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Submission: Australia faces a trying time when it comes to securing our military's air combat capability. In part this is because we stand now on the cusp of a revolution in air warfare technology- the transition from fourth to fifth generation planes. As an island nation, Australia's home security is dependent on control of the seas around us rather than our army's strength on the ground. And our navy's ability to operate in contested seas is dependent on the provision of adequate air cover. Therefore the RAAF should be seen as the Service which bears the primary responsibility for the protection of Australia against conventional military threats from abroad.

Given this fact, it is deeply disturbing to see that the RAAF has lost irreplaceable capabilities and is in the process of seeing its combat advantages eroded by the arrival in the region of high-end fourth generation aircraft, primarily the Russian-designed Flanker series.

Australia's long-term answer to these aircraft is the F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter (JSF), which is planned to replace the RAAF's entire combat fleet. Unfortunately, the JSF does not, in practical terms, exist as a viable option. Even the prototype has been beset by problems. This is not unexpected with a technology development program of such complexity, however it poses a unique risk to Australia. The other partners in the JSF program are not relying on the aircraft to secure their security as we are. The European countries have access to the Eurofighter Typhoon, which has already entered service with the British Royal Air Force. The US Air Force already possesses a small but growing number of F-22 Raptor fighters as well as highly capable F-15 and F-16s. Australia alone is totally reliant on the JSF. Our entire air combat capability- this cannot be stressed enough- will be hamstrung in one fell swoop should it fall short of its promises. The British Government is reported to be considering leaving the project and turning wholesale to the Typhoon.

History teaches us three things about complex military development projects- they will not come in on time, they will not come in on budget and they will not deliver the capabilities they said they would. All three facts should alarm Australian strategists when considering our future air combat capabilities.

If they are late, then we will be forced to rely on a fleet of outclassed F/A-18s as our front line. The classic F/A-18 is a respectable enough aircraft, particularly with our newfound Wedgetail control planes in support, but it is basically outmatched by the late-fourth generation aircraft now entering our region in increasing numbers. The regrettable purchase by the previous Federal Government of Super Hornets provides little comfort in this respect.

If the JSF is over budget, it will cost Australia a great deal of money on top of what is already the most expensive defence acquisition in our history. Already the JSF unit cost is edging perilously close to a point at which the F-22 looks more attractive, being able to compensate for its smaller numbers with its superior performance.

If the JSF cannot deliver on its capabilities, Australia faces a future in which we will no longer be able to claim the same degree of air superiority that we have long enjoyed. In any case, the already-extant F-22 has such an advantage in capability that in the long run it may prove a better investment than the F-35. It is true that the US has yet to approve the F-22 for export sale, but given its budgetary problems and Australia's status as a privileged ally, it is only a matter of time until they do. When this happens, it will be hard to escape the feeling that Australian F-35s will be the poor cousin of the F-22 Raptors.

Australia may be best served by a long-term plan centered on the F-22. I acknowledge that this would entail considerable cost, but believe it to be justified given the

RAAF's vital role as described above as well as potential economies to be made on the way.

Australia should give serious thought to the purchase of a number of high-end fourth generation aircraft to match the Flanker family. The Eurofighter Typhoon is the best example of the type. It is already in production, enabling us to buy 'off the shelf' with certainty of delivery and cost, and our European allies are already experienced in its use. We do not need to replace the RAAF fleet with such aircraft, which would be hugely expensive. But maintenance of a number of Typhoons alongside the existing F/A-18 squadrons and Wedgetail command planes would enable Australia to retain a regional air combat advantage for many years. The Typhoon could confidently be flown out beyond 2020. Alternatively, the latest model F-15 aircraft as operated by South Korea would also be an excellent choice. If it is possible to get out of the ill-conceived contract, the \$6bn allocated to the Super Hornet purchase could be used on Typhoons or F-15s that would serve us better and for longer.

Continued diplomatic pressure on the US is likely to result in their making the F-22 available to us by then, if not before. The RAAF could then acquire the F-22, acknowledged to be the most potent fighter ever built. We would thus be able to make the transition from the fourth generation to the best of the fifth generation, avoiding a capability shortfall and securing our future for longer than the F-35 would be able to, already outclassed by the F-22 as it is.

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