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$3.5Bln Weapons Deal with China Demonstrates New Dynamic

By The Moscow Times

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Relations soured in the 1990s when Russia accused China of reverse engineering the Su-27 fighter plane.

China is seeking renewed deliveries of advanced weapons from Russia with a $3.5 billion deal for fighters and submarines in the pipeline despite lingering resentment in Moscow over Chinese copying of its military technology.

Russia has not yet confirmed a deal reported last week in China's state media that Moscow had agreed to supply 24 Sukhoi Su-35 fighters and four Amur-class conventional submarines to the People's Liberation Army, or PLA, which would make it the first major arms deal between the two nations in almost 10 years.

The need to order some of Russia's most advanced military hardware indicates that shortcomings remain with some of China's home-grown defense technologies, military analysts said.

"Currently, the two sides are working on the relevant contracts, and the results are likely to be produced by the end of the year," said Vasily Kashin, an expert on Russia's arms trade with China at Moscow's Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies.

The reports of the agreements and extensive coverage of the capabilities of the fighters and submarines on China's state television also appeared timed to enhance the domestic propaganda value of the recent visit to Moscow by President Xi Jinping, his first foreign trip since he formally took office earlier this month.

"This is all being done to pump up Xi's image," said Reuben Johnson, a Kiev-based military analyst and correspondent for Jane's Information Group. "If the deal had been ready, it would have been signed when Xi was in Russia."

Xi, as chairman of China's Central Military Commission, is also commander-in-chief of the PLA. He has carefully cultivated strong links with senior military commanders over the decades as he rose through the Communist Party hierarchy.

In a series of speeches and visits to military units since he was named Communist Party chief last November, Xi has sought to cast himself as a leader who will push for China's re-emergence as a great power with the military strength to defend its sovereignty and national interests.

Russia's defense minister, General Sergei Shoigu, welcomed Xi with full military honors, and the Chinese head of state became the first foreign leader to inspect the Russian military command center in Moscow.

However, military experts in Russia said the arms deal had not been raised while Xi was in Moscow.

Preliminary agreements between the two sides had been signed late last year when former President Hu Jintao was still in office, they said.

China relied heavily on arms imports from Russia in the early years of its ongoing military buildup.

Russian analysts estimate that China took delivery of about $26 billion in weapons and technology between 1992 and 2006 in a trade that allowed the PLA to close a yawning gap between its largely obsolete inventory and modern Western hardware.

But this business began to sour in the mid-1990s when Russia accused Chinese contractors of reverse engineering what was then Russia's front-line fighter, the Su-27.

Russia sold more than 280 fighters from the Su-27 family to the PLA. There are also more than 160 of the reverse engineered version, known as the J-11, in service with the Chinese military.

Chinese aviation industry officials deny copying the Su-27, saying the J-11 superficially resembles the Russian fighter but relies heavily on locally derived technology and software.

Anger over what the Russian defense industry regarded as outright intellectual property theft

contributed to a sharp slowdown in weapons transfers by the middle of last decade with Moscow reluctant to risk selling its best hardware.

There were also fears in Moscow that arming the PLA could pose a long-term threat to Russia if there were a deterioration in ties between the two countries that share a 4,300-kilometer-long border.

However, in recent years, sales have picked up again with steady deliveries of equipment including jet aircraft engines, helicopters and missiles.

The value of new contracts signed last year exceeded $2.3 billion, Kashin said.

This is despite the growth of defense manufacturing in China that has accompanied its rise to be the world's second-largest economy. Authoritative Chinese military analysts acknowledge that Russia's defense industry still retains a substantial lead over its Chinese counterpart.

"Although China has stepped up the development of new stealth fighters and submarines in recent years, some of these technologies are not mature in key areas," said a commentary published this week in the Chinese language edition of the official Global Times newspaper.

Aviation industry experts say that China's failure to build high-performance jet engines for its fighters is one of the major reasons for its desire to buy the Su-35 in a deal that will be worth at least $1.5 billion.

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