



JAPAN'S STEALTH JET MAKES FIRST FLIGHT AS ABE BOOSTS DEFENSE

News / Manufacturer



Japan became the fourth nation to test fly its own stealth jet as Prime Minister Shinzo Abe moves ahead with plans to strengthen the military amid regional tensions.

The nation's first stealth plane took off from Nagoya airfield in central Japan around 8:50 a.m., Defense Ministry Program Manager Hirofumi Doi said by phone. The jet landed safely at Gifu Air Base in Gifu Prefecture at 9:13 a.m., Doi said.

The plane is a product of years of experience in fighter-aircraft manufacturing by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Ltd., which also made the A6M or [Zero](#), a single-seat plane which made its mark during World War II. The X-2 could become the basis for a new fighter jet to replace the F-2, which entered service in 2000 and is also manufactured by Mitsubishi Heavy, according to the defense ministry.

"If they did it themselves it would cost several times the price of buying them off the shelf," Edwin Merner, president of Atlantis Investment Research Corp. in Tokyo, said before the test flight. "It may build up their civilian business but you couldn't justify it in terms of a standalone project."

The ministry will study the flight data from Friday to make further developments to the aircraft, Doi said.

Jet Replacement

The government is due to make a decision on a replacement for the fighter jets by the end of March 2019.

If Japan decides to make a fighter-jet version of the stealth plane, its engines would be about three times the strength of those on the test version and the aircraft would need to be larger to store missiles, the ministry said in December.

The 14-meter-long (46-foot-long) X-2 is equipped with engines from IHI Corp. and cost about 40 billion yen (\$366 million) to develop, according to the ministry.

Since becoming prime minister for the second time in 2012, Abe has eased restrictions on arms exports as China increases its military power. He also succeeded in pushing through U.S.-endorsed legislation to allow Japanese troops to fight in overseas conflicts, despite concerns at home and abroad.

The U.S., Russia and China all are developing stealth jets, which have reduced visibility to infrared sensors and can cruise at supersonic speeds.

Fifth Generation

The category known as fifth-generation fighters began with the service entry of Lockheed Martin Corp.'s F-22 Raptor in 2005, according to IHS Jane's. The F-35 fighter, the Pentagon's costliest weapons program, was designated ready for limited combat operations with the Marine Corps last year.

China has already conducted flights for its first self-developed stealth fighter jet, the J-20, and its J-31 stealth plane made its debut in 2014 at China's 10th International Aviation and Aerospace Exhibition. Russia successfully tested a prototype of its fifth-generation PAK FA stealth fighter in 2010.

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