

With F-35's Arrival, Stealth Returns To Paris

The pros of sending the F-35 to the Paris Air Show now outweigh the cons

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More than two decades after the U.S. Air Force gave attendees of Europe's largest aerospace showcase a rare glimpse at the secretive B-2 bomber, stealth is returning to Le Bourget Airport. Lockheed Martin's F-35A will make its much-anticipated Paris Air Show debut this year, marking the first time a low-observable aircraft has appeared at the event since 1995.

There are many theories about why the U.S. has declined to send stealth aircraft to Paris for the past few decades, primarily related to security and logistics. While stealth is less exotic today than it was when Northrop Grumman unveiled the B-2, the Pentagon is likely still concerned the aircraft could be exposed to prying eyes. It is also simply more difficult for the U.S. to operate stealth aircraft in France than it is elsewhere in Europe such as Germany or the UK, as the Pentagon does not have secure military facilities or basing rights there.

Those security and logistics challenges still remain. In fact, Defense Department officials said right up until early May that the JSF would not go to the Paris Air Show, which runs from June 19-26. What has changed, according to multiple experts, is the growing importance of international F-35 sales to the health of the overall program, the increasingly volatile global security environment and the maturity of the aircraft itself. Simply put, the scale has been slowly tipping in recent years, and the pros of sending the F-35 to Paris now outweigh the cons.

A little history: Lockheed's F-117 was the first stealth aircraft to appear at Le Bourget, in 1991. The B-2 was next, but its time there was fleeting—about 1 hr. During the flying demonstration, several French aircraft "got a little too close" to the bomber, likely trying to take pictures of the sensitive stealth coatings, says Richard Aboulafia, an analyst with the Teal Group.



The F-35 will be the first stealth aircraft to fly at the Paris Air Show at Le Bourget Airport since the B-2 bomber made a brief appearance in 1995. Credit: Tech. Sgt. Andy Kin/U.S. Air Force

Lockheed's F-22 Raptor was scheduled to fly at the 2009 Paris Air Show, but the Air Force canceled the appearance at the last minute, saying the aircraft was tied up elsewhere. However, news reports at the time indicated there may have been another reason the F-22 was a no-show: concerns that the stealth fighter would be exposed to radar trying to gather intelligence on U.S. technology.

Eight years later, the Air Force maintains that the last-minute move to send the JSF to Paris is not a reversal, saying that by mid-May the decision simply had not reached the highest levels of leadership yet. (By contrast, Defense Department officials confirmed to reporters a full six months in advance that the F-35 would participate in the 2016 Royal International Air Tattoo and the Farnborough Airshow in the UK.)

"In all likelihood, it was the traditional: 'Well, we've never gone, and the answer has always been no.' Then someone has to shake that cage," says one former military officer familiar with the Paris Air Show process, who spoke on condition of anonymity. The official pointed to "getting murdered in the press" as one possible contributor to the Air Force's change of heart.

This year, the F-35 will not only fly an aerial demonstration at the European showcase but will also appear in the static park. This seems like unnecessary hassle and risk, given the logistics challenges and security concerns. The Air Force could fly the aircraft from air bases in the UK or Germany, do the demonstration and fly back without ever having to land at Le Bourget.

But both Lockheed Martin and the Pentagon appear to be going all out for the F-35's Paris debut, perhaps with the hope of securing additional international sales. Lockheed sees a market for the F-35 all over the world, with near-term opportunities including Belgium, Canada, Finland, Poland, Switzerland and possibly Germany down the road. In the Middle East, customers could eventually include Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, says Aboulafia. In a tight budget environment, securing international orders for the F-35 is not just a boon for Lockheed but also is in the best interest of the U.S. government. Whereas the B-2 and F-22 were never designed for export, selling the F-35 to foreign customers has become increasingly crucial for the health of the overall program. While many defense hawks hoped President

Donald Trump would increase funds for aircraft modernization, U.S. F-35 procurement is now stalled at fewer than 60 aircraft a year through the five-year defense plan. Absent a sudden influx of cash, any hope for an F-35 ramp-up in the near-term—necessary to decrease unit costs and mitigate a strike fighter shortfall across the armed services—now rests with international exports.

“Everything on that airplane is premised on rate,” says Doug Birkey, executive director of the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Power Studies. “From a sales standpoint . . . I don’t think they can afford not to go.”

Meanwhile, the international market is ripe for the picking. With the F-35’s upcoming appearance at Paris, Lockheed appears to be seizing the opportunity presented by an increasingly unstable world. Spooked by escalating aggression from Russia, China and North Korea, alarmed allies are likely more open to buying a fifth-generation stealth fighter.

“The best salespeople in the world include Vladimir Putin, the Chinese and our North Korean friends,” says Birkey.

International air shows present a prime opportunity to market new capabilities, says Dan Stohr, spokesman for the Aerospace Industries Association.

“The U.S. proudly arranges flight demonstrations and static displays of our civil and military aircraft at these international air shows to reinforce why America is the security and trading partner of choice,” says Stohr.

Finally, the F-35 program seems to have turned a corner, programmatically and in the eyes of the public. The long-anticipated Farnborough Airshow debut in 2016 went off without a major hitch, and the Air Force variant successfully completed its first European training deployment earlier this year. Meanwhile, a squadron of the [Marine Corps’](#) F-35Bs permanently deployed to Iwakuni, Japan, and recently completed joint training exercise Northern Edge in Alaska. Lockheed anticipates that development of the final warfighting software will be completed by the end of the year, in time for the Navy to declare its F-35C variant combat-ready in 2018.

As the warfighter begins operating the F-35, confidence in the fighter continues to grow. The successful European deployment in particular was “a major stepping-stone” to being able to deploy the F-35 anywhere in the world, says Col. David Lyons, commander of the 388th Fighter Wing at Hill AFB, Utah.

“That really was, at the end of the day, one of the biggest objectives of the deployment—to prove that we could take the spares package, the ALIS [Autonomic Logistic Information System], the personnel, the jets, all of the logistics train that goes along with this deployment,” Lyons says. “Now we know that we can take the F-35 and all the equipment, and we can go wherever we want to go in the world.”