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US planners prepare air war on China

By Peter Symonds

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A report published this month by the US-based Mitchell Institute has provided details of US Air Force (USAF) plans to use sophisticated “fifth generation” stealth aircraft in combat operations in an all-out war with China. These preparations are part of a far broader US military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific that envisages the basing of 60 percent of warships and aircraft in the region by 2020.

The authors of the report are serving USAF officers directly engaged in strategic planning, including for the deployment of “fifth generation” aircraft, particularly the F-22 Raptor and different versions of the F-35. Major General Jeff HARRIGAN currently heads the Air Force F-35A Integration Office at the Pentagon, having previously served as assistant deputy chief of staff for operations. Colonel Max Marosko, a F-22 pilot, is the deputy director of air and cyberspace operations at Pacific Command in Hawaii.

The report entitled, “Fifth Generation Air Combat: Maintaining the Joint Force Advantage,” declares that these aircraft are “a key element in US power projection in the 21st Century.” The F-22 and F-35 are designed to not only evade detection but “provide situational awareness of a conflict that is unparalleled in modern war, and lethal tools that enable both aircraft and capabilities in other domains to perform at a higher level.”

The war planes are packed with sensors and advanced electronics that provide greater “situational awareness” to their pilots, and to those of less-advanced fourth generation aircraft. The F-22 and F-35 are also able to jam or confuse enemy defence systems, enabling them to operate effectively “in highly contested combat environments, defined by the presence of the most capable current air and ground threats, and those reasonably expected to be operational in the foreseeable future.”

Air Combat Command chief General Herbert “Hawk” Carlisle declared last year that the F-22, which became operational a decade ago, “has even exceeded our expectations.” He boasted that the fifth generation aircraft gave the US “the asymmetric advantage we need to win our nation’s wars.”

In July 2013, *Foreign Policy* reported Carlisle’s plans for a huge build-up of US war planes and personnel throughout Asia, including in northern Australia, “Changi East air base in Singapore, Korat air base in Thailand, a site in India and possibly bases at Kubi Point and Puerto Princesa in the Philippines, in Indonesia and Malaysia.” The article also pointed out that old World War II bases in the Pacific, such as on Tinian Island in the North Marianas, were in the process of refurbishment.

Carlisle said the Air Force would “rotate” its “most capable platforms” into the Pacific, including F-22s, F-35s and B-2 stealth bombers. He noted that the first permanent deployment base for the F-35 would be in Asia.

The Mitchell Institute report spells out in greater detail how the fifth generation war planes will be deployed and used in combat. While China is not named, no one is in any doubt that it would be the chief enemy. In a section entitled, “Seizing the Advantage,” the report outlines a war scenario set in 2026, in which F-22s and F-35s would be rapidly dispersed to “numerous military and civilian airfields” throughout the region so that the enemy is unable to deliver a “knock-out” blow.

“As combat operations begin, US military fifth generation aircraft, along with F-35s from coalition countries effectively integrate and collaborate in the opening phase of operations,” the report explains. “[F]ighting focuses on the battle for air superiority as aircraft from both sides clash over contested territory ... As the operations continue, it becomes apparent stealth aircraft like the F-22, F-35, B-2 and B-21 are the only aircraft capable of operating over the contested territory in the conflict due to the large number of adversary mobile advanced Surface to Air (SAMs) deployed ...

“As the conflict continues, fifth generation aircraft seek out, degrade and destroy SAMs in contested territory, creating a more moderate threat environment. This enables legacy [older] aircraft to operate alongside their fifth generation counterparts. The mature integration and full operational capacities of fourth and fifth generation aircraft working together proves the turning point in the conflict.”

The scenario makes clear the critical role of allies and strategic partners in the Asia Pacific, not only to provide access to air bases and ground support for the USAF, but also in the case of countries like Australia and Japan, to join the US in carrying out combat operations with their own fifth generation war plans. The report as a whole stresses the need for the close integration and “interoperability” of the US and its allies, including regular war games to ensure their militaries can function seamlessly together.

The report highlights the key role of northern Australian airfields in providing a relatively secure rear base to maintain and repair fifth generation aircraft. Its scenario declares: “In one instance, a USAF F-35 is forced to recover at an Australian F-35 airbase after an inflight malfunction makes it impossible to return to its original deployment location. Royal Australian Air Force maintenance technicians are able to quickly repair, rearm, and refuel the USAF F-35 in a manner similar to US maintenance and regeneration practices. The F-35 in question rejoins combat operations the next day.”

The scenario outlined is for nothing less than a massive air attack on the Chinese mainland, spearheaded by stealth war planes, and operating in intimate collaboration with allies like Australia. A relentless air assault is one component of the Pentagon’s AirSea Battle strategy for fighting a war with China. The air attacks would be complemented by missiles fired from bases, warships and submarines based off the Chinese mainland with the aim of destroying much of the Chinese military, communications, command centres and key industrial sites. AirSea Battle also envisages a naval blockade designed to cripple the Chinese economy.

The Mitchell Institute report underscores the advanced nature of US preparations for war with China. While the scenario is set a decade ahead, many of the measures advocated by the report—joint training, access to numerous airfields, the stationing of advanced aircraft, warships and submarines in the Asia Pacific—are already well advanced. Having immeasurably heightened tensions throughout the region over the past six years, the US determined to be able to take advantage of any incident in the regional flashpoints, which it has deliberately inflamed, to advance its aims of subordinating China to American interests.