Canada may be stuck with the F-35 jet. But we can make smarter choices for our warships

A F-35 jet lands on the USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier during the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) military exercises about 100 miles south of Oahu, Hawaii, U.S. July 19, 2024.Marco Garcia/Reuters

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As a founding member of NATO, Canada has long viewed our defence needs and commitments to be contiguous with fellow members of the alliance, and our security has been a collective good. The U.S. has loomed largest in the coalition, and hosts the largest and most advanced defence industry in the world. It should surprise nobody that Canada has thus sourced much of its materiel from our southern neighbour.

But the U.S. can no longer be considered a reliable ally. The Trump administration clearly views its security commitments to foreign states as a protection racket, and much like gangsters, they offer no real guarantee of help in the event of actual war; indeed, they may be the very cause of the insecurity that they purport to offer protection from. Canada, along with other NATO countries, must grapple with the painful realization that the future of the alliance must not depend on U.S. security guarantees.

This may sound like hyperbole, but this thinking is both prudent and necessary. Canadian sovereignty depends on our ability to maintain defence preparedness independent of the dictates of foreign countries to the maximum possible extent. One pressing concern for Canada should be to secure a consistent supply of maintenance, spare parts, training, logistical support, data, and upgrades to any existing weapons system or platform we purchase. Ottawa should therefore think twice about future defence contracts with large American companies.

Unfortunately, we are stuck with at least 16 F-35 jets for which our country has already paid, and the dependency upon the U.S. that they will entail. We are in the process of making the same mistake in outfitting our new River-class destroyers, which will form the backbone of Canada's naval defence until well into the latter half of the century. The ships will cost $306-billion over their life cycle, making them one of the largest defence acquisitions in the country's history. While manufacturing of the warships themselves will take place domestically, the weapons systems chosen for the new class will be furnished by the Canadian subsidiary of U.S.-based Lockheed Martin and mostly built in America. But unlike with the warplanes, we can at least pivot to more reliable allied ship suppliers before it's too late – even if it requires a radical new approach to defence procurement.

Until now, successive Canadian governments have operated under the assumption that buying from U.S.-based companies was a safe – even desirable – bet. It would have previously been unthinkable that Washington

might, for example, direct major American arms companies to withhold parts, or worse, flip some kind of kill switch on their complex and proprietary software and networks to deactivate weapons entirely. But that is precisely what the U.S. did recently in Ukraine, disabling advanced HIMARS rocket launchers and briefly shutting off the flow of arms and intelligence until it ceded to American demands. Canada cannot assume the Trump administration wouldn't contemplate this to extract concessions from us, too.

Canada may have no choice but to receive the initial delivery of F-35s. This is a significant investment, and it is not recoverable; these planes will also entail continuing costs that will have to be managed. Unlike the European states that have opted to switch to European alternatives, Canada is obligated to use the F-35 for some time to come. Moreover, if we did now pivot to such alternatives, we would then need to train pilots and maintenance crews on multiple kinds of aircraft. This is costly and may not be worth the benefits, though the current government is nonetheless considering the switch.

But we do have readily available alternatives to the American-built weapons systems proposed for Canada's new River-class destroyers. When originally built, the Halifax-class frigates that the River-class ships are slated to replace had largely homegrown command and control systems (with an admixture of foreign sources weapons). Canada could always revert to this model, reviving a once world-class and globally competitive weapons industry. Alternately, Ottawa could decide to outfit the warships with weapons from more reliable partners, as the ships are a variant of a British frigate currently under construction.

The ink is barely dry on Canada's naval outfitting contract with Lockheed Martin, and there is still time to back out. No steel has yet been cut on the missiles, electronic warfare and radar suites. Penalty fees will be limited and our navy will not face the potential of Washington immobilizing us during a

crisis. Now is the time to pivot, and we hope that regardless of who forms our next government, Canadians can benefit from decisive leadership on this issue.