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BRIEFS

The F-22 Program in Retrospect

August 9, 2009 | **Barry Watts**

Resources: Forces & Capabilities

It now appears likely that F-22 production will end with a procurement of 187 Raptors, of which 179 will be operational aircraft. The crucial moment came on July 21st, 2009, when the full Senate voted fifty-eight to forty to strip the \$1.75 billion Senate defense authorizers had added to the Fiscal Year (FY) 2010 defense bill to keep F-22 in production. This vote came in the wake of intense lobbying by defense secretary Robert Gates and a veto threat from the White House should Congress continue F-22 production beyond FY 2009. In light of these developments, now seems as good a time as any to look back and try to take stock of the F-22 program. Are there any lessons to be learned, and where, if anywhere, is the program likely to go from here?

This paper first reviews the F-22 acquisition program, focusing on the cost increases and schedule slippages that, over time, led to the buy quantity to drop from 750 to 187. It is now almost certain that the US buy will end at 187 F-22s, of which around 130 will be combatcoded.

This procurement quantity has been determined more by budget constraints on the F-22 program than by operational requirements. This means that the Defense Department is, in effect, accepting high risk to its future ability to achieve the rapid air dominance that has been central to the American way of war since the Korean conflict.

The main sources of this risk stem from emerging anti-access/area-denial capabilities that, in the case of the People's Republic of China, include ballistic missiles capable of delivering conventional warheads and submunitions accurately against forward US airbases such as Kadena on Okinawa, thereby forcing US forces to operate from as far east as Guam.

Further, on the area-denial side of this growing challenge to US power projection, Russia's commitment to developing and selling abroad surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems such as the S-300 and S-400 argues that US-PRC and US-Russia conflicts are not the only future scenarios in which US air dominance could be seriously challenged. The ability of anyone to forecast US requirements for air superiority as far out into the future as the F-22 is likely to remain in service is limited at best. The fact is that proliferation of S-300 SAMs is already well underway and foreign sales of Su-35s and S-400s to any country with the cash to buy them are probably just a matter of time.