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A Fighter Gap?

By William A. Price*

Defense Secretary Robert Gates, in a July 16, 2009 speech to the Economic Club of Chicago, said that China would have no fifth generation aircraft by 2020. Our fighter force plans include the retirement of 112 F-15's and 134 F-16s, along with restriction of the F-22 program to 187 units. The Air National Guard had five F-15 squadrons in 2009, four down from nine in 1999, and reductions may continue. There could be a Navy and Marine Corps shortfall of 243 fighter aircraft by 2018. The F-35 program is over budget and behind schedule, and is much less capable than the F-22 in the air superiority role.

Strategic Context: Changed and Less Comfortable

Mr. Gates went back to China in January 2011. During his trip, China tested a "J20" fighter similar in appearance to the F-22. China is likely to deploy more than 600 air superiority fighters. Russia may build 300 or so Sukhoi Pak FA fighters. Development of this Russian FA series, with billions of dollars worth of cash support from India recently announced, means the F-22 could have a second "fifth generation" fighter challenge.

Policy Options

Options discussed in the defense press have included:

- Continuation of the current "Joint Strike Fighter" (F-35) program, with sales to allies and exclusive use of this weapons system, once F-22 production is done, for all three services;
- Modification of short term production plans to allow Naval air needs to be met with further FA-18 production;
- Cancellation of the F-35B VTOL variant for Marine Corps use;
- Extended production of F-16 and other older aircraft lines; and

* For a longer analysis of this issue, see [NSFR Special Report: Fighter Gaps](#), by William A. Price.

- Restart of production for the F-22.

Allies like Israel and Australia have requested F-22s, which are not now allowed for export.

Questions To Ask

1. *What does this option cost?* F-35 costs were originally projected at \$112 million per unit. Costs this year and next are above \$200 million per unit, and cancellation of Marine production and other delays are likely to increase costs, not cut them. F-18's cost about \$57 million per unit, upgraded F-16s about \$40 million. F-22 production costs averaged \$143 million per unit.

2. *What Difference Does This Design Make?* Australian analysis suggests that only the F-22 could survive the high threat ground to air defense systems now being deployed worldwide. RAND corporation analysis of possible US-China confrontations suggest that both the F-22 and the F-35 could run out of missiles against much larger numbers of hostiles. Stealth may mean nothing, if phased array radars can detect such planes, or may be all that keeps our planes alive in hostile space. Beyond visual range engagements may not avoid the need for dogfighting capability, which the F-35 lacks.

3. *What Political Difference Can This Option Make?* The Egyptian revolution may surround Israel with revolutionary and hostile states, with missiles and possibly with nuclear weapons. Northeast Asia has Korean and Taiwan Strait confrontation possibilities, as well as South China Sea territorial conflicts. In all of these, "close" air power balances can invite overconfident challengers to act.

Conclusion

We may need more air superiority systems, and more capable friends, in an increasingly hostile world.

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