China’s Long-Range Bomber Flights

Drivers and Implications

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Since March 2015, China has conducted a series of long-range strategic bomber flights throughout the Asia-Pacific region, including over the South China Sea, near Japan, and around Taiwan. These flights have unsettled China’s neighbors and have amplified questions over Beijing’s strategy for handling sovereignty disputes. Chinese president Xi Jinping, newly emboldened by the elimination of term limits, has prioritized development of the People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) to transform it into a “world-class” and “strategic air force” capable of executing multiple strategic-level missions far from Chinese shores. Recent bomber flights are an actualization of Xi’s intent, with important consequences for U.S. interests in the region.

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Contents

Preface ........................................................................................................................................... iii
Figures ............................................................................................................................................. v
Summary ......................................................................................................................................... vi
Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................................... x
Abbreviations .................................................................................................................................. xi
1. Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 1
   Methodology and Sources ........................................................................................................... 6
2. Cataloging PLAAF Bomber Flights in the Asia-Pacific ............................................................. 7
   Flights into the Western Pacific ................................................................................................. 13
   Flights into the South China Sea ............................................................................................... 17
   Flights Around Taiwan .............................................................................................................. 20
   Flights near Japan ...................................................................................................................... 25
3. Drivers of Chinese Bomber Flights ........................................................................................... 27
   Bombers in the Context of China’s Pursuit of a “Strategic Air Force” ..................................... 27
   Taking a Cue from Russian and U.S. Models ........................................................................... 31
   Win-Win Flights: Deterrence Flights Also Serve as Training Opportunity .............................. 35
   Flight Evolution Suggests Planned Rollout ............................................................................... 37
   PLAAF Use of Social Media for Internal and External Consumption .......................................... 38
4. Regional Reactions to Chinese Bombers .................................................................................. 45
   Japanese Reactions .................................................................................................................... 45
   Taiwanese Reactions ................................................................................................................. 47
   Other Regional Reactions .......................................................................................................... 48
5. China Developing a Next-Generation Bomber ......................................................................... 50
   Potential H-20 Capabilities ........................................................................................................ 50
   A Stepping Stone: An Air-Refuelable H-6 ............................................................................. 52
   Implications of the H-20 Strategic Bomber .............................................................................. 54
6. Implications and Recommendations for the United States ....................................................... 55
Appendix A. A Full List of PLA H-6 Long-Range Bomber Flights over Water .............................. 60
References ..................................................................................................................................... 67
Figures

Figure 2.1. PLAAF Long-Distance H-6K Flights over Water Since 2015 .......................................................... 9
Figure 2.2. Notional PLAAF Bomber over Water Flight Routes ................................................................. 10
Figure 2.3. Chinese Conception of First and Second Island Chains .......................................................... 11
Figure 2.4. South China Sea and Chinese Territorial Claims .................................................................... 12
Figure 2.5. PLAAF H-6K with Missile near Japan ....................................................................................... 16
Figure 2.6. Taiwan IDF Fighter Intercepting PLAAF H-6K near Taiwan ................................................. 22
Figure 3.1. PLAAF Bomber Long-Range Training Cycle ............................................................................. 36
Figure 3.2. PLAAF Weibo Post of H-6K Flying over Scarborough Shoal .................................................... 40
Figure 3.3. SCIO Twitter Post on H-6K Flying over Scarborough Shoal ................................................... 41
Figure 3.4. PLAAF Weibo Post of H-6K Flying Around Taiwan with Missile ................................................ 43
Summary

Since March 2015, the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) has sent its strategic bomber—known as the Xi’an H-6K—on long-range over water flights on at least 38 separate occasions. These flights have covered important areas throughout the Asia-Pacific region. PLAAF bomber flights have gone past the First Island Chain, patrolled the South China Sea, and, more recently, have focused activities around Taiwan and near Japan.

In this report we offer an in-depth analysis of the key issues driving top Chinese leaders to move in the direction of conducting these over water bomber flights. We find here that Chinese leaders seek to achieve at least four key objectives with PLAAF bomber flights throughout the region. First, bombers enable Beijing to send a deterrence message or to signal resolve in the conventional military domain to defend its maritime territorial claims, whether in the East China Sea against Japan, where Beijing claims the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, or in the South China Sea, where its claims conflict with those of a number of rivals, including the Philippines and Vietnam. Second, over water bomber flights significantly enhance realistic training for PLAAF operators—for example, by allowing them to operate in areas they might use to launch cruise missile attacks against U.S. regional bases in a conflict scenario. Third, successful bomber flights offer Chinese leaders the opportunity to play up their achievements for domestic consumption, highlighting progress toward the building of “world-class” military forces, in line with President Xi Jinping’s aspirations laid out in his “China Dream.” And fourth, in the particular case of Taiwan, the increased operational tempo of PLAAF bomber flights around the island appear to be designed, at least in part, to ratchet up pressure against Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen, as she has refused to acknowledge the “1992 Consensus”—an agreement also known as the One China Consensus, but with differing interpretations in China and Taiwan—since taking office in May 2016.

We further conclude here that reactions to PLAAF H-6K flights have varied significantly within the region. Japan intercepts all flights and comprehensively catalogs and publicizes the actions taken by the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) against Chinese bomber forces. Japanese interlocutors generally assess that bomber flights represent the next step in China’s attempts to assert sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and gain leverage in its dispute with Japan in the East China Sea. Tokyo has already been contending with air incursions by PLAAF and People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) aviation fighter aircraft, as well as other

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types of military aircraft, for years. Bombers, however, are a relatively new phenomenon that is indicative of, in the words of one interlocutor, “salami-slicing tactics” designed to gradually expand Chinese influence and reduce the maneuvering room of an adversary in a contested region.

Taiwan claims to intercept all Chinese bomber flights, but does not typically publicize the information, perhaps due to operational or political sensitivities. Taiwanese interlocutors generally assess that PLAAF bomber flights are the product of a combination of developments in both China and the relationship across the Taiwan Strait. In China, they argue, President Xi has fully consolidated power and is feeling increasingly confident. His confidence is yielding a more assertive military that is less averse to taking risks than has been the case historically. Additionally, some of our interlocutors have suggested, Xi’s military reforms in December 2015 may have given the PLAAF greater clout within the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to act more assertively.

China will likely be able to conduct a variety of even longer-range bomber flights once its next-generation long-range strategic bomber, dubbed the H-20, enters into service in the PLAAF in the 2020s. With a potential range of 10,000 km, according to media reports, the H-20 will feature the ability to reliably threaten U.S. targets within and beyond the Second Island Chain, to include key U.S. military bases in Guam and Hawaii. The H-20 will provide Beijing with a means of waging counterintervention operations against U.S. and allied forces at extended ranges throughout the region in the event of a conflict. Additionally, assuming that the H-20 will retain the standoff strike capability of the H-6K, its range using air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs) or air-launched ballistic missiles (ALBMs) will be even greater, potentially bringing even more distant targets into range. Coupled with other next-generation aircraft that have entered service over the last several years, including the J-20 fighter and Y-20 transport, these systems will advance China’s capability to project air power throughout Asia and possibly beyond.

In the nuclear domain, a nuclear capability for either the H-6K or the H-20 will complete China’s nuclear triad, which currently comprises ground-launched ballistic missiles under the PLA Rocket Force and nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines capable of carrying submarine-launched ballistic missiles. This should make Beijing’s nuclear deterrent even more credible and may diversify the options available to Chinese planners. It could also have implications for U.S. extended deterrence and assurance of U.S. allies and partners, at least some of whom could feel increasingly threatened by the additional capabilities presented by the H-6K or H-20.

In the meantime, given the multiple benefits China appears to derive from its H-6K bomber flights in the region, the United States should expect that Beijing will continue to pursue—and even ramp up—these activities for the foreseeable future. Indeed, as demonstrated by President Xi’s comments at the Nineteenth Party Congress, his intent is to modernize and professionalize the PLA, ultimately transforming it into a “world-class force,” aligns with his vision of a
stronger, “rejuvenated” China. This, coupled with Xi’s promotion of former PLAAF commander Xu Qiliang to senior vice chairman of the powerful Central Military Commission (CMC), virtually guarantees that the PLAAF will enjoy generous top leadership support in the coming years. Therefore, the U.S. Air Force and other decisionmakers tasked with handling the U.S. response to PLAAF bomber flights should anticipate that China will continue down this path and very likely make good on its statements that such bomber flights will become increasingly regular occurrences in the coming years.

Complicating the matter further, China has seized on the United States and Russia’s employment of bombers for strategic signaling purposes. Beijing has cited international law and norms to justify its new flights, echoing U.S. statements about freedom of navigation and overflight, but with uniquely Chinese characteristics (meaning China maintains exclusively overflight privileges within its historical claims). Thus, U.S. decisionmakers should be prepared to engage with Chinese interlocutors—whether in air force service-to-service dialogues, defense policy dialogues, or both—to discuss topics such as ensuring that flights by H-6Ks and accompanying fighters and other aircraft will comply with U.S.-China agreements for air-to-air encounters. The United States might also consider encouraging allies and partners to participate in similar discussions with Chinese counterparts. Chinese bomber pilots have discussed being intercepted by foreign aircraft on flights in the South China Sea and the Western Pacific, so discussions with Chinese counterparts should seek to minimize the potential for miscalculation and inadvertent escalation.

Finally, and more generally, because Chinese bomber flights occur through international airspace and are thus legal, some observers have suggested it is reasonable for U.S. government decisionmakers to ignore the issue entirely. In fact, it is fair to argue that paying an undue amount of attention to these flights would suggest that Washington is uncomfortable with them, which could enable Beijing to use flights as a new pressure point in the relationship. However, our research suggests that U.S. decisionmakers should consider adopting an active approach in response to Chinese bomber flights. Absent U.S. attempts to mitigate the negative effects of these flights, Beijing might be increasingly emboldened to take greater risks, and U.S. allies and partners might feel less assured. Indeed, the lack of a response by the United States over a sustained period of time would probably exacerbate the concerns of allies and partners that U.S. influence in the Asia-Pacific is receding and that they will inevitably have to accommodate China’s vision of the regional order. There could also be consequences in terms of future Chinese bomber flights aimed at highlighting China’s growing ability to reach more distant targets, including other U.S. allies and U.S. territory. New capabilities such as the H-20 and aerial refueling of H-6 bombers might be employed more often to demonstrate China’s ability to

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2 Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” speech delivered at the Nineteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 18, 2017.
threaten Guam, and perhaps one day Australia, Hawaii, Alaska, and the continental United States with both conventional and nuclear weapons.
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## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ADIZ</td>
<td>air defense identification zone</td>
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<tr>
<td>AEW</td>
<td>airborne early warning</td>
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<tr>
<td>ALBM</td>
<td>air-launched ballistic missile</td>
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<tr>
<td>ALCM</td>
<td>air-launched cruise missile</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCTV</td>
<td>China Central Television</td>
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<tr>
<td>CMC</td>
<td>Central Military Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>DoD</td>
<td>U.S. Department of Defense</td>
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<tr>
<td>EEZ</td>
<td>exclusive economic zone</td>
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<tr>
<td>EW</td>
<td>electronic warfare</td>
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<tr>
<td>IRBM</td>
<td>intermediate-range ballistic missile</td>
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<tr>
<td>JASDF</td>
<td>Japan Air Self-Defense Force</td>
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<tr>
<td>LACM</td>
<td>land-attack cruise missile</td>
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<tr>
<td>MOD</td>
<td>Ministry of Defense (Japan)</td>
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<tr>
<td>MRBM</td>
<td>medium-range ballistic missile</td>
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<tr>
<td>PCA</td>
<td>Permanent Court of Arbitration</td>
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<td>PLA</td>
<td>People’s Liberation Army</td>
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<tr>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>People’s Liberation Army Air Force</td>
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<td>PLAN</td>
<td>People’s Liberation Army Navy</td>
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<tr>
<td>PLANAF</td>
<td>People’s Liberation Army Navy Air Force</td>
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<tr>
<td>PRC</td>
<td>People’s Republic of China</td>
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<tr>
<td>SCIO</td>
<td>State Council Information Office (China)</td>
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<tr>
<td>TC</td>
<td>Theater Command</td>
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<tr>
<td>THAAD</td>
<td>Theater High-Altitude Area Defense</td>
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<td>USAF</td>
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1. Introduction

In March 2015 the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) began flying its long-range strategic bomber—known as the Xi’an H-6K—throughout the Asia-Pacific region.\(^3\) Between March 2015 and the finalization of this paper in May 2018, the PLAAF has conducted flights—either as a single bomber or bomber with multiple supporting aircraft flying in formation—on at least 38 separate occasions.\(^4\) H-6K flights mostly traverse strategic waterways, including the Miyako Strait (between Japan and Taiwan), Bashi Channel (between the Philippines and Taiwan), and the Tsushima Strait (between Korea and Japan), as well as the South China Sea. The initiation and rising operational tempo of PLAAF bomber flights is notable because it demonstrates a new capability designed to challenge U.S. military operations and threaten U.S. allies and partners. Bombers are yet another aspect of Beijing’s growing power projection capabilities that will complement its expanding maritime and missile capabilities.

In truth, it is no surprise that China is conducting bomber flights over water and well beyond China’s coastline. During his marathon address at the Nineteenth Party Congress, Chinese president Xi Jinping laid out an ambitious way ahead for the continued modernization of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), and the PLAAF is clearly an integral part of this initiative. Xi

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\(^3\) Based on the 1950s-era Soviet Tu-16 design, China’s H-6K bomber is an updated version capable of launching precision-guided munitions, such as air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs) and land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs), at longer ranges and at standoff distances. The H-6K is subsonic, with an operational range of approximately 3,000 km. When armed with CJ-20 LACMs, however, the bomber’s range increases to 4,500 km, and the upgraded version might be air-refuelable. The bomber is not considered nuclear capable.

