

F-35 Readiness Rates Get in Way of NATO War Planning

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Last year, NATO officially declared that Russia is its primary adversary, [officially restarting the Cold War](#). Since then, the belligerent alliance's war machine has started revamping its strategic posturing towards Moscow, [but after decades of numerous wars of aggression against relatively helpless opponents](#), NATO's conventional fighting capabilities have atrophied significantly. This seems to be affecting all branches of major NATO militaries, including their air forces, particularly those operating the deeply troubled F-35 JSF (Joint Strike Fighter), a pan-Western effort to unify all NATO and NATO-aligned countries into "a well-oiled joint fighting force with near flawless coordination and battlefield information sharing". At least that was the original idea.

However, the reality is much different. Publicly, the Pentagon is quite happy with "the best fighter jet ever made". Privately, the situation is starkly different. For at least a decade, [numerous reports on the F-35's countless flaws](#) have turned out to be not only true, but even overoptimistic, as the actual scale of issues plaguing the program is much worse. This has resulted in repeated delays in deliveries, as well as serious issues with modernization efforts. By the time many of the reported issues are resolved, the US Air Force already has new mission requirements that essentially nullify all the previous work and force the developers "back to the drawing board". In short, the F-35 has proven to be unable to adapt to new threats despite being devised (and marketed) to do exactly that.

[According to various sources](#), over 900 F-35s have been completed and delivered by April this year, but the fleet is still suffering from much of the same issues as when the jet was inducted into service nearly a decade ago. A plethora of maintenance issues and performance defects are causing disastrous availability rates. Back in February, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) revealed that the F-35 fleet not only failed to meet the requirements for improving readiness, but has even managed to make them a lot worse than in previous years. Availability rates for both the conventional F-35A and STOVL (short take-off, vertical landing) F-35B fell by 11% in 2022, with only the naval F-35C variant

making small improvements in this category.

“Between 2021 and 2022, F-35As’ availability fell by 11 percentage points, from 65 to 54”, CBO stated in a report, adding: “F-35Bs’ availability also fell, by 7 percentage points, from 61 to 54, while F-35Cs’ availability rose by 5 percentage points to 58.”

And yet, even these reports turned out to be overoptimistic as [Lockheed Martin once again resorted to using semantics](#) to make the performance of its products seem better than they actually are. [According to Bloomberg](#), the percentage of F-35s capable of flying any mission at any given moment, otherwise known as full mission-capable rates, was just over 29%, manager of the program Air Force Lieutenant General Michael Schmidt said in written testimony for the March 29 hearing of the House Armed Service Committee’s aviation subcommittee. [This is nearly 10% less than the full mission-capable readiness in 2020](#), which stood at 39% at the time. Such a drop effectively nullified possible advantages provided by deliveries of new jets.

“This is unacceptable and maximizing readiness is my top priority,” Schmidt said in his prepared remarks, adding: “[Our] goal is to increase readiness rates by at least 10% in the next 12 months.”

This is just the latest in a series of now well over a hundred scathing reports issued over the years by both military and civilian US officials. As there are currently close to 540 F-35s in service with the US military, the latest readiness figures indicate that no more than 160 are fully mission-capable, meaning it’s among the very lowest, [“bested” only by the F-22 “Raptor” jets](#) and the atrociously maintenance-heavy B-2 strategic bombers. Ironically, F-35s were designed to have low maintenance requirements and operational costs to replace F-16s and A-10s for USAF, F-18s for USN (Navy) and AV-8Bs for USMC (Marines). The jet’s many issues resulted in a spending “death spiral”, [as the program’s overall cost is getting ever closer to the staggering \\$2 trillion](#).

A major issue with the F-35 is its [troubled F135 engine prone to overheating](#), resulting in issues with its ability to fly supersonic, a feat considered standard practice for fighter jets ever since WWII. Defense Secretary under the Trump administration, Christopher C. Miller, was so frustrated with the jet that he referred to it as “a monster” and [“a piece of... \(well, you get the idea\)”](#). Even the late John McCain, well known for anything but enmity towards the US MIC (Military Industrial Complex), called it “a textbook example of our broken defense acquisition system”, stating in one of his Senate briefings that “the F-35 program’s record has been both a scandal and a tragedy with respect to cost, schedule and performance”.

US vassals and satellite states have also found numerous issues with the F-35. For instance, during 18 months of operational testing (from January 2021 to June 2022), [South Korea reported findings about nearly 250 critical flaws](#) in the jets it acquired from the US in 2019. As late as December, [Israel \(one of the first F-35 operators\) had to ground its entire fleet](#) during preparations for a possible war with Iran. Others, such as Japan and the UK, have also suffered similar issues, even resulting in crashes and deaths. However, while the F-35 has certainly been a disaster, it might prove to be a major contributor to improving global security, as [diminishing the political West’s ability to wage war is by far the best way to preserve peace across the world](#).

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