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Will China Sell New Long-Range Surface-to-Air Missiles to Pakistan?

By Franz-Stefan Gady
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Pakistan is ready to make a decision over the procurement of new Chinese air defense systems once it receives a complete sales proposal, Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said during a high-level meeting with senior Chinese officials last Friday in Islamabad, according to a press release issued by the Pakistani Prime Minister's Office.

"The Prime Minister said that the decision for induction of Air Defense System in Pakistan by CPMIEC would be finalized after receipt of complete proposal from the Chinese side. The Prime

Minister noted with satisfaction the pace of existing joint collaborative mechanism between Ministry of Defense Production and CPMIEC in other fields of mutual interest,” the statement notes.

The Chinese delegation included the deputy head of the China Aerospace Science and Industry Corporation (CASIC), Wei Yiyin, and the chairman of the China Precision Machinery Import and Export Corporation (CPMIEC), Zhao Xiaolong, along with a number of other senior government officials. The Chinese delegation was in Pakistan to discuss deepening defense industrial ties between the two countries.

The press release does not offer any details over the air defense system under consideration. However, Pakistani analysts believe that it could be a reference to a long-anticipated acquisition of a new long-range surface-to-air missile (SAM) system.

According to an analyst for the Quwa Defense News & Analysis Group, “it is (...) possible that the long-awaited push for a long-range SAM system is finally underway.” The long-range SAM system in question is in all likelihood an export variant of the HQ-9 medium-to-long-range SAM, dubbed FT-2000, and developed by CPMIEC.

China and Pakistan have held talks over the procurement of FT-2000 SAMs since the early 2000s, without ever concluding a deal. Pakistan did finally place an order for medium-range HQ-16 (Hongqi-16) SAM systems in 2014, but still failed to make a decision over the HQ-9.

“Pakistan could be inviting a proposal in regards to expanding its medium-range coverage via the HQ-16. But given that the proposal was noted by the Prime Minister, the idea of it being in regards to the HQ-9 or FT-2000 should not be ruled out,” the Quwa analysis concludes.

The HQ-9 is a derivative of the Russian-made S-300 long-range SAM system and can engage aircraft, cruise missiles, and theater ballistic missiles. With an operational range of 125 kilometers (77 miles), the FT-2000 export variant purportedly has a shorter range than the domestic HQ-9 SAM in use with the Chinese military, which allegedly has a reach of 200 kilometers (124 miles).

This Monday, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang met with Pakistani Army Chief, General Raheel Sharif, to discuss deepening the China-Pakistan bilateral relationship, in particular strengthening military-to-military ties, Xinhua reports. Sharif also met with the Vice Chairman of China’s Central Military Commission Fan Changlong.