

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2540
July 13, 2009

Congress Should Support the Development of an Allied Variant of the F-22A

Mackenzie M. Eaglen and Eric Sayers

The F-22A Raptor is the world's most advanced fifth-generation fighter aircraft. The F-22A offers several unique features: thrust-vectoring engines, which make it highly maneuverable; the latest in stealth technology; an avionics system that can fuse information into a single display; and the ability to cruise at supersonic speeds at 50,000 feet. What makes the Raptor spectacular—and why its capabilities cannot simply be replaced by additional F-35 Joint Strike Fighters—is the F-22A's unique ability to accelerate beyond the threat and reposition for attack.

Naturally, Congress is protective of these unrivaled technologies. Even though core allies like Japan and Australia have repeatedly expressed interest in purchasing a modified version of the F-22A, Congress has yet to waive legislation preventing the aircraft from being exported.

The continued growth of China's defense budget and the technological advancements of its People's Liberation Army (PLA) have alarmed many of America's allies in the western Pacific, prompting them to invest in expanding their own military capabilities. With the F-22 line set to permanently close down in 2011 if Congress does not purchase additional aircraft, the window for developing a variant of the F-22A that may be sold to allies in the Pacific, including possibly South Korea, is rapidly closing. A modified F-22A would provide these countries with the most advanced fighter on the market and help reinforce America's hedging strategy in the region by increasing interoperability with

U.S. military forces. Foreign sales of the F-22A would also reduce the unit cost of the aircraft, potentially paving the way for the procurement of additional F-22As to help fulfill the Air Force's military requirement of 243 aircraft. Furthermore, the numerous benefits associated with the foreign sale of the F-22A have bipartisan appeal.¹

Congress should therefore waive the Obey amendment in this year's defense bills and support the development of an allied variant of the F-22A fifth-generation fighter.

A Decade Lost. Largely as a result of the advanced technologies found in the F-22A, Congress, in the fiscal year (FY) 1998 defense authorization bill, decided to prohibit the export of the aircraft to any foreign nation. Although it has been challenged on several occasions, the so-called "Obey Amendment," named after Representative David Obey (D-WI) who authored the original legislation, has remained in effect for the past 11 years.

Since 1998, various allies have inquired about purchasing the F-22A. Japan has been the most vocal, persistently lobbying the U.S. government for the opportunity to acquire the aircraft to replace its aging fleet of F-4 Phantoms.² A major air combat

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/wm2540.cfm

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

capability review conducted by the Australian Department of Defense in 2008 also analyzed the benefits of purchasing the F-22A.³ Although Australia's 2009 Defense White Paper proposed buying 100 F-35 Joint Strike Fighters, many analysts believe Australia would be interested in taking advantage of the joint air dominance capabilities provided by the tandem operation of the F-22A and F-35 aircraft if the F-22A were available for export. South Korea and Israel have also shown interest in the Raptor.

Outdated Thinking. The original concerns that prompted Obey and Congress to prevent the export of the F-22A—the need for America to retain its fighter aircraft technological edge—no longer outweigh the two pressing demands: increasing the air superiority capability of America's Asian allies and retaining a national option to keep the production line open should Congress authorize production of more F-22As in the future.

Hedging against the medium- and long-term implications of China's military modernization will remain a critical component of America's strategy in the Pacific. Selling the F-22A to core allies that share both America's values and interests, like Japan and Australia (and even South Korea), will only contribute to this effort.

Moreover, the U.S.'s relationship with both countries has only deepened in the past decade as concerns over North Korea's nuclear program and China's growing military have drawn their interests closer to those of the U.S. Finally, an allied variant F-22A by default would be designed to alleviate the original concern of giving away too much critical technology.

