

Why this new fighter jet is worth the gamble

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Everything the Joint Strike Fighter's critics say about it is probably going to turn out to be true. It will cost more than we expected. It will not perform as well as we hoped. It will be delivered late. And we will not be told as much as we'd like about how the aircraft's software really works. But it is still probably the best new combat aircraft for Australia.

The JSF is being developed by the US in a massive collaborative program that includes Britain, Canada and half a dozen European countries. These countries have put their money into the JSF because it is the only aircraft on the market that fits our needs, at a price we can realistically afford. Blame the end of the Cold War, and the mind-boggling costs of developing new fighters, but since the Soviet collapse, only the US is investing in new technology and they are building only two new types of fighter. The JSF is one; the other is the super-performing, super-expensive F-22.

Meanwhile, however, the older 1970s-technology aircraft - what the experts call "fourth-generation" fighters - have spread around the world, especially in Asia. Many of these, including the ex-Soviet Sukhois and MiGs, are a close match to our 1980s-vintage F/A-18s. When we bought them they gave us a comfortable "technology edge" over almost any possible adversary. We are losing that edge as the Sukhois and the MiGs move in.

That is very serious for our defence posture. Although the army does most of the work in lower-level operations such as East Timor, our air combat capability would be the most important element of our military in the event of a more major regional conflict. Air power is vital both for our ability to defend the continent and making a significant contribution to regional coalitions in higher-level operations.

Now the F/A-18s and the even older F-111 long-range bombers are simply wearing out. The question is whether we replace them with a "new" version of the same old fourth-generation technology, like an updated F/A-18, or whether we move to fifth-generation aircraft.

The biggest difference is stealth. Modern air combat is an incredibly lethal business. Missiles are now so good that once an enemy has detected your aircraft, your chances of escaping are very low. So the key to success - and survival - is to make yourself as hard to find as possible, so you can detect an adversary and fire your missile first. To retain our traditional air-combat edge in Asia, Australia needs to move to a fifth-generation stealth fighter. And there are only two fifth-generation fighters on the market - the JSF and the F-22.

The F-22 is undoubtedly a remarkable aeroplane. At more than \$150 million, it ought to be. But while the F-22 is entering service, the JSF still has a long way to go, and faces serious technical and performance problems. Fixing those means delays and higher prices. Originally the JSF, at about \$60 million, was expected to be less than half the cost of an F-22. Now it may end up at two-thirds the cost. Why not switch?

Labor's defence spokesman, Robert McClelland, has suggested we buy a squadron of F-22s - say 25 aircraft - to sustain our air-combat edge until the JSF becomes available, and provide a high-end capability over the longer term.

It's worth exploring. But the big issue remains money. Running a mixed fleet of JSF and F-22 would be much more expensive than operating JSFs alone - probably hundreds of millions of dollars a year more expensive.

Buying an all F-22 fleet would mean we'd need to spend a lot more money, or buy many fewer aircraft. It's not clear if there is more money to be had, and buying fewer aircraft is a bad idea.

There is nothing magic about the number 100, but we need to be very careful not to trade quantity off against quality so that we end up with a bijou air force with superb aircraft but with too few of them to carry strategic weight.

The JSF will not be a perfect aircraft for Australia, but at the moment it is still probably the only fighter good enough to keep us at the forefront of regional air power, and cheap enough for us to afford the number we need. So I fear we are stuck with it.

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