

Cost of killing off the F-111

by Dr Carlo Kopp

The idea that Australia should kill off its F-111 fleet is by all measures remarkable - and has important strategic and political consequences. Any decision to emasculate the RAAF by removing around one half of its firepower must have profound implications. Aside from losing firepower the RAAF would also lose its ability to strike across the sea-air gap in strength, and to engage time critical battlefield targets. Clearly cost related arguments against the aircraft have no credibility - in terms of value for money bomb-trucking the F-111 outperforms the F/A-18A by a robust margin.

This year is strategically important for the RAAF. Iraq saw the first combat use of RAAF assets since Vietnam, and closer to home Malaysia and Indonesia have jumped on the regional bandwagon of advanced Russian weapons purchasing. Malaysia ordered 18 Sukhoi Su-30MKMs and Indonesia the first four of an intended fleet of about fifty Su-30 aircraft. The Su-30 is a second generation Flanker, not unlike a large F-15E, and brings with it the ability to cross the sea-air gap from Asia with buddy tanking alone, and the ability to launch a number of long range air-air and precision air-surface weapons. This is a strategic shift with no historical precedent since 1942, when Japan deployed long range Zeroes against the North. The reader can judge the strategic logic in killing off the F-111 while the region is buying up the nearest Russian equivalent.

The idea of killing off the F-111 also conflicts with the political and strategic realities of the US-Australian alliance posture in the Pacific Rim region. At this time the US is badly stretched with worldwide commitments and is running short of bombers, tankers and experienced crews - even B-1Bs were recently pulled out of AMARC mothballs to fill the gap. The RAAF's F-111s are equivalent in strategic punch to around 50 F-15E Beagles amounting to 25% of the

total US heavy strike fighter fleet - or around 15 B-52Hs amounting to 1/3 of the 44 strong B-52H force. Take away the RAAF's F-111s and the US Air Force has to fill that capability gap by beefing up the PacRim with additional aircraft. From a US perspective killing off the F-111 amounts to Australia playing the same downsizing game played by many European NATO nations - one of the causes of the ongoing bitterness between the US and some European nations.

Losing the F-111 has wider implications for the alliance, in a period of US Air Force overcommitment and ongoing coalition war campaigns. Shortages of US tankers presented genuine problems over Iraq - problems that will be repeated in any pre-2015 campaigns. Australia has much to gain politically from contributing F-111s to US-led coalition campaigns since the F-111 demands little tanking, and it covers a capability niche in precision bombing where the US is badly hurting - both in aircraft numbers and experienced crews. The idea of killing off the F-111 amounts to killing off the potential political payoffs from its use in coalition campaigns, and if substituted with smaller aircraft, imposes an extra burden on the US tanker fleet. The alliance issues arising in the PacRim from the loss of the F-111 are thus repeated on the global scene.

Killing off the F-111 has strategic implications for Australia's national technology base. Like the Collins submarine, the F-111 is wholly maintained in Australia. Weapon system software development, systems integration and design modifications are all performed in the Amberley WSBU facility, which employs hundreds of engineering personnel. DSTO contributes much to the F-111. Such capabilities are unique only to the most technologically advanced nations. The nucleus of skills at Amberley and DSTO Melbourne is of immeasurable value since they can be used to effect modifications to other ADF platforms, and lessons from the F-111 ageing aircraft



ABOVE: An F-111 of No 1 Squadron based at RAAF Amberley flies low over the airfield in full afterburner. Rumours abound that Defence is considering an early withdrawal of the F-111 from service, starting as early as 2006.

program can be applied to reduce operating costs of other RAAF aircraft. The taxpayer has an enormous intellectual and materiel investment in the F-111 fleet and its support base, which would be scattered to the winds should the F-111 be retired. The strategic damage to Australia's military systems integration capability would be tremendous - Australia would lose the ability to indigenously develop airborne weapons systems and slip into the technological domain of third world rather than first world nations. The only incentive one could see for killing off the F-111 is that like the Collins subs it is more visibly sensitive to Departmental mistakes in planning and funding prioritization. Therefore the F-111 can be a source of more embarrassment than overseas supported systems by exposing inadequacies in strategic planning and management. The three post-2000 groundings all resulting from known problems showed this graphically. Killing off the F-111 sends out the message that Australia is no longer technologically competent to maintain advanced weapons systems or manage their support. The strategic and political costs to Australia, domestic and overseas, of killing off the F-111 are enormous - all to trim about 3 per cent or less off the annual Defence budget. Put simply, the idea of early F-111 retirement is irrational.

Dr Carlo Kopp is lecturer at Monash University, Melbourne and a well known aviation analyst, consultant and writer.

WOFF Dickson retires to the good life

After 38 years of service Warrant Officer Bob Dickson has decided it is time to retire and live life at a more leisurely pace.

WOFF Dickson's military career began earlier than his Air Force in 1965 he enlisted in the Navy as a marine technician (stoker) and spent the next nine years posted aboard various ships.

"The highlight of my Navy service would have to be the times I served in Vietnam, I went over there three times," he said. In 1974 WOFF Dickson joined the Air Force as a firefighter.

"I was very proud when I made Warrant Officer in January 1999, even though it meant I had to sit behind a desk for the rest of my career.

Travel may be on the agenda for WOFF Dickson and his wife Robyn.



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