



Refuelling RCAF Aircraft Post-2020

For the past several years, the topic of a CF-188 Hornet fighter fleet replacement has been the bane of both the previous Conservative government and the current Trudeau administration. Since the replacement requirement was first identified, political haggling has not produced any progress on this important file. From an initial Conservative requirement to purchase 65 F-35 aircraft, to Prime Minister Trudeau's declaration in 2015 that Canada would never purchase this aircraft, a request for proposal for a new fleet of fighters has been kicked down the road like the proverbial can. Is the government awaiting a new mandate before going to competition to avoid embarrassment, especially if the F-35 is proven to be the aircraft of choice? It certainly is with our NATO allies.

Years after the replacement requirement was identified, nothing has been done. The 2017 "capability gap" requiring an additional 18 aircraft turned out to be a false premise which quickly disappeared with the Boeing Super Hornet and Bombardier C-series aircraft debacle. There is no capability gap but now due to the age of the RCAF Hornets, we will purchase 25 used Australian Hornets to keep ours flying until 2030 when the age of our front line fighter will be 50+ years old. This purchase is of course subject to US approval and we know what that atmosphere is like.

Now what has this to do with the air-to-air refuelling problem? Several facts should be stated.

The current fleet of two CC-130H Hercules refuellers and two CC-150 Airbus Polaris aircraft are reaching the end of their service lives. The Hercules aircraft will be retired in 2020 and no replacement has been announced. The vital point here is that it is the only aircraft in the inventory which can refuel the CH-47F Chinooks (this is due to the low speed of the helicopters compared to jet aircraft). Without knowing the type of new fighter we will purchase, planners cannot easily identify a new air refuelling tanker aircraft because the type of AAR (air-to-air refuelling) system, probe and drogue or boom connection must be known.

There is no easy answer. The USAF is phasing out its KC-135 aircraft and replacing the fleet with the KC-46 (Boeing 767 derivative). This old airframe will not meet our future needs as we also need a strategic airlift capability embedded in the aircraft. The Airbus 330 currently in production does in fact meet the need as it has both AAR systems, can be used as a strategic airlifter and with the partnership announced between Airbus and Bombardier, would be a good fit and a bonus to us. However, the Airbus 330 to my knowledge cannot refuel helicopters. This problem will have to be addressed as well. My solution - drop the requirement to air refuel our Chinooks or other future helicopters.

So what do the RCAF planners in Ottawa do? The need for a new AAR aircraft has yet to be identified as does the selection of an aircraft to replace the CC-150 Polaris which is now 30 years old. The in-production Airbus 330 meets all the needs for strategic airlift and has AAR versions flying now. This takes care of any future fighter identified as the new selection for the RCAF as well as the airlift part of the equation. The dangling question is: do we go to two fleets of aircraft or abandon AAR for the helicopters? As no funding has been identified for the latter requirement, if indeed it is one, let's go with the Airbus 330, take care of a new strategic airlifter and have an AAR aircraft as part of the bargain.

The author is a RCAF veteran fighter pilot with 37 years of service in the RCAF and Canadian Armed Forces. This work is the sole opinion of the author and does not necessarily represent the views of the Canadian Armed Forces, the Canadian Department of National Defence, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police or the Royal United Services Institute of Nova Scotia. The author may be contacted by email at: RUSINovaScotia@gmail.com.