

Chinese weapons gave Pakistan a new edge against India

America and its allies are now scrambling for details

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Flying high

INDIA'S FOUR-DAY military showdown with Pakistan set several new precedents. For military officials from outside the region, the most intriguing one was Pakistan's use of advanced Chinese fighter jets and missiles in aerial combat with Western-made counterparts.

What's more, Pakistan claims that its Chinese J-10C fighters and their PL-15 air-to-air missiles prevailed. It says they shot down five of India's fighters, including three French Rafales and two older Russian ones, on May 7th. And the dogfight of more than an hour involving 114 aircraft was conducted entirely beyond visual range, according to Pakistan's air force.

India has neither confirmed nor denied that, saying only that all its pilots are safe while claiming to have destroyed some "high-tech" Pakistani warplanes (which Pakistan denies, reporting only minor damage to one). Still, independent reports suggest that some Indian jets crashed, including at least one Rafale.

Pakistan's use of Chinese arms is no surprise. China has provided them for decades and is now its biggest supplier. But China's modern fighters were previously untested in combat and thought inferior to Western equivalents. This would be the first combat loss of a Rafale.

China's government has said only that it is unfamiliar with the issue. But *China Space News*, one of its state-run defence industry publications, reported on May 12th that Pakistan had used a new system in which air defences locked on to targets. Fighters would then fire missiles at them from afar, guided towards them by other aircraft. It did not say Chinese hardware was used but Pakistan also has Chinese air-defence equipment (which India says it jammed) and airborne radar aircraft.

The claims have grave implications for India. It has modernised its forces in the past decade by buying 62 Rafales and is considering buying more. Pakistan, meanwhile, has added 150 JF-17 fighters, most jointly made with China, since 2007 and has bought 20 J-10Cs since 2022.

America and its allies have cause for alarm too. China does not use the smaller, older JF-17 but it operates J-10Cs, including around Taiwan, so they could feature in a war with America over the self-

governed island. And though China has sold them only to Pakistan, others may now show interest (shares in the J-10C's manufacturer have surged).

Even if Pakistan's claim is confirmed, that would not prove the J-10C's superiority over the Rafale or other Western aircraft, many of which can perform a wider variety of missions. Still, military officials around the world are scrambling for more details and, in some cases, preparing to update war plans. ■