

China's homegrown C919 jet completes maiden flight

C919 is seen as a powerful symbol of China's global ambitions in the aviation market

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Clifford Coonan in Beijing

Video

Images

The C919, China's first domestically built large passenger jet, takes to the skies as China takes its first steps into competing in global aviation. Video: CCTV

China's homegrown C919 passenger jet completed its maiden flight on Friday, hailed as a triumph of the country's soaring engineering prowess and a sign of Beijing's ambition to compete in global aviation.

Reports on the C919 narrowbody emphasised the symbolic significance of the name. The "C" in the aircraft's name stands for both China and COMAC (Commercial Aircraft Corp of China), the number 9 is a symbol for "everlasting", while the 19 represents the aircraft's maximum seat capacity of 190.

"The flight makes China the fourth jumbo jet producer after the United States, Europe and Russia," the Xinhua news agency reported after the C919 flew north over the Yangtze River delta, performed various manoeuvres before returning south along the coast. The agency said the plane flew at about 3,000m and at speeds of 290-300 km/h.

The government hopes the C919 will prove a major competitor for aviation giants Boeing and Airbus, specifically the Boeing 737 and Airbus A320. It is expected to begin commercial operations with airlines by 2020.

National triumph

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The maiden flight was trumpeted as a national triumph in the Chinese media, coming just days after China launched its first domestically-built aircraft carrier. The Communist Party is keen that China's growing economic muscle should be matched by broader improvements in science and technology, and recent years have seen other major achievements for China, such as significant advances in its space programme.

After achieving economic growth from low-end manufacturing, the government is pushing a new "Made in China 2025" agenda that aims to make China's domestic output more sophisticated with high added value in areas such as robotics, biotechnology and aviation.

After about 90 minutes in the air the aircraft landed safely back at Pudong airport in Shanghai.

Local tech

While acknowledging the input of 16 international concerns such as GE and Honeywell, the reports stressed how much of the technology that went into the C919 was local.

Zhou Guirong, the aircraft's deputy chief designer, told the *Global Times* newspaper that the overall localisation rate of the C919 aircraft could reach over 50 per cent.

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COMAC said 23 foreign and domestic airlines, including the flag Air China and leasing company GE Capital Aviation Service, have placed orders for 570 aircraft.

Xinhua quoted Michel Merluzeau, director of the aerospace and defence analysis group AirInsight Research, as saying that the next challenge would be for the C919 to get Western certification, including European Aviation Safety Agency and Federal Aviation Administration certification. "If achieved, I think it will greatly enhance the accessible market of C919," said Mr Merluzeau.

Test pilot Cai Jun, a former China Eastern Airlines pilot, said he had full confidence in the aircraft. "I feel quite proud to pilot the C919 in my hometown of Shanghai," he told the *Shanghai Daily*.

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