

Feedback from tests at Boscombe Down recently confirms that from a handling perspective at least, the F-35B is simpler to fly than the Sea Harrier. A while back, the RN test pilot took the ex-skipper of Illustrious (a submariner) for a ride, even he could land it on the ship! The 'hands-on throttle and stick' control is a delight. The software works!

Two pilots (one an ex-RAN A4 / RN transfer Sea Harrier pilot was at RAE Farnborough during the 90s comparative aircraft performance & assessment phase; the other an ex-Vixen, F4, Top Gun exchange instructor '77-'78 and Sea Harrier air warfare instructor in the 80s, inc. Falklands air defence planner/strategy on Hermes was JSF Proj Mgr at Boscombe Down until retirement in 2008) summarised the F-18E/F vs F-35B argument as: "All the right issues re. combat/strike capability, endurance, self-defence, weapons bring-back, avionics, datalinks, comms, etc., etc. were investigated in great depth, but the real differentiator was its 'you can't see me' capability.

The argument for early F-18 lease, followed by F-35B buy has merit on several grounds, e.g. skills retention, cost and UK budget re-allocation from GR4 & Typhoon support. Such an approach would also have enabled cross-deck operations with USN and French carriers from the outset and a retained capability once F-35B is at sea. This would be a useful asset.

The biggest gripe is the lack of MoD grip on the whole CVF project and the absence of any real competitive alternative to BAE Systems, to "keep them honest". From a workshare perspective, Thales designed the ship and Lockheed Martin have the ship/air interface solutions, but it wasn't enough.

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The high cost, software & engine reliability, among many other issues remain to be resolved before we can say with any certainty that we have the right aircraft for the job, if it's not too late, i.e. Europe/NATO hasn't already been found wanting in the face of expansionist ambitions from the East.

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All of which raises the much broader question of a coherent UK foreign and defence policy/strategy and the essential industrial strategy to support it. Right now, there seems to be little evidence of anything that would resemble such a description, at a time when we need it most. SDSR may be around the corner, but show me any mature serviceman who believes that current wrongs will be put right and the UK will maintain 2% GDP defence spending from 2016, I'll eat another hat!

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