

Update: Japan presses ahead with ATD-X programme

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The Japanese Ministry of Defence (MoD) and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries will begin manufacturing the airframe of the Advanced Technology Demonstrator - X (ATD-X) fighter "very soon", the programme's manager told *Jane's* on 4 November.

"Technologically, Japan has no problems with developing stealth capabilities," said Lieutenant General Hideyuki Yoshioka, Director of Air Systems Development at the MoD's Technical Research and Development Institute (TRDI), adding: "We will build a good aircraft."



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Officials say Japan's ATD-X fighter will be airborne by FY14. (Kosuke Takahashi)

The MoD will sign a contract to manufacture airframes with Mitsubishi by the end of the year, Gen Yoshioka said. The MoD has budgeted JPY39.2 billion (USD505 million) for the project from 2009 to 2016, with a first test flight scheduled to take place in fiscal year (FY) 2014, he added.

"A maiden flight in 2014 is an absolute must ... it is vital to our nation's air defence," Gen Yoshioka said. "China and Russia will deploy the Chengdu J-20 and Sukhoi PAK-FA T-50 in the near future. We know that our 28 radar sites are effective at detecting third- and fourth-generation fighters from a long distance, but with the appearance of fifth-generation fighters we are unsure how they will perform."

The ADT-X Shinshin ('Heart of God') has been designed to be a stealthy air-superiority fighter with enhanced manoeuvrability. The MoD will use it to research advanced technologies and system integration, after which it plans to produce a sixth-generation fighter with the i3 (informed, intelligent and instantaneous) concept and counter-stealth characteristics.

This future fighter will replace the Japan Air Self-Defence Force's (JASDF's) Mitsubishi F-2: a platform that was based on the Lockheed Martin F-16C.

"The ATD-X will not immediately become Japan's next-generation fighter," said Colonel Yoshikazu Takizawa of the TRDI, "but by confirming its stealth capabilities and manoeuvrability we expect it to contribute to the F-2's successor."

Japan's plans to develop an F-3 from the ADT-X could run into opposition from the US, which has blocked Tokyo's attempts to develop an indigenous fighter in the past.

The 1980s FSX support fighter programme was blocked by Washington, which pressured Tokyo over concerns that the growth of the Japanese aviation industry could damage that of the US. Critics also played on political fears caused by Japan's large trade surplus. The pressure eventually led to the co-development of the F-2.

Lobbying for a similar outcome for a 'sixth-generation' platform has already begun. In October James Auer, a former special assistant for Japan in the Office of the Secretary of Defence, and Satoshi Morimoto, a Japanese academic specialising in international politics and national security, wrote separate opinion pieces in the *Sankei Shimbun* newspaper that urged Tokyo to co-develop a sixth-generation fighter with the US.

The political sensitivity of the issue is illustrated by the reluctance of MoD officials to publicise the benefits of domestically developing and producing the F-3, even though it estimates about 240,000 jobs would be created.

"The ATD-X will be 95 per cent domestically produced and will bring jobs to around 1,000 parts suppliers and manufacturers," said Gen Yoshioka, who added that the domestic aviation industry was underwhelmed by the licence-building element of the F-X fighter programme: the replacement for Japan's 1970s-era McDonnell Douglas F-4EJ Kai fleet.

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