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Will China Fill the Skies With Stealth Jets?

The U.S. military depends on its edge over other air forces. China could be on the verge of wearing that edge away.

DAVID AXE

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China is one step closer to selling stealth jets to militaries around world, now that the latest copy of China's newest stealth fighter has reportedly flown for the first time. The debut of FC-31 number two brings China closer to being an exporter of radar-evading warplanes—and draws the United States closer to, perhaps some day, facing Chinese-made stealth fighters in combat.

That could negate one of America's main advantages in aerial combat—its lopsided technological superiority over most of the foreign air arms it faces in wartime.

Chinese military websites began circulating grainy videos and images of the second FC-31 in flight apparently over the city of Shenyang in northeastern China on Dec. 23.

Beijing takes advantage of China's thriving military blogging community to unofficially announce new weapons—and even pays some bloggers for favorable coverage. Propaganda aside, the imagery underscored China's rapid progress on the twin-tail, twin-engine FC-31, the first copy of which debuted in the air in 2012.

The single-engine fighter, a product of the state-owned Shenyang Aircraft Corporation, is apparently getting stealthier ... and closer to being war-ready. The first copy of the single-seat jet featured wide, trapezoid-shape tail fins. The second copy clearly boasts fins whose angles more closely match each other—a quality that helps to minimize radar signature.

Likewise, the first FC-31 trailed thick plumes of smoke from its apparently Russian-made engines when it first flew two years ago. Smokey engines are a huge liability for fighter pilots hoping to avoid visual detection in close aerial combat.

The new FC-31, by contrast, appears to boast new, smoke-free engines—that is, if the scant video evidence is any indication.

The FC-31's quick progress parallels China's similarly determined efforts to get its first stealth fighter, the J-20, ready for wartime use. The Chinese air force apparently began equipping the first frontline squadron with the twin-engine J-20s in late 2016, just seven years after the fighter—which is much larger than the FC-31—first flew.

By comparison, the U.S. Air Force's F-22 stealth fighter took 15 years to go from initial prototype in 1990 to combat-ready warplane in 2005. The smaller F-35, the prototype of which first flew in 2000, also needed 15 years of work before it was ready to deploy to war.

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To be fair, it's unclear just how sophisticated the FC-31 and J-20 are under their skins. The F-22 and F-35 pack advanced sensors, communications and software suites that required at least as much work as their airframes and engines did. China's own military electronics industry lags far behind America's, so it's possible that both Chinese stealth fighters come equipped with old-style internal systems that, while inferior, take less time to develop than cutting edge gear does—helping to explain the plane's rapid development.

The U.S. Defense Department, in the 2016 edition of its annual report to Congress on Chinese military capabilities, claimed that the FC-31 includes some of the same technology that the J-20 does. The report did not specify which technologies the two planes share. ([pdf](#))

For all its hard work on the FC-31, it's not clear that Beijing intends to ever equip its own squadrons with the stealth fighter -- and that has implications for the new plane's capabilities.

In 2014, Song Zhongping, a former officer in Beijing's strategic missile force, told a Chinese T.V. program that Beijing had banned any export of the J-20 “in order to keep J-20's fifth-generation technology out of hostile hands.”

The reported ban could have put pressure on the state aircraft industry to produce a stealth fighter that is sufficiently advanced to attract foreign customers, but not so advanced that Beijing might

prohibit selling it abroad. China's aviation industry "is actively marketing the FC-31 as an export fifth-generation multirole fighter to compete with the F-35 for foreign sales," the Pentagon reported.

For their part, the Americans mitigated the risk of exporting the F-35 by requiring that most buyers return their copies of the plane to the United States for repair, rather than tinkering with the jets' sophisticated systems on their own.

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It's possible that Shenyang is developing the FC-31 with its own money in the hope of someday selling the plane to foreign customers. Chinese drones and non-stealthy warplanes have slowly become more popular on the global market, mostly in the Middle East and Africa. The United States is still, by far, the world's leading arms-exporter.

The Defense Department claimed in its 2016 China report that the makers of the FC-31 are lobbying Beijing to eventually acquire the plane for the Chinese air force. If those efforts fail, the FC-31 could become the world's first stealth fighter that is strictly a commercial commodity.

By comparison, the F-35 is a hot item on the global arms market—but the controversial jet is foremost a U.S. government-funded project for U.S. government use. At present, the Pentagon plans to buy around two thirds of all the roughly 3,500 F-35s that most analysts believe builder Lockheed Martin could ultimately sell.

If the FC-31 succeeds as an export commodity— and that's a big "if" considering how many fighter programs have failed over the decades—then it could greatly multiply the risk to U.S. forces in future wars. American fighter pilots patrolling conflict zones over, say, the Middle East and Africa could find themselves going head to head with Chinese-made stealth fighters ... flown by non-Chinese air forces.