

## **The F-22 and the Japan-U.S. alliance**

by Weston S. Konishi and Robert Dujarric

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North Korea's return to saber-rattling has returned military affairs to the top of the Japan-U.S. agenda. As many Japanese continue to have – unfounded – doubts about the commitment of the Obama administration to the bilateral alliance, they are pushing for Washington to allow Japan to purchase America's most advanced fighter aircraft, the F-22 Raptor. This trend must be quickly deflated before it becomes a misguided litmus test for bilateral relations.

The F-22 Raptor is a fifth-generation combat aircraft with two key characteristics: it represents a quantum leap in air power and it isn't cheap. The complexities of cost accounting and politics make it difficult to put an accurate price tag on the Raptor. But the lowest estimates range from a per-aircraft marginal cost of \$140 million to \$350 million if R&D expenses are included. To these must be added maintenance and operating expenses that the Pentagon concedes are "very expensive."

For several years, Japanese officials have expressed an interest in purchasing the F-22, rather than the cheaper and less advanced F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. Japan is in many ways a logical end-user for the F-22 Raptor. It is a close ally of the United States with the economic resources to afford the aircraft's exorbitant price tag. Moreover, Japan has legitimate security concerns about China's military modernization program, naval incursions into Japanese territorial waters, and claims on the Senkaku Islands. Procurement of F-22s could give Japan an additional advantage over China, which is rapidly acquiring more advanced fighter aircraft.

There are serious obstacles to such an acquisition, however. On the legal front, U.S. legislation prohibits the sale of this highly sensitive military technology to any foreign air force. The leaking, in recent years, of classified U.S. data by Japanese military personnel has undermined Tokyo's claim that it can protect top-secret technologies. On the diplomatic front, selling F-22s to Japan would make it harder for the Obama administration to resist pressure from other allies who have an interest in procuring the aircraft. Selling F-22s to other countries could disrupt delicate balances of power in Asia, the Middle East, and other regions.

Further complicating matters, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates wants to limit U.S. procurement of the Raptor to

187 planes, and has ruled out selling the plane to Japan. In late June, the Senate Armed Services Committee voted to explore selling a less advanced version of the Raptor to Japan, but the measure faces broader opposition from other relevant committees in Congress as well as a possible veto by the administration.

The United States is not the only party preventing Japan's procurement of F-22s. There are numerous hurdles on the Japanese side that diminish Tokyo's chances of acquiring the aircraft. Even if Washington were willing to sell the latest version of the F-22 at a foreclosure price of \$140 million per unit, a very small number of planes, say 40, would increase Tokyo's defense expenditures by \$5.6 billion. Operating costs would make that figure much higher.

In order for Tokyo to pay for a viable F-22 program, it would either have to cut pet projects, such as its spy satellite program, or shatter the unofficial 1-percent-of-GDP cap on defense spending, which Japanese voters widely support. Either scenario requires significant political groundwork that is not in the cards at this point.

Furthermore, for several decades, Japan has opted for the domestic manufacture of its military aircraft under license from U.S. contractors. Pursuing that option for the F-22 would make it even harder to go ahead. License manufacturing in Japan is a budgetary black hole, where billions can vanish as small production runs and other inefficiencies exponentially raise costs. According to experts, per unit costs under licensed production programs are twice those of the U.S.-made versions and sometimes even higher. Moreover, a made-in-Japan F-22 would create extra concerns in the Congress about technology transfers to a country that is considered an economic competitor and provide opportunities for unintended leaks of manufacturing secrets to hostile powers.

What about acquiring a less advanced version of the F-22, as the Senate Armed Services Committee has suggested? This could sidestep US concerns about exporting state-of-the-art stealth technology but, reportedly, could cost Japan an additional \$1 billion to reconfigure the aircraft – begging the question of whether a "dumbed-down" version of the F-22 would be an appreciably better option than the export-ready F-35.

At the very least, Japan's acquisition of the F-22 would significantly increase defense spending, force a rethinking of domestic production of weapons platforms, and require a more robust legal and enforcement framework to protect classified information.

Under current circumstances, these developments are highly unlikely. In the past two decades, China has invested heavily in its military and North Korea in its missile and nuclear arsenals. But Japan's defense budget has been flat, or

sometimes slightly lowered. Despite its enormous maritime interests, it took Tokyo months to approve the deployment of a few vessels to Somalia under restrictive rules of engagement.

Consequently, it is not realistic to expect the Japanese government and Diet to suddenly summon the willpower to boost military outlays, cut down on wasteful domestic production (which gives jobs and money to voters and campaign contributors), and pass draconian laws to safeguard classified information.

These realities, along with Secretary Gates' statements, have thrown cold water on Japanese aspirations to acquire the F-22. Unfortunately, the risk is that conservative critics in Japan believe it is their nation's inherent right to acquire the F-22, even though their country is unwilling to take steps that would make this financially and politically possible for Japan and acceptable to the United States.

Even more troubling is the assertion that Washington's refusal to sell the aircraft stems from a fear of upsetting China and signals a waning commitment to the Japan-U.S. alliance – an absurd and illogical conclusion. This reflects a broader fear in Japan that the United States is weakening its strategic commitment by appeasing China. As a result, almost all of Washington's decisions on Asia policy, be it the appointment of a new U.S. ambassador to Japan or policy toward North Korea, are viewed through a lens that magnifies suspicion of American motives.

Before this sentiment spreads, critics in Japan should consider whether the nation really *can* afford the F-22 given its shrinking defense budget. Tokyo must also implement strict policies that leave no doubt in Washington that sensitive military technologies will not be compromised.

The time may well come when Japan meets these basic requirements and Washington – in consideration of broader strategic calculations – is prepared to sell F-22s to Japan and other allies. Tokyo will then have a stronger case to make for acquiring the aircraft. That day is not yet here. In the meantime, the Raptor must not become a symbol of America's strategic commitment to Japan.