

By Dr Carlo Kopp

MELBOURNE – Defence plans to halve RAAF combat fleet strike capabilities over the next decade are likely to drive Australia down to parity with nations in the near region. The intent to downsize the RAAF by taking the F-111s out of service coincides with regional plans to grow strike capabilities by acquiring large Russian Su-27 and Su-30 strike fighters.

Malaysia has signed for 18 Su-30MKMs and Indonesia would like to buy about 50 over the next decade, while India has 180 SU-30MKIs on order and China aims to acquire up to 500 Sukhois.

The Sukhoi Su-30MK is the most capable strike fighter in the market, other than the Boeing F-15E, used now by the US Air Force as an F-111 substitute.

With 22,000 lb of internal fuel and a very clean air frame shape, the Sukhoi can strike out to 700 or more nautical miles without refuelling, or much further with buddy

refuelling or a tanker.

The Russians are using the Sukhoi as a delivery platform as well as a marketing vehicle for a wide range of smart air-ground and anti-shipping munitions.

In guided bombs, the Sukhois can carry KAB-500 1,000 lb series and KAB-1500 3,000 lb series weapons. Up to six of the smaller or three of the large weapons can be carried using tandem centreline, in let and wing stations.

The KAB-500L and KAB-1500L use laser seekers similar to the RAAF's GBU-10/12/16 Paveway. The KAB-500Kr and KAB-1500Kr use a television seeker similar to the AGM-65 Maverick or GBU-8 HOBOS.

The KAB-1500TK is the "Russian GBU-15" radio datalink guided bomb. KAB-500/1500 warheads include blast, fragmentation, buster busting and fuel air types.

These weapons will provide similar

capabilities to the RAAF's laser guided weapons, the planned JDAM, and US Air Force GBU-15 series.

China has ordered the Kh-59M series stand-off missile which is the "Russian AGM-142 SOW" with TV/IR seeker, and an APK-9 Tekon datalink pod. The Sukhoi, like an F-111 or F-15E, carries a pair of stand-off missiles.

China is also reported to have bought variants of the Kh-31R series ramjet anti-radiation missile; the Sukhois carry up to six of these Mach 3+ missiles.

For battle field strike, the Sukhois can carry up to six Kh-29T/L missiles, Russian analogues to the TV and laser guided AGM-65 Mavericks. In longer ranging stand-off missiles, the supersonic Kh-41 Sunburn and Kh-61 Yakhont are also on offer.

To page 4

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(Continued): India is now licence-building an advanced Yakhont variant as the PJ-10 Brahmos. With ranges between 100 and 200 nautical miles and Mach 2+ low altitude terminal flight, both of these missiles are extremely difficult to intercept with SAMs. With large war heads and fire-and-forget guidance, they add significant punch. The Tomahawk-like 3M-54E and land attack 3M-14E have been advertised but no sales reported yet.

Russia's industry produces direct analogues for most US, EU and Israeli guided weapons – a formidable arsenal for any Sukhoi operator. As deployment of many of these weapons in the near region involves only a software patch and a training package, warning times

to operational capability could be less than two years.

Why does this matter strategically? The downsizing plan for the RAAF vs growing regional Sukhoi inventories are trends running in opposite directions. Once the F-111 is killed we could soon see the aggregate throw weight of our nearest regional neighbours equal to that of the RAAF.

Until now Australia has owned most of the throw weight in the region – this will change dramatically by 2010. If Australia wishes to maintain the throw weight advantage it has held to date, the gap to be covered against regional nations must be added to the gap in future RAAF capabilities.

In terms of relative strategic effect, factoring in intended Sukhoi

buys, the retirement of the F-111 amounts to a relative throw weight reduction much greater than 50 percent.

But there is another danger. If Sukhois are used asymmetrically to threaten high value targets in the North-West, then defensive combat air patrols would require the use of the RAAF's tanker force, effectively as sets driving the RAAF's long range strike down to zero.

In strategic terms the loss of the F-111 opens up a range of high-risk regional scenarios which Australia has never had to contemplate – and evidently Defence did not bother contemplating. One must again wonder whether Federal Cabinet know exactly what they were sold with the F-111 retirement idea.

Newbie Orions win Fincastle

EDINBURGH – The Royal Australian Air Force's AP-3 subhunters defeated an international field to win the Fincastle trophy, in a competition off the coast of WA.

Fincastle is an annual ASW competition held between the Maritime Patrol Squadrons of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

Chief of Air Force Air Marshal Angus Houston presented the trophy to Crew 5, 10 Squadron.

The competition saw the debut of the AP-3Cs and highlights its excellent performance since the aircraft's recent upgrade, as demonstrated in Operation Catalyst in the Middle East and operations off the North coast of Australia.

Australia has won the FINCASTLE trophy 13 times though the RAF won it last year.

Elbit, ADI team on TUAV

HAIFA – Elbit Systems has signed a teaming agreement with ADI to bid for the Australian Department of Defence's JP 129 contract for tactical unmanned airborne vehicles (TUAV).

Elbit Systems with a range of proven TUAVs of various sizes and different capabilities, using a common ground control and data management, is proposing its Hermes UAVs and ground control stations.

ADI will integrate the TUAV system into the Australian operational environment.

Contract trickle from JSF

CANBERRA – Three more JSF contracts have dribbled out to Australian companies. This brings to nine the JSF contracts won by seven Australian companies.

Micreo, of Brisbane, won a JSF electronic warfare missions systems sub-contract. The contract is with BAE Systems for the design, development and qualification testing of two sub-assemblies to be used on the electronic warfare system.

Ferra Engineering and Production Parts will receive 40 per cent of the work packages in the Northrop Grumman tender. These are the second contracts won by these two.

Ferra Engineering employs 110 in Brisbane. Production Parts is a small Melbourne firm



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