We have no concrete evidence that before this time the PLAAF has ever conducted any over water bomber flights past the First Island Chain, though declassified documents note a possible PLAAF bomber operating in the South China Sea in the early 1980s. This possibility notwithstanding, we can confidently say that the open-source record indicates that PLAAF long-distance bomber flights over water began in March 2015 with a flight through the Bashi Channel, and that all available evidence suggests only the newer H-6K variants have conducted these flights. For more information, see *China: Military Options Against Vietnam*, declassified CIA-RDP84S00928R0003000050006-0, March 1, 1984, p. 10, cited in Peter Wood, “Snapshot: China’s Southern Theater Command,” *China Brief*, July 22, 2016.

\(^4\) This count is based on official Chinese media reports, Chinese social media, regional media reports, and information released by regional governments. According to these sources, PLAAF bomber flights have patrolled the South China Sea and conducted activities near Japan and around Taiwan. To be sure, People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) Aviation also engages in long-range over water flights. For example, PLAN Aviation flew H-6 bombers to conduct the Chinese military’s maiden round-trip passage through the strategically important Miyako Strait (between Okinawa and Taiwan) in September 2013. Such flights, however, fall within the traditional operational domains of naval aviation and are not covered here. It should also be noted that PLAAF H-6Ks are also training for long-distance flights over land, including at least one reported deployment to Xinjiang that was likely training for counterterrorist operations in western China or Central Asia. See “Large Group of PLA H-6 Bombers Massed at Fortress Airfield in Xinjiang” [“解放军大批轰 6 轰炸机集结新疆要塞机场”], Duowei, January 21, 2017.
expects the PLA to become a top-tier, global military by midcentury. Specifically, in support of his China Dream, which envisions “a strong country with a strong military,” Xi stated that PLA modernization will be “basically completed” by 2035. By 2050, according to Xi, the PLA will have been “fully transformed” into a “world-class force” capable of deterring or defeating potential adversaries and supporting China’s expanding global interests.⁵

The PLAAF has been keenly aware of Xi’s ambitions for years now, and bomber flights are a tangible example of progress to meet his demands.⁶ Starting with a visit to PLAAF headquarters in April 2014, Xi endorsed the PLAAF’s vision to become a strategic air force, and that same month, PLAAF commander Ma Xiaotian gave an important speech calling for the service to take a more active role in maritime security.⁷ The new PLAAF commander, Lt. Gen. Ding Laihang, took over from Ma in August 2017 and expressed his desire to continue the PLAAF’s outward expansion, as he said that the service “requires the ability to project power and make strikes over long distances” and added that “exercises on the open seas will become a regular part of training.”⁸ In February 2015 Xi visited the 36th Bomber Division in Shaanxi Province. Images released afterward by state media depicted Xi sitting in the cockpit of an H-6K bomber.⁹ PLAAF bomber flights over water commenced the following month.

The PLAAF in 2015 first concentrated on achieving what it characterized as the major milestone of breaking through the First Island Chain and flying into the western Pacific region. It did so several times with bombers in conjunction with other supporting aircraft through both the Miyako Strait and the Bashi Channel. Building on this momentum, the PLAAF in 2016 conducted several bomber flights—labeled combat air patrols by the PLAAF—over disputed claims under Chinese control in the South China Sea, including Fiery Cross Reef, Scarborough Shoal, Mischief Reef, and Woody Island.¹⁰ These bomber flights have been touted in Chinese

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⁶ Evolution of the PLAAF into an offensive strike force began in earnest in 1999 when then-president Jiang Zemin instructed the service to “prepare to struggle to build a powerful, modernized air force that is simultaneously prepared for offensive and defensive operations.” Then, in 2004, the PLAAF officially incorporated this guidance into its first strategic concept document, with an added emphasis on the need to integrate aerospace forces to carry out operations in accordance with Beijing’s strategic goals. For more information, see People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军], China Air Force Encyclopedia [中国空军百科全书]: Vol. 1, Beijing: Aviation Industry Press, 2005, p. 39; and Ji Yan, “The Strategic Positioning and Overall Transformation of China’s Air Force,” in Zhu Hui [朱晖], ed., Strategic Air Force [战略空军论], Beijing: Blue Sky Press, 2009, p. 73.


defense circles as enhancing PLAAF coordination with the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN)—another major milestone underscoring China’s determination to forge an increasingly joint PLA. In late 2016 Beijing turned its attention to Taiwan and directed the PLAAF to begin circumnavigating the island, simultaneously incorporating at least six different types of supporting aircraft, including intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance; early warning; fighter; and electronic warfare (EW) aircraft. Bomber flights around Taiwan continued through the summer of 2017 with an increased operational tempo—featuring seven flights that summer alone—and represent the most concerted training regimen yet. The PLAAF has flown close to Japan’s Kii Peninsula and through the Tsushima Strait, once again expanding its operational coverage. These flights offer PLAAF crews the opportunity to train in a combat-realistic situation while contending with complicating factors such as long pilot hours, varying weather conditions over water, navigational challenges, and interaction with foreign aircraft (Japanese and Taiwan fighter jets intercept flights near their airspace).

Thus far in 2018, the PLAAF has once again increased its operational tempo, with multiple bomber flights around Taiwan. In April, the PLAAF conducted flights over three days in a row for the first time, with a fourth flight several days later. These flights varied between solo H-6K flights and those that were accompanied by other support aircraft. In May, H-6Ks flew around Taiwan from different directions on the same day, similar to flights in July 2017. This May flight is also noteworthy since it was the first time the Su-35 crossed the First Island Chain, though it did not fly all the way around Taiwan. Furthermore, on May 18, China took the major step of landing a bomber on the disputed Woody Island in the South China Sea for the first time. The official announcement framed the flight as part of the PLAAF’s focus on operating throughout Chinese territory, at any time and against all targets.

Looking forward, Chinese bomber flights will almost certainly continue and probably ramp up. Xi’s interest in PLAAF modernization is the key driver, which should only embolden the PLAAF to demonstrate its prowess to take on missions farther and farther from Chinese shores. It is also important to note that the PLAAF as a service has generally been on the ascendance. At the Nineteenth Party Congress last year, Xi decided to promote PLAAF commander Xu Qiliang to senior vice chairman on the Central Military Commission (CMC)—the first senior vice

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chairman in the post–Mao Zedong era to hail from the PLAAF.\textsuperscript{12} China’s bomber units are almost certain to benefit from these developments.

With this important context in mind, what are Chinese leaders trying to achieve with bomber flights? Unfortunately, their specific motives remain relatively opaque. However, through careful analysis of Chinese official and unofficial statements; military doctrine; press, academic, and think tank reports; and social media, we offer this report in the hopes of getting to the answer. Additionally, we leverage interview data collected in both Taipei and Tokyo to assess regional reactions and responses to these PLAAF activities. Finally, we consider the potential implications of this analysis for the U.S. Air Force, as well as other defense and military officials charged with minimizing the negative impact of China’s new behavior on the United States and its regional allies and partners.

We find here that Chinese leaders seek to achieve at least four key objectives with PLAAF bomber flights throughout the region. First, bombers enable Beijing to signal resolve in the conventional military domain to defend its maritime territorial claims, whether in the East China Sea or South China Sea. Second, bomber flights significantly enhance realistic training for PLAAF operators. Third, successful bomber flights offer Chinese leaders the opportunity to play up their achievements for domestic consumption of building a world-class force, in line with Xi’s aspirations laid out in his China Dream. And fourth, in the particular case of Taiwan, the increased operational tempo of PLAAF bomber flights around the island appear to be designed, at least to some extent, to ratchet up pressure against Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen as she has refused to acknowledge the “1992 Consensus”—an agreement also known as the One China Consensus, but with differing interpretations in China and Taiwan—since taking office in May 2016.

We further conclude here that reactions to PLAAF H-6K flights have varied significantly within the region. Japan intercepts all flights and comprehensively catalogs and publicizes the actions taken by the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) against PLAAF bomber forces. Japanese interlocutors generally assess that bomber flights represent the next step in China’s attempts to assert sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and gain leverage in its dispute with Japan in the East China Sea. Tokyo has already been contending with air incursions by PLAAF and PLAN Aviation fighter aircraft, as well as other types of military aircraft, for years. Bombers, however, are a relatively new phenomenon that is indicative of, in the words of one interlocutor, “salami-slicing tactics.” This term is commonly used to describe Beijing’s alleged

\textsuperscript{12} The \textit{South China Morning Post} reported that Xu was promoted to second vice chair of the CMC in 2012 “due to his air force background as the PLA has stepped up military modernization,” further suggesting his continued connection to the PLAAF’s modernization. See Minnie Chan, “General Xu Qiliang: How a Chinese Air Force Top Gun Shot to the Top of Military,” \textit{South China Morning Post}, October 25, 2017a; Daniel Tobin, Kim Fassler, and Justin Godby, “Parsing the Selection of China’s New High Command,” \textit{China Brief}, Vol. 12, No. 22, November 16, 2012; “Former Air Force Commander Xu Qiliang Added as CMC Vice Chair” [“原空军司令员许其亮被增补为中共中央军委副主席”], \textit{Caixin}, November 5, 2012.
plan to gradually expand and normalize Chinese influence in a contested region at the expense of an adversary’s maneuvering room.

Taiwan claims to intercept all Chinese bomber flights, but does not typically publicize the information, perhaps due to operational or political sensitivities. Taiwanese interlocutors generally assess that PLAAF bomber flights are the product of a combination of developments in both China and the relationship across the Taiwan Strait. In China, they argue, President Xi has fully consolidated power and is feeling increasingly confident. His confidence is yielding a more assertive military that is less averse to taking risks than has been the case historically. Additionally, some of our interlocutors have suggested, Xi’s military reforms in December 2015 may have given the PLAAF greater clout within the PLA to act more assertively.

Many interlocutors in the region see the bomber flights as linked to broader U.S.-China competition. In particular, some have suggested that the bomber flights might be part of a broader Chinese approach that seeks to bolster China’s position in the region by undermining confidence in U.S. security assurances and exploiting uncertainty and mixed messages surrounding the administration of U.S. president Donald Trump’s approach to China policy and its broader Asia strategy. Ultimately, they argue, Beijing’s objective is to demonstrate that China is increasingly supplanting the United States as the most influential power in the region.

We separately assess that China’s next-generation long-range strategic bomber—dubbed the H-20 and scheduled to enter into service for the PLAAF by the early or mid-2020s—could give China new capabilities and range to threaten U.S. targets within and beyond the Second Island Chain, to include key U.S. military bases in Guam and Hawaii. Instead of relying only on its limited inventory of conventional medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM) and intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM) forces, the H-20 will provide Beijing with an alternative means of waging counterintervention operations against U.S. forces at these ranges during a conflict.

In the meantime, given the strategic and operational benefits that the PLAAF derives from H-6K bomber flights, Washington is unlikely to discourage China from conducting more of them in the future. Indeed, we believe that PLAAF bomber flights will not only continue but will almost certainly ramp up. Beijing almost certainly will instruct units to fly farther and farther from the shore of the Chinese mainland, eventually with aerial refueling capability, and practice increasingly sophisticated formations with other PLAAF aircraft while working jointly with other PLA services. Instead of attempting to dissuade China’s new behavior, we recommend that the U.S. Air Force and other U.S. decisionmakers consider ways of mitigating the negative effects of China’s over water bomber patrols.

This report proceeds as follows. Chapter Two catalogs all publicly known PLAAF bomber flights throughout the Asia-Pacific region. Chapter Three assesses potential drivers for this new air activity. Chapter Four gauges regional reactions—especially from Japan and Taiwan, the countries most impacted and capable of responding. Chapter Five considers the potential implications of China’s H-20 next-generation bomber. Finally, Chapter Six considers potential
implications and offers some recommendations for the U.S. Air Force and other U.S. decisionmakers.

Methodology and Sources

Our team employed an analysis of competing hypotheses approach to this project. We decided on this method as different team members held differing initial hypotheses about the drivers of Chinese bomber flights. In the end, although our approach was unable to identify any one driver as key to understanding H-6K flights, it did lay out the evidence underpinning each potential explanation—the first time, to our knowledge, that this has been done.

This report relies primarily on Chinese primary source documents, namely Kongjun Bao, the PLAAF’s official newspaper; Liberation Army Daily, the PLA’s official newspaper; Military Correspondent, a PLA academic journal focusing on propaganda and strategic communications; Strategic Air Force, a 2009 book that outlined the service’s vision for the future and laid the groundwork for much of PLAAF operations we see today; and other resources. We also paid close attention to Chinese social media postings pertaining to bomber flights, especially the PLAAF’s verified Sina Weibo account (Air Force Announcements, 空军发布), as well as regional news reports on bomber activities and local government responses. Information released by Japan’s Ministry of Defense on its official website also provided valuable details about a number of PLAAF bomber flights in areas around Japan. In addition, members of the project team visited both Taipei and Tokyo to engage in discussions regarding regional reactions and responses to PLAAF bomber activities. Specifically, we met with dozens of interlocutors, including defense and foreign policy officials in Taipei and Tokyo, as well as a wide range of scholars and think tank analysts covering regional defense issues. The information in this report is current as of October 1, 2018.
Chinese long-range bomber flights have become an increasingly common feature in the western Pacific region since the first PLAN aviation H-6 flight passed the First Island Chain in September 2013 and since the first PLAAF H-6K flight in March 2015. By the authors’ count, based on open source information, the PLA has conducted at least 48 long-distance flights over water over the last four years (see Appendix A for a full list), and the PLAAF has conducted 39. Although China has rarely, if ever, identified these flights directly as deterrence activities, the Chinese media narrative and military commentary surrounding such flights clearly frames at least some of them as targeted at specific countries for purposes of deterrence signaling or coercive diplomacy. Indeed, the 2018 U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) report on the Chinese military states that “such flights could potentially be used as a strategic signal to regional stages,” although it adds that “the PLA has thus far . . . not been clear what messages such flights communicate beyond a demonstration of improved capabilities.” The authors argue that the PLAAF has made clear that these flights serve to communicate China’s resolve to defend its territorial claims, including its willingness to use force if necessary.

