

Last of the big MiGs?



Mikoyan's heavyweight fighters languish in development and face uncertainty.

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THE VPK MAPO OBJECT 1.42 fifth-generation heavy fighter has yet to get airborne, but it has already been dubbed as the next "flying restaurant" by some of its detractors, a nickname last given to the 42t behemoth, the MiG-31 Foxhound.

Unlike the Foxhound, however, the 35t Object 1.42 — designed by Mikoyan, now integrated into VPK MAPO (*Flight International*, 5-11 June) — may never enter service with Russia's armed forces to meet the multi-role frontal fighter (MFI) requirement for which it is designed. Two prototypes of the 1.42 (which were dubbed the 1.44s) have been built, with taxi trials carried out as long ago as late 1994. A first flight has yet to be made.

FIFTH-GENERATION ASPIRATIONS

The MFI was intended to fly in 1990-1, with the aircraft expected to enter service with the air force after the turn of the century. The MFI was intended to replace the Sukhoi Su-27/Su-27M in the air-superiority role. Delays in the programme have, in part, been the result of developmental problems with the Lyulka/Saturn AL-41F engines, although this does not account for the overall slowness of the project. Despite

protestations by Gen Pyotr Deynekin, head of the air force, that a fifth-generation fighter remains central to its requirements, the future of the 1.42 appears increasingly bleak.

Mikhail Waldenberg, general designer with VPK MAPO, is intimately associated with the MiG-29 and, after an apparent period in the wilderness, has re-emerged at the heart of one of Russia's two fighter houses.

"My personal thoughts [on the MFI] are that it all depends on how you'd like to develop a fifth-generation fighter, especially with regard to exports," he says.

Exports have become the focus of attention for both MAPO-MiG and Sukhoi after the collapse of production orders from the air force. Factories which, in the 1980s, counted annual production runs in the hundreds are confronted by single-figure orders now. Garnering hard currency through exports, such as the MiG-29N Fulcrum deal with Malaysia, or Su-27 Flanker sales, has provided money to "drip feed" projects at home.

"Do we have a fifth-generation fighter only for the Russian air force? For me the answer is obvious. No, the fifth-generation fighter should be exportable," says Waldenberg.

With the air force now facing "genuine costs" for procuring combat aircraft, rather than hav-

ing an old, Soviet-era, wish list which disregarded capital concerns, the 1.42 may prove to be just too expensive. Anatolii Belosvet, deputy general director at MAPO-MiG, has already suggested that the air force cannot procure the 1.42 in meaningful numbers.

There are also suggestions that, within the air force hierarchy, there are those who now believe that the 1.42 no longer meets its needs, and that an alternative fifth-generation-fighter design should be pursued.

Using the analogy of the Grumman F-14 and the Lockheed Martin F-16, Waldenberg flags up the relative weakness of the F-14 from a commercial viewpoint. He asks: "Why buy the more expensive aircraft?" The same appears to be increasingly true of the 1.42, both for the air force and for export customers.

TOO HEAVY

While unwilling to discuss the configuration of "existing prototypes" in detail, Waldenberg's observations shed light on the differences of opinion within the design bureau about the fifth-generation requirement.

"If it were me," he says, "I would do the fifth-generation fighter another way. I have always believed that a 30t-class aircraft was too heavy. Look at the Tupolev Tu-128, for instance."

Within VPK MAPO it remains a matter of speculation as to exactly how much, if any, funding is now being allocated to the 1.42. It appears, now, to be no more than a trickle. A gap of 18 months between fast-taxi trials and a first flight