

Chengdu pushes FC-1 amid PLAAF doubts

CHENGDU Aircraft is increasing marketing efforts with the long-awaited FC-1 fighter amid continued questions over the programme's long-term viability.

Chengdu has been focusing its attention on China's People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF). The company has released images of an FC-1 full-scale mock-up to Chinese aviation magazines, although the mock-up carries "Super 7" logos, the name that was previously used for the programme.

A mock-up is also expected to appear at the Paris air show later this month.

The FC-1 is now primarily a Chinese-Pakistan venture, although the programme has received significant Russian design input and is powered by the Klimov RD-93, a derivative of the RSK MiG-29 Fulcrum's RD-33 engine, which is also used in the Chengdu J-10.

Despite repeated statements by Pakistan that China is committed to the programme, it is not clear whether the PLAAF will buy the FC-1.

India has hinted that Russia, its strategic partner, is not allowing China to sell the RD-93 to Pakistan. There have also been repeated delays in selecting a western avionics supplier, at least for the Pakistan air force's aircraft.

Meanwhile, Chinese sources say the FC-1 will be equipped with air-to-air and air-to-ground weapons, which could include a new Chinese medium-range missile.

This could be the equally long-awaited active guided missile formerly known as the AMR-1, first revealed at the 1996 Zhuhai air show.

The FC-1 must overcome the PLAAF's desire to invest its scarce budget in the Chengdu J-10 multirole fighter, the multirole Shenyang J-8IIC, and the Sukhoi Su-27 and Su-30MKK.

Chengdu is also insulating itself against an end to the FC-1 programme by investing company funding in the J-7ME, a further update of the J-7 with a chin intake and other improvements. □

Italy may lease P-3 Orions to meet maritime patrol needs

ANDY NATIVI/GENOA

ITALY'S AIR force and navy are considering the lease of Lockheed Martin P-3 Orions as a possible solution to the country's maritime patrol aircraft (MPA) needs. The discussions come in the face of delays with a combined German/Italian MPA competition.

As part of the discussions, the air force is proposing the transfer of its Dassault Atlantic MPAs to the navy. Italy has 18 aircraft split between two wings in Sardinia and Sicily. Although owned by the air force, the aircraft are manned by mixed air force/navy crews and are under the navy's operational control.

The air force is unhappy with the arrangement and is seeking to transfer full responsibility to the navy, as well as disbanding the Sardinia wing and concentrating the fleet at Sigonella, Sicily. A final decision is not expected until after the defence minister has appointed a new chief of the air staff.

The future of the Atlantic fleet is

also affecting the aircraft's replacement programme. Germany and Italy are planning a joint Atlantic replacement, but progress has been slow and a request for proposals, which should have been issued last year, has still to be released. The RFP is also described as "very basic" by sources in Rome.

One of the problems is a shortage of funding within the German defence ministry as well as the likely overall cost of the programme. Proposals include an Atlantic 3 and new or refurbished P-3s, while Italian industry has also suggested an anti-submarine warfare version of the ATR 72 regional turboprop and a possible MPA version of the Airbus Military Company's A400M airlifter.

Furthermore, although the RFP has not been issued, the new MPAs in-service date cannot be delayed any longer because the Italian Atlantics are approaching the end of their service life.

The operational availability of the aircraft is low and the cost of maintaining the aircraft is increasing.

Sources in Italy say that, while Rome awaits a possible decision to delay, downscale or withdraw from the programme, it has quietly started to seek other solutions.

Italy has started to assess the lease of US Navy P-3s, which would be refurbished and equipped with new mission systems, but would not receive upgraded cockpits or engines. Italy early this year leased Lockheed Martin F-16 fighters to allow it to retire its elderly Lockheed F-104 Starfighters and bridge the gap before the Eurofighter enters service.

Italy's MPA requirement is stated as 14 aircraft to replace the 18 Atlantics, but the preliminary P-3 lease discussions involve no more than nine aircraft. The nine would be P-3A/B airframes and are considered the minimum possible size force.

The lease could last up to 10 years and is viewed in Rome as a low-cost interim measure, allowing Italy to join the USN's Multi-mission Maritime Aircraft programme, intended to replace US P-3s from 2014. □

Hermes to fly longer after wing upgrade

Silver Arrow, a subsidiary of Elbit Systems, has received Israeli defence ministry funding to extend the wingspan of the Hermes 1500 unmanned air vehicle (UAV) to better meet the Israeli defence force's strategic UAV needs. The span has been

extended from 10m (33ft) to 15m. The changes will increase the air vehicle's endurance and allow it to carry specialised, secret payloads. The twin-engined UAV has a 1,500kg (3,300lb) maximum take-off weight and a 30h endurance.



NEWS IN BRIEF

■ **FIRST COASTGUARD ATR42**
Alenia Aerospazio has delivered the first of two ATR42MPs to the Italian coastguard. The second aircraft will be delivered in 2003. The aircraft is fitted with radar and other mission systems for search and rescue and maritime surveillance missions.

■ **AUSTRALIAN CAS**
AVM Angus Houston, currently head of the Australian Defence Force's Strategic Command, is to take over as the new chief of the Royal Australian Air Force on 19 June. He replaces Air Marshal Errol McCormack.