
China to Sell Pakistan 36 Fighter Jets

By

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China has agreed to sell Pakistan at least 36 advanced fighter jets in a landmark deal worth as much as \$1.4 billion, according to Pakistani and Western officials.

Beijing will supply two squadrons of the J-10 fighter jet in a preliminary agreement that could lead to more sales to Pakistan in the future, said a Pakistani official. The official said Pakistan might buy “larger numbers” of the multi-role aircraft in the future but dismissed reports that Pakistan had inked a deal to buy as many as 150 of the fighter jets. Defense experts described the agreement with China as a landmark event in Pakistan’s defense relationship with the growing military power. China’s transition from a manufacturer of low-(tech) fighters to more advanced jets comparable to some Western models is seen as evidence of Beijing’s growing strategic clout in Asia.

This agreement should not simply be seen in the narrow context of Pakistan’s relations with China, said Abdul Qayyum, a retired Pakistani General. There is a wider dimension. By sharing its advanced technology with Pakistan, China is . . . also saying to the world that its defense capability is growing rapidly.

China has supplied Pakistan with fighter jets for more than three decades. But Beijing has seldom supplied Pakistan’s air force with advanced fighter planes. Islamabad turned to France for Mirage fighter jets in the 1970s and to the United States for F-16s in the 1980s. Pakistan has a fleet of 45 F-16s, which are built by Lockheed Martin. The Pakistani air force is currently using the fighter jet in its campaign against militants in South Waziristan. The United States has agreed to sell Islamabad another 18 new F-16s and about a dozen older versions of the aircraft.

Over the past decade, China and Pakistan have collaborated on building their first jointly produced advanced fighter jet, known as the JF-17 or “Thunder.” Pakistan is expected to roll out the first domestically built version of the Thunder within weeks. Pakistan’s air force plans to purchase at least 250 of the Thunder fighters over the next four to five years. Experts see the new Pakistani focus on China as a supplier of advanced fighters as evidence that Beijing is trying to expand its military power.

Countries like Iran and possibly some of the Middle Eastern countries would be keen to deal with China if they can find technology which is comparable to the West, said one Western official in Islamabad.

Pakistan will work as the laboratory to try out Chinese aircrafts. If they work well with the Pakistani air force, others will follow.