The Window Is Closing. Congress has an opportunity in the pending FY 2010 defense autho-

rization and appropriations bills to advance a series of mutually reinforcing goals that will contribute to American national security. Congress should:

- Purchase 20 additional F-22As in the FY 2010 defense bills. These additional purchases will help grow the fleet, further reducing the level of risk inherent in a force of just 187 aircraft. A larger force will also reduce risk to Air Force pilots and America's ground forces. Finally, such a purchase will allow the production line to remain open, salvaging highly skilled design, engineering, and manufacturing abilities in the aerospace industry while helping to transition to full rate F-35 production in the years ahead.
- Rescind the Obey Amendment. While the original legislation may have been prudent during the post-Cold War period of the 1990s, America's stronger relationships with Japan and Australia—coupled with the growing sophistication of China's PLA—have raised the stakes in the Pacific. Ensuring a stable balance of power in the region to hedge against uncertainty and stave off miscalculation demands that America's allies have the opportunity to field the most advanced fifth-generation platform on the market.
- Study the feasibility and cost of an F-22A allied variant, as well as the impact such a design would have on America's aerospace industrial base. Both the House and Senate versions of the 2010 defense authorization bill require a report to study the potential sale of the F-22A. The House version singled out Japan as the only buyer, while the Senate bill chose to examine the issue more broadly. The final authorization bill should follow the Senate's lead and consider the possibility of selling the variant to multiple nations.

1. See James Ludes, "The F-22 Has a Future," *Defense News*, April 20, 2009, at <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=4045998> (July 10, 2009); Dan Blumenthal, "Strengthening Our Japanese Alliance," *The Daily Standard*, January 8, 2009, at <http://www.aei.org/article/29160> (July 10, 2009); Loren Thompson, "Japan and F-22: Why Not Reward a Reliable Ally?" Lexington Institute, June 9, 2009, at <http://www.lexingtoninstitute.org/1433.shtml> (July 10, 2009).
2. David A. Fulghum and John M. Doyle, "Japan Could Be Offered \$290 Million F-22," *Aviation Week*, June 25, 2009, at [http://www.aviationweek.com/aw/generic/story.jsp?id=news/JF22062509.xml&headline=Japan%20Could%20Be%20Offered%20\\$290%20Million%20F-22&channel=defense](http://www.aviationweek.com/aw/generic/story.jsp?id=news/JF22062509.xml&headline=Japan%20Could%20Be%20Offered%20$290%20Million%20F-22&channel=defense) (July 9, 2009).
3. Australian Department of Defense, "Review of Australia's Air Combat Capability," February 18, 2008, at <http://www.defence.gov.au/minister/Fitzgibbontpl.cfm?CurrentId=7434> (July 9, 2009).

- Design, develop, and manufacture an allied variant suitable for Japan, Australia, and possibly South Korea. Japan has reportedly expressed interest in paying to convert the F-22A to a version suitable for foreign military sale. However, a purchase of 40 converted F-22As would cost an estimated \$290 million each (including design costs), according to Senator Daniel Inouye (D-HI), chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee. Bringing Australia and possibly South Korea and Israel into a multi-nation, multi-year contract would help distribute the burden of these development costs.
- Purchase 20 more F-22As for the Air Force in both FY 2011 and 2012. An allied variant in full-rate production for multiple countries would keep most elements of the F-22A production line “hot” for the next decade. Keeping the production open will result in greater efficiency and a reduced per unit cost—thereby creating an opportunity for Congress to purchase the 40 additional Raptors needed to meet the Air Force’s “medium” risk air superiority requirement.

A Unique Opportunity. Congress is faced with a decision that stands to impact the next 30 years of U.S. air power and strategy in the Pacific. The House and Senate Armed Service Committees acknowledged the importance of the F-22A by adding additional funding during markup, against the wishes of the President and secretary of defense. Purchasing additional F-22As stands to reduce the risk of a fleet that is currently sized far below the military requirement. The unique opportunity now exists to significantly enhance the military capacity of America’s closest allies in the Pacific.

Congress should seize this moment and reward allies like Japan, Australia, and possibly South Korea with the option to purchase the F-22A.

—Mackenzie M. Eaglen is Research Fellow for National Security, and Eric Sayers is a Research Assistant in, the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.