



## SU-35 SALE TO CHINA: THE CHALLENGE FOR INDIA

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After many years of effort it seems that Russia has agreed to sell 24 Sukhoi SU-35 'Super Flanker' aircraft to China. According to a recent report in Jane's Defence Weekly the deputy director of Russian state run arms export company Rosoboronexport (ROE) stated that a contract for the delivery of 24 SU-35 may be realised some time in 2014<sup>1</sup>. This article briefly examines the background to this announcement and the implications for India



*SU-35 showing its hard points. Each wing has four hard points – one on the wingtip and three under-wing stations. There are two hard points on the underside of the fuselage on the centreline and one under each engine. Photo: Sukhoi Company website*

<sup>1</sup> Jane's Defence Weekly, Vol. 50, Issue 58, September 18, 2013

The SU-35 is an advanced version of the SU-27SK and SU-30MKK models which China had previously procured from Russia. China at present has 148 SU-27SK/SU-30MKK and another 165 license produced SU-27, which the Chinese have labelled J-11<sup>2</sup>. The Russian Air Force had ordered for 48 SU-35S in 2009 (SU-35S is the production version). The first aircraft was delivered in 2011 with final delivery of the last aircraft expected to be in 2015. The SU-35S is Russia's top of the line fighter and claimed by Sukhoi to be a "4++ generation aircraft employing technologies of the fifth generation." Some of its main features are<sup>3</sup>:-

- a) Fire Control Radar – It is equipped with the NIIP IRBIS-E radar which has a pick up range of 400 km on 3m<sup>2</sup> target.
- b) Infra-red search and tracking range – 90 km (Rear hemisphere); 50 km (Front hemisphere).
- c) Thrust - 2 X SATURN 117S engines with 14,500 kgf (kilograms-force) thrust and all aspect thrust vectoring control (TVC) nozzle.
- d) Super cruise capability - that means it will be capable of cruising at supersonic speed in dry power.
- e) Fuel – Internal 11,500 kg / 14350 l + 2 x Drop Tanks 3200 kg/ 4000l (1600 kg/ 2000 l each tank)
- f) Ferry range – 4500 km; maximum low level range – 1580 km.
- g) Maximum speed – 2.25M at 11 km altitude; 1400 kmph / 1.14M at low level.
- h) Armament – One GSh 30 mm gun with 150 rounds + 8000 kg of bomb load on 12 external hard points. It can carry a variety of air to ground, air to ship and air to air weapons. The two new weapons developed for this aircraft are the Novator Club anti ship missile and the K-100 long range air to air missile with a range of 400km.

China had been trying to buy the SU-35 since 2006 but the Russians were not keen to sell due to fears of China's propensity for illegally making reverse engineered copies and selling them to other countries at a cheaper rate. China's on/off negotiations for the SU-35 were most recently renewed in 2011 and even now other than the statement from Rosoboronexport there is no other confirmation that the deal is close to conclusion. If the

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<sup>2</sup> Figures of aircraft strength are from Military balance 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Jane's All the World's Aircraft Development & Production 2013-2014

deal goes through, it will be for the first time in a decade that Russia has offered offensive weapons to China.

It will also mark the first time that Russia will supply China with a more powerful fighter aircraft compared with what it has supplied to India. In the past, the opposite was the rule. For example, the Su-30MKK fighters Russia sold to China were no match for the Su-30MKIs supplied to India at about the same time. The Chinese planes had inferior radar and without the thrust vectoring engines the Indian version had. This time the situation has been reversed with the SU-35 having more powerful engines and more sophisticated radar, weapons and avionics compared to the SU-30 MKI<sup>4</sup>.

Apparently, the Russians seem to have reviewed their stand, on China, aiming for financial gains for their military industrial complex. The sale also needs to be seen in the context of the geopolitical realities of the USA-Russia-China triangle. In this case Russia seems to be the centre piece in the balance of power game between USA and China. What position Russia takes will be an important factor in the race for top spot between USA and China<sup>5</sup>. Russia and China have got into a bear hug to renew their defence ties at a time when USA-Russia relations are at a low ebb due to disagreement on the NATO's future role, differences on the Syrian civil war crisis and the Snowden incident. China is also miffed at Obama's re-balancing strategy in Asia-Pacific region which it sees as aimed at containing China.

The implications of this for India are:-

- a) While the SU-35 will give PLAAF a technological advantage over the IAF, this can be overcome if India gets its act together and pursues its options with vigour. If the deal is finalised next year it will still take, approximately, another four years for aircraft deliveries to be completed. In the meanwhile India needs to retain its position as the dominant air force in the region by speeding up development of the stealth fighter being built in collaboration with Russia. The stealth aircraft has been labelled as Fifth Generation Fighter Aircraft (FGFA) by the IAF and is planned to

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<sup>4</sup> 'The Hindu' newspaper dated March 8, 2013 <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-dragon-gets-a-bear-hug/article4485335.ece>, accessed on October 3, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> 'The Hindu' ibid.

enter production in 2022 but this needs to be hastened up. The FGFA will provide India the technological advantage to counter the SU-35 threat. China is also producing a new stealth fighter called the J-20 which is likely to enter service in 2018. There are reports that the J-20 program is running into delays due to China's failure to develop a powerful aero engine. While China has been able to copy Russian airframes they have not been able to copy aero engines. It is likely that the sale of SU-35 will give them access to technology of the advanced 117S engine of the SU-35. This is a trend which will have to be observed in the coming years.

- b) India also needs to finalise the 126 aircraft (18 aircraft to be purchased in fly away condition and 108 to be license built in India by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited) Rafale deal with Dassault of France. This deal has run into rough weather with Dassault refusing to take responsibility for the 108 aircraft to be built in India by HAL because of HAL's poor record of quality control and capability to meet delivery schedules. All these problems have to be solved quickly for the deal to move forward. The planned upgrade of 80 SU-30MKI to 'Super Sukhoi' standard also needs to be expedited<sup>6</sup>. The Rafale and Super Sukhoi will give the IAF a matching capability to the SU-35.
- c) With USA ready to treat India on par with its closest allies, UK and Australia, in terms of providing advanced military technology, India needs to pursue this opportunity and reduce its dependence on Russia for advanced weapon systems. Russian weapons generally require more maintenance and are in many cases lagging behind Western technology. India must procure the most optimum weapons from the West, Russia or Israel, to deter China by retaining the edge which IAF has over PLAAF.
- d) To counter China, the geopolitical options also need to be explored. The opportunity to pursue strategic partnerships with USA, Japan, Vietnam and other south-east Asian countries concerned about China's growing belligerence, needs to be taken advantage of without worrying about China's antagonism.

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<sup>6</sup> "IAF to Upgrade SU-30MKIs to Super Sukhoi standard" The Economic Times November 28, 2012.

China is going full steam ahead in modernising its military power. India is the only front line state capable of challenging China and it is India's air power which can keep China at bay. India must accept this challenge lest it be steam-rolled into submission by China's over assertiveness.

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