**Military might**

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Ensuring military readiness to confront future challenges and uncertainties has always been imperative for the armed forces. The approach often requires a consistent and steadfast commitment to innovation and modernization.

Central to this concept is the acquisition and integration of new and cross-cutting technologies. The possibility of the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) acquiring the Shenyang J-31 stealth fighter has created buzz recently.

Speaking at a recent induction ceremony of J-10C Firebird fighters and other advanced weaponry on January 2, Air Chief Marshal Zaheer Ahmed Baber alluded to the expansion of the fleet with the acquisition of the J-31 stealth fighter jets in the near future.

Tagged as a game changer, the J-31 has a similar mission profile as the J-20 and US F-22A Raptor. Designed as a stealth-enabled air superiority jet with cross-cutting technologies, advanced avionics, supersonic speeds, long-range strike potential, and radar-evading capabilities, the aircraft represents technological advancement, marking a notable leap in the service’s capabilities.

The acquisition can provide the PAF with fifth-generation aircraft. The stealth feature, due to the smaller radius cross section, enhances the ability of the aircraft to engage targets without immediate detection, allowing a greater probability of a successful strike. Likewise, advanced avionics comprising advanced sensors and radar systems enable refined situational awareness, enabling early threat detection, precise targeting, and successful engagement.

The acquisition can further refine the first-shot capability that contributed to the PAF’s aerial victory over the Indian Air Force (IAF) in the Operation Swift Retort on February 27, 2019. The possession of AMRAAMs provided the first-shot capability to the PAF. It was anticipated that the combination of Rafale jets and meteor missiles might shift the capability to the Indian side. However, Pakistan addressed the threat by opting for the Beyond Visual Range (BVR) PL-15 missile.

Like the J10, J-31 can also carry various air-to-air missiles, including the PL-15 medium-range missile. Hence, the combination of stealth capabilities and firepower makes it a formidable asset, offsetting the advantage claimed by India. While these features are crucial, tactics and prior training also prove decisive in aerial encounters. Hence, its potential acquisition is also likely to initiate comprehensive training programmes tailored to materialize the advanced features of the aircraft for missions’ success.

The potential acquisition is likely to mark another chapter of ongoing close cooperation on fighter aircraft with China. Pakistan is familiar with Chinese military technology, including fighter aircraft, and surface-to-air missile systems, among other weaponry.

Acquiring weaponry from the same buyer also mitigates integration challenges faced by the IAF due to its diverse weaponry acquired from multiple retailers. It is equally pertinent to mention that contrary to perceptions, the acquisition is not a replacement for the F-16 fleet; it is an effort to modernize the existing arsenal. A successful deal with Pakistan could also open new markets for Chinese aircraft.

The future acquisition of the J-31 stealth fighter by the PAF is also likely to mark an important chapter in the regional dynamics of South Asia. The news of this potential acquisition has sounded alarm bells across the border, sparking widespread anxiety and igniting a flurry of discussions in electronic media.

The IAF is awaiting the induction of its indigenous fifth-generation aircraft – the advanced medium combat aircraft (AMCA). However, the induction may take several years – as late as 2035. In the meantime, India may resort to options such as the American F-35 aircraft or the Russian Su-57 as an interim measure to avoid suffering a tactical disadvantage. Procuring fifth-generation aircraft was also advocated in the Standing Committee on Defence (2022-2023) report, citing the delayed timelines of its indigenous counterpart.

The PAF has consistently countered the IAF’s numerical superiority through technological advancements and efficient training, which remain the cornerstone of its strategy to address threats from India. Pakistan’s acquisition becomes even more important given the presence of an aggressive and risk-tolerant regime in India.

It can provide Pakistan with a potential edge in future conflicts, improve overall military readiness, position itself as a modernized force, and bring it a step closer towards becoming the next-generation air force.

Since its inception, the PAF has consistently demonstrated its excellence in maintaining aerial dominance and safeguarding national sovereignty. Through acquiring advanced technologies and implementing efficient training programmes, the PAF has consistently showcased its commitment and visionary approach. The pursuit of the J-31 fighter aircraft marks yet another strategic step forward, ensuring the PAF remains at the forefront of addressing the nation’s evolving defence challenges.

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