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J-10CE on India’s Eastern Flank and the Emerging Chinese Air-Combat Ecosystem Around India

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EXECUTIVE BRIEF & KEY FINDINGS

Bangladesh is moving towards one of the most consequential combat-aircraft acquisitions in its history. On 25 August 2026, Prime Minister Tarique Rahman’s Information and Broadcasting Adviser Zahed Ur Rahman publicly confirmed that Dhaka is advancing plans to procure Chinese J-10CE multirole fighters as part of a broader Bangladesh Air Force modernisation package that also covers attack helicopters, VIP helicopters and unmanned aerial systems. A government committee has prepared draft procurement documents, although the final number of aircraft, contract value and delivery schedule remain subject to approval and negotiation. Reuters reported that Bangladesh is considering as many as 24 aircraft. Earlier Bangladeshi government documents reviewed by local media had envisaged 20 J-10CEs under a package estimated at roughly US$2.2 billion.The acquisition should not be interpreted as evidence that Bangladesh is preparing for military confrontation with India. Such a conclusion is unsupported by currently available evidence and would overlook Bangladesh's legitimate requirement to replace an ageing fighter fleet. The more important development lies elsewhere.If the programme proceeds, India could eventually face variants of the same Chinese combat-aircraft family across three strategically relevant directions. Pakistan already operates the export J-10CE. The People's Liberation Army Air Force operates hundreds of the more capable domestic J-10C alongside J-16 and J-20 aircraft. Bangladesh could now become another operator of the J-10CE on India's eastern flank.This does not create a China-Pakistan-Bangladesh air alliance. It does, however, gradually expand a Chinese-origin combat aviation ecosystem around India that could share technological characteristics including AESA radars, Chinese datalinks, electronic warfare architectures, long-range air-to-air weapons and common training and maintenance philosophies. The strategic concern

> *for India is therefore less the addition of 20 or 24 fighters to Bangladesh's inventory than the diffusion of an increasingly mature Chinese air-combat architecture into another neighbouring air force.The timing is especially important. Dhaka has openly acknowledged that the reported performance of Pakistan's J-10CE during the May 2025 India-Pakistan conflict influenced its assessment of the aircraft. Reuters reported that U.S. officials had high confidence that Pakistani J-10 aircraft launched air-to-air missiles that brought down at least two Indian military aircraft during that confrontation, including at least one Rafale, although many details of the engagement and Pakistan's broader claims remain disputed.CNAWS assesses that a Bangladesh J-10CE acquisition would not fundamentally alter the India-Bangladesh military balance. It would, however, represent a qualitative transformation of Bangladesh's air-combat capability and expand India's exposure to Chinese aerospace technology across multiple fronts. Of greater long-term concern would be any subsequent convergence involving Chinese weapons, Pakistani operational training, integrated air-defence systems and common tactical doctrine.*

What Bangladesh Has Actually Decided

Reporting surrounding the programme has occasionally overstated its status. Bangladesh has not publicly announced the signing of a final J-10CE contract with a confirmed quantity and delivery schedule. What has been officially acknowledged is that the government is moving forward with the procurement process.

Reuters reported on 25 August that a government panel was preparing a draft agreement for formal negotiations with China. Zahed Ur Rahman did not disclose the number of aircraft, price or delivery timetable and said these would be settled during negotiations. Reuters nevertheless noted local reporting that Dhaka could acquire as many as 24 fighters.

There is, however, an earlier and more detailed procurement trail. Documents reviewed by *The Business Standard* in October 2025 indicated that Bangladesh was preparing to acquire 20 J-10CE fighters for approximately US$2.2 billion, with acquisition, training, maintenance and associated expenditure included. The reported plan envisaged implementation during FY2025-26 and FY2026-27 with payments extending over ten fiscal years. *The Daily Star* subsequently reported that an April 2025 document from the Chief Adviser's Office had given in-principle approval for the 20-aircraft proposal. The discrepancy between 20 and 24 aircraft suggests either that the requirement has evolved or that multiple configurations remain under consideration. For intelligence assessment purposes, CNAWS therefore treats 20 to 24 J-10CE aircraft as the current probable procurement envelope rather than a confirmed final order.

