

Beware of Selling to China

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Over the last several weeks, news reports have suggested that China and Russia are once again nearing an agreement on a Chinese purchase of 24 advanced Su-35 fighter jets. Many analysts consider the aircraft among the world's most advanced fighters.

On the surface, this deal seems like a win-win for both parties. Russia gains a much-needed customer, while China gains access to some of the world's best defense technology. This sale would have long-term ramifications for both parties.

Russia would be wise to look to the recent past, which offers clues showing why a sale to China would be a foolish mistake. The last major aircraft deal between Moscow and Beijing involved the Su-27 Flanker in the 1990s. Russia hadn't sold technological advanced military hardware to Beijing since the so-called Sino-Soviet split, when a rise in tensions sparked border clashes in 1969.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in December 1991, the Russian arms industry was struggling to survive. Russia was overflowing with weaponry that could help the Chinese jump ahead

generations, so a partnership appeared to make sense for both nations.

For China, gaining access to state-of-the-art defense technology was of vital importance. Chinese strategists were stunned at the speed at which the U.S. was able to overwhelm Iraqi armed forces in the 1990-91 Gulf War. Chinese strategists realized that much of their weaponry was obsolete in the face of U.S. high-precision munitions, stealth bombers and advanced fighter aircraft. Russian technology could provide a much-needed boost toward modernization.

In 1996, China and Russia deepened their partnership. Beijing paid about \$2.5 billion for a license to manufacture an additional 200 Su-27s at the Shenyang Aircraft Co. in China. The contract had an important provision: The Chinese version of the aircraft, which included imported and advanced Russian avionics, radar and engines, couldn't be exported. The provision presumably protected Russia from competition in the international arms market from its own technology.

Unfortunately for Russia, the deal was not completed. After building 100 or so jets, China canceled the contract in 2004. Beijing said the planes no longer met its specifications. Three years later, China tore the agreement to shreds when it developed a new fighter aircraft, the J-11B. The plane looked like an exact copy of the Su-27. China denies that it copied the plane, saying that it used 90 percent indigenous parts and that it developed superior domestic avionics and radar equipment.

Having been deceived once before, Russia has much more to lose going forward. Russia would be selling a small amount of fighters, just 24, in a deal that is believed to be worth \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion. The proposed agreement would transfer some of the world's most advanced fighter technology to an export competitor. Considering the cost of developing such an advanced fighter, China would gain access to a treasure trove of information that would once again allow it to create a domestically created version for export. Russia would once again be handing its best technology to China, and that technology could be used in competition for lucrative defense contracts.

Russia and China are also hard at work on fifth-generation fighters, which require highly advanced engines. Many defense analysts have concluded that China has thus far been unable to produce an engine needed capable of powering a stealth aircraft that could compete with U.S. planes like the F-35. Access to Russian engine technology could provide the technological infusion needed to bridge the gap.

Beyond technology transfers and export sales, Moscow must look to its own strategic self interest. While ties between both nations at present are cordial, they have had strained relations throughout their history. Selling such highly sophisticated technology to a nation that someday could be a competitor in the Asia-Pacific region would be a big mistake. Looking at the long term, both sides may see each other as regional competitors, and Beijing's influence is growing. Russia would then face an adversary that possesses highly sophisticated military technology that it helped develop.

Russia would gain very little in selling its best defense technology to China. It is a lesson it learned once before. It does not need to repeat the same mistake.

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