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Between Austerity and Viability: The Search for Future Air Combat Platforms in East Asia

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CHRISTOPHER WHYTE, OCT 12 2011

Recent years have seen the intensification of political tensions between various states in the Pacific and East Asia. The rise of China as a military and economic power has necessarily triggered concern in the region, causing countries like Australia, Japan and Taiwan to examine the needs of their defense establishments from new strategic, technical and, in light of the ongoing global financial crisis, budgetary perspectives.

There are few areas of those establishments facing more uncertainty than the air forces of these regional allies of the United States. Each has a vested interest in maintaining operability and the strategic capabilities to function in any future situation that threatens their sovereignty and their welfare. At the same time, each has the significant responsibility of lightening the burden of military expenditure on public coffers through the streamlining of budgets and the critical examination of future programs.

In the case of Australia, a commitment to the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) program has met with some difficulties, including both the need to continue purchases of legacy craft as a stop gap measure to compensate for delays and the loss of business and revenue for many of the domestic support companies that, again, due to delays are simply unable to financially survive. Moreover, Australia's particular strategic needs may not be met by the JSF. Beyond the observation that defending a continent with a mere hundred planes could be difficult, numerous commentators have also noted the shortcomings of the multirole F-35 as a fighter that for operational reasons could, in situations that may require advanced air superiority capabilities, fail to deliver.

For Japan, the proximity of China's rise is the sole factor driving military development and, through the ongoing F-X program, the procurement of new generations of combat air forces. With an aging fleet of F-2, F-4 and F-15 fighters, Japan's Ministry of Defense is actively seeking to improve the air superiority and strike capabilities of their fleet relative to rapidly growing 4th and 5th generation Chinese forces. However, the fiscal burdens of natural disaster- and recessionary-based recovery efforts dictate that any future production and deployment program must be not only strategically capable, but financially viable and economically constructive. Moreover, a future platform must meet Japan's particular tactical needs, able to engage in intense air superiority and strike operations but less dependent on the ancillary capabilities that larger countries like Australia need to operate over long distances.

In Taiwan, recent failures to secure new combat air platforms have been softened by the promise of coming upgrades to existing planes and weapons. The existing force structure of F-16A/Bs will see to Taiwan's needs for some years to come and it is possible that Mirage and Indigenous Defense Fighter craft can also be updated. Nevertheless, with the rapidly growing threat of advanced aerial and ballistic forces across the Straits, the island state will soon have no choice but to seek expanded capabilities for operation in a future conflict. Any procurement program will face a variety of restraints, from budgetary feasibility to political persecution in its international relations, and will have to address the unique reality of Taiwan's position near the mainland.

Given the numerous restraints that such a three-fold (strategic, technical and budgetary) approach to decision-making has placed on the development and procurement of future air combat platforms in these countries, what can be done both to ensure that an appropriate regional balance of capabilities is maintained and to satisfy the demands

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of austerity in the current political climate?

It is clear that much thought needs to be given to the production and deployment of the Joint Strike Fighter. Both Australia and Japan, while heavily invested or interested in the use of the F-35 in the future, possess the need to operate significant air combat forces in a variety of roles. The real threat that Russian- and Chinese-built Sukhoi and Mikoyan fighter designs pose in future conflict scenarios speaks to the need for an advanced air superiority capability. While the F-35 may be able to provide such abilities to the air forces of both countries, it must be recognized that the plane's limited air-to-air arsenal and the relative cost of the aircraft itself limit its usefulness in any conflict that involves numerous opponents and finite support options. Moreover, advances in the designs of 5th generation all-aspect stealth fighters abroad suggest that any advantages the F-35 offers may be limited and short-lived, particularly in "knife fight" situations where agility and short-range capabilities dominate survivability.

Nevertheless, the Joint Strike Fighter can play a key role in the future of each country's air force. From the practical deployment of VSTOL variants on amphibious craft to the deployment of F-35s as stealthy strike units, the JSF has uses that merit its production and reduced deployment as a complimentary unit to more numerous legacy strike platforms and elite squadrons of more advanced air superiority fighters.

Such air superiority fighters could come from a number of sources. The F-22A Raptor, though currently banned for export by the US government, would provide each country with an advanced stealth fighter capable of aerial domination for the foreseeable future and beyond. However, with the lack of Raptor availability, another option presents itself. The Russian-Indian joint venture to develop the PAK-FA 5th generation fighter represents a potential asset to Asian and Pacific partners of the United States. As the United States withdraws from the Middle East, it will continue to reorient towards Asia, particularly towards closer relations with India as a southerly balancer to China and a regional stabilizer. Such a relationship, mirrored by the above three countries, could provide a lucrative opportunity to procure new advanced air forces. With a production goal of nearly one thousand PAK-FA and its variants, a fighter whose moderate price tag, tested maneuverability and potentially advanced stealth capabilities are being lauded by many in global defense establishments, Moscow and New Delhi will be keenly looking for partners to engage with.

Ultimately, nobody wants a repeat of the Cold War or any other kind of conflict in the Asian-Pacific regions. Though China's rapidly growing military forces are a concern, it must be remembered that engagement is the best defense against alienation and rising tensions. However, the fact remains that continuing development of aerial and ballistic capabilities in the region is pushing America's regional allies towards new programs of procurement and military development. It is important that these nations, through the diversification of existing force structures, find the proper balance between austerity and strategic viability in the near-term. More importantly, the United States should support them in this endeavor, otherwise the future may hold yet further costs and recalculations, as states struggle to adapt to changing geopolitical circumstances and potentially lacking force structures.

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