Why Dhaka Wants the J-10CE

Bangladesh has a genuine fighter-replacement problem. Its fighter force has long depended upon Chinese F-7 variants and a small number of Russian MiG-29s. FlightGlobal's published inventory listed 36 F-7s and six MiG-29s in Bangladesh Air Force service. A modern multirole replacement has therefore been an operational requirement rather than an unexpected strategic shift. Bangladesh's Ministry of Defence has itself described Air Force modernisation, including new aircraft, radar and advanced equipment, as part of Forces Goal 2030.

The J-10CE offers several attractions. It is substantially more capable than the F-7 family it could ultimately replace. The underlying J-10C design incorporates an active electronically scanned array radar, modern datalinks, satellite communications capability, improved electronic warfare systems and compatibility with advanced Chinese air-to-air and air-to-surface weapons. RUSI characterises the J-10C as a capable modern medium-weight fighter with access to the PL-15 long-range air-to-air missile family.

Cost is another factor. Rahman publicly contrasted Chinese aircraft with European fighters such as the Rafale and Eurofighter Typhoon, arguing that comparable Chinese platforms were considerably cheaper. Bangladesh had explored

Western alternatives, including Eurofighter demonstrations, but acquiring an advanced Western fighter fleet would impose significantly greater acquisition, training and sustainment costs.

China additionally offers something Western suppliers may struggle to match in Bangladesh's case. Beijing already occupies a central position inside the country's defence supply chain. Reuters notes that China has supplied Bangladesh with combat aircraft, tanks, naval vessels and missile systems over the past two decades and remains Dhaka's largest source of military hardware. A J-10CE acquisition would therefore involve less of a geopolitical and logistical transition than introducing an entirely new Western combat-air ecosystem.

Operation Sindoor Changed the J-10CE's Export Story

The most revealing aspect of Dhaka's announcement is that Bangladeshi officials explicitly connected their interest in the aircraft to its reported performance during the May 2025 India-Pakistan conflict. This deserves attention. Before May 2025, the J-10CE was primarily an export fighter whose only confirmed foreign operator was Pakistan. After the India-Pakistan engagement, the aircraft acquired something extremely valuable in the international defence market.

Two U.S. officials told Reuters in May 2025 that Pakistan had used Chinese-made J-10 aircraft to launch air-to-air missiles against Indian aircraft and that at least two Indian aircraft were shot down. One official identified at least one of those aircraft as a Rafale. Reuters also emphasised that major tactical details remained unknown and that Pakistan's wider claims could not simply be accepted at face value. However, no confirmation has been received by New Delhi with regards to these claims.

That distinction matters. The episode should not be reduced to a simplistic conclusion that the J-10CE is technologically superior to the Rafale. Air combat outcomes depend upon airborne early warning, electronic warfare, datalinks, missile employment, pilot situational awareness, command and control, tactics and the geometry of the engagement. Indeed, this may be the most important lesson for Bangladesh. What attracted attention in 2025 was not merely the J-10 airframe. It was the Chinese-Pakistani kill chain surrounding the aircraft.

RUSI has emphasised that modern Chinese air power increasingly depends upon the integration of AESA-equipped fighters, long-range missiles, electronic warfare, airborne sensors and datalinks rather than the performance of an individual aircraft considered in isolation. For Bangladesh, buying the J-10CE could therefore become the first step towards importing portions of that broader architecture.

The PL-15E Factor

The weapon package accompanying the aircraft will be at least as important as the number of J-10CEs purchased. The obvious system to watch is the PL-15E beyond-visual-range air-to-air missile. The International Institute for Strategic Studies reported an advertised export range of approximately 145 kilometres for the PL-15E when the missile was publicly displayed, while noting that the domestic Chinese PL-15 has been associated with substantially greater reach. The export missile incorporates modern active-radar guidance and is specifically associated with aircraft including the J-10CE.

Open-source range figures must always be handled cautiously because actual engagement distance depends upon launch altitude, speed, target manoeuvre, electronic warfare and multiple other variables. The operational significance nevertheless remains clear. A Bangladesh Air Force equipped with J-10CEs and PL-15E-class weapons would move from predominantly ageing short and medium-range fighter capability into contemporary beyond-visual-range combat. This represents a qualitative jump far larger than the raw number of aircraft suggests.

A Chinese Fighter Family on Multiple Indian Fronts

This is where the development becomes strategically relevant to India. Pakistan operates the J-10CE. China operates the J-10C. Bangladesh could soon operate the J-10CE. The geographical result would place variants of essentially the same fighter family in air forces to India's west, north and east. That does not mean these air forces would function as a single force. Their command systems, strategic objectives and political relationships remain fundamentally different.

