

Revealed: Why Sri Lanka Backed Off the Sino-Pakistani JF-17 Thunder

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As Benjamin Baker wrote last week in *The Diplomat*, the JF-17 *Thunder*, a low-cost multi-role fighter built collaboratively by China and Pakistan, has run into some problems on the global fighter market. Recently, every time it appears to have locked down a buyer, problem crop up. Malaysia became the latest supposed buyer of the JF-17 to come out publicly and say that there was no finalized deal. Despite being competitively priced, the JF-17 has proved to be a tough sell for Pakistan Aeronautical Complex and China's Chengdu Aircraft Corporation, the joint manufacturers of the fighter.

The case of Sri Lanka is the latest curious case of a prospective JF-17 buyer backing down. As Franz-Stefan Gady reported recently, Colombo was expected to sign a multi-million dollar deal to purchase 8 to 12 units of the JF-17 during Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's state visit there last week. Despite a range of announced deals, a JF-17 purchase was not announced during Sharif's time in Colombo.

Shortly after Sharif's visit, Sri Lanka's minister of defense, Karunasena Hettiarachchi, denied that the JF-17 was even discussed. "The matter did not even come up for discussion during the talks [with the Pakistani government]," he said, according to *The Colombo Gazette*. He added that "if there arises a requirement for Sri Lanka to procure aircraft of this nature, in keeping with the policy of the Government of Sri Lanka to maintain transparency, expressions of interest will be called for, from all concerned."

However, mere days after the deal was reported, sources claimed that the deal had been cancelled. The reason for the cancellation of the deal is revealing of current diplomatic dynamics in South Asia. According to *The Indian Express*, the Sri Lankan government, led by President Maithripala Sirisena, canceled its plans to purchase the JF-17s after a "diplomatic missive" from New Delhi suggesting that Colombo should refrain from adding these aircraft to its fleet.

The report adds that New Delhi included a negative technical assessment of the JF-17 and "pointed out that [Sri Lanka's] defense requirements did not need fighters." According to the report, the Indian government delivered a "non-paper"—described as a "white sheet of paper without a letterhead of signature"—to the Sri Lankan government weeks ahead of Sharif's planned visit.

If true, Sri Lanka's decision to hold back on the purchase of JF-17 fighters demonstrates that the Sirisena-led government in Colombo is far more deferential to Indian interests than its predecessor was. Under Mahinda Rajapaksa, the former Sri Lankan president, the country tilted considerably toward China. After his surprise election victory last January, Sirisena signaled an intent to balance Sri Lanka's foreign policy by visiting New Delhi before Beijing.

It doesn't appear that India is planning on offering Sri Lanka a substitute for the JF-17. New Delhi's suggestion that Sri Lanka does not require multi-role fighters for its defense needs suggests that it does not plan to do so in the future. (The closest Indian analog, in terms of cost-per-unit, is the HAL Tejas Light Combat Aircraft, but its feature-set is very different from what the JF-17 offers.)

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