
JAPAN, CHINA, RUSSIA 'RACING TO FIND CRASH JET'

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Chinese newspapers say the crash of a Japanese F-35A is a blow to Lockheed Martin as well as US arms sales, as allies and foreign militaries may reconsider the reliability of the plane, billed as the worlds most advanced stealth fighter.

The fact that an F-35A operated by the Japan Air Self-Defense Force crashed not in a genuine dogfight but during a regular training drill over the Pacific could deal a crippling blow when Washington makes a pitch for the fighter to its allies across Asia, Beijings mouthpiece the Peoples Daily and its sister publication the Global Times claimed.

Japans Defense Ministry announced on Wednesday that an F-35A stationed at the Misawa Air Base disappeared from radar the previous evening, when it was about 135 kilometers east of the northern Aomori prefecture. The jet was later confirmed to have crashed after debris from its tail fins was spotted, but the fate of the Japanese pilot remains unknown.

The F-35A, the best-selling baseline version of the series, was flying with three other jets, in two groups to perform an offense-defense exercise. The pilot was a veteran with 3,200 flight hours, and he told the other pilots before the crash that he needed to cancel the mission, about 25 minutes after taking off. The jet was equipped with an emergency ejection system, but the military said it received no sign it had been activated, indicating that the pilot may not have had adequate time to follow evacuation procedures, according to Japans state broadcaster NHK. The single-seat jet had a system that would have emitted distress signals if the pilot ejected from the cockpit with a parachute.

The crash will make countries think twice before shelling out on the expensive fighter that costs no less than \$90 million each. A Chinese military observer said countries like Singapore, which just opted to procure four F-35s over other options like Chinas ace fighter, the J-20, would have to think if they should proceed with buying a fighter that has faults. The Global Times also suggested the crash could affect the Japan-US alliance.

All militaries that have already bought the aircraft will now have to conduct thorough checks, and for the time being their planes may be grounded or put on restricted operations.

There have also been rumors that China and Russia could get hold of the F-35 wreckage first to take advantage of the Japanese militarys misfortune, given the geographical proximity of the likely crash site. Both countries are believed to be considering, or already using, submarines in an attempt to reach the aircraft. Some analysts say parts of the radar and other sensors of the

doomed fighter would be prime targets for recovery and testing for reverse engineering by China and Russia.

It has been reported that US military patrol planes and ships have been taking part in the search for the plane and pilot, and Japan Self-Defense Force chief of staff Koji Yamazaki also said the force would keep a close watch on the movement of vessels from neighboring countries. He said efforts were being made to protect information about the cutting-edge fighter.

Japans 12 remaining F-35As have now been grounded, at a time when the nation is in a process of making the F-35A the main fighter jet of its fleet, with 105 more such jets set to enter into service over the next decade.

The F-35A began service in Japan in early 2018 and the countrys first F-35A squadron was just formed last month. The crashed jet was the first one assembled in the country by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries.

This is the first time an F-35 has crashed since an F-35B, the short takeoff and vertical landing version, crashed in California in September 2018, though the pilot ejected safely. Investigators said back then that the crash was likely linked to faulty fuel tubes in the engine, and all F-35s in service in the US were subsequently pulled from missions until each was inspected for a faulty engine fuel line.

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