Canada gets cold feet over F-35

Jason Lomberg, Technical Editor

A report released by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives [1] calls Canada's planned procurement of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter "fundamentally flawed." According to the CCPA, "Canada does not need the F-35, either for North American/domestic roles or for expeditionary roles."

On July 16, 2010 Canadian PM Stephen Harper announced plans to purchase 65 F-35 aircraft (worth a combined $16 billion) to replace Canada's CF-18 fleet. As elsewhere, this ignited a firestorm of controversy in Canada, primarily because the plan entails a "sole-source contract" to Lockheed Martin (allegedly putting Canada in a subservient position to the American defense contractor). Canada's Liberal Party has pledged to shelve the F-35 purchase (pending a formal review) if it wins the next election.

A Canadian CF-18 Hornet. If Stephen Harper's plan moves forward, Canada will purchase 65 F-35's to replace its aging fleet of CF-18s.

The CCPA report finds the JSF inapplicable (or overkill) for every potential role. Regarding Canada's NORAD responsibilities, the F-35 is both wholly inadequate and superfluous. As the CCPA points out, "The traditional NORAD role does not require an especially capable interceptor aircraft." But Air Power Australia [2] (one of the F-35's most vocal critics [3]) charges that the F-35 would be ineffectual in certain air defense scenarios. Against a foe equipped with PAK-FAs or Su-35s escort fighters, the F-35 would find itself underpowered.

The other potential JSF role is expeditionary operations, and in this, the F-35 comes up short. The CCPA notes that, "Participation in expeditionary operations is a matter of choice, for Canada as well as for other countries. Canada should limit its participation in such missions, restricting its operations under normal circumstances to UN-led missions…" In other words, allies with superior airpower could shoulder the load in any overseas conflict.

This has been covered ad-nauseum, but the F-35 is an inferior aircraft when matched with advanced Russian fighters like the PAK-FA or the Su-35. This limits the JSF's efficacy in a potential conflict with a technologically advanced foe. Even in the current arena of conflict (COIN operations), the F-35 is inadequate. As APA mentions, "In uncontested COIN operations, the F-35 lacks the payload and endurance to perform well, does not have the ballistic survivability for Close Air Support (CAS), and the CTOL variant demands long runways for operations, limiting choices in deployment sites."

Air power Australia declares that, "The mismatch between the F-35 and Canada's strategic needs is fundamentally no different from the mismatch between the F-35

and Australia's strategic needs." So why continue the program (in Canada, the US, or elsewhere)? APA concludes that the United States OSD (Office of the Secretary for Defense) has "shielded the program from proper scrutiny" (including an official Nunn-McCurdy Review [4]), behavior of which is indicative of a "bureaucracy that has blundered badly and wishes to protect itself from criticism." And why shouldn't we dig ourselves a deeper hole? The F-35 will replace up to 95% of the U.S. combat air fleet [5]. Like it or not, we've committed ourselves for the long term.

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