The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Top Three Arms Deals Expected At Upcoming MAKS Air Show

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August 19, 2015



Russian fighter jets taking part in the MAKS-2013 air show is good enough.

Russia next week will host the biennial Moscow Aviation and Space Salon (MAKS, by its Russian acronym), one of the world's largest air shows and a hub of business activity for Russian defense industry firms to hawk their wares to foreign military customers.

The last MAKS air show took place in 2013 amid a radically different business and political climate. This year's air show will kick off against the backdrop of Western sanctions against Moscow for its actions in Ukraine, and Russia's attempts to pivot its economic interests to the east.

Military hardware and weapons are some of Russia's most sought-after exports, and a wave of massive contracts signed with non-Western nations such as China, India, Algeria, and even U.S. allies in the Middle East such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan could underscore the limited

impact sanctions have had on Russia's defense industry and its ability to find eager customers.

In 2014, Russian defense exports surged to a record high of $13.2 billion, according to state arms export agency Rosoboronexport. These revenues, coupled with record levels of Russian spending on new equipment — about 2 trillion rubles ($30 billion) — drove double digit growth in revenues for seven major defense enterprises, according to the Defense News 2015 Top 100 Global Defense Companies ranking, which was released last month.

The Moscow Times took a look at some of the largest expected deals at the upcoming MAKS air show, as well as several items of interest for any aviation geeks that might attend the show. MAKS will run from Aug. 25 to 30 at Zhukovsky Airfield to the south-east of Moscow.

1) Massive Russian Air Force Fighter Purchase

One of the biggest expected contracts will be a domestic purchase of 48 Sukhoi Su-35 fighters, Russia's cutting-edge fourth generation multi-role aircraft. With Russia's fifth generation Sukhoi T-50 fighter facing procurement delays due to the collapse of the ruble, the air force is expected to focus on buying more of the older Su-35 fighters.

Last week, Vedomosti newspaper reported that the Defense Ministry will sign a 100 billion ruble ($1.5 billion) contract for 48 brand new Su-35s. Russia's United Aircraft Corporation, which owns Sukhoi, declined to comment on the Vedomosti report, saying all details will be announced at MAKS.

The contract will keep Sukhoi production lines running for several years while the Defense Ministry decides how many of the newer T-50s it wants. The company is finishing deliveries of a similar 48-fighter contract signed in 2009 this year.

2) Saudi and Jordanian Weapons Deals

There is a lot of speculation that Saudi Arabia is getting ready to buy Russian weapons systems. In the past few months Russian officials have met with the Saudi foreign and defense ministers and last week Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir confirmed that the Kingdom was interested in Russian Iskander-E tactical missiles.

But Saudi Arabia might be interested in more than advanced missiles. News website Lenta.ru reported Tuesday that the Saudi and Jordanian kings would join President Vladimir Putin to visit the MAKS air show on its opening day next week. This suggests high-profile deals with both countries, particularly involving sales of Russian ground-attack aircraft for the fight against the Islamic State.

Saudi Arabia in particular may be after special naval versions of Russia's Ka-52 attack helicopter, which were purpose built for service aboard the two French-built Mistral helicopter carriers that Russia ordered in 2011. France cancelled their delivery last year, and Russia recently received a refund.

Last week, French newspaper Le Monde reported that Saudi Arabia and Egypt were interested in purchasing the Mistral-class ships, and Russia might be interested in selling the Ka-52 helicopters designed for naval service, now that it has no real use for them.

3) Iranian S-300 and related weapons deals

According to news agency RIA Novosti, Iran will send a delegation to the MAKS air show to scope out Russian weapons systems. Free from international sanctions, Tehran may be looking to go on a military shopping spree to refit its vintage 1970s military.

Though it is not known if Tehran is looking to buy new Russian aircraft next week, Iranian Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan was quoted by the Iranian Fars news agency as saying the two sides were in negotiations for a purchase of Russian-made fighter jets, news agency Reuters reported Tuesday.

However, the big ticket item that Iran is eager to buy is Russia's advanced S-300 air defense system, manufactured by Russia's largest defense firm, Almaz-Antey.

Fars quoted Dehghan as saying "the text of the contract is ready and our friends will go to Russia next week to sign the contract," news agency Reuters reported.

According to Dehghan, Iran is interested in up to four battalions of S-300 launchers, but did not specify how many of the advanced anti-aircraft missile launchers are in each battalion — a figure that varies from military to military.

RIA Novosti reported on Wednesday that the S-300 systems would be delivered to Iran by the end of this year, citing an unidentified senior Russian Foreign Ministry official.

Other Items of Interest at MAKS 2015

If you are not a member of a Middle Eastern military delegation on the hunt for shiny new Russian equipment, the MAKS air show should still have plenty to offer hardcore aviation buffs.

Though the MAKS airshow is a major venue to sign new international and domestic military equipment contracts, the show is also a chance for defense firms from around the world to showcase new projects that they hope to eventually bring to market.

The show will run from Aug. 25 to 30, with general admission opened to the public on Aug. 28. There will be aerial demonstration of Russian aircraft on every day of the show, and various pavilions with full-scale and desktop models of airplanes, spacecraft and assorted military equipment on display.

If you do make it to the show, you might get to see the first public appearance of Russia's brand-new Sukhoi T-50 stealth fighter since the 2013 MAKS air show. The fighter was a noticeable no-show at this year's Victory Day parade, where a large variety of new Russian weapons were on display.

Famous Russian airplane maker MiG will also reportedly resurrect an early 1990s stealth fighter aircraft known as the MiG 1.44 and put it on display, ostensibly in hopes of generating renewed interest for the design, which lost out to Sukhoi's T-50 in the early 2000s.

Russia's Progress rocket company, maker of the Soyuz rocket which is currently used to send astronauts and cosmonauts to the International Space Station, will unveil a new rocket design

known as the Soyuz-5.

General admittance tickets run 850 rubles ($13) and are available for sale online at the show's website, aviasalon.com*.*

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Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/08/19/top-three-arms-deals-expected-at-upcoming-maks-air-show-a49057