

## The Curious Case of the F-22

The rise of China has led to a fundamental questioning of American priorities in Asia by many allies of the United States. The questions are usually a variation on the theme, “Will the United States lessen its focus on traditional allies in an effort to build a positive relationship with Beijing?”

This question arises partly from an emerging reality in the shifting balance of power in the region that is based in fact. However some of the anxiety felt by traditional U.S. allies in Asia can be attributed to their own insecurity about their own future. In this atmosphere, there is great potential for misunderstandings to develop in which an action taken by the United States is seen one way in Washington and another way in Asia.

An excellent example of this situation is the curious case of the F-22 fighter jet. The F-22 is the most advanced fighter aircraft in the world. It was designed to allow the United States to remain a generation ahead of all potential competitors in the realm of air power. As of early 2009, some 187 F-22's have been produced and deployed into the United States Air Force. The aircraft has proven itself to be a highly capable, yet expensive, weapons system.

The advanced nature of the aircraft led some Japanese officials, especially those connected with the Self-Defense forces to support the idea of acquiring the F-22 from the United States. Such an arrangement, it was viewed by many, would provide Japan with the capability to defend itself against any attack from the air from any potential foe. Such a sale was also seen by some as a way to strongly reaffirm the U.S.-Japan relationship. By providing its most advanced fighter aircraft to Japan, the United States would be sending a signal to all that the level of trust between the U.S. and Japan was high and the commitment for mutual self defense remained strong. In short, the sale of F-22's to Japan would be a way of telling the world that Japan was still America's most important relationship in East Asia.

The sale of F-22 fighter aircraft to Japan would have made sense for the United States from a strategic perspective. America's most reliable ally in the Pacific would have been provided with a weapons system that would enhance its capabilities for self defense while sending a political signal that the relationship between the two nations was still strong. A potential sale of F-22's to Japan would have kept production lines open saving thousands of American jobs and earning billions to address America's chronic trade deficit. On many levels the sale of F-22's to Japan made sense for the United States, but it was not to be.

A different policy priority was to take precedence in Washington, DC. Since replacing Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld at the Pentagon, Robert Gates had pursued an agenda of restructuring the Pentagon. During his tenure, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld had pushed the idea of “transformation” in the military. Rumsfeld favored the acquisition of next generation high tech weapons systems and a shift to a force structure that relied on highly mobile small formations. Upon assuming command at the Pentagon, Secretary Gates decided that resources and strategy needed

to be focused not on developing a futuristic force, but to win today's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Secretary Gates has said that his priority is to “fundamentally reshape the priorities of America’s defense establishment and reform the way the Pentagon does business, particularly the weapons we buy and how we buy them.” Gates began this shift in emphasis at the Pentagon by elevating the status of counterinsurgency doctrine and stability operations inside the Army. This has meant a restructuring of the Army away from a force designed to fight a large conventional power to one able to prevail in against insurgents. Gates also looked to increase funds for an expanded Army by cutting weapons systems not useful in wars being fought today. The F-22, never having seen service in either Afghanistan or Iraq, was just such a system.

Newly elected President Barack Obama provided his vote of confidence in Gates and his approach by retaining him as Secretary of Defense in 2009. Cost cutting at the Pentagon took on a new urgency for a nation in the midst of an economic crisis, and so the new President supported Gates’ renewed effort to halt production of the F-22.

Halting production of the F-22 was not to prove easy. The system is built by over 1,000 suppliers in 44 states across the nation. The end of the F-22 would mean the end of thousands of jobs, not good news for any Member of Congress seeking re-election.

The new President and his Secretary of Defense determined that to achieve their changes in the Pentagon, production of the F-22 needed to be halted. Politically, the new President needed to win on Capitol Hill early in his term. The President and his team put all their political strength in the battle. Obama said dollars spent on the F-22 were “an inexcusable waste” and vowed to veto any bill which contained funding for the F-22. To exert control over Pentagon spending and shift its priorities, the Secretary of Defense and President of the United States ended the F-22 program.

To sell F-22's to Japan would have kept the production lines open for several years, giving time for the supporters of the F-22 to keep the program alive. While Japan's self defense needs were taken into account, a larger conflict was being waged inside official Washington that had nothing to do with the U.S.-Japan security relationship.

The refusal of the United States to offer the sale of F-22's to Japan should be viewed in the context of domestic American politics rather than the dynamics of the U.S.-Japan relationship. Failure of the U.S. to offer F-22's to Japan should not be viewed as a lack of trust in our ally. President Obama's choice on this matter was driven by his desire to shift the priorities of the Pentagon and exert influence on Capitol Hill at the beginning of his Presidency.

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