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Airlift Aircraft: Background and Issues for Congress

The U.S. Air Force operates airlift aircraft to transport personnel, equipment, and supplies in support of military operations worldwide. Airlift aircraft support a function known as *rapid global mobility*, enabling the United States to project and sustain forces across long distances. During a 17-day period in August 2021, more than 250 U.S. mobility aircraft (a category of military aircraft that includes both cargo/personnel transport aircraft and aerial refueling tankers) evacuated about 124,000 U.S. citizens, allied personnel, and Afghan evacuees from Afghanistan—the largest noncombatant evacuation operation in U.S. history.

The Air Force conducts airlift missions through Air Mobility Command (AMC)—the U.S. Transportation Command (TRANSCOM) component responsible for transporting personnel, equipment, and supplies for the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD, which is using a secondary Department of War designation, under Executive Order 14347). AMC operates three categories of airlifters—executive, tactical (or intra-theater), and strategic (or inter-theater). Airlift missions include combat, executive transport, humanitarian relief, and specialized training. The Air Force directs the executive airlift mission using a specialized fleet—VC-25A, C-32A, C-40, and C-37—to provide secure, reliable, and global transportation for the President, Vice President, and other high-ranking civilian and military leaders. The Air Force operates four principal airlift aircraft: the C-130H and C-130J, which primarily conduct tactical airlift missions, and the C-17A and C-5M, which primarily conduct strategic airlift missions.

Through annual defense authorization and appropriations legislation, Congress influences the composition, size, modernity, and sustainment of airlift fleets. Related legislation may determine whether or not to fund upgrades, develop next-generation platforms, or replace aging ones. Congress has also begun to scrutinize the use of military airlifts for third-country deportations.

Presidential Airlift

The Air Force operates two VC-25A “Air Force One” executive aircraft to provide air transport for the President. Modified Boeing 747-200Bs are also used to transport the president and guests and are equipped with specialized electronics and communications equipment, a conference and dining room, and accommodations. The Air Force plans to replace the aging VC-25As, first flown in 1990, with two VC-25B aircraft, which are modified Boeing 747-8s. The VC-25B program previously scheduled aircraft delivery to begin in 2022; however, the manufacturer encountered delays related to labor shortages, supply chain disruptions, and engineering changes and now reportedly projects deliveries to begin in mid-2028. Upgrading efforts also include reportedly acquiring two additional 747-8s for crew training and spare parts. The Air Force is reportedly modifying a Boeing 747-8 aircraft—provided by the Qatari government as a “contribution”—as a “bridge” aircraft until

delivery of the VC-25B aircraft. President Trump said in May 2025 the Qatari aircraft, expected to be operational by summer 2026, would be decommissioned for use by his presidential library after he leaves office. Air Force officials said in June 2025 that funding details for the retrofit of the Qatari aircraft are classified. In 2025, some Members introduced legislative measures in opposition to the transfer and acceptance of the Qatari aircraft (e.g., S.Amdt. 3109, not agreed to in Senate, 46-50; H.Res. 410; and S.Res. 244).

C-130H and C-130J

Figure 1. C-130 Hercules



Source: U.S. Air Force.

The C-130 Hercules cargo aircraft, first produced in 1951, performs tactical airlift missions. The aircraft can operate from short, unpaved, or austere runways and is the Air Force’s primary platform for airdropping personnel and cargo into contested environments (i.e., those featuring air-defense systems and other adversarial capabilities). The C-130H variant is operated mainly by the Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve and is undergoing upgrades through the Avionics Modernization Program Increment 2 (AMP Inc 2). The Air Force states the upgrade integrates a new flight management system, autopilot, and digital avionics to enhance aircraft capability, reliability, and crew efficiency.

The C-130J Super Hercules, the newest variant of the Hercules, is replacing legacy C-130H aircraft. The C-130J incorporates updated propulsion, avionics, and flight control systems, allowing it to operate with fewer crew, climb faster and higher, fly farther, and take off and land in shorter distances compared with earlier variants. Lockheed Martin manufactures the aircraft in Marietta, GA.