This chapter reviews details of the flights and key narratives of strategic messaging surrounding them. Much of the information on these bomber flights is drawn from authoritative Chinese government and military sources as previously described in Chapter One’s discussion of our methodology and sources. Understanding the limits of this approach, we sought to corroborate these claims through public reporting on flights by the Japanese and Taiwan governments, as well as reliable media organizations.

The following four figures are provided as references to familiarize the reader with the flights and related information compiled and analyzed in this chapter. Figure 2.1 presents all known

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13 This chapter draws from Cozad and Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2017; Beauchamp-Mustafaga et al., 2016; and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Derek Grossman, and Logan Ma, “Chinese Bomber Flights Around Taiwan: For What Purpose?” War on the Rocks, September 13, 2017.


PLAAF over water bomber flights, while Figure 2.2 presents a notional illustration of the routes taken by these flights. Figure 2.3 presents a map of the First and Second Island Chains, which are conceptions of Chinese security rings that generally represent containment. Figure 2.4 presents a general map of the South China Sea and disputed features in the area.
Figure 2.1. PLAAF Long-Distance H-6K Flights over Water Since 2015

PLAAF H-6K Flights, Jan 2015-Sept 2018  (One dot \(\bullet\) represents one flight)

SOURCE: Calculations based on Japanese and Taiwan government reporting, as well as authoritative media. Data through October 1, 2018.

NOTE: A bolded circle indicates claimed PLAAF patrols of the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). The November 2015 ADIZ patrol is assumed to have been conducted by separate PLAAF H-6Ks, but the September and December 2016 ADIZ patrols are likely to have been the same planes that transited the Miyako Strait. Circles representing flights around Taiwan are two different colors to indicate that planes flew through both the Bashi Channel and Miyako Strait. The order of transit is indicated from left to right. Taiwan flights are only counted as circumnavigations of the island, even though flights to the western Pacific through the Bashi or Miyako pass next to Taiwan. Japan flights are flights that deviated from typical flight paths to the western Pacific to fly closer to Japan, even though all flights into the western Pacific pass next to Japan.
Figure 2.2. Notional PLAAF Bomber over Water Flight Routes
Figure 2.3. Chinese Conception of First and Second Island Chains

Figure 2.4. South China Sea and Chinese Territorial Claims

Flights into the Western Pacific

The first PLAAF H-6K strategic bomber flight to cross the First Island Chain occurred in March 2015 through the Bashi Channel. The PLAAF spokesperson said that the flight was “the first time [the service] conducted distant sea aviation training in the western Pacific” and that it “improved the distant sea operational mobility of the Air Force” and “[tempered] its combat capability.” The second PLAAF H-6K flight into the Pacific took place in May 2015 and passed through the Miyako Strait. According to Japanese government reporting, two bombers participated in this flight with no support aircraft. Subsequent PLAAF bomber flights in 2015 returned to these same routes, but included support aircraft and likely flew farther. An August 2015 flight through the Bashi Channel featured at least four bombers, and the PLAAF spokesperson said the flight included other types of aircraft. In November 2015, four H-6Ks, one Y-8 and one Tu-154 flew through the Miyako Strait, and were reportedly from the Nanjing Military Region.

Both of these flights reportedly flew 1,000 km away from China’s coast and DoD said in its 2018 annual report on the Chinese military that the bombers flew “within LACM range,” which, for the CJ-20 missile, is just over 1,000 km from China, suggesting that these flights could have been to the H-6K’s launch basket for Guam strikes. The additional distance of the second flights, combined with the addition of support aircraft, suggests that the PLAAF was slowly increasingly the training complexity of these flights.

These flights were framed as demonstrating the PLAAF’s growing combat capabilities. PLAAF spokesperson Shen said the flights “[boosted] the capability of the airmen for long-range, blue-water ‘system-of-systems’ operations.” The PLAAF’s magazine said the May 2015

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19 Qiu Yue and Xiao Hong, “Several Types of Chinese Air Force FightersPassed 1,000 km Beyond the First Island Chain to Conduct Distant Sea Training” [“中国空军多型战机飞出第一岛链 1000 余公里展开远海训练”], People’s Daily Online, August 14, 2015.


22 Zhang Yuqing and Wu Yi, “Chinese Air Force’s Planes of Several Models Including H-6K Go to Western Pacific Ocean for Blue Water Training: H-6K, Fighter Planes and Early Warning Planes of Several Models Simultaneously Dispatched to Conduct Policing Patrols in East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone”
flight was part of the service’s “strategic transformation” to “fly farther, strike more precisely, and build stronger combat capabilities.” Wang Mingzhi, a military commentator, described the H-6K as “a long-range combat platform capable of performing strategic deterrence, precision strike outside the defense area and overhead assault missions.” These flights demonstrated the bomber’s mobility and that “the presence of the PLA’s airpower in regions that are closely related to Chinese national security . . . [and] China’s conventional military deterrence capability.” This report is particularly notable in that it is a rare direct discussion of the H-6K flights as serving the PLA’s deterrence mission; and, tellingly, most of these explicit references have been made in English in externally directed Chinese media.

China also established its legal and normative argument that these bomber flights were not provocative and should be seen as normal military activities, somewhat conflicting with other messaging that these flights serve a more pointed deterrent signaling purpose. After the first flight in March 2015, Shen said the flights were “not aimed at any country or target and pose no threat to any country or region” and were “routine arrangements of the annual training plan.” Xing Hongbo, a military law expert, wrote an article and gave interviews with the same theme: “distant sea training [was] legal, legitimate [and] justifiable.” Chinese military media described the Miyako Strait, which lies between the Japanese islands of Miyako and Okinawa, as an “international waterway” and noted that “in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, all countries are entitled to the freedom of navigation and over-flight in this water,” closely echoing U.S. arguments for military operations in the South China Sea, to which China vigorously objects. Foreshadowing more high-profile statements that would come in 2017, Zhang Junshe in 2015 criticized Japan and others for hypocritically professing concern.

over Chinese military activities in the Pacific while accepting U.S. military activity as normal, writing, “Relevant countries should gradually get used to the vessels and aircraft of the Chinese Navy and Air Force to conduct similar distant sea training tasks, instead of making indiscreet remarks and of creating hot-button public opinions.”

Flights into the Pacific resumed in September 2016, with one each through the Bashi Channel and Miyako Strait. The Bashi flight included H-6K bombers, Su-30 fighters, early warning aircraft and refueling tankers. Two weeks later, another group of planes flew through the Miyako Strait, this time including H-6Ks, Su-30s, and refueling tankers, among other aircraft. Although the Chinese government claimed 40 planes participated in the flight, the Japanese Ministry of Defense only identified eight as flying through the Strait, suggesting the other planes stayed within the First Island Chain. Nevertheless, DoD said this was the PLAAF’s “most complex long-distance strike training to date.” Some military commentators framed the Miyako flight as a response to the Japanese minister of defense’s comments suggesting the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force might patrol the South China Sea, adding “to protect the South China Sea, the PLAAF will first act in the East China Sea.” The PLAAF spokesperson also announced in September that flights into the Pacific would be “regularized.” Some of the flights near Japan have included H-6Ks carrying missiles, as pictured in Figure 2.5.

30 Li Jianwen and Yu Hongwei, “Multiple Types of Chinese Air Force Aircraft Fly into Western Pacific to Test Distant Sea Combat Capability” [“空军多型战机赴西太平洋检验远海实战能力”], China Military Online, September 13, 2016.
In 2017 the PLAAF first flew into the western Pacific in July, but flights picked up in November. The July flight was at the same time as a circumnavigation of Taiwan and flew through the Miyako Strait, while the remaining four flights later in the year included three flights through the Miyako and one through the Bashi Channel. Other flights flew into the South China Sea and circumnavigated Taiwan, which will be covered below. These flights directly into the Pacific received relatively less media and propaganda attention, but one noticeable difference with the November 23 flight through the Miyako was that the PLAAF claimed this flight came from the interior of China and not a base close to the coast, suggesting the PLAAF was extending its projection capabilities.\(^{36}\) This base was likely the Central Theater Command (TC) bomber base that President Xi visited in early 2015 before flights commenced, suggesting a third theater is now involved with over water training.\(^{37}\) This flight was interpreted by PLA commentators as putting the Second Island Chain, and thus implicitly Guam, within range of H-6K missiles.\(^{38}\) Chinese media also recycled Taiwan reporting on the flights that claimed it

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\(^{36}\) Xinhua, “Multiple Chinese Air Force H-6K Combat Aircraft Spread Their Wings over the Far Seas and Conduct Combat Patrols over the South China Sea” [“中国空军多架轰-6K战机展翅远洋战巡南海”], November 23, 2017b.


\(^{38}\) “Asia Today,” CCTV-4, November 15, 2017a.
represented the resumption of “conventional deterrence” following the Nineteenth Party Congress.39

So far in 2018, the PLAAF has conducted one flight into the western Pacific in March, with four H-6Ks, two Su-30s, one Tu-154 and one Y-8 EW plane on the first day of flights for the year alongside a flight to the South China Sea.40

Flights into the South China Sea

The PLAAF focused its bomber flights in the South China Sea during the summer of 2016. This is the first known time the service has conducted long-range bomber operations in the South China Sea, although Chinese media did not claim it was the first time, leaving open the possibility that the PLAAF may have made unannounced flights in earlier years.41 The first flight likely took place in May 2016, as footage of an H-6K flight aired on China Central Television (CCTV) briefly showed Fiery Cross Reef in the Spratly Islands.42 The second flight, this time over the disputed Scarborough Shoal, occurred four days after the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruled against China for its territorial claims in the South China Sea, and images from the flight were released by the PLAAF’s Weibo account.43 The PLAAF officially acknowledged this flight three days later, adding that the flight included J-10 and J-11 fighters, airborne early warning (AEW) aircraft, and tankers joining the H-6K bombers to fly over both the Paracel and Spratly Islands.44 The third flight occurred in August, once again flying over Scarborough Shoal and the Spratlys, and included fighters, AEW aircraft, and tankers.45 A fourth


44 Xinhua, “China’s Air Force Conducts Combat Air Patrol in South China Sea,” July 18, 2016a.

flight was conducted later in December 2016, along with fighters, and reportedly flew along the “Nine-Dash Line.” The PLAAF’s Weibo account claimed in August 2017 to have conducted another combat air patrol over the South China Sea, but no further government statements or media reporting corroborated this flight. DoD argues that these 2016 flights into the South China Sea constituted a “bomber flight package” that would “provide defensive counter-air protection of the bombers beyond the first island chain.” This report’s authors assume that the notable addition was the presence of fighter aircraft for the first time, since the November 2015 flight through the Miyako Strait also included the intelligence components of this package.

The PLAAF announced that flights in the South China Sea would be “regularized” in July 2016, but flights have been sporadic since then. Reuters claims two flights took place in January 2017, citing U.S. government sources, but these flights were not mentioned by the Chinese government and only covered in Chinese media as recycled Reuters reporting, while also noting that the United States conducts “freedom of navigation” operations. In November 2017 the PLAAF returned to the South China Sea, with H-6Ks flying through the Miyako Strait, the Bashi Channel, and the South China Sea all on the same day for the first time. The planes flew over what a China Military Online report identified as Mischief and Subi Reefs, and the PLAAF released a three-minute video on Weibo about the flight.

Flights for 2018 began in March, and two months later, China took the major step of landing a bomber in the South China Sea for the first time. The first flight in March occurred on the same day as a flight into the western Pacific and marked the beginning of bomber flights this year.

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47 Based on China’s behavior in the East China Sea ADIZ, it is possible the PLAAF claimed one of the flights around Taiwan that passed through the Bashi Channel was a “patrol” of the South China Sea, even though it likely only passed through the northern part of the Sea and likely did not extend as far south as previous patrols. This claimed flight is not included in our total count. See People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, August 16, 2017d.


49 Xinhua, 2016a; Qiu Yue [邱越], “Air Force Combat Air Patrols in the South China Sea to Be Regularized, Expert: China Has the Capability to Safeguard Sovereignty” [“空军南海战斗巡航将常态化 专家: 中国有能力维护主权”], People’s Daily Online, July 19, 2016b.


