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fighter jet

By Roxana Tiron

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Three of the most senior House appropriators are planning to
discuss exporting Lockheed Martin’s F-22 Raptor fighter jet to the Japanese
government, which wants badly to buy the stealth plane.

Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.), the chairman of the House Appropriations Defense
subcommittee, said Wednesday that he intends to meet in the coming days with
Appropriations Committee Chairman David Obey (D-Wis.) and Rep. Bill Young (Fla.), Murtha’s GOP
counterpart on the Defense subcommittee, to discuss lifting the export ban on
the F-22.

The key player in that briefing will be Obey, who in 1998
wrote the legislation that bans the exports of the F-22 mainly to keep secret
the aircraft’s radar-evading stealth technology. Obey has not budged since, and
it’s unclear whether he is willing to relent.

“He is willing to listen,” Murtha said at a breakfast with reporters on
Wednesday.

Industry and congressional sources, however, tell The Hill that Obey was

adamantly opposed even to including what basically amounts to noncommittal language in the 2009 war-spending bill. Obey’s Senate counterpart, Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii), is a strong supporter of exporting the F-22 to the Japanese and has engaged government representatives with details on what it would entail for Japan to buy the jet.

Obey has been against exporting the F-22 from the very beginning and his base position has not changed, said Obey’s spokesman, Ellis Brachman.

He is always willing to listen, Brachman added.

Ultimately, Inouye was able to include language in the war supplemental bill that says some funds in the spending measure (which has money for four F-22s) can be used to explore options to develop an export variant of the F-22 A. Sources say that provision was adopted despite Obey’s objections.

Murtha, who is willing to work with Inouye on facilitating the sale of the F-22 to the Japanese, admitted it is an expensive proposition that also depends on whether Lockheed Martin’s Marietta,
Ga., production line will stay
open for several more years. That production line in turn depends on U.S. domestic orders for the plane. The Obama administration did not ask for money for the production of the fighter jet in fiscal 2010 and is adamant about halting production after the 187th airplane is delivered to the Air Force.

Murtha said that he would like to be able to purchase another 20 aircraft in 2010, but that he is uncertain whether that would be possible, considering the total price tag for those planes is $3.2 billion. Murtha also said that he is concerned about the high cost of operating and maintaining the existing planes.

But the veteran defense appropriator said he wants to assess future threats to the United States when
considering the purchase of more than 187 planes and also on the topic of selling them to Japan.

He said he will consult CIA Director Leon Panetta and Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair on the nation’s threat level.

“Intelligence tends to define itself by what the White House says. Give me an objective estimate of what is down the road,” said Murtha.

Murtha said China should be
considered a threat down the road, particularly as it will compete directly
with the United States
for energy supplies. He indicated that, such being the case, it would be good

for another country to have the F-22.

For the F-22 to end up in Japan,
Lockheed Martin would have to spend a considerable amount of time — several years — demilitarizing the plane. That essentially means stripping the jet of sensitive technologies employed by the U.S. military. That could be costly. By Murtha’s calculations the research and development to remove those capabilities would cost at least $1 billion and could go much higher, and it is unclear whether the Japanese would be able to pay such a steep price.

The F-22 is largely designed as an aircraft for offensive missions. Japan would buy the F-22 for its Air Self Defense Force because the country has a post-World War II constitutional prohibition on war fighting.

The F-22 quandary could lead to some intense negotiations on the fiscal 2010 defense appropriations bill, which Murtha’s panel is taking up after the Fourth of July recess.

Murtha also gave a glimpse into some of the decisions he may make on the bill. Among them is finding money to buy more Boeing F/A-18 Super Hornets to make up for a Navy and Marine Corps strike fighter shortfall. “We know we are going to do something about it,” he said.

The Appropriations Defense chairman — who earlier this year was adamant about splitting the Air Force’s midair refueling tanker contract between Boeing and Northrop Grumman — said he has a provision he is prepared to present to his subcommittee that will let Defense Secretary Robert Gates decide whether he wants to see one or two contractors build the tankers.

Murtha said he believed a split contract would be the way to go on the contentious program, fearing it will never take off because of prolonged protests by the losing bidders.

He met with Gates on Tuesday and said the secretary “listened … he was noncommittal.” But Murtha indicated that the administration may be willing to consider a split buy on the tanker. He said that the administration has about four issues on which it is not willing to negotiate.

“The tanker is not one of them,” Murtha said, refusing to disclose the non-negotiable items.

Gates has been strongly opposed to a split-buy for the tanker, arguing that it would be too expensive and a bad deal for taxpayers.