The Air Force modifies C-130Js to conduct specialized missions. For example, AC-130Js support special operations forces, whereas HC-130Js conduct personnel recovery missions. Although the Air Force is replacing C-130H aircraft for the C-130J, the transition is not one-for-one. The service is inactivating some C-130H squadrons, potentially shifting associated missions to other platforms or domains. As of 2025, the Air Force operated 102 C-130Js on active duty, the Air National Guard operated 40

C-130Js and 91 C-130Hs, and the Air Force Reserve operated 12 C-130Js and 13 C-130Hs. The Navy operates the EC-130J as a command relay for nuclear submarines.

C-17A

Figure 2. C-17A Globemaster III



Source: U.S. Air Force.

The C-17A Globemaster III serves as the Air Force's primary airlift aircraft. The aircraft can rapidly deliver troops and cargo to main operating bases or forward-operating locations. The aircraft can conduct strategic and tactical airlift missions, perform airdrops, and transport litter and ambulatory patients during aeromedical evacuation operations.

The Air Force first flew the C-17A in 1991 and planned for a total fleet of 120 aircraft. The Air Force later expanded fleet requirements to 180 aircraft, and Congress subsequently funded additional aircraft beyond Air Force requests, bringing the total fleet to 223. The Air Force now operates 222 C-17As. As of 2025, 146 aircraft are assigned to active-duty units, 50 to the Air National Guard, and 26 to the Air Force Reserve.

C-5M

Figure 3. C-5M Super Galaxy



Source: U.S. Air Force.

The C-5M Super Galaxy performs strategic airlift missions and is the largest aircraft in the Air Force inventory. The aircraft is capable of transporting oversized cargo over distances of more than 4,800 nautical miles. The aircraft's nose and aft cargo doors can be opened simultaneously, enabling concurrent loading and unloading to reduce ground time. The C-5M is a modernized variant of the C-5 aircraft originally manufactured in 1968. Modifications have included new engines to improve performance, reliability, and mission availability. As of 2025, the Air Force operates a total of 52 C-5M aircraft, with 36 assigned to active-duty units and 16 to the Air Force Reserve.

Next-Generation Airlift (NGAL)

In November 2025, as part of its Airlift Recapitalization Strategy, the Air Force announced plans for the C-5M fleet to remain operational through approximately 2045 and the C-17A fleet through approximately 2075. The proposed Next-Generation Airlift (NGAL) program is intended to replace both fleets. According to the Air Force, with an accelerated analysis of alternatives in FY2027, stable funding, and uninterrupted acquisition process, NGAL production could begin in FY2038 and initial operational capability could occur in FY2041. Plans call for NGAL to replace the C-5M fleet on a one-for-one basis, followed by replacement of the C-17A fleet. To mitigate risks associated with acquisition delays, prevent capability gaps, and maintain mission capacity, the Air Force has emphasized sustaining the existing C-5M and C-17A fleet until a replacement is operational.

Connectivity

AMC has stated plans to modernize connectivity of the mobility fleet to enhance both line-of-sight (e.g., radio) and beyond line-of-sight (e.g., satellite) secure communications. According to the Air Force, improved access to tactical data networks by airlift aircraft could increase mission success in contested environments by enhancing survivability, agility, and situational awareness for aircrews and command and control elements. Such connectivity could provide aircrews with timely information on potential threats, fuel availability, and alternate landing locations in degraded communications environment.

Selected FY2026 Legislative Activity

Section 161 of the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2026 (NDAA, P.L. 119-60) directed the Air Force to conduct an analysis of alternates to identify potential solutions for the recapitalization of the executive airlift aircraft fleets. The NDAA authorized \$602 million for the VC-25B program. The Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2026 (P.L. 119-75, Division A), matched the authorization for the VC-25B program. Congress provided \$976 million in additional funding to acquire six C-130Js for the Air National Guard and \$165 million for one LC-130J for polar missions, according to the accompanying joint explanatory statement.

Potential Issues for Congress

Congress may consider whether or not to establish statutory requirements for the overall size and composition of the airlift fleet. Members may consider whether or not to authorize the Air Force to retire additional C-130H aircraft, procure more or fewer C-130Js, or develop a next-generation airlift aircraft to replace C-5M and C-17A fleets. Related considerations include whether or not to fund upgrades to existing aircraft—such as communications or survivability enhancements—and how to balance near-term modernization needs against long-term recapitalization efforts. Members may assess the cost of operating military aircraft to support other government agencies. Congress may consider oversight questions to monitor aspects of the Qatari-donated 747, including cost and schedule, acquisition processes, levels of classification, security risks, operational control, and eventual ownership.

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