51 Xinhua, 2017b.

This flight was accompanied by Su-35 fighters and was claimed to be a “joint combat patrol.”\footnote{People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, March 24, 2017a.} Although the announcement did not specify the flight was coordinated with the PLAN, it appears the PLAAF is suggesting that the H-6Ks trained with the PLAN’s Liaoning aircraft carrier, since it was in the South China Sea at the same time and appears in a video of the bomber flight released by the PLAAF a week later.\footnote{People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, March 27, 2017b.} The second flight featured 12 H-6Ks, likely the largest group of bombers to fly this far over water for the PLAAF.\footnote{The authors thank Ken Allen for this insight.} Notably, the PLAAF’s Weibo account released an image of an H-6K from this second flight flying over a feature, which eagle-eyed internet users identified and the RAND Corporation confirmed was Alison Reef, which is under Vietnamese control.\footnote{People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, March 27, 2017a.} This is the first known photo of PLAAF bombers flying over a feature in the South China Sea that China did not control. Moreover, this flight was claimed to have taken off from China’s interior, similar to the November 2017 flight through the Miyako, which would make this flight pushing close to the limits of the H-6Ks’ range. On May 18, PLAAF H-6Ks conducted “takeoff and landing training on an island reef at a southern sea area,” and based on video released on the PLAAF’s Weibo account, this was Woody Island in the Paracels.\footnote{People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, March 31, 2018a; People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, May 18, 2018q; People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, May 18, 2018r; People’s Daily, “Chinese Bombers Including the H-6K Conduct Takeoff and Landing Training on an Island Reef at a Southern Sea Area,” Twitter, May 18, 2018.} The official announcement framed the flight as part of the PLAAF’s focus on operating throughout Chinese territory, at any time and against all targets. It also said the bombers conducted maritime strike training that was “beneficial for improving [the PLAAF’s] ability to respond to all types of security threats in the maritime direction” and “accumulated experience” for takeoff and landing on islands and reefs, while also suggesting that other types of bombers participated. This flight to Woody Island may be a stepping stone to the eventual rotational, or even permanent, basing of Chinese bomber aircraft on Chinese-made islands in the South China Sea.

These flights were clearly intended as conventional strategic deterrence signaling, but this was mostly conveyed through the Chinese media. The most explicit connection drawn by the Chinese government was a July 2016 visit to a Southern TC base, likely after the PCA ruling and revealed one day after the second H-6K flight, by CMC vice chairman Fan Changlong. Accompanied by PLAAF commander Ma Xiaotian, Fan reviewed H-6K bombers and other strategic assets and told the assembled troops they must “continuously increase [their] deterrent
and warfighting capabilities.” The PLAAF spokesperson implicitly explained why the PLAAF was needed for deterrence, stating that “the PLA Air Force will firmly defend national sovereignty, security and maritime interests, safeguard regional peace and stability, and cope with various threats and challenges.” Chinese military commentators emphasized the H-6K’s reach throughout the South China Sea and the flights’ demonstration of an improved combat capability that better integrated early warning aircraft for enhanced strike performance. After the May 2018 flight, Chinese military commentators said the H-6K was likely to land on the Spratlys in the future, and Western analysis assessed that the bomber could reach nearly all of Southeast Asia and even parts of Australia if operating from the Spratlys. The 2018 DoD China report asserts that if H-6Ks were “deployed to airfields in the Spratly Islands,” this would “extend their range through the Balabac Strait into the Celebes Sea or through the Sunda or Malacca Strait to fly into the Indian Ocean.”

Flights Around Taiwan

After flying past Taiwan for a year and a half on its way out to the western Pacific, the PLAAF began H-6K flights circumnavigating Taiwan in November 2016 and has conducted at least 14 such flights around the island. Likely because the PLAAF had already flown through the Miyako Strait and Bashi Channel and was thus familiar with the area, the PLAAF began its flights including support aircraft. Flights in November and December 2016 included two H-6Ks, one Tu-154, and one Y-8, and flew once from south to north (out through the Bashi Channel and back in through the Miyako Strait) and once north to south (out through the Miyako and back through the Bashi). These flights were both accompanied with Su-30, J-10, and J-11 fighter jets.

63 For more detailed analysis of the Taiwan flights, see Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Grossman, and Ma, 2017.
within the First Island Chain, but the fighters did not continue with the bombers and other aircraft around Taiwan. According to DoD, in wartime, H-6s could conduct “shorter-range strikes targeting eastern Taiwan from all directions,” providing a clear practical training rationale for these flights along with the benefit of deterrence signaling.65

Flights around Taiwan resumed in the summer of 2017 at an unprecedented pace, as PLAAF H-6Ks conducted four flights around Taiwan in July and another in August.66 These flights were a mix of H-6Ks alone and others with support aircraft, including planes for EW and intelligence collection. This was also the first time multiple flights occurred on the same day, with the flights on July 13 featuring one group of planes flying all the way around Taiwan and another group flying out and returning only through the Miyako Strait, while the flights on July 20 featured two groups of planes flying around Taiwan from different directions at the same time. The PLAAF also stated the flights were “regularized” in July when they posted a photo of the bombers in front of a mountain and wrote, “Regularized! Regularized! Regularized!”67 In response to some of these flights, Taiwan scrambled fighters to intercept the H-6Ks, as pictured in Figure 2.6.

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67 People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, July 20, 2017c.
In December 2017, H-6Ks bombers, Su-30, and J-11 fighters, as well as several supporting aircraft, circumnavigated Taiwan from north to south. In the most explicit signaling yet, the PLAAF spokesperson referred to the flight as an “island encirclement patrol” and said the PLAAF was “an important force for effectively shaping the situation, controlling crises, containing war, and winning wars.” The PLAAF posted photos on Weibo of an H-6K against the backdrop of an unnamed island and asked internet users to guess which it was (they correctly

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69 People’s Liberation Army Air Force, December 11, 2017h. For one example of a PLAAF spokesperson implicitly suggesting photos posted to Weibo from flights near Taiwan were of Chinese territory, see People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, December 12, 2017j. For Taiwan’s reaction, see Michael Martina and Jess Macy Yu, “China Angered as U.S. Considers Navy Visits to Taiwan,” Reuters, December 13, 2017.
guessed Taiwan). The flight was front page news in *People’s Daily*, a prestige placement reflecting high-level support. It was also reported in the *Liberation Army Daily* and was the top story on CCTV news, all of which the PLAAF reposted on Weibo. Reflecting the assumed division of labor for theater commands, in the PLAAF statement announcing the flights, the Eastern TC PLAAF commander discussed distant sea training and East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) patrols, while the Southern TC PLAAF commander discussed distant sea patrols and the South China Sea “combat patrols,” implicitly confirming that they were responsible for those flight paths.

Despite the implied message to Taiwan, Chinese military commentators were less explicit about the deterrent value of these flights and instead analyzed the value for training. The late 2016 flights were framed as demonstrating the PLAAF bomber fleet’s improved ability to operate in a “system” now that these flights frequently involve support aircraft alongside the bombers. The summer 2017 flights were not discussed widely in the Chinese media, and instead most Chinese reporting recycled Taiwan media stories, including Taiwan’s concerns over not being able to match the PLAAF’s operational pace with intercepts and potentially running out of fuel before a war even started. One Chinese article cited Russian and Hong Kong media to link the H-6K flights to the Liaoning’s transit through the Taiwan Strait just one day before a bomber flight in July and say the carrier was a “show of strength” and safeguarding China’s territorial integrity.

For the December 2017 flight, Chinese commentators signaled more directly that it was aimed at Taiwan and reminded viewers that Taiwan was an indivisible part of China, reinforcing the deterrent signal of the flight. One commentator said the “exercises near Taiwan are [primarily] a warning to the DPP [Democratic Progressive Party], which always plays down...”

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70 People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, December 11, 2017i.
73 Wang Min [王敏], “PLA H-6 Encircles Taiwan Again: Taiwan Weather Anchor—Mainland Will Play ‘War of Attrition’ and Taiwan Will be ‘Killed’” [“解放军轰 6 再绕台 台气象主播: 大陆玩’消耗战’ 台湾会被’玩死’”], *Global Times*, July 24, 2017; Shi Lao [施佬], “Three Times in Four Days, Our [China’s] H-6 Approached Taiwan Island Again” [“四天三次 我轰-6 战机再次接近台湾岛”], *Observer*, July 25, 2017; Li Ming [李名], “The PLAAF’s Flights Around Taiwan Have Been Labeled a Battle of Resources: Taiwan Will Be Played to Death” [“解放军轰炸机绕台被指打消耗战, 台湾会被'玩死’”], *Global Times*, July 25, 2017; “Mainland H-6 Encircles Taiwan—Taiwan Scholar Criticizes Tsai Ing-wen: Cross-Strait Relations Have ‘Rapid Progress’” [“大陆轰-6 战机绕台 台学者讽蔡英文: 两岸关系‘突飞猛进’”], *Global Times*, July 22, 2017.
74 “Liaoning Carrier Just Left the Taiwan Strait, H-6 Encircled Taiwan Again in a Week” [“辽宁舰刚刚驶离台湾海峡 ‘轰 6’ 又绕台湾一周”], *Reference News*, July 14, 2017.
Beijing’s military might, and a reminder to the Taiwanese public,” while also noting that the Japanese intercepting Chinese aircraft near the Miyako Strait “helps the Chinese pilots to improve their combat skills.” Another commentator on CCTV said the flight was intended to show combat power and resolve, and echoed reported comments by PLAN Aviation pilots warning the Taiwan air force not to interfere with the Chinese patrols or they would face the consequences. Wang Mingzhi directly linked the more explicit Chinese messaging on the patrol to the activities of “Taiwan separatists” and warned them not to overstep China’s bottom line, and Du Wenlong described these flights as “targeted training” to signal that China could now attack all of Taiwan, including its east coast, early on in a war; Du echoed Wang’s warning to “Taiwan separatists.” The most notable aspect of the messaging was via the PLAAF’s social media use, which is described further in Chapter Three.

The first half of 2018 once again saw multiple bomber flights around Taiwan. In April the PLAAF for the first time conducted flights over three days in a row, with a fourth flight several days later. These flights varied between solo H-6K flights and those accompanied by other support aircraft. In May, H-6Ks flew around Taiwan from different directions on the same day, similar to flights in July 2017. The May flights are also noteworthy since it was the first time the Su-35 crossed the First Island Chain, though it did not fly all the way around Taiwan. Wang Mingliang explains that the May flight improved the bombers’ operational capability to strike its targets from multiple directions and the employment of two theater commands at the same time improved cross-theater operations.

These fights came with much more explicit deterrence signaling. On the day of the first flight in April, the PLAAF released a video about the H-6K unit that had participated in the 1996 exercises targeted at Taiwan during the last major Taiwan Strait crisis. Most notably, the video was dubbed in Southern Min, the dialect of Chinese spoken in Taiwan; internet users clearly

75 Minnie Chan, “Chinese Air Force Flexes Muscle into Western Pacific in Warning to Taiwan,” South China Morning Post, December 12, 2017b.
76 PLAN Aviation H-6 bombers conducted a flight through the Miyako Strait on December 7, 2017, for training with PLAN ships and reportedly threatened action against a Taiwan F-16 that intercepted them. See “PLA Pilot Warns Taiwanese Flier in Rare Airborne Face-Off,” Asia Times, December 8, 2017; “Editorial: PLAAF Bombers Brazenly Ask Taiwan Aircraft to Move Aside, Cool” [“社评: 解放军轰炸机霸气要求台机让路，酷”] Global Times, December 7, 2017; and “Asia Today,” CCTV-4, December 13, 2017b.
77 “Asia Today,” CCTV-4, December 14, 2017c.
78 People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, April 19, 2018i; People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, April 21, 2018j; People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, April 26, 2018m.
79 People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, May 11, 2018p.
81 People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, April 19, 2018g.
understood this was intended to convey PLA messaging directly to the Taiwanese people. It did the same for another video two days later. It also released its flight route for the first time and explicitly acknowledged for the first time that the “island” the flights circled was indeed Taiwan, after over a year of ambiguity and innuendo. The rhetoric by military commentators also ramped up, as one said that the H-6K’s missiles are intended for “destroying Taiwan’s key military facilities or decapitate important human targets like Tsai and [prime minister William] Lai.”

Flights near Japan

The PLAAF began flying routes more explicitly focused on Japan in July 2017. That month, six H-6Ks flew through the Miyako Strait but then turned north and flew close along Japan’s east coast to the Kii Peninsula. There were no support aircraft escorting the bombers, consistent with the PLAAF’s typical solo first flight on a new route. The PLAAF acknowledged the flight but did not say it was close to Japan, though it released a photo of a bomber flying off a coastline that is likely that of Japan. In December two H-6Ks, along with a Tu-154 reconnaissance aircraft, flew through the Tsushima Strait between Korea and Japan for the first time, escorted by Su-30 fighters that appear to have turned around in the Strait and did not accompany the bombers the entire time. Of note, PLAN Aviation has flown several flights through Tsushima since at least August 2016. The PLAAF announcement said the flight was “not targeted at any country, region or target,” and rolled out familiar arguments about freedom of navigation under United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), while also noting that “the Japan Sea is not Japan’s sea.” Striking a populist tone, the PLAAF also claimed that the flight was “in

82 The video was also dubbed in English and Cantonese. For the Taiwanese version, see People’s Liberation Army Air Force, Weibo, April 19, 2018f; for the English version, see People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, April 19, 2018h.
83 People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, April 21, 2018k; People’s Liberation Army Air Force, 2018j.
84 People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, April 23, 2018l; People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, April 28, 2018m; People’s Liberation Army Air Force, 2018n.
85 Minnie Chan, “Navy and Ground Troops to Join Air Force in Drills Around Taiwan as China Increases Pressure on President Tsai Ing-wen,” South China Morning Post, May 14, 2018.
87 People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, August 24, 2017e.
90 People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, December 18, 2017n.
response to the expectations of the people,” and a CCTV segment listed the flight as one of the PLA’s five biggest accomplishments of 2017. Japan and South Korea claimed the flight passed through their ADIZs, and both scrambled fighters in response. DoD asserts that these flights near Japan “demonstrated a maturing capability for H-6K bombers to conduct off-axis strikes against U.S. and allies facilities.”

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91 People’s Liberation Army Air Force, 2017n; People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, December 27, 2017o.


