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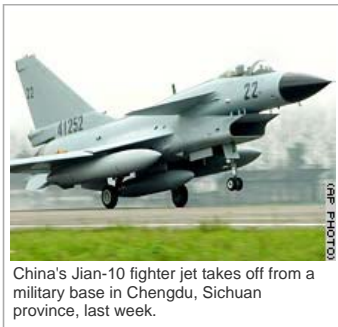
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China unveils new fighter jet

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China's Jian-10 fighter jet takes off from a military base in Chengdu, Sichuan province, last week.

BEIJING, China (Reuters) -- China has unveiled its Jian-10 multi-role indigenous fighter jet, marking a "historic leap forward" and narrowing a technological gap with major military powers, state media said on Saturday.

China is the fourth country in the world capable of developing its own advanced fighter aircraft, engines and air-to-air missiles, the People's Daily, the mouthpiece of the Communist Party, said in a front-page story.

The newspaper did not identify the three other countries, but defense analysts said it was apparently referring to the United States, Russia and France.

"The Jian-10 is superior to the SU-27 but inferior to the SU-30," a military source who spoke on condition of anonymity told Reuters, referring to Russia's Sukhoi fighter jets.

A five-minute video was shown to Chinese reporters in Beijing on Friday, revealing how the fighter takes off, lands, fires missiles and flies in formation, the official Xinhua news agency said. Foreign journalists were barred from the news conference.

The Beijing Daily, the Guangming Daily, the Farmers' Daily and Internet portals splashed pictures of fighters taking off and pilots marching past a row of fighters.

"It has increasingly become apparent the J-10 has the potential of becoming one of the most significant fighters in the next few decades," www.globalsecurity.org said on its Web site.

But Xinhua quoted unnamed military experts as saying the Jian-10 cannot match the performance of fourth-generation U.S. fighter jets, but its basic design and indigenous equipment are comparable to those of mainstream fighter aircraft in the West.

As many as 300 Jian-10 may be produced, sinodefence.com said.

The Jian-10 first flew in 1998 and entered the PLA Air Force service in 2003, sinodefence.com said, adding that the single-seat and twin-seat trainer are "all-weather, high-performance multi-role fighter aircraft capable of both air-to-air and air-to-ground roles".

"(It) marks a breakthrough in China's research and development of heavy fighter aircraft," Liu Gaozhuo, executive commander in chief of the Jian-10 program, told Xinhua.

According to China's defense-policy paper released last December, the air force is reducing the number of combat aircraft, giving priority to the development of new fighters as well as air and missile defense weapons.

The China Aviation Industry Corp. I, China's leading aircraft manufacturer, provided the armed forces with 90 percent of its airborne weapons.

AVIC I has produced 15,000 aircraft, 50,000 aero-engines and more than 10,000 missiles. Company sales rose for the sixth straight year last year, hitting 80 billion yuan (\$10.3 billion), up 15.7 percent. Profits surged 42 percent to 3 billion yuan.

China has claimed Taiwan as its own since their split in 1949 amid civil war and vowed to attack the self-ruled democratic island if it formally declares independence.

The United States and Japan are to discuss in February joint plans for their troops to deal with a potential stand-off between China and Taiwan, Japanese media said.

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