

“The F-22 and the Japan-U.S. alliance” – A Response to Weston Konishi and Robert Dujarric by Ross Babbage

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I enjoyed reading the commentary by Weston Konishi and Robert Dujarric and broadly agree with the thrust of their argument. However, in my view this commentary perpetuates some misleading assumptions about the relative merits of the F-22 and F-35 and, in consequence, may encourage some of our Japanese friends to strive for air capabilities that are both ageing rapidly and arguably unsuitable for their needs.

At one point the Konishi-Dujarric commentary asserts that the F-35 is less advanced than the F-22. Let me respond that in all but one respect this is not really the case.

The F-22 will undoubtedly be the world's pre-eminent control-of-the-air fighter for the next two to three decades. It is optimized for air-to-air combat, with its all-aspect stealth, supercruise, extreme agility, and complementary avionics and weapons systems. In this narrow air-to-air role it is superior to the F-35, though not by a wide margin.

However, the F-22 is so specialized that it is not very good at other important air combat roles. Most importantly, it is clearly inferior to the F-35 in air-to-surface land and maritime strike and as an information/surveillance/reconnaissance system, both of which would appear to be essential roles for the Japanese.

The F-22 will not be able to carry the 2000-lb class of weapons that are an essential part of the F-35's inventory. The F-22's radar currently has neither a ground mapping facility nor a precision targeting system. The F-35 also has superior electronic defense and other systems. While there are plans to upgrade the F-22 to the F-35's standard, there are serious doubts whether funding to do this will ever be available. Even if such upgrades went ahead, the F-22 will never have the F-35's extensive suite of electro-optical sensors.

The F-35 is also a newer technology aircraft, being almost a generation more current than the F-22. Indeed, many of the advanced systems on the F-35 are being considered for back-fitting onto the F-22.

The F-35 also has some advantages of range and endurance over the F-22 in most modes.

Then, any purchaser needs to understand that not only will the F-35 have a far lower unit cost than the F-22, but that current planning is that some 16 times the number of F-35s will be built, when compared to F-22s. This has huge implications for relative supportability and life-cycle costs.

In short, despite its air-to-air excellence, the F-22 remains a limited war-fighting system. The F-35 is a more modern,

more flexible, more easily supported, more affordable and, overall, a more capable air-combat package. While it is, of course, for our Japanese colleagues to decide what they wish to purchase, it would be unfortunate if such judgments were made on false assumptions.