3. Drivers of Chinese Bomber Flights

As Chinese strategic bomber operations achieve greater prominence and publicity, public Chinese military discourse touching upon strategic bomber operations has likewise expanded. This chapter provides an overview of Chinese thinking on strategic bombers and which imperatives may be driving these activities. The overall approach to this chapter involved analyzing authoritative and unclassified Chinese military publications. Insofar as it is feasible, it draws insights gleaned from Chinese military publications written by PLA researchers of relevance, including Strategic Air Force, a volume containing commentary by researchers associated with the PLAAF Command Academy in Beijing. This chapter also makes use of discussions drawn from Chinese military press to supplement writings from more authoritative sources. These media sources include commentary written by PLAAF Command Academy researchers appearing in Liberation Army Daily, the official newspaper of the PLA.

None of the views expressed in this chapter by PLA researchers should be misconstrued as reflective of official doctrine. PLA equivalents to the U.S. Joint Publication series or Air Force Doctrine Documents are typically classified and inaccessible to foreign analysts. Rather, these views reflect the personal views of well-informed individuals in the PLAAF establishment. Furthermore, the opinions discussed occasionally deal with PLAAF capabilities that have yet to mature, and therefore we should view this literature as reflecting arguments for how the PLAAF could employ capabilities, but not necessarily how the service actually employs them in practice.

Bombers in the Context of China’s Pursuit of a “Strategic Air Force”

An examination of Chinese commentary on strategic bombers is incomplete without couching long-range bomber flights within the context of the PLAAF’s remarkable strategic transformation over the last two decades. Once viewed as a backward force equipped with antiquated aircraft flown by poorly trained pilots, the PLAAF has gradually stepped out of the shadow of China’s ground forces and emerged as one of the world’s premier air forces. In its path to modernization, it aspires to become what PLAAF officers and other Chinese military thinkers refer to as a “strategic air force.”94 The hallmarks of a strategic air force entail the following: a defined strategy and an accompanying set of missions conducive to completing national security objectives and protecting China’s national interests; requirements for state-of-the-art platforms and systems that are commensurate with China’s standing as a major power, including advanced offensive and defensive capabilities; and the institutional status befitting its

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94 For more on this topic, see Michael S. Chase and Cristina L. Garafola, “China’s Search for a Strategic Air Force,” Journal of Strategic Studies, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2016.
role as a “strategic service,” an important consideration given the historically subordinate role
the PLAAF has played in China’s traditionally ground force–centered military.95

by the Military Strategy Research Department of the PLA’s Academy of Military Science—
traces the PLAAF’s search for a strategic air force.96 Until the 1990s, the PLAAF’s main
strategic mission centered on territorial air defense, thus limiting its operations to the defense of
the homeland.97 Changes in China’s security environment; the expansion of national interests in
the air and space domains, as well as overseas; and the ensuing struggle to protect those interests
have since resulted in an increase in strategic requirements and more diversified roles for the
PLAAF.98 President Xi Jinping endorsed the PLAAF’s vision of a strategic air force during a
visit to PLAAF headquarters in April 2014, reaffirming support of the PLAAF’s transformation
from the highest level of Chinese government.99

The PLAAF’s strategic transformation is rooted in changes to PLA doctrine since the 1990s.
In 1999, the PLA issued campaign guidance to the PLAAF, signaling a major shift in PLAAF
doctrine.100 Although the contents of the campaign guidance are classified, developments in the
PLAAF afterward suggested a departure from its traditional mission of territorial defense. In the
same year, then-president Jiang Zemin stressed the need to “build a powerful People’s Air Force
with both offensive and defensive capabilities,” signaling the conferment of an offensive strike
mission on the PLAAF. Five years later, in 2004, the PLAAF altered this guidance to include
added emphasis on the need to integrate air and space, resulting in its first service-specific
strategic concept, which called for “air and space integration, with both offensive and defensive
[capabilities].”101

With changes in doctrine came changes in operational concepts. Along with air defense
campaigns and air blockade campaigns, the PLA now tasks the PLAAF with air offensive
campaigns. PLAAF publications detail three major types of air combat operations: air-to-air
combat, air-to-surface-combat, and surface-to-air combat. Traditionally, air-to-air combat and
surface-to-air combat occupied the primary responsibilities of the PLAAF due to the absence of

95 Chase and Garafola, 2016.
97 Chinese Academy of Military Science, Military Strategy Department [中国军事科学院军事战略研究部门], ed.,
99 Xinhua, 2014.
100 Roger Cliff, John Fei, Jeff Hagen, Elizabeth Hague, Eric Heginbotham, and John Stillion, Shaking the Heavens
and Splitting the Earth: Chinese Air Force Employment Concepts in the 21st Century, Santa Monica, Calif.:
101 Cliff et al., 2011, p. 45.
both the relevant capabilities in the form of advanced systems and the lack of an emphasis on offensive strike missions in official doctrine. With the official conferment of an offensive strike mission in 1999, the PLAAF’s emphasis has since shifted toward air-to-surface-combat—that is, a focus on achieving air superiority by striking enemy aircraft and airfields on the ground. The activities of the PLAAF’s H-6K bomber fleet represent an extension of the PLAAF’s relatively newfound emphasis on offensive strike missions. PLAAF writings describe as “most effective” operations that are conducted over long distances and at high speed using intensive firepower against the enemy in strikes deep in its territories. Long-range bombers such as the H-6K, armed with precision strike munitions, greatly expand the operational reach of the PLAAF. Indeed, H-6K training flights circumnavigating Taiwan and flying beyond the First Island Chain no doubt serve a purpose in preparing for a future contingency that potentially involves striking adversary bases.

Multiple PLAAF discussions couch the practice of employing strategic bombers and deploying them beyond China’s periphery as falling in line with the PLAAF’s aspirations of strategic transformation. In a 2007 interview with China Youth Daily, PLAAF Command Academy associate professor Han Yuemin describes strategic bombers as the manifestation of a country’s comprehensive national power, as well as manifestations of its national and military strategy. An article appearing in China Air Force, a bimonthly magazine published by the PLAAF’s Political Department, identifies the “air-space integration capabilities and offensive and defensive operations” strategic concept as the “ideological guidance” influencing the outward expansion of PLAAF strategic bomber operations. Writing in Liberation Army Daily, PLAAF Command Academy professor Yang Yujie describes strategic bombers as the “standard for a great power and a symbol of its strength.” More authoritative insights on the significance of bomber operations for the PLAAF’s strategic aspirations appear in Strategic Air Force, a compilation of writings by prominent PLAAF thinkers published in 2009 by the official publishing house of the PLAAF. Although Strategic Air Force appeared six years before PLAAF bombers first soared through the skies above the western Pacific, several of its essays offer credible insights into PLAAF perspectives on the use of long-range bombers.

105 Lin et al., 2015.
In discussing the global nature of a strategic air force, a group of PLAAF researchers including Yang Yujie and fellow PLAAF Command Academy professor Wang Mingliang note that a strategic air force must play a role not only at home but also worldwide in order to safeguard national interests, necessitating the ability to fly farther. While calling for the outward expansion of PLAAF flights, the authors take into consideration the potential domestic and geopolitical repercussions of such flights, noting that “relevant countries and domestic departments” unaccustomed to PLAAF activities beyond China’s borders will inevitably view them as threats and provocations. To mitigate the potential for conflict, the authors advise the PLAAF to avoid sudden expansions of such flights and instead opt for a gradual and incremental normalization of activities so that “flying across the border” becomes a “routine and unsurprising practice.”

Indeed, in the real-world application of long-range bomber flights, the PLAAF, at least in regard to foreign audiences, has strived to publicly portray its activities as ordinary. For example, in the aftermath of a September 2016 exercise that saw multiple H-6K bombers and support aircraft traverse the Bashi Channel between Taiwan and the Philippines, PLAAF spokesperson Shen Jinke noted that long-range over water flights are a “common practice for the air forces of coastal states, and a normal need for developing China’s defense,” and that “the Chinese airforce [sic] will normalize these exercises beyond the ‘First Island Chain’ according to international laws and regulations.”

PLAAF thinkers view the acquisition and employment of strategic bombers as a necessary step in its strategic transformation. Indeed, strategic bombers should be perceived as part of China’s quest to acquire modern platforms and systems commensurate to its status as a rising global power. Writing in Strategic Air Force, PLAAF researchers Shi Keru, Liu Gang, and Ma Honggang provide three arguments in favor of China following the United States and Russia in enhancing its strategic combat power through the development of strategic bombers.

First, the authors view strategic bombers as a necessity for maintaining national safety and safeguarding national security interests. China faces a precarious security environment surrounded by threats on all sides; this necessitates the employment of strategic combat power to patrol the regions relevant to its national interests.

Second, the employment of strategic bombers would optimize the PLAAF’s force structure and expedite the development of other strategic systems. In comparison to other developed countries such as the United States and India, these researchers note that the PLAAF utilized a


much lower proportion of ground-attack aircraft. This in turn placed the PLAAF’s strategic
deterrence capabilities at a disadvantage. While acknowledging internal PLAAF arguments
favoring the use of fighter-bombers with aerial refueling support to fulfill strategic long-range
ground-attack roles, the authors are adamant in their belief that strategic bombers remain the
only platforms capable of operating long distances while delivering payloads large enough to
cripple strategic targets. As an added boon, the authors believe developing strategic bombers
would in turn advance other platforms and systems, such as early warning, strategic lift, and
aerial refueling capabilities, thereby expediting the pace of the PLAAF’s strategic transformation.

Finally, strategic bombers are necessary for the PLAAF to play its part in the integration of
ground, sea, air, space, and electromagnetic operational domains in joint operations under
“informationized” or information-centric combat conditions. Without strategic offensive
capabilities, they argue, a state of imbalance would occur on the multidomain battlefield,
jeopardizing the operational effectiveness of the various arms and services.

PLAAF researchers Hu Jiansheng and Liu Jinjun echo the views of their colleagues in a
separate essay extolling the virtues of long-range offensive capabilities. As they put it,
strategic bombers are more agile than sea and ground forces and more precise than surface-to-
surface missiles. Compared to tactical aircraft, strategic bombers possess greater operational
range. Even with the added benefit of aerial refueling, the safety of refueling zones in China’s
periphery is far from guaranteed, thus constricting the utility of tactical aircraft in long-range
operations. The authors also list practical applications of strategic bombers, such as bringing the
First and Second Island Chains within striking range to counter perceived efforts to contain
China, deploying long-range flights to threaten Taiwan’s vulnerable eastern flank, and
leveraging long-range offensive capabilities to defend interests in the South China Sea, as well as
vulnerable sea-lanes. These insights proved prophetic as the PLAAF initiated long-range over
water bomber flights in May 2015, and PLAAF bombers now consistently fly past the First
Island Chain toward Guam, circumnavigate Taiwan, and patrol the skies over the South China
Sea.

**Taking a Cue from Russian and U.S. Models**

As the PLAAF strategic bomber force continues to expand its operations beyond China’s
periphery, it will undoubtedly take on missions long considered routine by their peers in the
Russian and U.S. air forces. One such mission is the use of strategic bombers for strategic
signaling purposes. While other practices such as training could also be influenced by the two

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110 Hu Jiansheng [胡健生] and Liu Jinjun [刘进军], “A Strategic Air Force Should Attach Importance to Building
Long-Range Offensive Air Power” [“战略空军应重视空中远攻力量建设”], in Zhu Hui [朱晖], ed., *Strategic
longtime strategic bomber operators, accessible commentary from PLAAF researchers on Russian and U.S. strategic bombers almost exclusively focuses on their signaling role.

During the height of the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States consistently used bombers for *strategic cruising*, a term Chinese analysts use to describe the employment of bomber flights by the two superpowers as a means of conveying strategic intent and sending deterrence signals.\(^{111}\) Chinese analysts note that the practice continues to this day, with Russian and U.S. strategic bombers taking flight whenever strategic requirements dictate. Despite China’s relatively late entry into the club of countries conducting long-range bomber operations, it appears to have quickly grasped the application of its H-6K flights for signaling purposes. As PLAAF Command Academy professor Wang Mingliang puts it, “in displaying the H-6K to the world, the message being sent is our faith and ability to use more active methods in much wider spaces to protect national sovereignty, security, and development.”\(^{112}\) For example, after the July 2016 PCA ruled in favor of the Philippines, in the process invalidating many of China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea, a flurry of Chinese media activity highlighted images depicting PLAAF H-6K bombers patrolling the skies over disputed waters for the first time.\(^{113}\) During a televised appearance on China Central Television, PLA National Defense University professor and military commentator Li Li said the appearance of H-6K bombers over Scarborough Shoal meant that the wings of China’s strategic air force were now capable of reaching the Spratly Islands and covering the whole South China Sea.\(^{114}\)

Chinese military writings on strategic deterrence are well documented.\(^{115}\) Many of these focus on the PLA Rocket Force (known as the PLA Second Artillery Force from its founding in 1966 until it was renamed in December 2015) and are replete with references to how it can display or use its theater and strategic missiles for purposes of deterrence signaling or intimidation of potential adversaries. Less common are specific references to ways in which long-range bombers can send a deterrence message, but there are sources that address some of the means through which air power can be used for strategic signaling.

\(^{111}\) *Strategic cruising* is not officially defined in authoritative PLA or PLAAF reference books (*PLAAF Encyclopedia*), but based on the context of usage in military circles, denotes flights undertaken with a strategic intent.

\(^{112}\) Wei Yiping [魏一平], “The New Missions of the Strategic Air Force—An Exclusive Interview with PLAAF Command Academy Professor Wang Mingliang” [“战略空军的新使命—专访空军指挥学院教授王明亮”], *Sanlian Life*, August 31, 2015.

\(^{113}\) See Beauchamp-Mustafaga et al., 2016.


