35 in the future, Lauderdale said, the military services and the defense industry are going to need to work more closely together.

The F-35 enterprise’s sustainment network is “enormous,” Schmidt said, encompassing airplanes operating from 27 bases and 10 ships. Nine nations fly the F-35 operationally, and there are 17 countries in all taking part in the program.

Schmidt said the international nature of the F-35 program will provide opportunities for the U.S. and other partner nations to work together and more efficiently maintain their jets.

"In a few years, we're going to be flying between 500 and 600 F-35s in Europe, and less than 100 of those are going to be U.S." fighters, Schmidt said. "What a huge opportunity that is to leverage each other's logistics and maintenance environments."

At the same time, he said, the F-35 program needs to work on ensuring it can get the right parts and other materials to the right places, so those maintenance hubs can do the necessary work on the planes.

## 'Huge win'

Schmidt acknowledged that the program was "a little bit late" in standing up depots to handle the sustainment capacity the F-35 will need, adding that as the Pentagon was negotiating with Lockheed on lots 15-17 last year, it opted to use some of the money to pay for more depot capacity, instead of buying an unspecified number of additional fighters.

"That's a huge win," he said. "I think once we can really figure out this global sustainment enterprise, to make sure that we can meet all the demands of all the countries ... getting that right is a huge focus area of mine."

The F-35 program, including the heavy maintenance depot at Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma, has made great progress in fixing an engine shortage, which at one point was a "top degrader" dragging down readiness rates. Schmidt said. A little more than a year ago, 48 F-35s were without engines, he said. Last month, that number was down to one.

The commander of Tinker's Oklahoma Air Logistics Complex told Defense News last year that the base had overhauled its processes, hired more workers and acquired new tools and equipment to repair more of the fighters' F135 engines.

F-35 maintainers are also getting more data they can use to assess the health of the fighters' engines, without having to go through the time-consuming effort of pulling the engines out of the plane to do a closer inspection.

"We're seeing over a 50% increase in reliability in terms of engine-on-wing time," Schmidt said. "I'm anxious to see how that really plays out over the life of the program."

## About [Stephen Losey](#)

Stephen Losey is the air warfare reporter for Defense News. He previously covered leadership and personnel issues at Air Force Times, and the Pentagon, special operations and air warfare at Military.com. He has traveled to the Middle East to cover U.S. Air Force operations.

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