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PLA's fighter jets go up for sale

By Zhao Lei
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China appears to have given the green light for its domestically-developed J-10 fighter jet to be exported as the country looks to attract buyers at an overseas air show.

A large-scale model of the FC-20, the export version of the J-10, is on display at the China National Aero-Technology Import and Export Corp booth at the six-day Singapore Airshow 2016, which kicked off on Tuesday.

It is an unspoken rule in China's defense sector that weapons solely designed for the People's Liberation Army are never displayed at foreign exhibitions, so the model's appearance in Singapore carries a clear indication: that China now wants to promote the warplane to the international market.

The J-10 is a third-generation, multirole combat aircraft designed and produced by Aviation Industry Corp of China. It features a canard delta wing design, a fly-by-wire flight control system and is regarded by military experts as one of the best fighter jets in the world.

First entering service as the J-10A with the PLA Air Force in 2004, the plane was declassified in 2009 and by February 2014, the PLA Air Force and PLA Navy's aviation units had at least 260 of the jets in operation, British think tank the International Institute for Strategic Studies has estimated.

The country has also developed at least two upgraded versions of the aircraft—the J-10B, which has started to be delivered to the PLA Air Force, and the J-10C that is still in the testing stage, Chinese media reported.

Speculation has been rife in recent years among Chinese military observers and their foreign counterparts about when the J-10's export would be approved. Potential buyers named by foreign media include Pakistan, Iran and Argentina, but none have been reported to be in substantial negotiations with China so far.

Ma Zhiping, former general manager of China National Aero-Technology Import and Export Corp, said in September 2013 that several foreign countries from Asia, Africa and South America had "expressed interest" in the J-10, with his company expecting a huge market for the plane.

Wang Ya'nan, deputy editor-in-chief of Aerospace Knowledge magazine and an expert in aviation, said selling fighter aircraft was never an easy task as such arms sales were often influenced by a host of geopolitical factors.

"Land arms such as tanks or even short-range surface-to-surface missiles have limited impact on geopolitics, but fighter jets can perform strikes far away from their home country and thus are considered to have stronger prowess," he said.

"In addition, a contract for fighter jets usually means a large amount of profit because their life span is very long, so the value behind the aircraft and the after-sale services involved would be

very high. Therefore, every major player in the aviation industry will spare no effort to scramble for the contract."

A weakness in China's efforts to sell its fighter jets is the fact that they are unproven in combat, according to Wang.

"Fortunately, the PLA Air Force has many air combat drills each year, which can enable foreign clients to know the capabilities of Chinese aircraft."