

CHINA'S CHALLENGE

The Shanghai-built Comac C919 jet is poised to disrupt the short- to medium-haul narrow-body airliner market. Will this mean turbulence ahead for Boeing and Airbus? *Paul Sillers* reports

The Chinese sage Confucius noted, “It does not matter how slowly you go as long as you do not stop.” That’s a doctrine that encapsulates Beijing’s game plan for self-sufficiency in its aeronautics sector and is integral to the nation’s broader “Belt and Road” strategy. The Comac C919 short/medium haul jet, launched in 2008 as China’s challenger to the Airbus A320neo and Boeing 737 MAX, has taken 15 years to reach commercial deployment (with China Eastern Airlines in May 2023). That’s a long gestation period by aeronautical standards, and yet, the C919 has now garnered 1,000-plus orders, mainly from China Eastern Airlines, China Southern Airlines and Air China, plus a raft of domestic operators.

And the sales keep rolling in. Last year, Brunei’s airline startup GallopAir placed the first overseas order for Comac’s C919. Operations, mooted for later this year, are subject to approval by Brunei’s aviation regulator. Then Comac announced a contract for 40 C919s from Tibet Airlines.

Spreading its wings further afield, at February’s Singapore Airshow, a China Eastern Airlines C919 made its international debut. The following month, Comac carried out a demonstration flight tour covering Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia and Indonesia – pointing to China’s ambition of penetrating the Airbus/Boeing duopoly for jets in the 150- to 200-seat class.

THE PRIZE AT STAKE

Driven by a booming economy, China will need 8,560 new commercial aeroplanes between now and 2042, according to Boeing’s Commercial Market Outlook – that’s 20 per cent of the world’s airline demand over the next two decades.

Of those 8,560 planes, 6,470 will be single-aisle aircraft needed to serve China’s thriving domestic market – precisely the category served by the 737, A320 and the C919. For context, the book price of all three aircraft are in the ballpark of £78m apiece, depending on options. Linked to this there’s another incentive: China’s commercial fleet will require £520 billion in maintenance, repair, training and spare parts over the forecast period. So it’s hardly surprising that Darren Hulst, Boeing’s vice president of commercial marketing, explains, “As China’s economy and traffic continue to grow, Boeing’s complete line-up of commercial jets will play a key role in helping meet that growth sustainably and economically.”

NOT IN AIRBUS’S OR BOEING’S BACKYARDS

Could the Comac plane impinge on Airbus’s and Boeing’s global dominance? Currently the C919 isn’t certified to fly commercial operations outside of China, but that doesn’t preclude prospecting for the longer term. It has been reported that Saudi Arabia is speaking with Comac about establishing a local production line. Comac chairman He Dongfeng visited Riyadh this May where, according to media reports, he informed the Future Aviation Forum delegates that, “Comac envisions enhancing global connectivity and diversity by contributing to Saudi Arabia’s aviation transportation development.”

ALLIES OR ADVERSARIES?

So the short/medium-haul jet market is a duopoly where American and European rivalries could eventually transition to a three-way contest, right? It’s complicated. Although branded Chinese, the C919 relies on Western components: GE Avionics



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China Eastern Airlines’ first C919 landed at Shanghai Hongqiao International Airport on 9 December 2022

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China’s C919 passenger aircraft takes flight in Hong Kong in 2023

supplies the flight recorder, Parker Aerospace the fuel system and Kidde the fire detection system.

Xiao Jin, vice-president Asia Pacific ATR OEM at Honeywell Aerospace, which provides the cockpit systems, brakes and wheels, says, “Over the years, we have established a close partnership with Comac... to support the development of China’s aviation industry, enabling the development of products to win business opportunities in the global aviation market.”

Then there are the engines. The 737 MAX, A320 and C919 use variants of the LEAP engine, the progeny of CFM International, a 50/50 joint venture between US manufacturer GE Aerospace and French titan Safran Aircraft Engines. Meanwhile, China is developing a homegrown engine – the CJ1000A, already undergoing flight tests – that could become an alternative to the LEAP for C919 customers.

INTERTWINED FORTUNES

While the C919 might eventually reduce its reliance upon Western suppliers, there’s a long-established and successful symbiosis between Chinese, European and American aeronautics ecosystems that has benefited all parties.

Airbus established a presence in China in 1994, and its first final assembly line outside Europe was set up in Tianjin in 2008. By 2018, there were more than 1,700 Airbus jetliners in service in China, and deliveries to the country represent nearly a quarter of its total jetliner production.

Boeing’s collaboration dates back to the 1970s, and the US manufacturer’s jets are the mainstay of China’s air travel and cargo system. China, Boeing says, “has a component role on every current Boeing commercial airplane model – the 737, 747, 767, 777 and 787 Dreamliner”.

Could Comac do for aviation what Huawei, Xiaomi and Honor have done for the smartphone sector, or what MG, BYD and Ora are bringing to the electric car market? Interviewed recently on Bloomberg, Willie Walsh, director general of the International Air Transport Association, said, “It’s been great to see the Comac C919 entry into service with China Eastern...but I think it’s going to be a long-term issue.”

How long international certification could take depends on the C919 reaching compliance with regulatory bodies outside China, which can take years. Then again, as Confucius pointed out, the main thing is to keep going... ■