

Britain Mulling F-35 Future Commitments

Aviation Week

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LONDON—Britain appears to be scaling back its F-35 ambitions as officials reassess the country's defense plans.

The 2015 Strategic Defense and Security Review (SDSR) reconfirmed the UK's commitment to its full complement of 138 F-35s over the lifetime of the Joint Strike Fighter program. But now, just two years on, the language of defense chiefs is changing.

Lt. Gen. Mark Poffley, the deputy chief of the UK defense staff, told a parliamentary defense committee on Nov. 21 that he was "sympathetic" to the idea that the overall number of F-35s being purchased by Britain could fall, saying "this was the reality of the world we are living in."

Poffley said the UK had "in principle committed to 138," but had contracted for 48 jets. He added that there was no recourse to "adjust those numbers."

Members of parliament have been attempting to shine a light on F-35 costs in a series of hearings. The defense ministry has so far released costs for fleet operations "with a degree of precision," according to Stephen Lovegrove, the defense ministry's most senior civil servant, up until 2025. It has also provided cost estimates for a 48-strong fleet for up to 2048.

The F-35s are expected to cost around £9.1 billion (\$12.1 billion) up to 2025 and to around £13 billion in 2048.

The £9.1 billion figure includes Britain's contribution to the System Development and Demonstration program and its 48 aircraft, as well as support and infrastructure costs.

A defense ministry spokesman said "our plan to buy 138 F-35 jets over the life of the program has not changed, with only the U.S. planning to buy more aircraft."

Britain plans to take delivery of its 14th aircraft by year's end. It will then receive three additional aircraft in 2018 and a single aircraft in 2019. Britain wants to purchase 17 aircraft in Lockheed Martin's anticipated three-year block buy, and a further 13 in a second two-year-long block buy as part of Low-Rate Initial Production (LRIP) batches 15 and 16.

The uncertainty over F-35 numbers emerges as the defense ministry braces itself for a reappraisal of the decisions made during the SDSR. The assessment, announced by the Cabinet Office in July, is being conducted by Mark Sedwill, Britain's national security advisor, and is expected to result in additional defense cuts to try to close an independently estimated £20 billion black hole in the ministry's finances.

One of the primary causes for the gap was the shock fluctuations in the strength of the British pound, particularly against the U.S. dollar, following the UK's decision to exit the European Union. The pound's weakness has increased the cost of equipment purchased from the U.S. by up to 15-20%. With the F-35 now the second largest procurement program in the defense ministry after the renewal of the nuclear deterrent, the uncertainty around foreign exchange rates is likely to be a factor in any future purchases.

But officials also hinted again that the UK could be looking to purchase a mix of F-35 variants for future requirements, with Poffley saying that "judgment [on future fleet mix] will be taken later."

For now, it seems the F-35 fleet will be focused on the UK's carrier strike capability, with the formation of two frontline squadrons of 12 aircraft and an operational conversion unit for training.

"For carrier strike to be viable the carrier should operate two squadrons," Poffley said. The first of Britain's new aircraft carriers, on which the F-35 will embark, is due to be commissioned by the queen into Royal Navy service on Dec. 7.