

# THE DIPLOMAT

Read The Diplomat, Know the Asia-Pacific

## Japan Officially Selects F-35

December 20, 2011 *By The Diplomat*



**Japan has officially selected the U.S. F-35 for its next generation fighter aircraft. Was there a better choice?**

*The Diplomat speaks with Christopher Hughes, professor of International Politics and Japanese Studies at the University of Warwick, about Japan's recent decision to purchase the U.S. F-35 fighter aircraft.*

**Japan has selected the F-35 as its next generation fighter aircraft. What do you think led to this decision over other possible choices like the Eurofighter or F-18?**

The first reason that the Japanese government may claim, but which I think is one of the least convincing, would be the capabilities of the F-35 over the F-18 and Eurofighter. The F-35 is supposed to replace the F-4, which is essentially an interceptor/air superiority fighter, and this is the kind of role that the F-X (project) is necessary for, especially if the aim is to ensure Japanese air defense against Chinese fighters like the J-20. The F-18 and especially the Eurofighter could easily fulfill this kind of role, whereas the F-35 is perhaps not ideally suited to this role.

For sure, the F-35 is a very capable aircraft (or should be whenever it goes into service), but it isn't the F-22, and the Eurofighter could certainly match anything that Russia and China has and perform an F-22 type of role. Moreover, the F-35 is really designed because of its stealth capabilities for air defense penetration and for delivering precision guided munitions. So it isn't really an air superiority fighter. Its stealth capabilities might be attractive to Japan, but again these are less important for air defense. The Eurofighter, although lacking stealth, is designed to counter an adversary's stealth capabilities. So if the mission and defense requirement as declared by the Japanese Ministry of Defense is for an F-4 replacement with F-4 roles, then the F-35 is probably not the ideal aircraft.

The F-35 is also not ideal in terms of providing Japan with domestic industrial fighter production to help preserve its defense industry. Japan probably would have been allowed to build and develop indigenously nearly the entire set of technologies for the F-18 and Eurofighter. It looks like Japan may get some domestic build on the F-35, and this will provide some useful technological learning, but it will be quite minimal compared to the Eurofighter or F-18.

I think what probably was the main factor influencing Japan picking the F-35 is simply an alliance argument. Japanese policymakers probably feel that in order to boost confidence in the alliance at this tricky juncture they need to buy a U.S. airframe, and the F-35 is the best one available.

**Many prominent voices within the United States have argued against the sale of America's best military technology like the F-35. They argue that such weapons could be utilized by foreign intelligence agencies to gain valuable information. What steps has Japan taken to ensure the F-35's unique technology is protected? Do you see any scenarios under which a Japanese F-35's technology could be compromised by a foreign government?**

I can understand how the U.S. may have some concerns about this given that Japan has been seen as rather lax in safeguarding some Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) technologies, and also that its defense producers have been subject to cyber attacks and the possible loss of sensitive information. However, I think this is probably less of a problem as Japan and the United States have recently signed agreements which bring

Japan more into line with other U.S. allies on the treatment of confidential military information. Moreover, as I said, I'm not really sure just how much technology the U.S. is really going to let Japan have on the F-35. I suspect the vast bulk of it will be black boxed.

**As you say, the F-35 is slated to replace the Vietnam era U.S. F-4 fighter. What missions can you see the F-35 fulfilling for the Japanese Self Defense Force? How much of a leap is this fighter over the F-4 or F-16?**

The F-35 will probably have to play some kind of interceptor role if it's to replace the F-4, even if rather suboptimally compared to the kind of capability that the Eurofighter would provide. But in addition, the interesting thing is that the F-35 really is most suited to an air defense penetration role, or a more offensive role. It will be interesting to see what kind of role the F-35 could play in countering North Korean missile provocations, for example

**Japan by most reports is looking to purchase about 40-50 F-35's. Is such a number adequate for Japan's defensive needs?**

I'm not really convinced the F-35 is the ideal aircraft to meet the declared requirement in the F-X competition for an air defense fighter. It probably is somewhat adequate. However, there's an important question of timing as to when it becomes available. The F-35 is still not operational, so in this sense it might not be adequate simply because it can't be deployed. The number of 40 to 50 is probably enough. But Japan is probably going to have to run another F-X competition in the next decade to replace its F-15s, which are looking rather decrepit recently, and which are going to need to be replaced in much larger numbers than 40 to 50.

**Many other nations have been skeptical of the F-35. Some have complained about the number of "hardpoints" it carries for bombs and munitions, others have complained about its range. With Japan purchasing the airplane, should this put to rest some of the negative comments about the F-35?**

The F-35 is going to be a very good aircraft, but it may not be best suited to the declared requirement of replacing the F-4. So I'm not sure if Japan has made entirely the right choice on operational grounds. On short term alliance management grounds it may have made the right choice. But longer term, this may impose costs on Japan's strategic autonomy. Japan may be passing up opportunities to develop new strategic relations with Europe and also to help preserve its domestic defense production. The F-35 just makes Japan more dependent on the U.S. in defense. Whether that's the right choice is up to Japanese policymakers.

Related Article

Japan's F-35 Choice Questioned

Japan's F-35 Gamble

Report: Japan Chooses F-35

Japan Readies for North Korea Test

Japan "To Deploy PAC Missiles"

---

<http://thediplomat.com/flashpoints-blog/2011/12/20/japan-officially-selects-f-35/>

---

For inquiries, please contact The Diplomat at [info@the-diplomat.com](mailto:info@the-diplomat.com)