But there are still significant implications. India would increasingly encounter a common technological baseline in different theatres. Electronic support measures could repeatedly face Chinese radar emissions. Indian aircrew could increasingly encounter similar missile families, datalink philosophies and electronic-warfare approaches during exercises or contingencies. Intelligence gathered on Indian tactics by one Chinese-equipped force could also be technologically relevant to others, even without direct operational coordination.

Common equipment reduces the technical barriers to future cooperation. It can facilitate training exchanges, simulator use, maintenance assistance, weapons familiarity and tactical knowledge transfer. The significance therefore lies not in present-day interoperability alone but in interoperability potential.

The Pakistan Link Deserves Close Attention

This dimension has become considerably more important during 2026. Bangladesh and Pakistan have rapidly expanded military engagement. In January, Bangladesh Air Force Chief Air Chief Marshal Hasan Mahmood Khan visited Pakistan and met Pakistan Air Force Chief Air Chief Marshal Zaheer Ahmed Baber Sidhu.

According to Pakistan Air Force and ISPR reporting, the discussions included comprehensive training opportunities for Bangladeshi personnel, maintenance support, air-defence radar integration and potential procurement of JF-17 fighters. The Bangladeshi delegation was also shown Pakistan's National ISR and Integrated Air Operations Centre, Cyber Command and National Aerospace Science and Technology Park.

Reuters separately reported in January that Pakistan was exploring a defence arrangement with Bangladesh and possible JF-17 sales. Dhaka has now apparently leaned towards the J-10CE rather than the JF-17 for its high-end fighter requirement. Paradoxically, that could make Pakistani assistance more, rather than less, relevant. Pakistan is currently the most experienced foreign operator of the J-10CE. Its pilots, instructors and operational planners have accumulated years of experience integrating the aircraft into a mixed fleet and, critically, have used it during an actual confrontation.

If Bangladesh eventually requests conversion training, tactical assistance, simulator support, doctrine development or operational lessons from Pakistan, Islamabad could become an important intermediary between Dhaka and the Chinese aerospace ecosystem. There is no public evidence that such an arrangement currently exists. It is nevertheless one of the most important indicators India should monitor.

China Is Also Deepening the Institutional Relationship

The fighter negotiations are occurring alongside broader China-Bangladesh defence engagement. During Prime Minister Tarique Rahman's June 2026 visit to China, the two governments agreed to deepen defence cooperation through exchanges, visits and training. More significantly, they agreed to explore establishing a 2+2 dialogue mechanism covering diplomacy and defence. The same communiqué described the bilateral relationship as a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership and called for deeper maritime cooperation.

In April 2026, China's ambassador to Bangladesh also met the Bangladeshi prime minister's defence adviser, with the two sides discussing technological and military cooperation. This does not transform Bangladesh into a Chinese military ally. Dhaka continues to maintain diversified military relationships. Bangladesh hosted Exercise Tiger Lightning 2026 with U.S. Army Pacific in July, demonstrating that its defence policy remains more diversified than a simple China-alignment narrative would suggest.

That nuance is important. Bangladesh is pursuing military modernisation through multiple partnerships while attempting to maximise strategic autonomy. China, however, holds a particular advantage because of the scale, cost and existing penetration of Chinese defence equipment within Bangladesh's armed forces. The J-10CE would deepen that technological dependency at the highest end of the Air Force.

What Changes for India

India has historically faced its most demanding air threat calculations on the Pakistan and China fronts. Bangladesh has not formed part of that category. The induction of approximately two dozen J-10CEs would not change that fundamental hierarchy. The numerical and qualitative balance would continue to favour India overwhelmingly. What would change is the complexity of the eastern air environment. A modern AESA-equipped fighter armed with contemporary BVR missiles requires considerably greater attention than Bangladesh's F-7 fleet. Indian planners would have to incorporate that capability into surveillance, electronic-order-of-battle development, air-defence planning and contingency assessments even if relations remain peaceful. Military planning is capability-based as well as intent-based.

The Siliguri Corridor Question Requires Perspective

The geographic proximity of Bangladesh to India's northeast will inevitably generate discussion around the Siliguri Corridor. Some commentary is likely to exaggerate the immediate threat. Possession of 20 to 24 J-10CE fighters would not provide Bangladesh with the capability to sever the corridor or defeat Indian air power in eastern India. Any such scenario would involve India's vastly larger air, ground, missile and air-defence capabilities and would carry enormous strategic consequences for Dhaka.

