

Raptor Roulette

"None of the funds in this act may be used to approve or license the sale of the F-22A advanced tactical fighter to any foreign government."

Those 26 words, known to all as the "Obey amendment," for a decade have guided US export policy for the F-22 Raptor. Named for Rep. David R. Obey (D-Wis.), the amendment, in one version or another, has appeared in every Defense Department appropriations act since 1998.

The ban is not necessarily permanent. Obey himself said in 2006, "Times may have changed, but I don't know that we are yet at the point that would justify removing these limitations."

This is not an academic debate. Australia, Japan, and Israel have expressed interest in buying the Raptor, and the possible end of the fighter's production run will inevitably increase calls to keep the F-22 line open.

Asked about Australia's interest, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates said DOD officials "in principle have no objection to it," but, until the statute is changed, "we are not able to sell it to any country."

Raptor exports would improve the security of allies, increase US interoperability with friendly air forces, foster long-term military relationships, protect American jobs, keep open a vital fifth generation fighter production line, and reduce the cost of F-22s procured by USAF itself.

However, the Raptor is not like other fighters; a major, asymmetric US advantage could be lost if global malefactors ever laid hands on F-22 engine, avionics, or stealth technologies. Obey cites this danger as justification for the ban. Critics say his real goal is to hasten the end of the F-22 program.

Then there is the case of Iran's F-14s, the sine qua non of fighter export problems. The US sold top-of-the-line Tomcats to Tehran shortly before the 1979 Islamic revolution toppled the Shah and, with him, the US-Iran military relationship.

Venezuela—a belligerent pro-Communist dictatorship under Hugo Chavez—still flies F-16s it purchased in 1982.

It is hard to imagine a similar fate befalling Japan, Israel, or Australia, but a government does not have to fall for technology to spread. Business deals based on offsets and co-production can send high technology directly to customers. Many US allies have been accused of surreptitiously re-exporting military technology.

By itself, the existence of advanced technology is not a definitive reason to block export of a particular weapon. One of the highest profile fighter sales in recent years was the sale to the United Arab Emirates of Block 60 F-16s, fighters far more advanced than any F-16 currently flown by the US Air Force.

Japan clearly can afford F-22s, and has long flown F-15s. Japan, however, prefers co-production arrangements that, almost by definition, bring about a transfer of technology and, if Tokyo succeeds in acquiring the F-22, Washington might find it politically difficult to deny the Raptor to South Korea and perhaps Taiwan.

Australia is planning to purchase both the F/A-18 Super Hornet and the F-35, but top government officials also express interest in the F-22. "I intend to pursue American politicians for access to the Raptor," Defense Minister Joel Fitzgibbon recently said. "I want it to be part of the mix."

Israel already flies US-built F-15 and F-16 fighters, and clearly needs to maintain advanced air capabilities. Israel's track record



A South Korean F-15K (top) and an Iranian F-14: the good and the bad of fighter exports.

on tech transfers, however, has been less than sterling. Moreover, the US might have to "balance" Raptor sales to Jerusalem with comparable sales to Saudi Arabia or the UAE.

Simply put, any F-22 sale at all may throw open the door for many more. Still, policy-makers should focus on two facts:

First, the Iran and Venezuela mistakes happened some three decades ago and haven't been repeated.

Second, the actual sale is not the true end of the story.

One analyst, USAF Col. Matthew H. Molloy, in 2000 called attention to a "maintenance hedge," a degree of residual control that exists even after fighters are exported. This hedge, he said, "was so effective against Iran that their most capable air defense interceptor [the F-14] became a white elephant after US support was terminated." He went on, "When Venezuela bought [F-16s] without a viable maintenance or training program, the aircraft were reduced to symbolic functions only."

Sales of "off-the-shelf" F-22s are highly unlikely: Raptors would be modified prior to export to protect American secrets. Because of the strictures of the Obey amendment, though, the Air Force can't study what modifications are needed, how much they cost, or how long they would take.

"We're in a position where we take no action until authorized because there's a specific prohibition," said Lt. Gen. Mark D. Shackelford, the Air Force's top uniformed acquisition officer. USAF therefore takes no position on whether the F-22 should be exported.

Inability to perform preparatory studies is significant because "the F-22 was not built with foreign military sales in mind," Shackelford said. If legislative approval is granted, the Air Force would work with Lockheed Martin to determine the changes needed to make the F-22 exportable. Such design studies and modifications could cost a billion dollars.

F-22 exports should be decided on their merits—whether they would improve overall US national security. Time is running out to make that determination, however. Unless the new Administration decides to continue production, the last Raptor will be delivered at the end of 2011. ■

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