

The K-8 Karakorum



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Nowadays, the Pakistani air force's demoteam 'Sherdils' flies the K-8. At the above occasion, El Ain 2007, the K-8 performed solo because the team performed with the T-37 still... (03-02-809, El Ain, 28 January 2007, Erwin van Dijkman)

For decades now we see the K-8 flying around. It has become quite a prolific aircraft, which does not necessarily mean it was an outright success. In this short article, mainly an annotated attempt at a production list, we outline its troubled birth and slow but steady onward production. Meanwhile, it has earned a place of its own in the World's jet trainer ranks.

Let us build a jet trainer together

That is what Pakistan and China decided in the late eighties of the last Century. Pakistan was looking for a successor to its obsolete T-37 and FT-5 trainers and China had similar requirements. Contracting parties were Nanchang Aircraft Manufacturing Company (NAMC), later rebranded Hongdu, of China and the Kamra-based Pakistan Aeronautical Complex (PAC). The West learned from this plan in 1987 when a L8 mock-up was presented at the Salon Aeronautique in Le Bourget. Pakistan's share eventually was aid in the design and the manufacturing of the aft fuselage and tail section, whereas the rest of the aircraft, the production and assembly was taken care of by the Chinese. Rebranded as the more internationally sounding K-8 Karakorum, they got on to a quick start and the first prototype took to the skies on 21 November 1990. At that point in time, the aircraft was powered by the Garrett (later Honeywell) TFE731-2A engine, basically a business jet turbofan.

Together translates different in Chinese

In those early years it was Pakistan that was eager to get this project off the ground. They ordered six on 9 April 1994 and these were handed over 21 September and formally delivered and taken on charge on 10 November of the same year. Meanwhile, China had yet to order the aircraft. Reluctantly, and with allegedly some pressure from Pakistan, they also took on six aircraft. Main reason for the Chinese reservations was the dependence on US components, notably the aforementioned engine. They were proved right as that engine was embargoed for export to China by the USA, the latter did not want to support Chinese effort to mass produce a jet for military use in aircraft or cruise missiles. So, with the knowledge gained and independence from the USA sought, the Chinese JL8 was drafted up. As an engine is not built in one day, they turned to Ivchenko-Progress State Enterprise of Zaporozhye, Ukraine

to acquire the AI-25TLK, a scaled down development of the TL that powers the L-39. Also the Martin-Baker ejection seat needed replacement. Furthermore, it took quite a while to reverse-engineer the AI-25 into the Wushi WS-11 engine for the production aircraft. The first AI-25-engined JL8 took to the skies in December 1994, 30 aircraft were built using that engine. The production configured aircraft powered by the WS-11 only flew 26 October 1998. This aircraft is also referred to as JL11.

K-8s entering service

At this point in time, the late-nineties, the pool of available TFE731 engines was used in the K8 production. However, the Pakistanis evaluated their first six and came up with quite a list of improvements to be made. Meanwhile the type attracted the first export customers, Zambia and Myanmar ordered the type. But the big bang came late 1999 when Egypt signed for no less than 80 K-8E aircraft, to be assembled at Helwan, with an option for a further 40. This variant was changed from the original K-8 in many ways. Likely, it incorporated many of the improvements that also were to be implemented in the Pakistani K-8P. In any case, from now on production of the K-8 was to a large extent geared to this westernised K-8 for export and Pakistani use. In parallel the Chinese manufactured the more indigenously kitted JL8 (or JL11) for use by the People's Republic Air Force.

The poor man's or rogue state's trainer?

Looking at the initial export customers like Zambia, Namibia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe, it seems that clients that either do not have the funds or the political leeway to buy proven and more expensive types like the BAe Hawk or MB339, ended up buying the K-8. Maybe that is a bit harsh, but the client-list for the more advanced K-8P adds countries like Ghana, Sudan, Tanzania, Venezuela, Bolivia and Bangladesh. For example the deal with Ghana, through a British broker, was not a textbook transaction. In fact the broker was sentenced for two years after mediating a deal for four aircraft without applying for the proper trading license in time. So, if you phone the China National Aero-Technology Import & Export Corporation (CATIC), be sure you have your paperwork in order beforehand.