

Canada Not Ruling Out Canceling F-35 Buy

Rob Gillies, Associated Press

TORONTO (AP) — Canada's associate defense minister said Tuesday his government could back out of a multibillion-dollar plan to buy F-35 stealth fighters from the United States.

Julian Fantino said that Canada is considering "if and when" to sign a contract for the Lockheed Martin manufactured jet.

"We have not, as yet, discounted the possibility, of course, of backing out of any of the program," Fantino said during questioning by opposition members at a Parliament committee in Ottawa.

Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper has been a staunch supporter of the program, but Fantino's remarks represent a slight step back. Canada has said it would buy 65 jets for about \$9 billion.

"We're going to, at some point in time, make the definitive decision," Fantino said.

Japan has said it may cancel its plans to buy dozens of the fighters. The next-generation fighter is set to become the centerpiece of U.S. and allied air forces, but the program has been plagued by delays and cost overruns.

Canada is a funding partner in developing the Joint Strike Fighter, which the U.S. Defense Department describes as the largest fighter aircraft program in history. Most of the funding comes from the United States, while Australia, Turkey, Britain, Italy, Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands are also funding partners.

Canada is looking for a new fighter to replace the current fleet of 1980s-vintage CF-18s, which the government says will reach the end of their projected service life around 2020.

Canadian opposition Liberal lawmaker John McKay described Fantino's testimony as "a welcome change in tone" that was evidently brought on by a meeting earlier this month in Washington in which partner nations had a chance to quiz both the manufacturer and the Pentagon, which is co-ordinating international orders.

Lockheed Martin, in conjunction with Northrop Grumman and BAE Systems, is building 2,400 F-35s for the U.S. as well as partner nations. But the cost of the program has jumped from \$233 billion to \$385 billion. Some estimates suggest that it could top out at \$1 trillion over 50 years.

Lockheed is building three versions of the F-35 — one each for the Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps. The plane would replace Cold War-era aircraft such as the Air Force F-16 fighter and the Navy's F/A-18 Hornet.

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Last January, then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates had put the Marines' version of the aircraft on a two-year probationary period because of "significant testing problems."

His successor, Leon Panetta, ended the probation late last month.

But the Pentagon has said it will slow its purchases of the fighter to save money, which has raised concerns abroad. Slowed production could lead to delays in delivery to foreign buyers, and could make the planes more expensive to produce.

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