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Russia's Modernized Soviet-Era MiG-31 Fighters to Fly for 50 Years

By The Moscow Times

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Russia has completed the first phase of modernizing its MiG-31 fighter jet fleet, a program that Deputy Defense Minister Yury Borisov said will extend the operational lives of the Soviet-built aircraft to up to 50 years, news agency RIA Novosti reported.

The planes, which were built in the 1980s and early 1990s, remain one of Russia's most capable fighter aircraft. Twenty-four of the modernized MiG-31BM planes have entered service with the air force, Borisov was quoted by RIA as saying Thursday. In total, 130 will be souped up for prolonged service, he added.

Officials had considered restarting production of the MiG-31, but decided last year the money would be better spent modernizing the existing fleet while waiting on the aviation industry to field a new design.

The air force expects impressive results from the revamp: "It is already clear that after modernization ... [the MiG-31] might be in military service for 40 to 45 years. But that isn't even the limit," Borisov said, RIA reported.

"I think we will consider the possibility of extending its lifespan to 50 years."

The modernization work is being done in Nizhny Novgorod at the Sokol aviation plant, which Borisov said would churn out 12 to 13 upgraded fighters annually.

The modernization process is intensive, requiring a complete overhaul of the interceptor's radar, flight controls and electronics. The planes are also disassembled to check for structural fatigue and then put back together.

With the MiG-31s sticking around until at least 2030, and possibly longer, the planes will be pushed to the edge of their limits. Airframes age, and the stress of flying will eventually make the MiG-31BMs unsafe to operate.

This was the problem faced by the U.S. F-15 Eagle, a Cold War contemporary of the MiG-31 manufactured since the mid-1970s.

Renowned as an exceptionally well-designed aircraft by generations of U.S. air force pilots, the entire fleet was grounded for a few months in 2007 after an F-15 disintegrated in a training flight over Missouri.

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