Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

by Grant Rumley **(/experts/grant-rumley)**

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Brief Analysis

In what has become a major test of America's shift to great power competition, Washington must weigh its desire to maintain a close security partnership with the UAE against Abu Dhabi's growing ties with China.

In December, reports emerged that the United Arab Emirates was suspending talks over its $23 billion arms sale with the United States. Negotiated in the waning days of the Trump administration, the sale includes up to fifty F-35 fighter aircraft, eighteen MQ-9 Reaper drones, and approximately $10 billion in advanced munitions. If completed, it would make the UAE the first Arab country in the Middle East to field the F-35 and MQ-9

The sale emerged in the wake of the Abraham Accords, the UAE's normalization agreement with Israel. Upon taking office, the Biden administration reviewed the deal, then announced last April that it would proceed. As recently as November, a senior official reiterated that the United States was still "fully committed" to the sale. Yet administration officials have also consistently warned that it was not a done deal. As Emirati officials have indicated publicly and privately, the current breakdown in talks stemmed from "technical requirements" and "sovereign operational restrictions," none of which will be easy to overcome.

U.S. Concerns and the China Factor

Legally, potential U.S. arms sales to Middle Eastern countries are **prohibited (https://www.congress.gov/bill/110th-congress/house-bill/7177)** from including any items that could erode Israel's qualitative military edge. Additionally, the Arms Export Control Act **states (https://sgp.fas.org/crs/weapons/IF11197.pdf)** that potential buyers may use these items for "specific purposes only, including internal security, legitimate self-defense, and participation in collective measures requested by the UN or comparable organizations." These restrictions add a layer of complexity to every arms transaction with U.S. partners in the region, but they are particularly thorny in this case given the F-35's near-unmatched capabilities and the UAE's recent history of foreign interventions in **Yemen (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-**

analysis/breaking-point-consolidating-houthi-military-setbacks-yemen) , Libya **(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/making-libyas-berlin-process-work)** , and Somalia **(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/dont-part-red-sea-formulating-holistic-policy-toward-key-region)** .

This sale is also overshadowed by growing U.S. concerns over Abu Dhabi's increasingly close relationship with China. From a technical perspective, defense officials are extremely guarded about the F-35's proprietary stealth capabilities, sensor technology, and other features that make it the crown jewel of U.S. airpower. For example, Turkey was expelled from the F-35 program for taking delivery **(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/turkeys-f-16-request-may-not-stave-inevitable)** of the Russian S-400 air defense system, which was designed in part to defeat aircraft like the F-35.

U.S. officials have also repeatedly warned that a dense, Huawei-controlled 5G mobile phone network near F-35 bases and operating areas could potentially be used to passively track and collect intelligence on aircraft and operators without the host country's knowledge. Britain, a key partner in the F-35 program, banned Huawei from its 5G networks due in large part to U.S. pressure. Other partners have either enacted similar restrictive policies or selected alternative 5G providers. The lone exception is South Korea, whose economy and telecommunications sector are so intricately linked with China that completely decoupling for security concerns is largely unfeasible (e.g., the deployment of a U.S. air defense system there in 2017 triggered a Chinese tourism boycott that cost South Korea an estimated $5.1 billion in lost revenues). In the UAE's case, officials inked an agreement in 2019 for Huawei to supply the country's 5G infrastructure and begin constructing hundreds of cell towers.

In addition to technical issues, Washington is concerned about the trajectory of Abu Dhabi's security and economic relationship with Beijing. In early 2021, for instance, Chinese military aircraft unloaded crates of undetermined materiel in the UAE; later that year, U.S. intelligence agencies assessed that China may be building a secret military installation at the Khalifa port north of Abu Dhabi.

The UAE has also emerged as one of Beijing's most important regional trade partners: in 2019, the *Economist* estimated that roughly two-thirds of Chinese exports to Europe, Africa, and the Middle East flow through the Emirates. Moreover, Ambassador Ni Jian stated last December that Chinese "non-financial direct investment" in the UAE accounts for nearly 50 percent of his country's overall investments in the Arab world. Emirati officials regularly downplay concerns that their economic ties with China preclude closer security relations with the United States. Yet U.S. officials become guarded when such ties place American platforms at risk of surveillance.

Another consideration for Washington is the precedent it might set by selling the MQ-9 to the UAE. The United States has traditionally been wary of exporting its premier armed drones, basing this stance on a strict interpretation of the multilateral Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). In 2020, however, the Trump administration announced that it would reinterpret the U.S. approach to allow for more exports of armed drones, citing increased competition with China and Russia in the arms market. The UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt have already bought variations of the Chinese Wing Loong drone, a competitor to the MQ-9; the Emiratis have allegedly deployed the system to Libya, Ethiopia, and Yemen.

The UAE's Perspective

It is no secret that Abu Dhabi has wanted the F-35 for years. As far back as 2011, Emirati officials were requesting classified briefings on its capabilities, a precursor to entering contract negotiations. At the 2017 Dubai Airshow, deputy air force commander Rashid al-Shamsi noted: "We in the UAE already live in a fifth-generation environment. So acquiring the F-35 fighter jet is only a step forward to cope with the fifth generation mind-set." The purchase would also enable Abu Dhabi to reaffirm the closeness of its security relationship with Washington. The UAE already

hosts thousands of U.S. troops at al-Dhafra Air Base and holds the distinction of being the only Arab country to have participated in six coalition operations with the United States since the 1991 Gulf War. The Emiratis see the F-35 acquisition as the logical next step for both militaries.

In negotiating the sale, Abu Dhabi has been using a familiar playbook. Back in 1998, the two countries announced a deal to send eighty F-16s to the UAE. Over the course of the negotiations, however, Emirati requests led to the creation of a more advanced F-16 variant, the Block 60, which included a new mission computer, cockpit display, radar system, and conformal fuel tanks. This new variant was even more advanced than what the U.S. Air Force had at the time. How did Abu Dhabi extract these concessions? The year before entering the deal, the Emiratis announced that they had purchased thirty French Mirage 2000-9 aircraft and warned that if their F-16 upgrade requests were not met, they would look elsewhere for additional jets. By playing hardball, the Emiratis wound up with the most advanced fourth-generation fighter on the market. And they repeated this tactic last December—just days before meeting in Washington to discuss the F-35 deal, they announced the purchase of eighty Rafale fighters from France.

Regarding China ties, the UAE and many other partners in the region are wary of being forced to choose between a security relationship with Washington and an economic relationship with Beijing. As one analyst put it in a December article by TFIGlobal, Abu Dhabi has been trying to recast itself as the "Singapore of the Middle East"—that is, positioning itself as the region's main commercial and technological hub while maintaining some semblance of impartiality in its affairs. Cooperation with China is part of this endeavor. The Emiratis also likely view relations with Beijing as an insurance policy in an era when the future of America's regional presence is uncertain.

Conclusion

The United States must weigh the benefits of proceeding with the F-35 sale against the risks of increasing the jet's vulnerability or, if the deal collapses, spurring the UAE to ask China or Russia for fifth-generation fighters. For its part, Abu Dhabi must recognize that its leverage has decreased under the Biden administration, which supports the sale but does not appear as enthusiastic about it as the Trump administration was. Adding urgency to the talks is the **recent Houthi attack (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/houthi-strikes-uae-open-another-front-yemen-war)** on Abu Dhabi, which prompted Emirati officials to press for more U.S. defense support. Ultimately, the sale represents one of the first major tests of whether the United States can shift its focus to global great power competition while convincing countries in the Middle East that it is still a reliable partner.

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