

EYE ON THE EAST

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AIR WARFARE BRIEFINGS
FROM THE ASIA-PACIFIC

IN THE LAST few months, the joint Sino-Pakistani JF-17 Thunder fighter has earned a good amount of publicity. But it still lacks any genuine success in the field of export sales.

There have been a number of positive developments for the Thunder. Last year a total of 16 JF-17s were delivered to the Pakistan Air Force (PAF), with serial number 15-216 being the last aircraft built in 2015. By May 2016, the production run included several more Block 2 aircraft, and the aim was to build as many as 24 JF-17s this year.

Construction of the dual-seat JF-17B (FC-1B) version was launched on April 27. It is now planned to roll out the first two-seat aircraft in late 2016, for delivery to the PAF by December. Another milestone was the maiden flight of aircraft 2-29 on January 21, 2016, this being the first example fitted with the definitive in-flight refueling probe. This will be standard on all new-build Block 2 airframes.

Furthermore, it was reported in April that the long-delayed indigenous WS-13E 'Taishan' engine had achieved certification, and is expected to be ready for serial production in around 12 months. This powerplant is said to provide a significant improvement in thrust (providing close to 95kN) compared to the current RD-93 (81.3kN). It is far less smoky than the original Russian engine. As an alternative, Klimov JSC of St Petersburg continues to refine its own engine and now offers the modified RD-93MA (developing 91.2kN).

In parallel, the JF-17's capabilities continue to develop in PAF service. The Thunder has reportedly logged in excess of 19,000 operational flying hours since service induction in 2011. This has included participation in several international maneuvers, including the

'Northern Thunder' joint exercise in Saudi Arabia between February 14 and March 10, 2016 — the largest military exercise in the region in terms of participating countries and equipment. Between April 15-30, Thunders also took part in the Sino-Pakistani 'Shaheen V' joint exercise.

Within the PAF itself, another milestone was the official service introduction of the JF-17 with the famous No 2 'Minhas' Squadron at PAF Base Masroor on April 11. There the JF-17 replaces the unit's previous Chengdu F-7P fighters. No 2 Squadron is now the fourth operational unit — after the Combat Commanders School (CCS) 'Dashings', No 16 'Black Panthers' Squadron, and No 26 'Black Spiders' Squadron. Between them, they use a total of 66 aircraft delivered so far.

As well as ongoing production of Block 2, all Block 1 aircraft will be upgraded to Block 2 standard, which includes the indigenous Link 17 tactical datalink, making the type network-capable with the ZDK-03 Karakoram Eagle (also known as KE-03) airborne early warning aircraft. The Block 2 aircraft also features expanded weapons capabilities. As a result, one might expect the Thunder to be making its mark on the export scene. The reality, however, is somewhat different.

THE JF-17'S DILEMMA

