

Newcomers face tough task

By Geoffrey Tudor

This year is destined to be a landmark year for the first Chinese home-grown regional jet, the ARJ21, as the airplane is due to receive certification and make its first deliveries to Chinese customers.

Last year saw the second and third models of the Advanced Regional Jet take to the skies to join aircraft number one, which first flew in November 2008, for a programme of certification testing at the Chinese Flight Test Establishment in Xi'an. To date the order book for the "Flying Phoenix", as it is known, stands at a claimed 248, including one foreign order for 25 airplanes from U.S. lessor, GECAS.

It is projected the long-awaited domestic regional jet will grab about a 60% share of the 900 regional jets expected to enter service in China in the next 20 years. But outside the country the ARJ21 might find the going tough in the global market long dominated by Bombardier and Embraer.

And the Russians are coming, with new regional jets from Sukhoi, Tupolev and Antonov. And so are the Japanese with Mitsubishi's yet-to-fly MRJ attracting attention as the first original Japanese airliner since the YS-11 project of the 1960s.

"We marked a number of major milestones [in 2009]. We made major progress, announcing our final configuration and design improvements in September. At the same time, we also announced a 100-seater as a potential addition to the MRJ family," said Mitsubishi Aircraft



Lion Air: more ATR orders in 2009

Corporation (MJET) president, Hideki Ogawa.

But the most noteworthy MRJ achievement was the Letter of Intent with Trans States Holdings of the U.S. for 100 MRJ aircraft announced in early October 2009. MRJ's only other announced order was for up to 25 aircraft for All Nippon Airways.

"We are looking ahead to our first flight in 2012 and the first delivery of the revolutionary MRJ in 2014. This year we are prepared to capitalize on our significant momentum as we freeze the MRJ design in the summer," said Ogawa.

For the established manufacturers, Philippe Poutissou, vice-president, marketing of Bombardier Commercial Aircraft described 2009 as a 'mixed year'.

"Despite early signs of a recovery, the economic environment remains difficult. Simply put, gaining firm orders for any commercial aircraft is a challenge," he said.

"Our Q400 saw 32 firm

orders from five different operators, including two new operators: Olympic Airways of Greece and Air Niugini of Papua New Guinea.

"We also received firm orders for 37 CRJ regional jets from two airlines – Air Nostrum of Spain purchased 15 CRJ1000s and American Eagle just acquired 22 CRJ700s. Our biggest newsmaker was the all-new CSeries aircraft, which earlier this year was purchased by Lufthansa and Lease Corporation International – a total of 50 aircraft."

The Bombardier executive believes long-term the Asia-Pacific can expect to have above average growth in demand for air travel and consequently aircraft deliveries. In the next 20 years, the region, including China, is expected to take delivery of 3,650 aircraft in the 20 to 149-seat category, surveys say.

Last year, Embraer, the other established major RJ maker, marked its 40th anniversary. According to Alexandre Glock,

managing director, Embraer Asia-Pacific, it was a 'busy year'.

"The delivery of our E-Jets continued to take place while customers like Fuji Dream Airlines in Japan confirmed their options with us and will be taking delivery of their third Embraer aircraft soon," said the executive. "In 2010, we anticipate a more robust environment."

Regional turboprop manufacturer ATR continued its penetration in the Asia-Pacific last year, according to Stéphane Mayer, ATR CEO, with the planemaker delivering some 50% of its last year's production to the region.

"In 2009, we also received new orders from existing customers, Lion Air in Indonesia and Vietnam Airlines, while Air New Zealand purchased the eight ATR 72-500s they had on operating lease," said Mayer.

"The ATR is showing its versatility in the region, effectively developing low-cost networks with carriers such as Cebu Pacific in the Philippines, or competing directly with larger capacity jets on mainline routes, such as Firefly in Malaysia.

"The importance of this region is also underlined by our presence in the field of services, with two ATR training centres in Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur, one support centre in Singapore and the recent establishment of a new ATR logistic support facility in Kuala Lumpur.

Mayer expects that the Asia-Pacific in 2010, which already has 40 operators flying 200 ATRs, "will continue to provide many commercial opportunities, given the growth of the regional markets." ■