China’s largest air show takes off with fighter jets, attack drones

AFP- Stealth fighter jets and attack drones took centre stage as China’s largest air show officially opened on Tuesday, an opportunity for Beijing to showcase its growing military might to potential customers and rivals alike.

China has poured resources into modernising and expanding its aviation capabilities as it faces off against the United States and others around regional flashpoints like Taiwan.

Record numbers of Chinese warplanes have been sent around the self-ruled democratic island, which Beijing claims as its territory, over the past few years.

The star of Airshow China, which showcases Beijing’s civil and military aerospace sector every two years in the southern city of Zhuhai, is the new J-35A stealth fighter jet.

Its inclusion in the airshow suggests it is nearly ready to enter operation, which would make China the only country other than the United States to have two stealth fighters in action, experts said.

The J-35A is lighter than China’s existing model, the J20, and looks more similar in design to a US F-35.

A group of J20s performed a display flight on Tuesday morning, flying in a diamond formation across a grey sky.

State news agency Xinhua quoted military expert Wang Mingzhi as saying the combination of the two models greatly enhances the People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF)’s “ability to conduct offensive operations in high-threat and contested environments”.

– Attack drones –

The airshow will feature a dedicated drone zone for the first time, reflecting their increased prominence in warzones, including Ukraine.

The SS-UAV – a massive mothership that can rapidly release swarms of smaller drones for intelligence gathering, as well as strikes – will be on display in Zhuhai, according to the South China Morning Post.

In October the United States unveiled sanctions targeting China-based companies linked to the production of drones that Russia has deployed in Ukraine.

Moscow and Beijing have deepened military and defence ties since Russia's invasion of its neighbour three years ago, and the secretary of its Security Council, Sergei Shoigu, is due to visit Zhuhai.

This year the show's focus is squarely on the military sector, as it coincides with the 75th anniversary of the PLAAF, but China's burgeoning space industry will also be showcasing developments.

A model of a homegrown reusable space cargo shuttle will debut at the show, Xinhua reported on Monday.

Named Haoloong, the shuttle is designed to be launched on a commercial rocket, and then dock with China's space station Tiangong.

"It can re-enter the atmosphere, fly and land horizontally at a designated airport, allowing for recovery and reuse," Xinhua said.

Beijing has poured huge resources into its space programme over the past decade in an effort to catch up to traditional space powers the United States and Russia.

Reports: AFP