

Russia to Finally Receive a Few Stealth Fighters Next Year

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The Russian Air Force, after years of waiting, is expecting to finally receive the first five of its shiny new Sukhoi T-50 stealth fighter jets sometime in 2017, Air Force chief Colonel-General Viktor Bondarev told reporters Friday, the Interfax news agency reported.

The T-50 is Russia's newest military aircraft, designed in part with India to cut costs and secure a healthy user base beyond Russia's Defense Ministry – a measure to ensure production lines at Sukhoi stay busy once the fighter enters serial production next year.

“Next year, we are completing testing of the T-50,” Bondarev said. “Therefore, in the next year, I think we will start to receive the first five aircraft. [Meanwhile], we won't stop receiving new Su-35s, Mi-28s, and Ka-52s,” he said, referring to current generation Russian aircraft.

The Air Force is also busy modernizing its Soviet-built fleets of long-range

nuclear bombers like the Tu-95 “Bear” propeller-driven bomber and the sleeker Tu-160 “Blackjack” supersonic bomber.

Designed to be Moscow's answer to the U.S. F-22 stealth fighter jet, the Sukhoi T-50 is constructed largely of radar absorbing composites and the contours of its air-frame are streamlined to further minimize the signature it leaves on radar displays – making it theoretically hard to detect.

But amid economic crisis, the Russian Defense Ministry is not as enthusiastic about the new jet's prospects as they once were. According to the original draft of President Vladimir Putin's 20 trillion ruble (\$300 billion) military modernization drive, the Air Force was to buy 52 of the new fighter jets.

To the manufacturer's disappointment, last year the Defense Ministry pumped the breaks on the T-50 program, likely for economic reasons. While Russian military spending is higher than ever and procurements have received privileged exemptions from cuts, things are now more expensive to build.

And so, Deputy Defense Minister Yury Borisov – the ministry's procurement czar – last year announced that the ministry would buy just 12 of the new fighters out of the gate. After having some time to evaluate their performance, they will consider buying more of the T-50 jets.

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