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Japan F-35 Buy Is No Surprise

Since the 1950s they've sold us Toyotas, and we've sold them fighters

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Defense - Fall



Written by: [Eric Tegler](#) on January 28, 2012

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The selection of Lockheed Martin's F-35 Joint Strike Fighter by Japan's Ministry of Defense was a boon to the program and a continuation of a Japanese tradition of buying fighter aircraft from United States companies. Lockheed Martin rendering

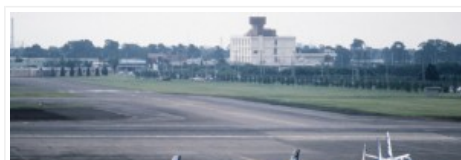
As the 1980s German synthpop band Alphaville proclaimed in their hit single, "Things are easy when you're big in Japan."

American fighter aircraft are just that. On Dec. 20, 2011 Japan's [Ministry of Defense](#) announced its selection of the [F-35 Joint Strike Fighter](#) as the next generation fighter to meet the needs of the [Japan Air Self-Defense Force](#) (JASDF). The announcement was a shot in the arm for the beleaguered [JSF](#) program, but not a surprise.

“Since World War II, the U.S. has exported technology of all kinds to Japan, and vice-versa. Toyota sold its first car in the U.S. – a Toyopet Crown – in 1958, beginning a tidal wave of sales. Often overlooked has been the large-scale purchase, license-production and employment of American fighters in Japan, which began two years before that first Toyopet left the dealership.

Though the terms of the Armistice Agreement signed aboard the USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay in September 1945 prohibited Japanese aerial activity, including aircraft manufacturing, the swiftly changing geostrategic climate resulted in the establishment of

the Japan Self Defense Force in 1952. The Japan Air Self Defense Force (JASDF) was formed on July 1, 1954, and under American tutelage a flight training school stood up at Hamamatsu Air Base with 25 Beech T-34



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Mentors in December 1954.

Jet training began the following year in Lockheed T-33As. The initial advanced training classes graduated to jet fighter conversion both in Japan and in Nevada, taking the controls of the Japan's first post-War fighter, the North American F-86F Sabre.

The first operational wing of JASDF F-86Fs was established at Hamamatsu in 1956, with 70 Sabres on the flightline. Two additional F-86F wings were formed in 1957 at Chitose and Matsushima Air Bases, with a fourth wing added in 1959. All-weather F-86Ds were adopted by the JASDF in the same period, with 60 having been delivered by the end of 1958.



The Japan Air Self Defense Force's (JASDF) flight demonstration team, Blue Impulse, taxi their F-86F Sabre aircraft out during the annual Japanese-American Friendship Festival at Yokota Air Base, Japan, Jan. 1, 1981. U.S. Air Force photo

Japan was actually the third Asian Sabre operator after Taiwan and South Korea, but acquired the aircraft in larger numbers than any other foreign air force. Japanese and Asian orders for the fighter convinced the USAF to reinstate Sabre production in 1955 with the new F-86F-40 which enjoyed extended wing tips and leading-edge slats. The first batch of this improved Sabre was shipped to Japan via Sacramento in 1956.



A Lockheed Martin F-104J Starfighter of the Japanese Air Self Defense Force (JASDF) in flight with a target sleeve during a training exercise in 1983. The Japanese F-104J were manufactured by Lockheed Martin but assembled by Mitsubishi. U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Steve McGill

Even before the first F-86s were delivered, plans were made for the resumption of indigenous aircraft production with the acquisition of manufacturing licenses from American aerospace firms. Mitsubishi, maker of the iconic A6M Zero, got the North American license for the Sabre, completing its first F-86 in 1956. By 1960 Mitsubishi would turn out some 300 Sabres, firmly establishing a tradition.