In the 1995 *Science of Air Force Strategy*, a seminal publication hailed as China’s first publicly released research monograph on air force strategy, air-based deterrence is generally described as achieved by “making use of methods such as establishing no-fly zones, organizing air patrols, adjusting force deployments, holding military drills, testing new air-based weapons, and other methods to subtly or directly display air power and determination.”

Another reference to strategic signaling can be found in the *China Air Force Encyclopedia*, an authoritative two-volume work published in 2005 and compiled by an editorial committee led by Qiao Qingchen, the commander of the PLAAF at the time. Wang Chaoqun and He Weirong, the then–deputy commanders of the PLAAF, and Liu Yazhou, the then-deputy political commissar of the PLAAF, also sat on the same committee. An entry in the encyclopedia describes the practice of air-based deterrence as “including drills to display power as the ultimate gesture, deploying power air forces near borders [as well as] the simultaneous utilization of multiple methods.”

Signaling activities are described as part of nonwar air force missions in *Introduction to Air Force Military Thought*, a 2005 publication edited by PLAAF Command Academy researcher Min Zengfu. The text notes that air forces are the tool of choice when major powers face issues short of war deemed unresolvable by ordinary methods such as diplomacy. It views air-based signaling as a gradual process, beginning with the remote deployment of reconnaissance and monitoring systems. Should these preliminary methods fail in their deterrence role, activities such as shifts in alert levels, visible deployments, and large-scale exercises can be adopted. As a last resort, more provocative actions such as implementing no-fly zones and conducting limited strikes could be utilized. Finally, writing in 2009’s *Strategic Air Force* on the need to normalize long-range flights, Wang Mingliang and his colleagues make a brief reference to “the time-appropriate implementation of cruising flights in sensitive regions during military struggle to demonstrate power.”

While PLAAF researchers appear to be disinclined to openly link the practices of PLAAF long-range bomber forces with those of their Russian and U.S. peers, an overview of commentary by PLAAF researchers suggests they pay close attention to Russian and U.S. experiences with the strategic signaling applications of long-range bombers. PLAAF Command Academy professor Wang Mingliang notes how Russia “always releases strategic bombers for strategic cruising . . . to ‘make noise’ each time tensions flare with the West, a ‘usual practice in

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119 Wang et al., 2009.
the chess match between great powers.”120 Wang’s comment echoes observations made six years prior with fellow PLAAF Command Academy professor Yang Yujie and other PLAAF researchers in Strategic Air Force. While discussing the hallmarks of a global air force, they make specific reference to how Vladimir Putin’s restoration of long-range bomber flights in 2007 allowed Russia to project power globally while “fully displaying the power and prestige of a great country.”121 In following the Russian example, the researchers are convinced that PLAAF should “fly beyond national borders, and [establish] systems such as ‘strategic cruising.’”

Writing in a full-page Liberation Army Daily feature in March 2017, PLAAF Command Academy professor Yang Yujie provides an in-depth examination of the signaling role of strategic bombers in the Russian and U.S. air forces. As she puts it, the United States “excels at using strategic bombers to maintain hegemony over the seas and skies, project national willpower, and exert strategic influence,” particularly through the peacetime employment of “bomber diplomacy,” which she describes as, on the surface, the use of bomber deployments, rotations, and drills and maneuvers and, under the surface, the nonwar use of bomber units that combines “strategic weapons, long-range deployments, and extensive dissemination of propaganda” to achieve the “visualization of deterrence effects and the frequency of deterrence postures” with the aim of “[honoring] commitment to security promises, [exerting] strategic influence, and [deterring] the at-hand opponent.”122 What Yang refers to as bomber diplomacy is undoubtedly a reference to what the U.S. Air Force (USAF) calls continuous bomber presence, the task aimed at ensuring the presence of battle-ready bombers at Andersen Air Force Base on Guam.123

In Yang’s view, U.S. bomber diplomacy is realized in three ways: by regularly rotating deployments from mainland bases to Guam as part of long-range “global force” tasks; by participating in drills and exercises such as Global Thunder, which she describes as a large-scale drill conducted by U.S. Strategic Command to display the flexibility and adaptability of U.S. strategic bombers; and by carrying out deterrence missions in response to crisis situations such as North Korean nuclear and missile provocations. Yang notes that each situation necessitates the formation of a task force consisting of strategic bombers carrying multitask payloads, aerial refueling tankers, fighter support, and ground-based maintenance and supply.124 In their practice, PLAAF long-range bomber flights function in a similar manner, with missions of expanding scale and complexity involving H-6K bombers and various types of support aircraft.

120 Wei, 2015.
121 Wang et al., 2009.
122 Yang, 2017.
124 Yang, 2017.
In her examination of the Russian long-range bomber force, Yang believes it remains an effective tool for conveying strategic signals in spite of its inferiority in comparison to its U.S. counterpart. She notes that the Russian Air Force lacks advanced strategic bombers on par with the B-2, as well as military bases spanning the entire globe. As a consequence, its ability to directly match capabilities with the United States is severely impaired. Despite its shortcomings, Yang points out that activities conducted by the Russian long-range bomber force still elicit widespread media attention and draw significant military responses from Western nations. Because of this, Yang assesses that Russian long-range bomber flights will continue to constitute an important tool in Russia’s efforts to reclaim great power status and challenge American hegemony.

Yang’s assessment of Russian long-range bomber activities reiterates the views of her peers in 2009’s *Strategic Air Force*. Writing on the advantages inherent in long-range offensive power, PLAAF researchers Hu Jiansheng and Liu Jianjun note that while the long-range offensive capabilities of the U.S. Air Force exceed those of the Russian Air Force in all respects, the latter possessed “long-range offensive power consistent with its national interests.” Hu and Liu perceive outdated long-range bombers such as the Tu-95 and the Tu-150 as sufficient to satisfy the basic requirements of global reach, and point out that the operational radius of the medium-range Tu-22M still allowed it to conduct strategic signaling missions in airspace surrounding areas of strategic interest, such as Europe and Japan. Considering that the PLAAF likewise operates limited numbers of technologically inferior strategic bombers from bases limited to its own territories, Russian bomber flights could potentially offer the PLAAF insights in sending strategic signals to a superior opponent.

**Win-Win Flights: Deterrence Flights Also Serve as Training Opportunity**

PLAAF bomber flights in the Asia-Pacific not only serve deterrence or coercive diplomacy purposes but also provide rare opportunities for pilots and crews to train in more realistic conditions. According to one analytical article on the Taiwan flights, “These bomber flights provide important operational training for PLAAF crews on a range of skills . . . such as pilot endurance . . ., varying weather conditions over water, navigational challenges, interaction with foreign aircraft (Japanese and Taiwan fighter jets intercept flights near their airspace), and signals intelligence collection.” DoD has said that the flights into the Western Pacific are intended as training for strikes on Guam and have demonstrated this capability.

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125 Hu and Liu, 2009.


With three years of flight data, it may be possible to begin tracking the PLA’s over water training cycle, shown in Figure 3.1. According to previous RAND research, the annual training cycle for PLAAF pilots includes five phases, beginning with “new year flight training” in January and February, general skills training in the spring and fall, peak drilling and exercise season in the summer, and year-end testing in November and December. Based on the number of distant sea flights for PLAAF bombers since 2015, we can see there is a noticeable increase in flights during the summer and winter, and this correlates well with the assessed peak training and testing seasons, respectively. While the 2016 flights into the South China Sea were clearly timed for the PCA ruling in July of that year, the flights around Taiwan do not so clearly demonstrate a political and strategic logic for their timing. One possible explanation, offered by an observer in Taiwan, is that President Xi felt the need to pressure Taiwan after President Tsai’s election.

![Figure 3.1. PLAAF Bomber Long-Range Training Cycle](image)

One important gap in our understanding is how many of these flights are the first distant sea flights for the pilots involved. One of the few PLAAF pilots identified by name, Liu Rui, has conducted several flights over water, which may suggest that the PLAAF is building a smaller


group of experienced pilots before broadening training to all H-6K crews. However, at least one Kongjun Bao report suggests that younger pilots are also now flying these distant sea flights: “Previously, due to the importance of the mission, only experienced pilots were allowed to take a leading role, affecting the development of young pilots. However, the annual military training conference proclaimed . . . this kind of conservative thinking must be changed.” With an estimated 90 H-6Ks in service in 2017, it will be important for the PLAAF to develop a broad pool of qualified pilots if they are to successfully fulfill their mission of strikes on U.S. and allied regional bases in wartime.

Flight Evolution Suggests Planned Rollout

Available evidence strongly suggests that these over water flights were planned years in advance, and the flight progression on multiple routes indicates a standardized training program for pilots and crews. The 2013 Science of Military Strategy appears to have foreshadowed the PLAAF bomber flights. In a discussion of the PLAAF’s new historic missions, “air and space deterrence” includes first “organizing activities having strategic significance, to display the Air Force’s strategic capability and strategic resolve . . . to the outside world.” This had already been accomplished through humanitarian assistance/disaster relief and foreign military exercises. The book then states, “In the future, [the PLAAF] should realize some breakthroughs in terms of blue-water training and strategic cruising.” This strongly suggests the PLAAF’s long-distance bomber flights have been planned for many years.

The flights clearly demonstrate an increasing training complexity for H-6K crews. The first flights through the Bashi Channel, Miyako Strait, and South China Sea all had only H-6Ks. The second flights through the same routes featured other supporting aircraft, mainly Tu-154s and Y-8s, based on public reporting. The third flights included fighters and refueling aircraft, and additional flights sometimes mixed in different fighters. The December 2017 flight through the Tsushima Strait broke this trend, possibly suggesting greater PLAAF confidence in its pilots operating over unfamiliar waters. Speaking at the Nineteenth Party Congress, H-6K pilot Liu Rui, who has been profiled extensively in the Chinese media, asserted these distant sea flights

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134 For the second flight through the Bashi Channel in August 2015, the PLAAF only said that “multiple types” of aircraft were involved, and there is no other reporting to provide greater detail. See Qiu and Xiao, 2015.
have “raised [the PLAAF’s] ability to fight and win [wars]” and have been “regularized, systematized, and made more realistic.” Liu explained the three important changes for distant sea training: the “training frequency” has shifted from “four times in the first year [2015] to now many times in a month”; the types of aircraft flying have evolved from just bombers (“we did it ourselves”) to now “forming a system with other types of planes—fighters, refueling aircraft, early warning aircraft and reconnaissance planes”; and the “training direction” has shifted from “first flying through the Bashi Channel and Miyako Strait to now flying through both in one flight.”

The evolution of these flights clearly reflects a long-planned rollout by the PLAAF. Beyond establishing the legal justification early, Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo, a frequent commentator on military issues and director of the PLAN’s Expert Consultation Committee, in March 2015 also presciently suggested several aspects of the flights that would come to fruition over the next several years. Yin noted that the H-6Ks might be escorted by support aircraft in the future, including fighters, early warning aircraft, reconnaissance aircraft, and air-refueling tankers. Moreover, he suggested the PLAAF would deepen cooperation with the PLAN, including being escorted by carrier-based early warning aircraft and “coordinating with large surface ships or even submarines” in order to “provide air cover or targeting information to naval formations.” Yin also asserted that these flights would be “regularized,” suggested the PLAAF would eventually fly north instead of just east into the Pacific, and noted the possibility of foreign surveillance on these flight routes. As of October 1, 2018, PLAAF H-6Ks have done all of these except having been escorted by carrier-based early warning aircraft and coordinated with submarines, and Yin named the wrong northern strait the PLAAF would fly through: he specified the Osumi Strait, but H-6K bombers transited the Tsushima Strait instead.

**PLAAF Use of Social Media for Internal and External Consumption**

The PLAAF’s choice of Weibo as its preferred messaging platform suggests its target audience is primarily domestic internet users, as the messages are all in the Chinese language and thus have limited reach to foreign audiences. The PLA realized early on that social media would play a key propaganda role in influencing Chinese domestic public opinion of the military; as one 2008 article notes, “As we grasp the new trend of an increasingly diversified and targeted social media . . . we need to actively occupy the public cultural service platform, so as to

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135 Liu Rui, quoted in People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], CCTV video, October 23, 2017f.
promote and display a positive military image.”

It is difficult to overstate the PLAAF’s embrace of social media for propaganda purposes, and the importance of the PLAAF’s Weibo messaging and domestic support is evident in a CCTV documentary on the bomber force that touts the popularity of the PLAAF’s Scarborough Shoal flight on Weibo. More recently, one PLAAF post offered to send interested internet users some propaganda materials about the flights around Taiwan, explaining, “Whether you are a worker, a farmer, a science and technology worker, a cleaner, or a courier, the strength of the motherland needs your commitment! The strength of the army requires your support!”

The most explicit case of PLAAF social media use targeted at foreign audiences is the coverage of H-6K bomber flights in the South China Sea in the summer of 2016, which marked the first PLAAF use of social media to announce and broadcast bomber flights. Revealing the first flight via a split-second clip on CCTV in May provided a low-key channel for preemptively suggesting bombers would appear in the South China Sea, and this was the first time the PLAAF spokesperson did not announce the flight when it happened. Although the PLAAF’s official Weibo account was the first to publish photos of the H-6K flying over Scarborough Shoal on July 15, shown in Figure 3.2, the official Twitter account of the Chinese government’s State Council Information Office (SCIO) quickly picked up the images, shown in Figure 3.3, followed by other Chinese state-run media organizations on Twitter. The information these organizations tweeted was obviously aimed at an international audience, since Twitter is not available to internet users in China and the posts were in English. Similarly, when the PLAAF returned to the South China Sea in November 2017, CCTV’s America branch posted its own video of the flight with English subtitles, whereas Twitter posts from the Chinese state-run media paid less attention to the December 2017 flight around Taiwan.

