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For lucrative military aircraft deal, Eurofighter tries to woo Japan away from US

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ERIC TALMADGE
Associated Press
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TOKYO (AP) — In a deal that could be worth billions of dollars and determine one of the primary fighter jets in Asia for decades to come, European aircraft makers are trying to convince Japan to do something it has never done before — snub America.

U.S. planes have long been Tokyo's overwhelming favorite, but Japan appears to be wobbling under a strong sales pitch for the Eurofighter Typhoon, coupled with problems and restrictions that have made the American alternatives less attractive.

The stakes are high.

The contract is expected to be worth upward of \$10 billion, and the chosen plane will be the showcase aircraft for Washington's chief ally in the region at a time when both China and Russia are modernizing their air forces. Going European, some analysts say, also could complicate future U.S.-Japan air defense cooperation.

Lobbying has intensified as Japan nears a long-delayed decision on what will be its next generation of fighters, or "F-X" fighters, after it retires much of its current fleet. The deal is expected to involve 40 or 50 new planes.

Because of Japan's close military ties with Washington, options such as the Lockheed F-35 and Boeing F/A-18 have long been the top contenders, and analysts say the U.S. advantage remains strong.

But the four-country consortium that builds the Eurofighter is benefiting from a tail wind created by the U.S. decision not to sell Japan what it really wanted — the stealthy F-22 "Raptor" — and by production delays and cost overruns that have shadowed the F-35.


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"Eurofighter Typhoon is the most capable aircraft available to Japan. It is the world's leading multi-role platform with outstanding air-to-air capability," Jon Bonnick, a spokesman for the British BAE Systems division spearheading the Eurofighter deal, told The Associated Press in an e-mail.

The plane is built by a consortium of European military manufacturers led by BAE Systems PLC, the German-French EADS NV and Italy's Finmeccanica SpA.

Planners in Tokyo have been alarmed by the rapidly advancing capabilities of neighboring China, which recently rolled out its next-generation stealth fighter, the much-touted Chengdu J-20. Though that fighter may be years away from actual operations, it is seen as a rival to the F-22 and far superior to what Japan now has.

Even without the J-20 shock, Japan was under increasing pressure to replace its aging F-4EJ and F-15 fighters. It had initially planned to make a decision in 2007, but has repeatedly pushed back its deadline amid budget and bureaucratic battles.

"This is an issue we must consider," Defense Minister Toshimi Kitazawa told parliament last week. Some lawmakers have promoted a Japanese-made alternative, but Kitazawa said that was not under consideration.

The U.S. Congress nixed the F-22 over concerns about maintaining the secrecy of the aircraft's advanced technologies. Now, delays suggest the F-35, another stealthy, state-of-the-art option, will not be available until 2020, which could leave a longer-than-acceptable gap for Japan.

Enter the Eurofighter, which is not as advanced as the F-22 or F-35 — known as fifth-generation fighters— but is already in service.

The supersonic aircraft, which made its first flight in 1994, is used by six countries: Germany, Italy, Spain, Britain, Austria and Saudi Arabia. Its makers are looking to sell the fighter to Greece, Denmark, Romania, Qatar and India. It is believed to cost about \$100 million per aircraft.

A big part of the Eurofighter sales pitch is that it will not tightly restrict the transfer of technology, which means some of it could eventually be built in Japan — a significant plus for Japanese planners concerned with domestic industry. The U.S. options may not be as generous.

"Japan clearly wants a fifth-generation fighter, but if nothing is available, then they will look at what they can buy and also get licensing to build," said Michael Auslin, an analyst with the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C.

"The Eurofighter group has offered Tokyo lots of sweeteners, including industrial participation," he said. "If the U.S. side can't come up with something equally attractive, then I think it will be difficult for Tokyo to choose a less beneficial deal."

Christopher Hughes, a Japan specialist and political scientist at the University of Warwick, said he believes Tokyo may go for the Eurofighter as a gap-filler, then buy the F-35 once it is ready.

"My feeling is that the Eurofighter might have a chance, but not as the main F-X," he said. "It ticks a lot of boxes and is ready to go, and whilst not cheap, probably nowhere near as costly as the F-35."

Working against the Eurofighter is Japan's track record — it has always bought American.

The primary reasons are political and practical. Washington is Tokyo's main ally, and roughly 50,000 U.S. troops are stationed in Japan under a security pact. Japan's air forces must work closely with their American counterparts, and using the same or similar equipment makes that easier.

"A U.S. platform for F-X would help ensure that these strong military ties continue in the future, with all the corresponding benefits to the stability and security of Japan and the region as a whole," said

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Boeing said it remains confident it has the best plane.

"We believe the F/A-18EF Super Hornet Block II is the most realistic option for Japan's F-X," said Jim Armington, a vice president at Boeing Defense Systems.

Choosing the Typhoon could lead to some bumps ahead for Japan, Auslin said

"Not to have what we assume will be the most capable fighter available to allies, the F-35, I think would cause difficulties down the road," he said. "Especially as Chinese and Russian air forces modernize, Japan would not be operating at the level of other U.S. allies, like Great Britain, Australia, and even South Korea."

BAE System's Bonnicks said Eurofighter's track record of working with the U.S. and NATO should dispel such concerns.

The Europeans may also be willing to try harder than the U.S. to get the deal — the Eurofighter is badly in need of some victories on the sales front.

Last year, Italian Minister Ignazio La Russa said his country will reduce its order of Eurofighter jets by 25 planes to save €2 billion (\$2.6 billion), while the U.K. is considering defense cuts of up to 20 percent.

Associated Press writer Matthew Pennington contributed to this story from Washington, D.C.

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