



Submission No 7

Inquiry into Australian Defence Force Regional Air Superiority

:

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PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade

RE: Inquiry into Australian Defence Force Regional Air Superiority

Thank you for providing the opportunity for public submissions to your Committee on this issue.

The following views on the proposed replacement of the RAAF F-111 and F/A-18 aircraft with the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter are mine alone. I have no association with any group, organisation or individual involved in this issue.

The F-35 as a Heavy Long Distance Regional Weapons Platform

After a shaky RAAF genesis the F-111 has become the most effective aircraft of its type and is the only fast, long range heavy weapons platform in our region, and probably the world, outside of the USA. It is a tangible expression of Australia's intention to secure its interests and territories and to ensure that any armed interdiction in the defence of those interests will be carried out at the optimal stage and location.

Our F-111s are unique in their range/speed/weapon load capability. They are capable of cost-effective service for another two decades or more given the availability of mothballed airframes and components from the USA and their capacity for both engine and electronic systems upgrades. Maintenance and upgrade programmes will ensure that their unique capability remains available to us for some considerable time. The Americans are showing how effective this approach is in their ongoing B-52 service life extension on an aircraft older than the F-111.

The proposal to substitute the inferior capacity of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, with or without in-flight refuelling, for that of the F-111 challenges logic if existing capability is to be maintained. The F-35 has around half the F-111's combat radius, is significantly slower and cannot carry anywhere near the same payload. Granted it will have some stealth capacity but is this really intended to be a substitute for the ability to actually reach the target area and return in the minimum possible time or to provide theatre loiter time where appropriate? It should also be noted that the US intends to use the F-35 in a battlefield environment in which all high level threats have already been removed by F/A-22As or other aircraft. In its carrier based role it is to be escorted by F/A-22As.

The F-35 as an Air Supremacy Fighter

This leads to the F-35s performance in an air supremacy role. Given the likely emergence in our region of high performance Sukhoi fighters it appears derelict to expect the F-35 to be capable of holding its own in an air supremacy role – in our region or elsewhere. However, the F/A-22A will be the leading air supremacy weapon for some decades.

The defence systems and networking arguments appear academic in this context as they will apply (or otherwise) irrespective of our equipment mix. But we will be justifiably condemned if academic rigour is offered as the means of bridging the capability gap our F-35 pilots would suffer in any future encounter in our region - or elsewhere.

Conclusion

The F-35 is neither fish nor fowl and re-equipping the RAAF with it as an F-111/F/A-18 substitute compromises our defence posture as we will have no means to either sustain a long range strike campaign or to stamp our authority on airspace in time of conflict.

The F-35 proposal flags an air defence policy of rundown or withdrawal rather than one of best value risk management in our region. It questions both our commitment to securing our essential interests in time of threat and our intentions to help those in need of assistance should either of those unfortunate circumstances actually arise. It is totally unsustainable given our current and future strategic environment and responsibilities.

So which is wrong – the F-35 or the strategic environment in which we expect to exist?

In my view the most cost effective RAAF frontline re-equipment proposal is –

- Retain the F-111 and maintain and upgrade its performance to ensure survivability and operational effectiveness until the next generation of medium/long range attack aircraft emerges. The USA's FB-22 appears the most likely candidate. An expressed interest by us in the FB-22 may be a factor in the US continuing its development.
- Replace the F/A-18 with the F/A-22A. But provision is needed for the F/A-22As to escort the F-111s should risk profiles require it.
- Retain our F-35 participation only if we intend to give fixed wing capacity to our two new heavy amphibious ships.

I hope you find this helpful.

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