

Japan's Passenger Jet Takes to the Skies for First Flight

The first passenger plane developed in Japan in more than half a century made its debut flight Wednesday, a key step toward the country's goal of competing globally as an aircraft manufacturer.

The [Mitsubishi Regional Jet](#), which can seat as many as 92 people, took off at 9:35 a.m. Wednesday with two pilots. A round of applause rang out when the plane landed back in Nagoya at 11:02 a.m. after a flight that took it over Japan's Pacific coast.

Mitsubishi Aircraft Corp. has delayed the MRJ's delivery date three times, finally tapping bullet-train specialists to ensure the plane was completed. The company has won 407 orders, including options and purchase rights, for two versions of the plane, with the first models due for delivery to All Nippon Airways Co. in the second quarter of 2017.

"The MRJ has a lot of potential," said Dan Lu, an analyst at JPMorgan Securities Japan Co. in Tokyo. "I expect demand for regional jets to increase as more people fly and airlines put smaller jets on some routes."

Sales Assistance

The launch will intensify competition for orders with Brazil's Embraer SA and Canada's Bombardier Inc. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said Wednesday the government will help Mitsubishi Aircraft sell the plane overseas.

"I appreciate the government's support and look forward to joint corporate delegations with the government to sell the planes overseas," Mitsubishi Aircraft President Hiromichi Morimoto told reporters when asked later about Suga's comments.

Shares of parent Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Ltd. rose 1.8 percent Wednesday to 625.8 yen, beating the 0.1 percent gain in the benchmark Nikkei 225 Stock Average. The company's shares are down 6.6 percent so far this year, compared to a 13 percent gain in the benchmark.

The white jet with red, black and gold lines along its sides and "MRJ" written on its tail took off into a blue sky with a few clouds, on a brisk fall morning with a light wind. About 350 journalists and guests milled about as helicopters hovered in the air

a few hundred meters from the runway. A smaller escort plane shadowed the MRJ, observing the condition of the airframe in flight.

The debut flight comes nine days after China [unveiled](#) its first narrow-body passenger jet, the Commercial Aircraft Corp. of China's C919. Japan's trade minister, Motoo Hayashi, hailed the flight as "the beginning of a new era for Japan's aircraft industry."

Overseas Demand

The company hopes the MRJ can break the virtual lock that Embraer and Bombardier have on the market for passenger jets with fewer than 100 seats. Boeing Co. and Airbus Group SE control the market for larger passenger planes.

With Montreal-based Bombardier focusing on its larger C-Series jets, which can carry as many as 160 passengers, Mitsubishi Aircraft sees an opening it could fill.

"In our forecasts we have the MRJ replacing Bombardier as the second-biggest regional jet supplier," said Rob Morris, head of consultancy at Ascend Flightglobal Consultancy.

Mitsubishi Aircraft's Morimoto said the company has had requests from within Japan and from Europe for 100-seat versions of the plane.

"We're studying the demand but haven't made a decision yet," he said.

Homegrown Option

Japan's last homegrown passenger plane was the YS-11, a turboprop made by Nihon Aircraft Manufacturing Corp., a consortium that included Mitsubishi Heavy, Kawasaki Heavy Industries Ltd. and Fuji Heavy Industries Ltd. Only 182 of the planes were sold.

Nihon Aircraft stopped the YS-11 production line in 1974, a dozen years after its rollout. The company disbanded in 1983 with debts of about 36 billion yen (\$293 million), according to the Asahi Shimbun newspaper.

Tetsu Sakai, 55, a pilot at ANA Holdings Inc. who [flew](#) the YS-11 for 14 years before it was retired, is anticipating delivery of the MRJ.

"I look forward to Mitsubishi using the most of Japan's engineering technology and building a good plane," he said.

International Orders

Mitsubishi Aircraft estimates the cost of developing the MRJ at about 180 billion yen. The 92-seat MRJ90 is selling at a list price of \$47.3 million, according to the company.

The MRJ will use a geared turbofan engine built by United Technologies Corp.'s Pratt & Whitney unit, which is expected to make the jets at least 20 percent more fuel-efficient than similar aircraft, the company has said.

The two biggest customers for the MRJ are SkyWest Inc. and Trans States Airlines Inc. in North America. Domestically, Mitsubishi Aircraft has won orders from Japan Airlines Co. in addition to ANA, Japan's largest airline.