



A ‘STRATEGIC PIVOT FOR CHINESE WEAPONRY?’ PRC MEDIA RESPONSES TO PAKISTANI J-10’S COMBAT SUCCESS

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On 9 May 2025, a Reuters report claimed that at least one Indian Air Force Rafale combat aircraft was shot down by a Pakistani pilot flying an export variant of the Chinese J-10 fighter.¹ The defeat of a leading Western combat aircraft by a People’s Republic of China (PRC) indigenously-produced fighter has garnered significant attention globally from both military analysts and governments, with implications ranging from potential arms sales to the viability of PRC military equipment in a future conflict. This article examines initial reactions to the incident from official PRC state media and influential commenters.

The response of PRC state media in the weeks immediately following the shoot down has been muted, likely in an effort to preserve the PRC’s official stance as a relatively neutral third party.² Direct discussion of the event has been limited. The incident was first reported in a China Central Television (CCTV) report on 17 May, more than a week after the initial *Reuters* report.³ Notably, official military and Ministry of National Defense (MND) sources have been almost completely silent. An MND spokesperson was asked directly about the shoot down on 29 May but declined to answer the question, instead expressing a general desire for regional peace and stability.⁴

Despite this muted response, PRC media has subtly celebrated the event. Official sources have taken a quietly triumphalist tone, praising the capabilities of the J-10 aircraft and PRC military technology more broadly, likely with an eye toward both domestic propaganda and boosting international exports. The initial report from CCTV offers an example of this tone, saying, “Recently, our country’s export-oriented J-10CE fighter achieved actual-combat results for the first time. In air combat, it shot down multiple fighter jets in one fell swoop and suffered no losses.”⁵ In the days following the shoot down, CCTV also posted videos lauding the capabilities of both the J-10 and the PRC-made PL-15 missile allegedly used in the shoot down.⁶ The latter included the hashtag, “Why Pakistan’s Air Force is so fierce.”⁷

The PRC is also clearly interested in exploiting the event to boost international sales of the J-10. An article from *People's Daily* pointedly noted that a J-10 display at a recent Malaysian defense expo attracted delegations from over 20 countries,⁸ and a *Global Times* article explicitly connected Indonesia's interest in acquiring the J-10 to the aircraft's recent combat success:

According to media reports on Thursday, Indonesia is assessing purchasing China's J-10 fighter jets, taking into account the aircraft's recent combat success. A Chinese military affairs expert said the J-10 is an outstanding warplane that can attract many potential buyers, especially after having proved its effectiveness in real battle...Fu Qianshao, a Chinese military affairs expert, told the *Global Times* that China's J-10C fighter jet is an excellent warplane that has now been put through the test of real combat. It has fully displayed its outstanding beyond-visual-range air-to-air combat capabilities with advanced avionics and radar systems. If some countries are planning to modernize their air force fleets, the J-10C could be a highly attractive option, Fu said.⁹

While traditional state media has remained relatively quiet, the same cannot be said of more bombastic semi-official media and commentators, which do not necessarily reflect official government or Party positions but are often indicative of broadly held views among officials. Here, the celebratory tone was less guarded. For example, one *Global Times* article from 19 May stated that the incident “once again showcased the determination, integrity and confidence that underpin China's commitment to self-reliance and self-improvement in science and technology,”¹⁰ while another *Global Times* article from 3 June stated that the “J-10 series will serve as the strategic pivot for Chinese weaponry to reshape the global arms trade landscape, becoming a game-changer in the international fighter jet market.”¹¹ The former longtime *Global Times* editor Hu Xijin called the event “the most convincing appearance of Chinese weapon systems on the world stage.”¹² Some commenters, such as international security analyst Zhou Bo, have referred to this event as a “DeepSeek Moment,” comparing this event to the recent shock over the advanced technological capabilities of China's DeepSeek artificial intelligence model.¹³ Further comparisons to DeepSeek have appeared in at least one local state media outlet,¹⁴ but none have appeared in national-level state media.

As of writing, official media has mostly eschewed detailed technical analysis. However, at least one article from China Space News [中国航天报], published by PRC state-owned aerospace conglomerates CASC and CASIC, provides some interesting commentary which centers the shootdown as a success of advanced network-centric warfare. The article emphasized the importance of seamless integration of the intelligence-command-strike link, and a comprehensive combat system between aircraft, radar, and missiles. Under this system, the Pakistani Air Force successfully demonstrated a “A locks on, B shoots, C guides” capability: an air defense system locked on, transmitted the information to air platforms which launched missiles from long range, and these missiles were guided by either early warning aircraft or other fighters. In this way, the article argues, militaries should not simply procure equipment in an ad hoc manner, but keep

systems integration and interoperability in mind, something it says the Indian military has not done. Again, the underlying theme is the celebration of PRC weapons and equipment, which Pakistan has used to great success.¹⁵

Overall, PRC state media reaction to this incident was largely sparse and guarded, likely in an effort to avoid further inflaming the situation or complicating the PRC's official diplomatic stance. It did take a quietly celebratory tone, and clearly seeks to capitalize on this success to promote the J-10 and other PRC military equipment on the international arms market. The response from less "respectable" state media, most notably the nationalist tabloid *Global Times*, was less guarded in tone, reflecting a more openly triumphalist narrative and placing the success of the J-10 in the context of other recent PRC technological successes.

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ENDNOTES

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³ "The J-10CE shines for the first time in actual combat, how powerful is this export-type fighter?" [歼-10CE 首次实战大放异彩 这架外销型战机到底有多厉害?], *CCTV News* [央视新闻], May 17, 2025, <https://military.cctv.com/2025/05/17/ARTIyGGIP7fHlmc593ek1cKK250517.shtml>.

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