The more relevant issue is operational geography. Bangladesh's position means that any deterioration in bilateral relations would require India to allocate additional ISR, air-defence and combat-air resources towards an area that has traditionally been treated differently from the Pakistan and China fronts. This becomes more important if India is simultaneously engaged in a crisis elsewhere. The strategic effect is therefore better understood as a force-planning complication rather than a new existential vulnerability.

Electronic Intelligence May Matter More Than Aircraft Numbers

One less discussed implication concerns electronic intelligence. Once Bangladesh operates J-10CEs, Indian sensors will have opportunities to observe an export version of a Chinese fighter operating routinely in a relatively accessible regional environment. That works in both directions. India could collect valuable information on radar modes, datalink behaviour, electronic emissions and operational procedures associated with the aircraft. China could also benefit from operational feedback generated by Bangladesh's use of the platform near Indian airspace.

The relationship between manufacturer and operator normally includes software updates, technical representatives, maintenance support and performance reporting. Chinese personnel supporting the fleet could consequently obtain extensive knowledge of how the aircraft performs in South Asian electromagnetic conditions. This does not imply that Bangladesh would deliberately provide intelligence on India. It means that exporting sophisticated military systems

inevitably expands the manufacturer's technical knowledge of the operating environment in which those systems are used. For India, that is a counterintelligence consideration worth monitoring.

The Emerging Ecosystem Is Bigger Than the J-10

India should avoid becoming fixated on the fighter itself. The more important question is what follows it. A modern combat aircraft requires an ecosystem consisting of ground radar, identification systems, datalinks, air-defence command networks, electronic warfare systems, simulators, mission-planning infrastructure, weapons, maintenance support and potentially airborne early-warning capability.

If Bangladesh's fighter modernisation increasingly moves towards Chinese solutions across these layers, the significance of the J-10CE purchase will increase considerably. A fleet of 20 fighters operating largely independently represents one level of capability. Twenty fighters connected to Chinese ground-based air defence, modern AESA surveillance radar, secure datalinks, UAV reconnaissance and integrated command and control represent something very different. The network matters more than the aircraft. This is the primary lesson India should derive from Pakistan's experience.

Why the Pakistan Model Matters

Pakistan demonstrates how Chinese weapons can evolve from individual acquisitions into an integrated military technology architecture. SIPRI reported that China accounted for approximately 80 percent of Pakistan's major-arms imports during 2021 to 2025. Pakistani forces now operate Chinese fighters, air-defence systems, frigates, submarines, UAVs, radars and multiple missile families.

The result is not simply Chinese equipment in Pakistani service. It is increasing technological integration across domains. Bangladesh is nowhere near that level of dependence. But its existing inventory of Chinese equipment, combined with the possible J-10CE acquisition, means India should monitor whether the relationship follows a similar direction over the next decade. The threshold to watch is not "Bangladesh buys Chinese weapons". That has happened for decades. The threshold is Bangladesh begins constructing its future networked warfighting architecture predominantly around Chinese standards.

What India Should Monitor

The first indicator will be the final weapons package. Confirmation of PL-15E missiles would be particularly important, followed by details concerning short-range air-to-air weapons, precision strike systems and electronic warfare pods.

The second indicator will be the radar and command-and-control package. Acquisition of Chinese long-range surveillance radars or stronger integration between Chinese sensors and the Bangladesh Air Force's air-defence network would increase the significance of the fighter programme.

The third will be training arrangements. Chinese pilot conversion would be expected. Formal involvement of Pakistan Air Force instructors or institutions in J-10CE tactical training would carry much greater strategic significance.

The fourth will be exercises. J-10CE participation in future China-Bangladesh or Pakistan-Bangladesh air exercises would gradually improve tactical familiarity and could generate increasingly sophisticated operational cooperation.

The fifth will be sustainment infrastructure. Permanent Chinese technical presence, major maintenance facilities, mission-data support or locally established Chinese aerospace facilities would create longer-term technological

dependence.

The sixth will be UAV integration. Dhaka's fighter programme is being discussed alongside unmanned systems. If Chinese UAVs become integrated into the same reconnaissance and command architecture, Bangladesh's capability would move beyond simple fighter modernisation towards networked air operations.

The seventh will be airborne early-warning and electronic-warfare procurement. These would be the clearest indicators that Bangladesh intends to build a complete modern air-combat system rather than simply replace ageing fighters.

