

Canadian Defense Official F-35s Part Of “Crusade” With U.S., NATO

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Strong, vocal opposition at home will not dissuade the Canadian government from plans to buy the F-35 joint strike fighter, a senior government minister told Fort Worth business leaders Tuesday.

The F-35 is important to Canada, said Julian Fantino, associate minister for defense, not only for its future air defense and military operations, but also for the economic benefits to the country's aerospace industry.

Canada has been a development partner since the earliest days of the F-35 program, but Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government continues to draw stinging criticism for its commitment to buy 65 F-35s to replace the country's fleet of aging CF-18 Hornets.

The F-35 has its American critics too. Sen. John McCain, the top Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, has been particularly displeased with the program, which is billions of dollars over budget and behind schedule. But the level of stridency appears higher north of the border.

Scarcely a day goes by in Canada without an opposition politician, news columnist or other critic questioning the wisdom and cost of the high-tech fighter being developed by Lockheed Martin in Fort Worth.

Fantino, who heads military procurement for the Harper government, said opponents were fueled “by a lot of misinformation, miscommunication, and some jealousy,” the latter a reference to supporters of Boeing, which would like to sell Canada its F/A-18 Super Hornet.

“We will purchase the F-35,” Fantino asserted. “We’re on record. We’re part of the crusade. We’re not backing down.”

Last year, the Harper government committed to spending an estimated \$9 billion on 65 F-35s and \$17 billion or more counting long-term outlays. That decision was one bone of contention that resulted in the Parliament's no-confidence vote against Harper in March, leading to a new election in which his Conservative party won an outright majority.

Ottawa has not ordered any aircraft.

Canada needs the F-35, Fantino said, so that it can not only defend its own territory but also work more closely with the militaries of the U.S. and other allies. One of the key sales pitches for the F-35 is that the planes bought by U.S. and foreign nations will have the same

electronic warfare and communications systems for instantly sharing intelligence and surveillance data.

Citing remarks by Harper, Fantino said “there is no threat to the U.S. that is not also a threat to Canada.”

Fantino was in Fort Worth to meet with Lockheed Martin officials and get a first-hand look at the production line. The luncheon with businesspeople at the Fort Worth Club was sponsored by Heroux Devtek, a Canadian aerospace components manufacturer which owns Progressive Inc., a south Arlington machine shop that produces bulkheads for the F-35.

Numerous other Canadian companies have a hand in producing F-35 components, “and production of the global fleet will provide many more opportunities for Canadian industry,” Fantino said.

After touring the Lockheed assembly line, Fantino said critics can no longer say the F-35 “is a phantom plane. It’s here. It’s rolling off the assembly line.”

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