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Defence Editor

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THE AIR-SUPERIORITY FIGHTER 15 ITALY'S MULTI-ROLE MISSILE 25

Cover: The GD F-16 is not just a photogenic fighter. It has the potential to become the most successful combat aircraft since the Phantom—if it can fight off the F-18and Mirage 2000

IF THE planned Harrier deal with China goes through, Britain will have sold V/Stol aircraft to

two of the three superpowers, a unique achievement in aerospace history. The third superpower is less than amused at the prospect and has attempted to put pres-sure on the British Government

in the hope of stopping the sale. The Soviet Government is

understandably nervous at being sandwiched between the Nato alliance and a re-armed China, but the proposed Harrier sale must be seen in perspective. Though the People's Liberation Army keeps more than three mil-lion men under arms, the air force which backs them up is in

need of modernisation.

The only operational Mach 2 aircraft in Chinese service are

about 80 unlicensed copies of the MiG-21, while the only modern bombers are a similar number of

Tu-16s. The remaining front-line types are copies of the MiG-17, MiG-19 and 11-28.
The Soviet Union is in the

midst of a vast upgrading pro-gramme of its own, replacing earlier types with hundreds of new Foxbats, Floggers, Fencers and Backfires. Such a re-equip-ment programme makes 300 Chinese Harriers seem modest by comparison. Kremlin rhetoric seems to be ignoring simple arithmetic. D.R.

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The

air-superiority fighter

Are fighter salesmen from East and West deluging your in-tray with brochures or swapping punches with each other in the corridor outside your office? Doug Richardson and Graham Warwick have prepared this report to help you assess the merits of everything from the diminutive Ajeet to the 26-ton F-14 Tomcat.

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VER since the days, early in the First World War, when the crew of "scout" aircraft began firing on enemy machines with rifles, service revolvers, shotguns or
any other weapons that came to hand, specialised air-craft have been developed for air-to-air combat. No single quality can ensure that a design will be successful, but when the right aircraft appears its manufacturer can reap rich rewards. The customer lists for Dassault's Mirage III, the MiG-21 Fishbed or the Northrop F-5 contains a major portion of the nations which make up the Third World. General Dynamics' F-16 has already been ordered by five Nato nations and the eventual order book could run into several thousands.

Comparing fighters is rather like comparing different

models of car or hi-fi. There is no shortage of friendly salesmen and glossy brochures, at least for Western air-craft, but they sometimes leave the reader little wiser. No one actually tells lies but the truth is sometimes stretched. At the risk of getting an Atoll or Sidewinder through the Flight office window, this article will try to establish some common yardsticks and attempt a compara-tive survey of the wide range of designs on the market. Air superiority is not a role or mission but a state of affairs. The air force which has such superiority can main-tain control of the airspace over a battle area, feeding off attacks by enemy strike aircraft while keeping hostile fighters off the tail of its own strike formations.
The classical air-superiority fighter is a highly manoeuv-rable aircraft capable of "mixing it" in close combat. But long-range air-to-air missiles are no respecters of such qualities. Any air force which sends F-16-class fighters within 100 miles of an F-14 formation will learn a new meaning for the words "air superiority" as soon as the

Yes, it does rain in the Nevada desert. Two F-I4s and an F-15 sit on the
wet concrete at Nellis AFB, awaiting another day of Red Flag mock combat