

Fighter Jets and the Unknowable Future

In a slow summer for serious political matters, the government announcement that Canada will buy 65 F35 fighter jets for a cost (including maintenance) of \$16 billion has upset the Opposition and critics of the government's defence policy. For its part, the Harper government did little to help itself by having the Defence minister talk about how pilots like fast aircraft and having them would help recruiting. Nor did the Prime Minister's press secretary assist much by announcing that the Russians were invading across the Pole and that only Canada's present-day fighter jets had turned their bombers away. It really is the summer silly season.

But there are serious issues here. One of the basic duties of a nation is the protection of its sovereignty, its territory, and its people. The Russians of today aren't the Soviets of 1960 or 1970, to be sure, and the old bombers the Russian Air Force regularly puts over the North are likely on training flights and merely checking to see if Canada's Air Force is still there. That's today. But tomorrow? Ten years hence? We cannot see into the future very clearly, and simply because there is no credible threat to our airspace today does not mean that the future is permanently secure. Which commentators in 1990 or 2000 could have predicted that the Canadian Forces would be fighting a war in Afghanistan in 2010?

Retired Air Force general Leonard Johnson opined that the F35s were designed only to fight enemy jets: "The age of major inter-state war between developed nations has vanished, so why prepare for one?" He may be right, and I certainly hope that he is. But what if he's as wrong as everyone who confidently declared that Hitler would stop once he had re-incorporated the Rhineland back into Germany. What then?

Moreover, if the Canadian Air Force does not mount sovereignty patrols in our airspace, who will? The answer is all too clear: the United States Air Force. Does anyone want to have American pilots flying over Canada to check out Russian bombers? Can Canada be a sovereign state if the defence of its most basic national interest is provided by another nation? We will surely require some aircraft to do such patrols for the foreseeable future.

But which aircraft? Do we really need \$16 billion worth of hot new fighters for this purpose? We do have the present CF18s that have just been expensively refurbished to the point that these 1980s aircraft will be able to fly until 2017. Fortuitously, given our glacially slow procurement procedures, that end date is around the time the F35s will come into service. Perhaps someone in Ottawa knows what she's doing.

The F35s, like the CF18s, are also useful for more than sovereignty and surveillance roles. In our unknowable future, if General Johnson is wrong, Canada might again decide that its national interests will be served by cooperating with its allies in military operations. These advanced fighters can play a role even if today we cannot determine where this might be. Who could have predicted that the CF18s would serve in the Gulf War or over Former Yugoslavia? Not all Canadians agreed with those missions, to be sure, but governments, Conservative and Liberal alike, determined that they served the nation's interests.

I am no expert in aircraft capabilities, and I am – unlike such renowned experts as Professor Michael Byers and columnist Linda McQuaig – completely incapable of judging if the F35 is the best fighter for our particular needs. But I do know that Canada has national interests and that these will always need to be defended and advanced. I do know that Canada must always be able to undertake surveillance over its own territory and to be prepared to turn away Russian bombers on training missions today or some other nation's aircraft on more mischievous operations tomorrow. And I understand and accept that at some point in the coming years Canadians may again decide that they must send their military abroad to work with our allies.

The F35 fighters can do the most likely tasks Canada might need to undertake. They can watch over our territory, and they can be part of an overseas Canadian military response in the 2020s and 2030s, if the Canadian governments of those days feel the need to act. Of course, we all hope that the money spent on these aircraft turns out to have been completely unnecessary, so peaceful will the world be. But no one should live in the expectation of perfect peace, not in our world of terror and aggression. If Canadians must fight, it is surely important that for once they have the modern weaponry to do so effectively. Like armies and navies, fighter jets can't be conjured out of nothing when they are urgently required, and good sense demands that Canadian governments plan and prepare for an unknowable future.

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