One PLA article notes that “only by producing great domestic influence may a newspaper’s opinion . . . enjoy a solid foundation for overseas propaganda” and suggests taking cues from the state-run nationalistic tabloid Global Times, which “effectively conveyed the [diplomatic strategy of the state] by lowering the ‘tone’ in playing the part of a social media organ.” Although it is difficult to

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138 “Face to Face,” 2017.

139 People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, April 29, 2018.


gauge the reach of this external signaling, and the SCIO tweet appears to have been retweeted and liked only a small number of times, it may ultimately have been aimed at a very limited audience in any case.

Figure 3.2. PLAAF Weibo Post of H-6K Flying over Scarborough Shoal

The PLAAF’s most frequent use of social media came during its flights around Taiwan in the second half of 2017 and first half of 2018. These flights were posted to the PLAAF’s Weibo account, suggesting they were intended for domestic propaganda. However, since the Taiwanese people speak Chinese and roughly 25 percent reportedly have Weibo accounts, it is likely that this also served strategic messaging purposes for the deterrence or intimidation of Taiwan. A 2011 article on military propaganda directed explicitly against Taiwan suggests that some in the PLA think “the focus in the psychological war with Taiwan must lie in force deterrence,” but “during the current peaceful development stage, the main objective is to win over the hearts of the military and the will of the people” and that the PLA should not scare the Taiwan people, so instead “the best tone is . . . confident, sincere, natural, frank, firm, and like an iron fist in a velvet glove.” One military commentator also explained that the PLAAF’s messaging strategy

143 “Penetration of Leading Social Networks in Taiwan as of 4th Quarter 2016,” Statista, 2017. For one example of CCTV focusing on Taiwan reaction to PLAAF bomber flights, see “Asia Today,” 2017b.
had switched from passive to active with its December 2017 flight around Taiwan, and Weibo allowed it to release information before Japan to gain the “initiative” for public opinion. The PLAAF has also increased its emphasis on multimedia content on Weibo, releasing videos of its flights through the South China Sea and around Taiwan in late 2017 and early 2018, excerpts of which have been reshared on Twitter. The PLAAF even released a cartoon video in April 2018 called “My Godly Might, Your Peace,” a play on the H-6K’s Chinese nickname, God of War. Although it is nearly impossible to gauge the impact of the PLA’s propaganda on its domestic audience, one anecdotal piece of evidence suggests these flights around Taiwan reinforced “agenda setting” of consistent messaging of a strong Chinese military and weak Taiwan: in a Global Times online poll about these Taiwan flights, 94 percent of respondents (1,301 out of 1,392) said they felt “pleased” and less than 1 percent said they were “hurt” or “angry.” The PLAAF’s Weibo account was recognized as one of the best military accounts at the 2017 Weibo Military Influence Summit, and one popular post taunting Taiwan is presented in Figure 3.4.


146 People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, November 23, 2017g; People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, December 17, 2017m; CCTV+, “#AirForce  #Chinese Reveals Different #Warplanes in Latest Promo Video,” Twitter, December 17, 2017; People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, March 31, 2018c.

147 People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, April 2, 2018e.

148 Li, 2017.

149 “Because of Many Experiences, the @空军发布 Account Received Attention at the ‘Weibo 2017 Military Influence’ Summit!” [“因为干货多，@空军发布 在 ‘微博 2017 军事影响力峰会’ 上备受关注!”], Sina, December 7, 2017.
In 2018, the PLAAF also became clearer in its discussions of the value of these bomber flights for deterrence. In its announcement for the March flights into the western Pacific and South China Sea, the PLAAF said the flights “have become an important force for shaping the situation, managing the crisis, curbing the war, and winning the war.” Later that month, it further noted that “the H-6K is China’s indigenously developed medium-range new-model bomber and fulfills the important mission of delivering the nation’s power and will” and that the flights “declared the strength of the Chinese Air Force in the western Pacific.” Wang Mingliang explained this even more explicitly following the May flights around Taiwan:

> It is undeniable that this is also a special language for China’s security communication on the international stage. The information transmitted is that the PLAAF is determined to be able to maintain the sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity of the country in a broader space. It also [says that China] has the resolve and capability to show the PLAAF’s legal existence in international public airspace. This helps maintain regional stability and peace.

Finally, the PLAAF has sought to enhance the targeting of its messaging. It has released propaganda materials in Cantonese, English, Japanese, and Southern Min (Taiwanese), revealing the PLAAF’s intended audiences for this deterrence signaling. It has explained that this is intended to “convey [China’s] will to safeguard the unity of the country,” and that using multiple

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150 People’s Liberation Army Air Force, 2018b.
151 People’s Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军], Weibo, March 31, 2018c.
153 People’s Liberation Army Air Force, 2018n.
languages “allows the people of all nationalities across the country and the compatriots in Taiwan and overseas to understand and see more clearly” that “every inch of territory of our great motherland cannot and absolutely must not be separated from China.” This marks a more assertive PLAAF approach to leveraging the political significance of these flights for deterrence signaling.
In this chapter we present an analysis of regional reactions to PLAAF bomber flights with a focus on the nations that have been most heavily impacted by this new air activity—namely, Japan and Taiwan. We base our conclusions here primarily on interviews we conducted in both Taipei and Tokyo with interlocutors hailing from the defense and foreign policy communities. In general, our interlocutors see the bomber flights as linked to wider U.S.-China competition. In particular, some have suggested that H-6K flights might be part of a broader Chinese approach that seeks to bolster China’s position in the region by undermining confidence in U.S. security assurances and exploiting uncertainty and mixed messages surrounding the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump’s approach to China policy and its broader Asia strategy. Ultimately, they argue, Beijing’s objective is to demonstrate that China is increasingly supplanting the United States as the most influential power in the region.

Although we did not interview interlocutors beyond Japan and Taiwan, we also highlight here our assessment of other countries potentially impacted by Chinese bomber flights—namely, Australia, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Korea, and Vietnam. In these cases, our assessments are derived primarily on media reporting.

Japan Reactions

Japanese interlocutors generally assess that bomber flights represent the next step in China’s attempts to assert sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and gain leverage in its dispute with Japan in the East China Sea. Tokyo has already been contending with air incursions into Japan’s ADIZ by PLAAF and PLAN Aviation fighter aircraft, as well as other types of military aircraft in recent years. Bombers, however, are a relatively new phenomenon that is indicative of, in the words of one interlocutor, “salami-slicing tactics” designed to gradually expand Chinese influence and reduce the maneuvering room of an adversary in a contested region. Indeed, one observer from a Japanese think tank likened Chinese conceptions of an ADIZ, which China established in the East China Sea in 2013, to their notions of a maritime exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in that both are meant to demonstrate “control.” It is unclear, however, what Chinese control actually means in practice. Regardless, the risk of miscalculation in this gray area is serious and only growing over time, according to a retired JASDF officer. By constantly pushing the envelope with air incursions, according to this interlocutor, Beijing is attempting to change

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154 Although this is a predictable consequence from these flights, we found no PLA literature that directly addressed the value of bomber flights for undermining extended deterrence or degrading alliances.
the status quo and perhaps even to goad Japan into an incident that could render Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Alliance nonapplicable.

Japan’s Air Staff College prepared a briefing revealing that JASDF fighter aircraft were scrambled 1,168 times in FY2016—an increase of 295 scrambles from FY2015 and double the number of scrambles conducted in 2012. Our Japanese interlocutors noted that this is the largest number of scrambles they have had to conduct since 1958, when the focus was against Soviet aircraft during the Cold War. According to their estimates, 73 percent of aircraft intercepted by the JASDF these days are Chinese aircraft, compared to 26 percent Russian aircraft, and 1 percent aircraft from other countries. The largest number of 2016 intercepts, 803, occurred closest to the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku region, though the northern region of Japan also experienced double the number of scrambles, 265, compared with five years earlier. The data did not provide specific numbers for Chinese bombers.

Notably, some Japanese experts are less concerned about bomber flights than they are about PLAAF fighter aircraft, such as Su-30s, presumably because these aircraft are more likely to be involved in an incident with JASDF interceptors and could thus spark a crisis or even a conflict. Nevertheless, observers have noted that some Chinese bomber flights appear to be armed with land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs), which they interpret as aimed at sending a stronger message. For example, the Japanese Ministry of Defense published a photograph of a bomber transiting through the Miyako Strait in September 2016 that appeared to show it was loaded with a cruise missile. Chinese bomber pilots have described other foreign aircraft showing missiles as “a provocative act . . . it was like he was showing his muscles to me.”

Many Japanese interlocutors called for improvements in Tokyo’s intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance coverage to enhance monitoring of these activities, particularly in the western Pacific Ocean. Traditionally, most of China’s air operations have been concentrated over the Sea of Japan, but as the PLAAF pushes farther and farther from mainland shores, especially with bombers, Tokyo has been reassessing its requirements for adequate coverage. Indeed, the recent PLAAF flight through the Tsushima Strait may be intended to test Japan’s capabilities in these traditionally overlooked areas, similar to flights around Taiwan’s east coast.

Finally, Japanese interlocutors were concerned about the inexperience and, at times, unprofessional behavior displayed by Chinese pilots. Unlike Soviet or Russian pilots, they stated, Chinese pilots seem more reckless, perhaps because they do not know their own limitations, seek to impress commanders with their daring, or both. To head off a potential incident, Japan, under

158 The authors thank Jeffrey Horung for this insight.
the auspices of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation in 2013, established a Track 2 dialogue with the
China Center for Collaborative Studies of the South China Sea at Nanjing University that
prominently featured a proposed code of conduct on airspace safety in the East China Sea.\textsuperscript{159}
Amid a warming of bilateral ties, China and Japan established the Maritime and Aerial
Communication Mechanism in May 2018 during Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang’s visit to Tokyo.
The Mechanism entered into use in June 2018 and is intended to “avert accidental clashes in the
air and at sea.”\textsuperscript{160}

Taiwanese Reactions

Taiwanese interlocutors generally assess that PLAAF bomber flights are the product of a
combination of developments in China and the relationship across the Taiwan Strait. In China,
they argue, President Xi has fully consolidated power and is feeling increasingly confident. His
confidence is yielding a more assertive military that is less averse to taking risks than has been
the case historically. Additionally, some of our interlocutors suggested Xi’s military reforms in
December 2015 may have given the PLAAF greater clout within the PLA to act more assertively
on its own.\textsuperscript{161}

In the more immediate term, observers in Taiwan assert that these conditions have given
Xi the opportunity to intimidate President Tsai and the Taiwanese people with impunity. The
domestic population, however, appears to pay little attention to these developments, as public
opinion polling typically shows that most Taiwanese think that the chances for conflict with
China are low. Even still, Beijing’s intention is to make these flights so routine that they would
reduce Taiwanese society’s alertness to the growing problem, according to think tank experts.
The current environment also enables the PLAAF to conduct more over water training.
According to one defense official, H-6K bomber pilots have to practice simulations until they
satisfy certain hourly requirements for being able to carry out a realistic bombing of Guam.
Indeed, a retired military official assessed that the bomber flights were far more focused on
training than anything else because of the need to ensure that the PLAAF can overcome
challenging weather and other operational conditions in a real combat scenario.

\textsuperscript{159} Marta McLellan Ross, \textit{The Japan-China Maritime and Air Communication Mechanism: Operational and
Strategic Considerations}, January 2015; Sasakawa Peace Foundation and China Center for Collaborative Studies of
the South China Sea at Nanjing University, \textit{Report on Japan-China Dialogue on the Safety of Airspace in the East

\textsuperscript{160} Laura Zhou, “China and Japan Agree to Set Up Hotline to Prevent Military Clashes,” \textit{South China Morning
Post}, May 9, 2018; “Japan and China Launch Defense Communication Mechanism to Prevent Air and Sea Clashes,”
\textit{Kyodo}, June 8, 2018; Shinichi Fujiwara and Hirotaka Kojima, “Japan-China Communications Start Up to Avoid Air,
Sea Clashes,” \textit{Asahi Shimbun}, June 8, 2018.

\textsuperscript{161} Although this chapter primarily focuses on our discussions with Taiwanese interlocutors, it is also the case that
Taiwanese media report on Chinese bomber flights, citing Ministry of National Defense information. See, for
Other Taiwanese interlocutors worried about possible gaps in the island’s coverage of PLAAF bomber flights, particularly through and around the Bashi Channel. Indeed, the Taiwanese Ministry of National Defense has, since 1999, become overly accustomed to monitoring Chinese military aircraft up to the center line in the strait—perhaps to the exclusion of new areas of operations, according to one observer. Bombers might also change the rules of engagement in heretofore unknown ways.

