

Introduction

Previous debate

- 1.1 Australia's regional air superiority has been the subject of regular commentary and debate by government, various defence and strategy organisations, the media and the general public since 2000 but in particular since 2002/03.
- 1.2 The Defence Sub-Committee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade first examined issues relating to Australia's air combat capability in its *Review of the Defence Annual Report 2002-03*.
- 1.3 The Committee's report focused on the following topics:
 - The Department of Defence (Defence) rationale for retiring the F-111 in 2010;
 - F/A-18 Hornet and AP-3C Orion proposed strike capability;
 - Defence capability prior to the acquisition of the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF); and
 - the comparative capability of the JSF.
- 1.4 The Committee made two recommendations:
 - at the start of the next Parliament, the Minister for Defence should request the Committee to conduct an inquiry into the ability of the

Australian Defence Force to maintain air superiority in our region to 2020; and

- in 2006, the Government should make a statement focusing on:
 - ⇒ the most accurate delivery date for the replacement combat aircraft;
 - ⇒ the implications this date will have on the decision to retire the F-111 in 2010;
 - ⇒ the need to ensure that key upgrades and deep maintenance on the F-111 continues through to 2010 with the possibility of extending the lifespan should the need arise; and
 - ⇒ the measures the Government will take to ensure that Australia's superiority in air combat capability in the region is maintained.

- 1.5 In response to the first recommendation, the Government did not agree, noting that:

The Defence Capability Plan makes sufficient provision to maintain Australia's air combat capability at a level at least comparable qualitatively to any in the region. The Government continues to monitor regional developments and, were there a need to, the Government would adjust the Defence Capability Plan.¹

- 1.6 In response to the second recommendation, the Government partially agreed noting that:

The ADF [Australian Defence Force] New Aerospace Combat Capability is an important issue on which announcements by the Government can be expected at key milestones. Similarly, the Government will make relevant announcements relating to other air combat capabilities such as F/A-18 Electronic Warfare Self Protection, Tactical Air Defence Radar Systems, and Airborne Early Warning and Control.²

1 Review of the Defence Annual Report 2002-03, *Government Response to Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade*, November 2004, p. 3.

2 Review of the Defence Annual Report 2002-03, *Government Response to Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade*, November 2004, p. 3.

Background

- 1.7 In the *Defence 2000 – Our Future Defence Force* (the ‘White Paper’), Australia’s air combat capability was described as the ‘most important single capability for the defence of Australia.’ Following this assertion, the White Paper proceeded to outline Defence’s air combat capability goal:
- The Government’s aim is to maintain the air combat capability at a level at least comparable qualitatively to any in the region, and with a sufficient margin of superiority to provide an acceptable likelihood of success in combat.³
- 1.8 The paper then noted three major challenges facing this goal:
- the capability of the F/A-18 would become outclassed by the growth in capabilities of regional air forces;
 - the Boeing 707 aircraft would need to be refurbished or replaced in order for Australia to maintain an air to air refuelling (AAR) capability; and
 - the replacement of the F/A-18 fleet upon its retirement between 2012 and 2015 would need to be addressed.⁴
- 1.9 In response to these challenges, Defence planned to upgrade the F/A-18’s capabilities, purchase Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C) aircraft, replace its AAR aircraft, and look at potential replacements for the F/A-18 and the F-111 fleets.⁵
- 1.10 Defence continues to maintain and implement these plans:
- F/A-18 upgrades continue;
 - AEW&C aircraft will be delivered in 2009;
 - new Multi-Rolled Tanker Transports (MRTT) are due to enter service in 2009;
 - in June 2002, Defence announced its intention to participate in the United States F-35 JSF program with the expectation of replacing the F-111s (and eventually the F/A-18s) with the JSF; and

3 Department of Defence, *Defence 2000 – Our Future Defence Force*, December 2000, pp. 84–5.

4 Department of Defence, *Defence 2000 – Our Future Defence Force*, December 2000, pp. 85–6.

5 Department of Defence, *Defence 2000 – Our Future Defence Force*, December 2000, pp. 86–7.

- in March 2007, the Government announced its decision to acquire 24 F/A-18F Block II Super Hornet aircraft.
- 1.11 In 2003, the *Defence Capability Plan 2004-2014* revealed that the planned withdrawal date for the F-111 would be 2010 rather than the original date of 2015.⁶ This decision was based on ongoing reviews of the F-111s maintenance needs, as well as wing fatigue problems and a fuel tank explosion – both of which arose in 2002.⁷ In addition, the Air Force advised Defence in 2002 that by 2010, the Air Force will have ‘a strong and effective land and maritime strike capability...[which] will enable withdrawing the F-111s a few years earlier.’⁸

Concerns

- 1.12 The decision to purchase the JSF, upgrade the F/A-18 Hornet and retire the F-111 fleet earlier than originally expected has led to a number of on-going concerns. They include:
- a capability gap resulting from the 2010 retirement of the F-111s and the planned delivery of the JSF in 2012-2014 – which the F/A-18 upgrades and Super Hornet acquisition are expected to address;
 - the suitability of the JSF for Australia’s defence needs;
 - the JSF’s capabilities given the fact that it is, at present, a ‘paper plane’; and
 - the rising cost of the JSF and the impact of those costs on the fleet numbers.

Conduct of the inquiry

- 1.13 In June 2005, the Senate resolved that the following matters be referred to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence

6 Department of Defence, *2004–2014 Defence Capability Plan: Public Version* (DCP 2004-14), November 2003, p. 44.

7 Department of Defence, *Supplementary Submission No. 4, Defence Annual Report 2002–03, Air Combat Capability*, June 2004, pp. 5–6.

8 Minister for Defence Media Release 0142/2003, *Defence Capability Review*, 7 November 2003.

and Trade for inquiry and report under the following terms of reference:

- the ability of the Australian Defence Force to maintain air superiority in our region to 2020, given current planning; and
- any measures required to ensure air superiority in our region to 2020.

1.14 The Committee advertised the inquiry in *The Australian* on 2 November 2005. The Committee sought submissions from government departments, relevant organisations and individuals.

1.15 The Committee received 41 submissions, listed at Appendix A, and took evidence at public hearings in Canberra on 31 March 2006 and in Ipswich on 5 July 2006. Copies of the transcripts of evidence from the public hearings and the volume of submissions are available from the Committee's secretariat and for inspection at the National Library of Australia. The transcripts and submissions can also be obtained from the Committee's website at:
<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/jfadt/adfair/index.htm>

Structure of the report

1.16 This report continues in Chapter 2 with a discussion of the strategic considerations, both global and regional, which underpin Australia's future regional air superiority. Strategic concepts such as network-centric warfare and asymmetric threats are examined. The chapter concludes with an examination of the regional strategic challenges facing Australia and their impact on Australia's future air superiority.

1.17 Chapter 3 covers the ADF's current capability planning including the Hornet upgrades. Chapter 4 addresses issues surrounding the F-111, while Chapter 5 summarises the ADF's future capability planning with particular attention given to the purchase of the JSF and any potential capability gap which may arise from a delay in its purchase.

1.18 The report concludes in Chapter 6 with a comparative analysis of the JSF and the FA-22 Raptor (Raptor) covering issues such as capability, availability and cost. Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 are intended to address, in part, the debate surrounding the potential viability of an F-111/Raptor force mixture proposed in a submission to the Committee prepared by Dr Kopp and Mr Goon.

