

Australia to be maintenance base for controversial F-35 jet fighter

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The announcement last month that Australian bases will serve as the South Pacific maintenance facilities for the Lockheed Martin F-35 Joint Strike Fighter further underlines the degree to which the country is being integrated into US strategic and logistical preparations for war in the region.

The US Department of Defense announced on December 17 that as the so-called “fifth generation” fighters enters service with the US and other armed forces, aircraft based or operating in the Pacific would be maintained in either Japan or Australia. The DoD had previously made public that Italy, the United Kingdom, Turkey and Norway would share maintenance of F-35s in Europe.

The agreement means that not only Australian F-35s will be serviced in Australia, but also American Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps aircraft operating in the South Pacific. The US military plans to acquire some 2,400 of the various models of F-35 in production, at an ever rising cost, currently estimated to be well over \$1 trillion.

The South Korean military also announced that it would send its F-35s to be maintained in Australia, rather than Japan, with which Seoul has tense diplomatic relations. South Korea has committed to purchasing 40 F-35s, while Japan will buy 42.

Australia has ordered 72 F-35s, at an estimated cost of at least \$24 billion. The first aircraft are scheduled to arrive in the country in 2018. The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) plans to have one squadron operational by 2021 and three squadrons by 2023. Over the next three years, Australian pilots will train in the aircraft with their American counterparts at the Luke Air Force base in Arizona.

By 2018, Australian facilities will have to be able to provide maintenance for air frames and heavy engines,

as well as repair, overhaul and upgrade capabilities. The companies expected to bid for the multi-million dollar contracts are Lockheed Martin Australia, BAE Systems and Northrop Grumman, with the location of depots likely to be near the RAAF base at Williamstown, in the city of Newcastle.

Explaining the military calculations behind the US plans for maintenance sites in Japan and Australia, Air Force Lieutenant General Christopher Bogdan told journalists last month: “If you’re having airplanes in the northern Pacific that need a rapid upgrade to respond to a new threat, having to move them 7,000 miles to do that mod [modification] in Australia, or vice versa, has an operation impact because the war fighter won’t get the airplane as quickly as he needed to.”

The maintenance agreement suggests a further expansion of US military “rotations” on Australian soil and basing arrangements. By 2016-2017, a 2,500-strong US Marine Air Ground Task Force will be spending six months of each year in Darwin. Over the following years, air force and marine F-35 squadrons may join them, operating from the nearby RAAF base at Tindal.

The US “pivot” or rebalance to Asia, which President Barack Obama announced in the Australian parliament in November 2011, calls for 60 percent of all US air force and naval assets to be based in the Indo-Pacific region by 2020. The US thinktank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, proposed in 2012 that, as part of the “pivot,” an entire aircraft carrier battlegroup, with its complement of F-35s, be shifted from the Atlantic coast to an Indian Ocean base near the Western Australian city of Perth.

The construction and deployment of F-35s is proceeding despite the controversy and recriminations

that surround the aircraft. It has been repeatedly derided by former military personnel and aviation experts as an excessively expensive design that is inferior to aircraft being developed by Russia, China and other countries. In a 2008 computer-simulated war with China arranged by the RAND Corporation, the results of which were leaked to the media, the F-35s were wiped out by Chinese aircraft.

Dennis Jensen, a right-wing member of the Australian ruling coalition who previously worked as a defence analyst and is a longstanding critic of the F-35, last year denounced the decision to purchase 72 of the planes as a “great national scandal.” Jensen told parliament: “The simple fact is Lockheed Martin and the military-industrial complex may be selling the US, Australia and allies a pup, but nations that may not be friendly to us are not buying the pitch.”

In the most recent F-35 scandal, the American website *The Daily Beast* reported on December 31 that it had been told by unnamed Air Force officials that “the jet’s software does not yet have the ability to shoot its 25mm cannon” and that the problem would not be resolved until 2019. Lockheed Martin and the Pentagon have denied the report.

The growing military tensions between the US and both China and Russia will only exacerbate concerns in the American political and military establishment that the F-35s will not be capable of defeating Russian- or Chinese-designed aircraft.

A November 2014 report to the US Congress by the US-China Economic and Security Review, for example, claimed that “on several occasions” since late 2013, American and Chinese warships and aircraft had confronted one another. It alleged that “Chinese military personnel engaged in unsafe, unprofessional and aggressive behaviour that could have resulted in the loss of life or a major political crisis.”

The incidents referred to in the report were all, in fact, the outcome of the US backing for Japan and the Philippines in their volatile and reckless territorial disputes with Beijing. Far from simply triggering a political crisis, armed clashes in the East or South China Sea have the potential to set off an all-out war in which the deficiencies of conventional weapons such as jet fighters would only heighten the danger of a nuclear exchange.



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