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Symbolism and the CF-18 Replacement

by Alan Stephenson

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POLICY UPDATE

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The release of the Standing Committee on National Defence's Report on *Canada and the Defence of North America: NORAD and Aerial Readiness* last month was, as argued in the Official Opposition's dissenting opinion, another example of the government's desire to be portrayed as consulting Canadians yet shaping the issues to align with predetermined party ideas.¹ In toto, the report is a decent analysis of the contemporary landscape regarding the defence of North America, however, the conclusions with respect to aerial readiness are inconsistent with the stated scope that limited the study geographically. How does the committee square-the-circle by conflating the high-density threat environment of Canada's commitments to NATO into the relatively benign Arctic sovereignty mission as a procurement template for the CF-18 replacement in its recommendations? Using this 'defence of North America' logic, one must question how the Standing Committee will capture the need for heavy tanks and artillery when it studies the Canadian Army's role in North American defence.

Herein lays the problem. By using the narrowly defined scope of the study, the committee members were able to shape the discussion on the requirements for fighter operations to feed into a predetermined narrative – one that focussed on stealth, number of engines, immediacy of replacement and flyaway costs. This, unfortunately, was a continuation of the politicization of the whole procurement saga. Prejudicial language such as “fifth-generation stealth capabilities” obfuscates the discussion by conflating a myriad of technological advancements into a debate over the design of the aircraft. All four dimensions of military capital procurement need to be objectively considered and assessed in any future decision (political, technological, operational, and economic).

First – the elephant in the room. ‘Stealth’ is a self-protection measure.... period! It is neither explicitly offensive nor defensive in nature. It is electronic camouflage (electronic counter-measures - ECM) built into the structure of fifth-generation fighters to ‘minimize’ its radar signature. Fourth-generation fighters use ‘strap-on’ electronic camouflage to ‘mask’ the fighter's radar signature. The former has upfront, built-in costs while the latter requires additional, customized costs. It is not a question of whether ECM is needed, but how it is delivered to best protect the pilot in a combat situation.

Second, one engine versus two engines is a poor determinate for procuring Canada's next fighter aircraft. It is but one factor in the overall assessment of the operational and technological dimensions needed in determining the right replacement for the CF-18s. In reviewing the Standing Committee's prescriptive attention to this particular platform discriminator during testimony, it is evident that the second recommendation alludes to the need for two engines in stating that “pilot safety be a key consideration” for operations in the “far North region”.² Ironically, pilot safety in a combat fighter aircraft is premised more on the technological superiority of the platform than on how many engines it has – read superior ECM, greater situation awareness, and advanced weapons systems.

Third, the immediacy of a replacement decision (recommendation three) should not be used as a premise for sole-sourcing or narrowly defining the requirement as the CF-18s will last until



2025 and the government is in a good position to quickly conduct a competitive process given the 40,000 person hours of analysis already conducted by government bureaucrats.³ Finally, the first recommendation's identification of a replacement fighter having "well-defined capital and sustainment costs" and "working .. [within] ... existing infrastructure" shortchanges the true question of economics – that is, the economic logic of an interim 20-year solution versus a long-term 40-year solution.

A fourth-generation fighter will have a life-cycle of roughly 20-25 years before it will become prohibitively expensive to maintain. The fifth-generation fighter will have growing pains (as did the CF-18 in the 1980s), but will evolve with the times and technology with the potential to last for 40 years. Having flown both a third-generation fighter (CF-104) and the fourth-generation CF-18, I can personally attest to the paradigmatic shift in both government strategy and operational tactics that accompanies such a dynamic change in fighter technology. However, only an objective competitive process can fully ascertain the factors within the political and economic dimensions needed to determine the best value for money.

The Defence Policy Review is due to be released in early 2017 and the Standing Committee's report will be used as part of the consultation process.⁴ Although only one of many submissions, the Standing Committee's report is, in fact, a 'trial balloon' of some contentious issues such as Ballistic Missile Defence and the CF-18 replacement, for the government to assess public reaction. It is unfortunate that the leader of the Liberal Party continued to politicize the CF-18 replacement by stating he would not purchase the F-35 while on the 'pre-election hustings'. Now as Prime Minister, he faces a dilemma – will the CF-18 replacement process become a symbol of good governance through an open and fair competitive process or will it become a symbol of keeping parochial party promises through process manipulation?

¹ Canada, *Canada and the Defence of North America*, Standing Committee on National Defence Report dated 19 September 2016, p. 75 – "It is the opinion of the Official Opposition that the members of the governing party took advantage of their majority status throughout the study to draft a report that suits their political needs, rather than the shared opinion of all committee members.... Furthermore, the Minister of National Defence said that he would use the committee's findings in shaping the government's defence policy, which is currently under review. The Official Opposition is of the opinion that the committee's majority report is not reflective of all members of the committee, but only of those of the governing party."

² Ibid, p. 61. This recommendation followed from the concerns expressed with respect to pilot safety and number of engines when operating in the Arctic environment in pp 41-48.

³ Although conducted under the previous government, the National Fighter Procurement Secretariat produced significant factual analysis of all potential fighter aircraft replacements that, along with the recent 2016 CF-18 Replacement Industry Consultation Questionnaire, can provide a definitional baseline from which to conduct a time-sensitive competitive process to decide on a replacement for the CF-18s.

⁴ Standing Committee on National Defence Report, p. 3; Department of National Defence, "Minister Sajjan Launches Public Consultations on Defence Policy Review," 6 April 2016.

▶ **About the Author**

Alan Stephenson is a Fellow at the Canadian Global Affairs Institute, holds a PhD from Carleton University, and is a veteran of the Canadian Armed Forces with 3600 fighter hours flying third generation CF-104 Starfighters and fourth generation CF-18 Hornets. He has held senior appointments in National Defence Headquarters, NATO and NORAD.

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