

China's stealth fighter J20 takes to air

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President Hu Jintao confirmed China yesterday conducted its first test flight of a stealth fighter jet, which marks dramatic progress in the country's efforts to develop cutting-edge military technologies.

After talks with the Chinese president, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates said Hu told him that the maiden test flight of the advanced J-20 fighter jet prototype was not timed to coincide with his visit and had been planned earlier.

"I asked President Hu about it directly, and he said that the test had absolutely nothing to do with my visit and had been a preplanned test. And that's where we left it," Gates told reporters.

On January 6, just days ahead of the J20 test flight, President Hu signed an order, awarding a first-class service merit to Gan Xiaohua, a senior aircraft engine expert from a PLA Air Force's equipment research institute.

Gates is visiting Beijing, seeking to improve often tense military relations.

Guan Youfei, deputy director of Foreign Affairs Office of China's Defense Ministry, said yesterday the development of China's military hardware "is not aimed at any other country or any specific target". Weaponry was developed to safeguard China's sovereignty, national security and territorial integrity, and to adapt to the world's military changes, he said.

China yesterday successfully tested its radar-eluding fighter.

The prototype plane, known as J-20, took off from an airstrip at the site of Chengdu Aircraft Industrial Group at 12:50pm in the southwestern city of Chengdu.

The flight lasted for about 18 minutes, with a J-10 fighter - China's last homegrown jet - accompanying the J-20.

Although it will be some years before the J-20 enters service, it is a potential rival to the US F-22 Raptor, the only stealth fighter currently operating.

The US is also employing stealth technology on the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, while Russia's Sukhoi T-50's stealth fighter made its maiden flight last year and is set to enter service in about four years.

In photographs, China's twin-engine J-20 appears larger than either the Russian or US fighters, potentially allowing it to fly further and carry heavier weapons.

The plane is developed by the Chengdu Aircraft Industrial Group.

Stealth technology is difficult to master as it relies on systems to hide the presence of the plane, while equipping the pilot with information to attack an enemy, military analysts say. Emissions must be hidden and the fuselage sculpted to avoid detection by radar and infrared sensors.

Despite the challenges, the J-20's entry into the test flight stage seems to indicate China is progressing faster than expected with the new technology, even though the plane's true capabilities aren't known, military analysts say.

Analysts said two prototypes have been developed, with one employing a Russian engine and the other a Chinese one. It wasn't clear which prototype flew yesterday.

"Source: Shanghai Daily/People's Daily Online "