

Australia to purchase more US fighter jets

By Mike Head
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In a further signal of its complete integration into Washington's "pivot to Asia"—designed to confront China—the Australian government yesterday announced it would buy 58 more US F-35 Joint Strike Fighters (JSF) at a forecast cost of \$12.4 billion.

As part of the announcement, more than \$1.6 billion will be spent on new facilities at air bases in Williamstown, near Newcastle, in New South Wales and Tindal, near Darwin, in the Northern Territory.

The package is designed to help satisfy the Obama administration's demands for Canberra to increase military spending, as part of the "pivot," which includes the stepped-up basing of US war planes and Marines in northern Australia. The "pivot" or "rebalance," formally announced by Obama in the Australian parliament in 2011, is a comprehensive US strategy throughout the region aimed at undermining China's influence and encircling it militarily.

The purchase of the expensive F-35 stealth fighters, despite a decade-long record of serious technical faults, delays and cost overruns, is aimed at maintaining combat air superiority over China, and all other countries in the Asia-Pacific.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott said the JSF was the most advanced fighter in production anywhere in the world, and "will ensure Australia maintains a regional air combat edge." The F-35 would also "provide a major boost" to the Australian military's "intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities."

The announcement—the most expensive military acquisition in Australia's history—was made as the government prepares sweeping budget cuts to social spending, including aged pensions, healthcare and disability payments. It marks a further militarisation of Australia, in preparation for war, at the expense of the living conditions of the working class.

The purchase also underscores Canberra's unwavering support for the US military-industrial

complex. It gives a badly needed boost to the F-35's manufacturer, Lockheed Martin, which has been hit by threatened withdrawals from the crisis-riddled JSF project by other countries, notably Canada and Denmark.

Australia has already bought two F-35s and ordered a further 12, so the new purchase will bring the fleet up to 72. The government said it would consider in a few years whether to buy a further 28, taking the number to 100—and the total bill to at least \$20 billion.

Defence Minister David Johnson referred to the militarist calculations behind the F-35 announcement. "This is a very, very potent force with a range to take out an adversary not seen around the world before," he said. "With respect to our neighbourhood, I think no one is going to be in that league for some long time ... We see it dominating the skies for the next at least 10 to 15 years."

There was immediate bipartisan support for the purchase within the political establishment. Opposition leader Bill Shorten not only backed the decision, but claimed credit for it. "It was Labor who believed that the Joint Strike Fighter was an appropriate addition to our air power," he told Radio National.

The Howard Liberal government agreed to the initial purchase of F-35s in 2002, but it was the Gillard Labor government that fully backed the Obama administration's "pivot" in 2010 and paved the way for the latest package. In May 2012, the Gillard government deferred approval of the F-35 purchase by two years, in order to "align" the Australian air force's planned F-35 operating start date in 2020 with that of the US Air Force.

A US defence strategist, the Brookings Institution's Michael O'Hanlon, pointed to China as the target of the acquisition. "If Australia wants to be able to have aircraft that can go up against what China might deploy ... then I think you want something ... like the F-35," he

told Australian ABC radio.

A series of US think tank reports have highlighted the central importance of Australia in US war preparations against China. A Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment (CSBA) report last year entitled, “Gateway to the Indo-Pacific: Australian Defense Strategy and the Future of the Australian-US Alliance,” explained that “Australia had moved from ‘down under’ to ‘top centre’ in terms of geopolitical import” for American strategy.

The CSBA, which has close ties with the Pentagon, outlined in detail the role that the Australian military and its bases would play in a US war with China. The island continent would help sustain a US blockade of China by controlling key shipping lanes through South East Asia and conducting attacks on Chinese vessels in the Indian Ocean. The report listed what was needed to upgrade northern Australian air bases, as well as the purchases required for the Australian military.

The CSBA declared that the Australian air force “lacks sufficient long-endurance maritime surveillance and strike assets, as well as refueling aircraft, capable of sustaining operations far from its shores.” This weakness, it said, would partially be offset by the “planned acquisition” of F-35s. The report insisted that “absent a greater budgetary effort, Australia’s military capabilities will fail to meet the nation’s strategic aspirations.”

The F-35 has been billed as the smartest fighter jet on the planet, designed to strike enemies in the air and on the ground without being detected by radar, but the plane’s development has been plagued by technical and cost problems.

Last month, the US House Armed Services Committee was told the planes were not affordable to use at the moment. The committee heard software problems could further delay the fighter’s production, and a lack of foreign purchases could see countries like Australia paying millions of dollars more per aircraft.

Australia is one of only eight countries, apart from the US, that have taken part in the JSF program: Britain, Canada, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and Turkey. At least two of the participants, Canada and Denmark, are debating whether to even buy it for their own military.

Delivery of the F-35 was originally scheduled to commence in 2012. According to US government

figures, over the past decade the estimated cost of the JSF program as a whole jumped from \$US233 billion to \$US395.7 billion—a 70 percent rise.

In order to sweeten the deal for Australian corporate elite, some Australian-based companies have been promised a share of the profits to be made from Canberra’s purchase. Prime Minister Abbott said some 700 F-35 tailfins would be made at a factory in Victoria, and Australian manufacturers had the potential to earn an additional \$A7.5 billion.

There is also a bipartisan commitment to militarise Australian-based industry. South Australian Premier Jay Weatherill, whose Labor government is enforcing the closure of General Motors Holden’s auto assembly in Adelaide, last December opened a BAE Systems machining facility that has a contract to make titanium parts for F-35s. Weatherill said the plant would “fill a niche capability in advanced manufacturing.”

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