

COMMENTARY

F-35s for Finland: Bolstering Deterrence and the Transatlantic Link

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Finland's decision to procure F-35 fighter jets from the US will strengthen transatlantic defence cooperation and provide enhanced deterrence capabilities in Northern Europe.

In December 2021, the government of Finland announced that it would procure 64 F-35A fighter jets from the US over a period from 2025 until 2030 to replace the fleet of F/A-18 Hornets currently in service with the Finnish Air Force (FAF). At a total cost of €9.4 billion, this is the largest single procurement in Finnish history and one of the larger military procurements in Europe in recent years. Having approved the procurement process, confirmed by all bidders to have been fair and – capability wise – extremely demanding, successive Finnish governments respected the process and formally selected the plane proposed by the experts. Holding a call to discuss broader security tensions in Northern Europe with Finnish President Sauli Niinistö soon after the announcement, US President Joe Biden welcomed the F-35 deal, **stating that it** ‘would provide a strong foundation for even closer bilateral defence ties for years to come’. The F-35 deal is another important benchmark in the development of Finland’s transatlantic security link following its selection of the F/A-18 in 1992.

Transatlantic Engagement

This is the third time that Finland has procured US military aircraft. The first, a significant historical event in itself, came in 1939, when the US administration of Franklin D Roosevelt gave its permission to Finland to purchase Brewster Buffalos, which were used to great effect during the Second World War. Finland ‘split bought’ fleets from East and West due to its neutrality and geopolitical constraints during the Cold War, with the FAF owning aircraft produced in the UK, the Soviet Union and Sweden. The procurement of the F/A-18 in 1992 was therefore a landmark decision because, while made based on performance, it reopened direct military to military ties with the US. However, while Washington was willing to sell modern fighter jets, doubts lingered about Finland’s military alignment as the country made it clear that it had no intention of seeking NATO membership, even as it shed its neutrality with EU membership in 1995.

These doubts are now a distant memory thanks to the strong military partnerships that Helsinki has forged with the US and NATO over the intervening years. This enhanced trust is perhaps **best illustrated** by US permission given in 2012 for Finland’s purchase of AGM-158 JASSM air-to-surface missiles, its top air-to-ground weapon at this time, and prior to Finland, only sold to Australia. The capabilities offered by JASSM are fully independently useable by Finland, and it forms a core part of Finland’s long-range strike capability, creating strong military deterrence. On the defence policy side, Finland and the US signed a ‘Statement of Intent’ in 2016, which has enabled even deeper structured cooperation between the two countries.

“ Policymakers and commentators in the region have welcomed Finland's decision, perceiving it as further strengthening deterrence against Russian aggression and reinforcing the transatlantic security link

While the increasingly strong bilateral defence relationship with the US formed one component in Finland’s evaluation this time around, it was capabilities contributing to Finland’s wider defence system that again mattered most. With the procurement designed to meet Finland’s defence requirements **until at least 2060**, this Hx-acquisition programme had **four main criteria**: capability; operating and lifetime costs; industrial participation and the security of supply this would bring; and security and defence policy impacts. Five fighter jet models made the final shortlist: the Boeing F/A-18 Super Hornet and its Growler electronic attack version; the Dassault Rafale; the Eurofighter Typhoon; the Lockheed Martin F-35; and the Saab Gripen E. At the end of a unique multi-stage negotiation process, each manufacturer was invited to make a bid and final offer in spring 2021. The F-35 scored significantly better than any of the competitors in the capability evaluation, which included a number of war games and simulations (4.47 out of a required 4, with the next best package achieving 3.81), and, to the surprise of many, it also scored well on costs. The F-35’s strong ‘situational awareness’; its sharing of targeting data with other military systems; its stealth characteristics; and its sensors **all impressed** Finland’s evaluators.

Regional Benefits

The deal’s industrial cooperation agreement will see the F-35 programme establish a strong manufacturing and maintenance presence in Finland, strengthening security of supply while creating other economic benefits. A prominent place in the F-35’s industrial development network will further integrate Finland’s security with that of other Nordic (Denmark and Norway) and NATO states using the aircraft. The Finnish economy’s advanced strengths in electromagnetic and software technology **are now expected** to play a key role in the F-35’s future development. Despite many advantages, Finland’s procurement decision did bring some disappointment in the Nordic region. Saab’s **bid with the Gripen E** and Globaleye AEW&C plane was strongly supported by the Swedish government. Ever closer Finnish and Swedish defence cooperation since 2015, with joint operational plans now being a reality, was thought to further enhance the overall attractiveness of the Swedish bid.

Nevertheless, Swedish policymakers have reaffirmed that this **will not affect** Stockholm’s ‘excellent’ defence cooperation with Finland. Elsewhere in the region, Finland’s F-35 decision has received a warm welcome, with **policymakers and commentators** in neighbouring Estonia – a NATO ally – perceiving this not only as further strengthening deterrence against Russian aggression in Northern Europe, but also as a decision to further **reinforce the transatlantic security link** in the region. Most significantly, the capabilities offered by the F-35, when combined with future weapons procurement (both advanced air-to-air and very long-range air-to-ground) and deepening defence policy cooperation, will strengthen transatlantic defence cooperation and contribute to the deterrence capabilities and defence of not only Finland but Northern Europe as a whole.

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