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Israel's role in China's new warplane

By David Isenberg

The recent unveiling (sort of) of China's first domestically designed (sort of) fighter jet was the culmination of a long saga of international military-hardware wheeling and dealing that has seen US-designed or -funded high-tech weaponry fall into the hands of potential military rivals.

The showpiece of many years' work, dating back to the late 1980s, recently happened - albeit unobserved - when China confirmed the existence of, but did not unveil, the Jian-10 fighter jet. It had been reported that the J-10 (F-10 being the export version, using North Atlantic Treaty Organization designation) would be shown in public for the first time during the fourth China International Aviation and Aerospace Exhibition (Airshow China 2002) held in Zhuhai in southern Guangdong province from November 4-10, but the plane did not appear.

The J-10 is a multi-role single-engine and single-seat tactical fighter, with a combat radius of 1,000 kilometers. Although billed as a domestically produced fighter, in truth the J-10 could not have happened without the help of other countries, especially Israel.

The program began in the late 1980s and is thought to be based on an Israeli design. It contains Israeli and Russian avionics, and is powered by Russian engines.

Chinese engineers developed the J-10 from a single F-16 provided by Pakistan, and with assistance from Israeli engineers associated

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with Israel's US-financed Lavi fighter program, which was canceled in 1987, according to the Federation of American Scientists website. The Lavi was based on the US F-16 and built with US\$1.3 billion in aid from Washington.

In 1983, when US support for the Lavi commenced, the program was opposed vigorously by the Defense Department, partly because of re-export concerns. An early supporter of the Lavi was George Shultz, then secretary of state in the administration of US president Ronald Reagan. Shultz would later label his advocacy of the program a "costly mistake".

Only in early 1995 did the US government make public its concerns about Israel's Lavi-related technology re-exports to China. David Lari, director general of Israel's Ministry of Defense, acknowledged in an Associated Press interview that "some technology on aircraft" had been sold to China and that some Israeli companies may not have "clean hands".

Yet China's acquisition of the Russian Su-27, after China had attempted for years to develop the J-10 aircraft with equivalent technology to perform similar functions, is seen by some experts as a sign that China lacks confidence in its domestic industrial capabilities.

Though it has never been certain precisely what specific technologies and systems Israel provided, it was reported that the Jian-10's radar and fire-control system is the Israeli-made ELM-2021 system, which can simultaneously track six air targets and lock on to the four most threatening targets for destruction.

In December 1991, US intelligence officials announced that Israel planned to open a government-coordinated and -sponsored "arms office" in China. Given what the Israelis had to offer, and what the Chinese needed, it was most likely that a transfer of avionics and other technologies developed in the Lavi program would ensue, since there was a void in the Chinese avionics and fire-control system

capability due to the 1989 termination of a US-Chinese program in response to Tiananmen Square.

China and Israel started collaboration in the early 1980s and full-scale cooperation was under way officially by 1984. As neither China nor Israel was capable of developing the propulsion system required by the J-10, in 1991 China acquired the AL31F turbofan engine from Russia for incorporation into the J-10 fighter. This engine is also used in the Su-27 air-superiority fighter that Chinese acquired from Russia. As the performance of the AL31F engine is significantly better than that of the American PW1120 originally slated for the Lavi, it may be anticipated that the performance of the J-10 will be accordingly enhanced. Built by the Chengdu Aircraft Industrial Corp, the J-10 attempts to rival current fourth-generation Western fighters. China has inked a 10-year deal with the Russian engine maker SRPC Salut for 300 AL-31F engines for its J-10 program and will begin production of the jets next year.

The plane is said to have capabilities similar to the Su-27, the Russian MiG-29 and the US F-16 fighter jets, but with an estimated cost of less than \$10 million, it could rival other jet makers on the international market.

In March 1997, despite official denials from Israeli officials, the US Office of Naval Intelligence in its unclassified "Worldwide Challenges to Naval Strike Warfare" restated more strongly than it had the previous year its belief that US-derived technology from the canceled Israeli Lavi fighter was being used on China's new F-10 fighter. It said, "The design has been undertaken with substantial direct external assistance, primarily from Israel and Russia, with indirect assistance through access to US technologies." In fact, according to the annual intelligence report, "the F-10 is a single-seat, light multi-role fighter based heavily on the canceled Israeli Lavi program".

Until it was canceled in 1987, much of Lavi technological development was paid for by the United States. Ironically, the potential capability

of F-10 fighters was cited by both the US Navy and Air Force as one of the future threats justifying the expenditure of billions on new tactical aircraft, such as the F-22, F/A-18F, and Joint Strike Fighter. The fact that possibly US-derived technology provided by an ally might be contributing to that potential threat is a delicate subject.

However, this is not the first time accusations of illegal technology have been made. A March 1992 report by State Department inspector general Sherman Funk, "Report of Audit: Department of State Defense Trade Controls", states that alleged Israeli violations of US laws and regulations "cited and supported by reliable intelligence information show a systematic and growing pattern of unauthorized transfers ... dating back to about 1983".

In the summer of 2000, the Washington Times reported that a memo circulating inside the Pentagon's Defense Threat Reduction Agency told analysts they no longer had to gain input from the Defense Intelligence Agency before deciding whether controlled technology should be transferred to Israel. The DIA had compiled evidence that Israel had violated US export regulations by transferring missile, laser and aircraft technology to China.

Subsequently, when Israel tried to sell the Phalcon to India, the US government demanded that Israel limit arms exports. Israel was told that it must inform the US of all weapons transfers to 27 nations regarded as "countries of concern" such as China, India and Yugoslavia.

"Israel ranks second only to Russia as a weapons-system provider to China and as a conduit for sophisticated military technology, followed by France and Germany," stated a report this year by the US-China Security Review Commission, a panel established by Congress to examine security and economic relations between the two countries. "Recent upgrades in target acquisition and fire control, probably provided by Israeli weapons specialists, have enhanced the capabilities of

the older guided missile destroyers and frigates" in the Chinese navy's inventory, it said.

The commission cited Israel as a supplier to Beijing of radar systems, optical and telecommunications equipment, drones and flight simulators.

Arms exports have not only played a crucial role in offsetting Israel's trade imbalance but have also performed a key role in furthering its diplomatic efforts. The sale of arms and technology has become one of the most effective techniques to furthering Israeli goals overseas. The quiet ties with China and India and the growing alliance with Turkey in the 1980s and the 1990s are good examples of strong links based on such cooperation.

The J-10 is hardly the only result of Israeli-Chinese military cooperation. For example, the Chinese F-8, the same type of plane that collided with the US reconnaissance plane last year, is armed with Israeli Python-3 missiles. The Python, adapted from the US ALM-9L Sidewinder missile, has a high degree of US technology. Ironically for Israel, China apparently sold its version of Python-3, called the PL-8, to Iraq.

And, as was widely publicized, Israel was set to sell China the Phalcon, an airborne early-warning radar system, until it was forced by the United States to cancel the deal. The US Central Intelligence Agency also believed Israel was marketing its STAR cruise missile in China. The STAR incorporates sensitive US technology.

And former US officials report that both Israel and the Dutch company Delft made unauthorized sales of US thermal-imaging tank sights to, among others, China. The sights were installed on China's 69 MOD-2 tanks, some of which were sold to Iraq. The United States acquired physical evidence of this transfer after these tanks were used against US marines in the 1991 Gulf War.

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