

Still no sales

Following its successful service introduction by the PAF, there have been constant rumors — as well as 'confirmed' reports — suggesting considerable foreign interest in the JF-17, and even possible contracts.

As such, and despite some high-profile reversals for the JF-17 at several international airshows — including, most recently, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia last December and at Marrakesh, Morocco in late April — officials from the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex (PAC) remain optimistic about regional sales. The same officials repeatedly offer details of the fighter that they co-developed with China's Chengdu Aircraft Industry Group.

Nevertheless, only a few hard facts have emerged about the various sales campaigns. Media reports consistently state that 'talks are under way' with up to eight countries interested in the JF-17, and that these are likely to make their decisions 'very soon'. As is so often the case, however, a deal apparently just 'inked' is denied the following day, or the decision is reported as being 'still open'.

Over the years, we have been left with the usual suspects from Asia, Africa and South America regularly expressing

While the JF-17 continues to populate Pakistan Air Force squadrons (jets from No 16 'Black Panthers' Squadron are pictured), export orders remain elusive. Forthcoming Block 3 improvements may improve its chances.
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their 'strong interest' in the JF-17. These nations include Argentina, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Egypt, Morocco, Myanmar, Nigeria, Qatar, Sri Lanka, and others. To date, however, the only 'confirmed' export contract was announced in June 2015. This came from an undisclosed Asian customer, most likely Myanmar. The \$560-million contract could involve an initial batch of 16 aircraft and deliveries should start in mid-2016. According to other reports, Nigeria also seems set to become an export customer.

One problem for the JF-17 — regardless of all its merits and its affordable price — is its inheritance of a stigma through its association with a political 'pariah'

Underlying problems

With the PAF being quite happy with the Thunder, what exactly is the issue with what is apparently an attractive, capable, low-cost fighter?

Probably the most significant weakness is that the JF-17 — often enough erroneously described as a J-7 development — is deemed to represent 'medium technology'. As such, it is a lightweight multi-role fighter with a relatively cheap price tag (a unit cost of around \$20-24 million). With this price it competes on the international fighter with the Saab Gripen, second-hand F-16s, several new 'high-end' advanced jet trainers, and certain Russian designs.

The Thunder is certainly not lacking in terms of specifications and equipment. A modern KJ-7V2 X-band multi-functional pulse-Doppler fire-control radar has the ability to track 10 and engage two targets simultaneously (with a look-up range of 110km/68 miles against a target with a 3m² radar cross-section). Other avionics equipment includes a 'glass' cockpit compatible with night vision goggles, hands on throttle and stick (HOTAS) controls, and inertial navigation system (INS) and GPS. The flight control system features Type 634 quadruplex

