

Canada and the F-35: Beyond the Price Tag

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There is no question that Canada needs to replace its aging fighter jet fleet. There are, however, questions as to the suitability of the F-35 as Canada's best option. To date, the public debate over the Harper government's announced purchasing of sixty-five F35-A fighters has focused on the underestimated \$9 billion price tag (\$138 million each), and a controversial procurement process (or lack thereof). In these frugal economic times, the price tag is important: this will be the single largest military equipment purchase in Canadian history. However, an explanation from the Harper government on the foreign policy objectives that the F-35s would serve has been notably absent. By examining the factors that impact the cost of the F-35s, some strategic foreign policy objectives emerge. Most notably is Canada's commitment to interoperability with our allies despite the volatility of the price and economical alternatives to the F-35. In light of these foreign policy objectives, the Harper government's rhetoric about sovereignty, as well as their unilateral posturing at the United Nations, appears to contrast with this commitment to our allies. And beyond this, commitment to our allies is a part of more aggressive foreign policy and the selection of the F-35s over other jets determines who our closest strategic allies will be for the years to come.

One of the main reasons for the purchase of the F-35s was the interoperability factor with our allies in the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) program. The other participating nations in the JSF are the United States, United Kingdom, Netherlands, Denmark, Italy, Australia, Norway and most recently Japan. While the procurement process should have been made transparent from the beginning, it is clear that Canada's announced purchasing of the F-35s relied on dubious assumptions about our allies' commitment as well as the jets' current performance.

In February 2010 the United States Secretary of Defence, Robert Gates, stated that both the progress and performance of the jets had not been what it should - the United States recently suspended both ground and air testing due to mechanical problems. Meanwhile, JSF nations have begun to reassess their plans to move forward with their purchases.

The United States, United Kingdom and Italy have all decided to reduce their quantity of jets:

- The United States reduced their acquisition for fiscal year 2011 from 42 to 32 and will be reducing their purchases from 449 to 325 jets between 2012-2016.
- The United Kingdom changed their order from 150 F-35Bs to a much reduced purchase of the C model that may only reach 40 jets.

Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands have made the decision to delay their purchases:

- Norway pushed back their purchase of 4 training jets from 2014 to 2016 and their purchase of their operational jets from 2016-2020 to 2018-2022.
- Both Denmark and the Netherlands have decided to wait until at least 2014 to make their final procurement decisions.

Australia had reservations about the design of the F-35A as it pertained to their operational requirements:

- Australia has accepted a new design and will eventually purchase 100 jets, receiving their first four in 2017 as Lockheed Martin proposed a redesign that will be less expensive and less complex.

However, as the United States has openly admitted there are performance-related issues that will need to be addressed and as Canada's JSF allies are questioning their commitment, it is worth exploring other available options.

Three alternatives to the F-35s are the Eurofighter Typhoon, F15E-Strike Eagle and the Super Hornet, that, in our analysis, highlight how prioritizing interoperability may have resulted in forging different alliances but at a cheaper price point:

- The Eurofighter Typhoon (€90-125 million, approximately \$138-192 million CDN) would allow interoperability with the German, British, Italian and Spanish air forces.
- The F15E-Strike Eagle (\$40.8 million USD) would allow interoperability with the United States, Saudi Arabia, Republic of Korea, and Israeli air forces.
- The Super Hornet (\$55 million USD, flyaway) would allow interoperability with the United States Navy and Australian air forces.

If one of Canada's procurement goals is to obtain a multi-role jet that will be interoperable with our allies, the F-35 is not our sole option.

Since the Conservatives won the majority in May 2011, Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird have mused about Canada's foreign policy. However, the linkage between the foreign policy direction and the purchasing of the F-35's has been notably absent.

In fact, that the purchasing of the F-35s demonstrates Canada's commitment to its interoperability flies in the face of Harper government's rhetoric about Canadian sovereignty. The Harper government suggests the F-35's operations would include: patrolling the Arctic due to address Canada's sovereignty (even though the radio communication appears to be limited), identifying potential threats and deterring Russian aggression. At the United Nations, John Baird appeared to be grandstanding in boycotting North Korea's leading the UN Conference on Disarmament, quipping Canada cannot simply "go along to get along." No other countries followed suit. Overall, the combination of this rhetoric about Canadian sovereignty and unilateral posturing distracts from a more aggressive foreign policy outlook.

The F-35 is a stealth multi-role fighter that has first strike bomber capabilities. As such, F-35s intimidate in 'shock and awe' fashion by neutralizing an adversary's air defence and securing air superiority over the battlefield. It is projected the F-35 will be the backbone of American airpower for decades to come. Canada's purchase of these jets will enhance our ability to support North American Aerospace Defence (NORAD) operations. Furthermore, Canada supported the UN mandated mission in Libya by committing six CF-18 Hornets and one warship. It is impossible to predict where and how many conflicts Canada will see fit to deploy resources in the future. Not since Kosovo in the 1990's have Canadian jets been part of any foreign operation - Canada's CF-18 Hornets have been the only ones from a major NATO country not to have flown in Afghanistan. The Libya mission points to the potential for future conflicts and reinforce the need for new fighter jets

Canada is becoming increasingly more involved militarily in world affairs in addition to increasing its own military power to protect national sovereignty. As such, new fighter jets are required to meet these demands. However, there are many fighter jet options that are comparable to the F-35 and come in at a

lower price point. Furthermore, these alternatives have the similar performance capabilities that will still allow our Air Force to remain interoperable, albeit with different allies. Even remaining interoperable with our closest ally, the United States, the Super Hornet and the F15-E are both strong alternatives to the F-35. The Canadian government appears to be prepared to take a more committed role when it comes to world crises - Libya is a case in point. A military equipment purchase of this magnitude ought to be billed as a necessary expense in order to achieve more aggressive foreign policy objectives.