The JASDF operated the F-86 through the early 1970s, its "Blue Impulse" jet aerobatic team keeping the Sabre in business until 1982. In the early 1960s the Japanese Defense Ministry was already considering its next fighter option. At the time, Lockheed was looking for potential customers for its

redesigned F-104. Europe was a likely target, but the JASDF's interceptor needs matched well with the 104, which Lockheed realized would sell most readily under license arrangements.

The company built a Starfighter for Japan largely similar to the F-104G, optimized for air defense. The first three F-104Js were assembled in the spring of 1961 and flew in June. They were then disassembled, shipped to Japan and reassembled by Mitsubishi. The first units to get the Starfighter were the 201st and 202nd squadrons at Chitose and Nyutabaru, commencing operations in 1962. Some 210 F-104s were manufactured by both Mitsubishi and Kawasaki as the single-seat 104J and two-seat F-104DJ. They remained in JASDF service through 1986.

Its air defense needs unabated, the JASDF continued to look to the U.S. for fighter aircraft in the mid-1960s. With its range, power and radar, the F-4 Phantom was a natural choice. Its selection was announced in 1968 and, as Lockheed had done, McDonnell Douglas built the first two prototype F-4EJs, disassembled them and shipped them for reassembly in Japan.



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Following initial deliveries in 1971, Mitsubishi undertook production of the F-4EJ and the reconnaissance RF-4EJ. The 7th Air Wing was the first to equip with the Phantom, standing up at Hyakuri Air Base in August 1972. Ultimately, the JASDF would field 154 Phantoms (140 F-4EJs, 14 RF-4EJs) acquired in small batches through the 1980s. Updates kept the F-4 viable through the 1990s, and two squadrons of F-4EJs remain in service today with a few RF-4EJs still operational.

A Japanese Air Self Defense Force (JASDF) F-4EJ Phantom II aircraft of the 301st Hikotai takes off during the joint U.S./Japan exercise Cope North 85-4. Below is a Japanese Lockheed T-33 aircraft. DoD photo by Staff Sgt. James R. Ferguson

Involvement with the Sabre, Starfighter and Phantom gave the Japanese aerospace industry enough experience to embark on its own fighter, the Mitsubishi F-1, which debuted in 1971. While the F-1 proved successful, Japan continued to rely on U.S. designs for the backbone of its fleet. Next up was the McDonnell Douglas F-15 Eagle.

The F-15 was one of 13 candidates to replace the F-104/F-4, and despite initial technology transfer limitations, was selected by Japan's Ministry of Defense in 1975. Dubbed the



A Japan Air Self Defense Force F-15DJ in flight, as viewed from the boom operator position of a U.S. Air Force KC-135 from the 909th Air Refueling Squadron, Kadena Air Base, after being refueled during air refueling training July 30, 2009. U.S. Air Force photo by Angelique Perez

“Peace Eagle” the F-15J/F-15DJ were essentially export versions of the F-15C/D. McDonnell built the first two F-15Js and 12 F-15DJs, with most of the early aircraft manufactured in large components and shipped to Japan. Mitsubishi would again handle assembly and go on to produce the remainder of the 203 Peace Eagles acquired.

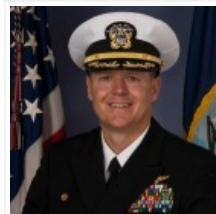
The first F-15J/DJs joined the 23rd Flying Training Squadron at Nyutabaru in late 1982. Subsequently, Eagles began replacing F-104s at Chitose beginning in 1984. Engine and weapons systems upgrades have kept the F-15J/DJs effective, and they equip seven front line squadrons and other units including an aggressor squadron.

Finally, while not an American fighter design per se, the F-16-based F-2 was introduced into JASDF service in 2000. Having grown out of the “big-wing” F-16 Agile Falcon proposal, the F-2 has a higher proportion of Japanese weapons and other systems. Approximately 75 are in service and up to 94 may be acquired.

With its F-35 announcement, Japan becomes the second FMS buyer for the [Lightning II](#) following Israel. The acquisition proves the America's fighters are still big in Japan, and it's certainly a big deal for the JSF program.

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