What India Should Not Do

India should not respond by portraying Bangladesh as a new military adversary. That would be strategically counterproductive. Dhaka has legitimate defence-modernisation requirements and possesses the sovereign right to select its equipment suppliers. India's objective should be to prevent a normal procurement relationship from evolving unnecessarily into strategic alienation.

Nor should India assess the J-10CE through platform-versus-platform comparisons such as J-10 versus Rafale. Operation Sindoor demonstrated precisely why that approach is inadequate. Modern air combat is conducted by systems of systems. Radar coverage, electronic warfare, airborne early warning, communications, mission planning, missile kinematics and pilot situational awareness frequently matter more than headline aircraft specifications. India's response should therefore remain centred upon its own networked air-combat capability.

Strategic Assessment

The proposed J-10CE acquisition is not alarming because Bangladesh may receive two dozen sophisticated fighters. It deserves attention because it could become another node in the expanding geography of Chinese military aviation.

Beijing has achieved something significant with the J-10 programme. The platform has evolved from a largely domestic Chinese fighter into a credible export product with combat experience, an advanced missile ecosystem and growing international interest. Pakistan provided the aircraft's first major overseas foothold and its first reported combat employment. Bangladesh could now expand that footprint into the eastern subcontinent.

For China, every additional J-10CE operator has advantages beyond aircraft sales. It expands the user community for Chinese weapons. It creates long-term requirements for Chinese training, spare parts and software support. It familiarises another foreign air force with Chinese operating concepts. It strengthens the export reputation of Chinese aerospace technology and makes subsequent Chinese acquisitions easier.

For Pakistan, a Bangladeshi J-10CE fleet could create opportunities for training and knowledge transfer based on its own operational experience.

For Bangladesh, it provides a comparatively affordable route from ageing third-generation aircraft to a contemporary multirole fighter.

For India, it changes the strategic environment incrementally rather than dramatically.

No credible evidence presently supports claims of a coordinated Chinese, Pakistani and Bangladeshi air strategy against India. The political relationships and national interests of the three states remain different. But strategic planning must distinguish between alliance and ecosystem. An alliance requires common political objectives and coordinated military commitments. An ecosystem requires only shared technology, compatible weapons, training relationships,

common suppliers and increasing institutional interaction. It is the second phenomenon that India should watch. Pakistan already sits deeply inside China's military technology ecosystem. Bangladesh is not in the same category, but acquisition of the J-10CE would represent another substantial step in that direction.

CNAWS Assessment

> *Near-term military impact on India - Low to Moderate*

The prospective fleet is too small to materially overturn India's overwhelming conventional air advantage over Bangladesh.

> *Qualitative impact on Bangladesh Air Force - High*

The transition from F-7-class aircraft to J-10CEs equipped with AESA radar and modern BVR weapons would constitute one of the largest capability jumps in Bangladesh Air Force history.

> *Chinese defence-industrial influence — High and rising*

The programme would reinforce China's position as Bangladesh's dominant high-end defence supplier and could generate decades of training, sustainment and weapons dependence.

> *Pakistan-Bangladesh interoperability risk — Moderate, but worth monitoring*

The January 2026 military engagement demonstrates genuine interest in training, radar integration and aerospace cooperation. There is currently insufficient evidence to conclude that a joint operational architecture is emerging.

> *Long-term strategic significance for India — Moderate to High*

The most consequential scenario would not be Bangladesh merely operating J-10CEs. It would be the gradual integration of those fighters with Chinese missiles, radars, UAVs, electronic warfare systems and command networks while simultaneously developing operational links with a Pakistan Air Force already experienced in Chinese-origin networked air warfare.

The critical question for New Delhi is therefore not whether 20 or 24 J-10CEs can threaten India. They cannot independently transform the regional balance. The more important question is whether South Asia is beginning to witness the emergence of a Chinese combat-air ecosystem stretching from Pakistan in the west, through the PLA's own forces along India's northern frontier, to Bangladesh in the east. If that ecosystem remains principally commercial and nationally compartmentalised, its impact will be manageable. If common equipment begins to evolve into common training, shared tactical knowledge, interoperable sensors and increasingly integrated Chinese support structures, India will be confronting something strategically more consequential than another fighter procurement. It will be confronting the gradual networking of Chinese air power influence around the subcontinent. And that is the development that deserves sustained monitoring.