NEW $40BN STEALTH FIGHTER JET BUILT IN JAPAN ON THE CARDS

News / Manufacturer

Japan’s aerospace and arms industry will use this week’s airshow in Tokyo to push the case to develop a highly advanced, and costly, stealth fighter jet.

The new fighter, dubbed the F-3 could cost as much as $40 billion to bring to deployment level, depending on its specifications.

Tokyo faces a crunch choice between ordering an industry-pleasing advanced stealth fighter or opting for a cheaper conventional combat jet that will deliver a bigger bang for taxpayers’ yen.

In March, Japan’s ministry of defence issued a request for information (RFI) to gauge interest among foreign aerospace companies for jointly developing the F-3, which would operate alongside Lockheed Martin’s new F-35s and older F-15s.

"It cuts to the core of the future of Japanese defence industry," said an industry source, who asked not to be identified. "There is now a premium on actual capability."

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A final decision on the project is expected by early 2018.

The prime minister Shinzo Abe has reversed a decade of defence cuts with spending reaching record levels.

A cheaper fighter programme would free up funding for other purchases and a lower-cost jet that other nations could afford opens up the prospect of overseas sales that would further lower unit costs for Japan's Self Defence Force.

Pushing for a more advanced fighter are defence ministry bureaucrats and local companies seeking to secure jobs, underpin defence industry supply chains and compensate for business lost to US defence industry suppliers.

Proponents aim to build a jet more advanced than the US Lockheed's F-22 Raptor stealth fighter, said the industry source.

Japan's last domestic fighter jet, the F-2, which the F-3 will replace, is widely regarded as an expensive failure. Based on F-16 it was built two decades ago by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries and Lockheed.

It was the world's first production aircraft built with composite carbon fibre wings, but cracks in the composite plagued the program.

An initial plan to produce 141 jets was pared down with less than 100 entering service, costing around four times that of an equivalent off-the-shelf fighter.

Mitsubishi Heavy has tested a prototype jet, dubbed the ATD-X, showcasing numerous stealth technologies.

Almost 800 other commercial aerospace and defence firms that are exhibiting at Japan Aerospace 2016, the four-day show which begins in Tokyo on Wednesday.

The event, held only once every four years, is the first major aerospace show since Mr Abe two years ago ended a ban on military exports, allowing Japanese firms to export arms for the first time since the end of the Second World War.

Japan is also promoting the Mitsubishi Regional Jet (MRJ) at the show, the nation's first attempt in half a century to build a commercially viable civilian aircraft. The 100-seat MRJ, which has been delayed by five years, is aimed at taking on regional jet makers Bombardier in Canada and Brazil's Embraer.

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