**Other Regional Reactions**

Japan and Taiwan are not the only countries that China appears to have tried to send a signal to with its long-range bomber flights. The Philippines is another given its competing territorial claims with China in the South China Sea. Following the PCA ruling in the Philippines’ favor in July 2016, Beijing conducted bomber flights over the region. In response to a question about whether these flights were threatening, Perfecto Yasay, Jr., then–foreign minister for the Philippines, replied, “I don’t think so, personally. It is no different from the flyover of U.S. military aircrafts in the area. It continues to remain in international waters even if it’s our exclusive economic zone.” Philippines defense minister Delfin Lorenzana added that he could not confirm bomber flights because Manila lacks the capability to monitor them.162 Most recently, following China’s bomber landing on the disputed Woody Island in the Paracels, the Philippine Foreign Ministry expressed “serious concerns” that it planned to handle through “appropriate diplomatic action.” These statements suggest that Manila is both unable to monitor H-6K bomber flights and is trying to avoid provoking China further.163

Vietnam’s response to China’s bomber patrols in the South China Sea had been relatively muted until the landing at Woody Island. Following that event, the Vietnamese foreign ministry called upon China to “put an end to these activities immediately, stop militarization, [and] seriously respect Vietnam’s sovereignty over the Hoang Sa Islands.”164 Indeed, prior to the Woody Island landing, a retired Vietnamese general had highlighted his concern that the PLAAF would eventually land a bomber somewhere in the South China Sea.165 Separately, we have not

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detected any response from Indonesia, even though there are growing concerns in Jakarta over the status of fishing in the Natuna Islands.166

The South Korean government has announced some Chinese bomber flights through its own ADIZ, and some observers have voiced skepticism about the stated training purpose, with Korean media linking the flights to tensions over Theater High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD).167

Additionally, although no Chinese bombers have flown close to Australia yet, some Australian academics have already assumed these flights are for deterrent signaling and raised concerns about future flights directed at Australia. According to one observer, “China’s trying to send a signal that, if Australia gets involved directly or indirectly in joint patrols in the South China Sea, Australia shouldn’t assume that its distance protects it.”168

5. China Developing a Next-Generation Bomber

In the years to come, PLAAF modernization is almost certain to include the deployment of a new, next-generation strategic bomber. Known in Chinese as the strategic project, the next-generation long-range strike bomber, or the new type long-range combat aircraft, this bomber is likely to be dubbed H-20 once it becomes operational.\(^{169}\) The H-20 will feature a longer range and perhaps even nuclear delivery capability, enhancing the PLAAF’s ability to perform strategic deterrence and strike missions and therefore elevating it to true “strategic service” status within the PLA. This chapter highlights what we currently know about the H-20’s proposed capabilities and considers some potential implications for the United States and its allies and partners.

Potential H-20 Capabilities

After years of speculation, the PLAAF commander, General Ma Xiaotian, publicly confirmed in September 2016 that China was developing a “next generation, long-range strike bomber.”\(^{170}\) Although Ma did not disclose further details, Chinese commentary in the *China Youth Daily* noted that the H-20 is likely to have several key characteristics.\(^{171}\) First, it will have “good stealth.” This will be accomplished by designing the H-20 in the flying wing layout to mirror the stealth advantages that U.S. and next-generation Russian bombers derive from this configuration.\(^{172}\) Second, the bomber will be capable of conducting “ultra long range” missions. The H-20’s range will be 10,000 km, and the combat radius of the system will be 5,000 km.\(^{173}\) These ranges could be extended farther with aerial-refueling capability. Third, the H-20 will possess a “large bomb load,” meaning it will be larger than that of the H-6K, but still smaller

\(^{169}\) The PLAAF will likely select the designator H-20 to remain consistent with the 20 equipment designator, which also includes the J-20, Y-20, and Z-20—next-generation fighter aircraft, transport aircraft, and helicopter, respectively. Chinese military commentary also notes that the “20” designation is in anticipation that this grouping of systems will all become available in the 2020s. For more information, see Zhang Lijun and Li Wei, “New Strategic Bomber to Make PLA Air Force a Strong Force,” *China Youth Daily*, February 16, 2017. There is a rumor that the H-20 is already delayed. For more information, see “Old Soviet Warhorse Fills the Gap as H-20 Is Delayed,” *Asia Times*, January 29, 2018.


\(^{171}\) Zhang and Li, 2016.

\(^{172}\) Although Russia does not currently have a flying wing aircraft, it is planning to build one for its next-generation bomber. For more information, see David Cenciotti, “Russia to Start Building Its Next Generation Flying Wing Stealth Bomber to Replace the Tu-22, Tu-95, and Tu-160 Aircraft,” *Aviationist*, February 27, 2017.

than the B-2A (23 tons). Fourth, the H-20 will feature “nuclear-conventional integration,” suggesting that it will be responsible for both conventional and nuclear deterrence and strike missions. Finally, the H-20 will provide the PLAAF with a “strong electronic combat capability.” According to the authors of this commentary, the H-20 “is able to disturb and destroy incoming missiles and other air and ground targets through a range of equipment including radar, electronic confrontation platform, high power microwave, [and] laser and infrared equipment.” Another electronic combat role for the H-20 will be to serve as a command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance node itself. The authors note that the H-20 will be “capable of large-capacity data fusion and transmission,” enabling it “to interact with large sensor platforms like UAV [unmanned aerial vehicles], early warning aircraft and strategic reconnaissance to share information and targeting data.” 174

There are few details available on the H-20’s munitions capacity or the type of munitions it might employ. It appears likely, however, that the new strategic bomber will have a nuclear delivery mission. Indeed, DoD in its 2017 Annual Report to Congress on Chinese military power has already assessed this to be the case.175 Further information over time should offer new insights on the specific means of nuclear delivery. Regarding conventional munitions, some artwork depicting the H-20 shows it possessing only a single weapons bay, though other artwork shows two bays. The H-20 might have the capacity to deliver up to six KD-20 air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs) or other precision-guided munitions using a rotary launcher, according to one article.176 It is also important to note that in May 2017, then-director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, LtGen. Vincent Stewart, told the Senate Armed Services Committee during his “Worldwide Threat Assessment” testimony that China is pursuing “two, new air-launched ballistic missiles [ALBM], one of which may include a nuclear payload.”177 The H-20 is likely to be capable of employing these as well.

China’s Xi’an Aircraft Corporation, which is the same organization that designed and built the H-6K, is reportedly developing the H-20. Judging from recent Chinese military commentary, it would appear that the PLA has already instructed Xi’an to focus on stealth, as demonstrated by the flying wing configuration, rather than supersonic capabilities. According to Yin Zhuo, China has gained essential expertise on stealth through its development of the J-20 and F-31 stealth fighters.178 Indeed, Yin opined, the H-20 would be on par with the B-2 Spirit in terms of stealth

174 Zhang and Li, 2017.
175 DoD, 2017.
Another military expert, Li Li, assessed that it would be technically demanding to incorporate both stealth and supersonic capabilities into the new bomber because of differences in the required aerodynamic configuration of the aircraft for each capability. This strongly suggests that Xi’an will have to remain focused on stealth.

Although Beijing has not provided an official timeline of key milestones for development and an eventual entry into service date for the H-20, it is reasonable to assess that the H-20 will not be available to the PLAAF until the early 2020s at the soonest. According to German aviation specialist Andreas Rupprecht, who has studied the development cycles of Chinese military aircraft, the PLAAF might reveal prototypes of the H-20 by late 2018. Regardless, Rupprecht believes that a first flight might take place by early 2020. His estimates are based on his analysis of the timeline used for Beijing’s indigenous development and production of the Y-20 transport aircraft. It is reasonable, however, to expect a longer time frame given the comparatively higher level of technology that will be incorporated into China’s next-generation strategic bomber. Chinese online commentary in early 2018 has suggested that the H-20 has already conducted its first test flight and will likely enter service between 2022 and 2025.

A Stepping Stone: An Air-Refuelable H-6

As the PLA waits for the H-20 to enter service, it is still working to improve the range of its current bombers. China is reportedly developing a new model of the H-6 that will be air-refuelable with a range of 12,000 km, and the first test flight was apparently conducted at the end of 2016. The most recent DoD report on the Chinese military asserts that “China may add an aerial refueling capability to at least some H-6s, extending their range and loiter time,” giving credence to the online Chinese rumors. Chinese commentators and media refer to this as China’s first “truly strategic bomber” with an ability to “break through the Second Island Chain”—that is, to strike Guam and beyond. This air-refuelable H-6 is sometimes mentioned

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179 Besides the B-2, the H-20 has also been compared to Northrop Grumman’s X-47B unmanned combat air vehicle demonstrator. For more information, see Chen Chuanren, “China Modernizes Bomber Fleet, Looks to Future with H-20,” AIN Online, August 29, 2017.

180 Zhang Tao, 2016b.


185 Yan Lingqi [鄢玲淼] and Yan Jiaqi [闫嘉琪], “Foreign Media Speculate on China’s Air-Refuelable H-6; Expert: Can Break Through the Second Island Chain” [“外媒炒作中国空中加油型轰-6 专家：可突破第二岛链”], People’s
in English-language analysis as the H-6N and designed to carry the DF-21D antiship ballistic missile, suggesting that it may be intended for PLAN Aviation. Chinese analysis has generally picked up this reporting but has not confirmed which service it is for, and at least one report suggests that the PLAAF may get an air-refuelable version of the H-6K. One Chinese military commentator has hinted that this might be applied to the H-20 when he said that “new technologies have been applied and tested for the H-6K, which aided research and development of a new generation long-range strategic bomber.” Chinese media have noted that the PLA’s lack of overseas bases requires even longer range for its bombers, that this range would allow it to circle all of Japan, similar to Russian bomber flights around Japan in recent years, and that air refueling would support China’s transition to a nuclear triad, namely a nuclear-capable bomber. Coupled with other next-generation aircraft that have entered service over the last several years, including the J-20 fighter and Y-20 transport, these systems will advance China’s capability to project air power throughout Asia and possibly beyond.

One additional capability expected to come online soon that would support further bomber operations is a new air-refueling tanker. China currently operates a fleet of 12 H-6U tankers that are too small and technologically obsolete to fulfill the needs of long-distance air combat. In the near future it is likely that the PLAAF will employ a tanker variant of the Y-20 heavy transport, which first entered service in 2016, to fill the gap in its aerial refueling capabilities. This will not only greatly expand the operational range of China’s long-range bomber fleet but will also allow fighters to accompany and escort the bombers over longer distances. The current range limitations of PLAAF fighters means that H-6Ks “would be easy targets for American, Japanese, and Taiwanese air defenders long before they could get within range of Guam,” but providing air refueling to bomber escorts would likely improve the survivability of

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191 For one mention of the Y-20 as a likely tanker variant, see “6N: Air Force Will Have True Strategic Bombers,” 2017.

the platform in wartime.\textsuperscript{193} Such benefits would also be conferred to J-20 and other escorts for the future H-20 bomber flying past Guam.

**Implications of the H-20 Strategic Bomber**

Once the H-20 enters into service for the PLAAF, China will almost certainly feel increasingly confident in its ability to reliably threaten U.S. targets within and beyond the Second Island Chain, to include key U.S. military bases in Guam and Hawaii. Instead of simply relying on its MRBM and IRBM missile forces, the H-20 will provide Beijing with an alternative means of waging counterintervention operations against U.S. forces at these ranges during a conflict. Additionally, assuming that the H-20 will retain the standoff strike capability of the H-6K, then its range using ALCMs or ALBMs will be even greater, perhaps threatening the U.S. homeland itself. In the nuclear domain, the H-20 will complete China’s nuclear triad, which is currently comprised of ground-launched intercontinental ballistic missiles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles.\textsuperscript{194} This will not only bestow greater prestige on the PLAAF as a service but practically should also make Beijing’s nuclear deterrent even more credible and may diversify the options available to Chinese planners. It could also have implications for U.S. extended deterrence and assurance of U.S. allies and partners. Such allies—notably, Australia and Japan, but perhaps others as well—could feel increasingly threatened by the additional capabilities presented by the H-20.

Despite these accomplishments, the PLAAF must still train with the H-20 to ensure the success of real missions. The fact remains that the PLAAF continues to have very little experience training in combat formations over water and far from the Chinese mainland. As we have closely examined in this report, training—and particularly training in a joint environment—has been a key driver of PLAAF bomber flights throughout the Asia-Pacific region. Thus, training is very likely to continue to be the central focus of the PLAAF when conducting H-20 flights, causing the PLAAF to train in combat formations at greater distances from China’s shores. It is unclear, however, whether Chinese leaders maintain any reservations about flying too close to the airspace of islands hosting U.S. military bases, or near the U.S. homeland (with the help of aerial refueling) itself.

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Given the multiple benefits derived from long-range strategic bomber flights, whether in the area of conventional strategic signaling, realistic training opportunities, coercion of Taiwan, or propaganda for domestic consumption, the United States should expect that Beijing will continue to pursue—and even ramp up—these activities for the foreseeable future. Indeed, as demonstrated by Chinese President Xi’s comments at the Nineteenth Party Congress, his intent is to modernize and professionalize the PLA into a “world-class” force that aligns with his vision of a stronger, “rejuvenated” China. This, coupled with Xi’s promotion of former PLAAF commander Xu Qiliang to senior vice chairman of the CMC, virtually guarantees that the PLAAF will enjoy generous top leadership support in the coming years. The development of new PLAAF weapons systems, such as the J-20 fighter aircraft, Y-20 transport aircraft, Z-20 medium-lift helicopter, and H-20 bomber, will all be priorities for integration into the force by the early to mid-2020s. In July 2017, PLAAF spokesperson Shen Jinke explained that “no matter what obstruction we encounter . . . no matter who flies up to meet us, the Chinese Air Force will still go and conduct many flights.” Therefore, the U.S. Air Force and other decisionmakers tasked with handling the U.S. response to PLAAF bomber flights—namely, the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, the U.S. Department of State, the National Security Council, and Pacific Command—should not expect to be able to dissuade Chinese leaders from continuing down this path; the die is already cast, so to speak.

Complicating the matter further, China has seized on recent Russian and U.S. employment of bombers for strategic signaling purposes. Beijing has cited international law and norms to justify its new flights, echoing U.S. statements about freedom of navigation and overflight, but with uniquely Chinese characteristics (meaning China maintains exclusively overflight privileges within its historical claims). Therefore, U.S. decisionmakers should instead engage with Chinese interlocutors—whether in air force service-to-service dialogues, defense policy dialogues, or both—to discuss topics such as basic air navigation safety issues for H-6K flights. As discussed above, bomber flights are increasingly occurring in formation with other aircraft, including Chinese fighter aircraft such as the Su-30. Unfortunately, Chinese pilots reportedly still...

196 For the United States see, for example, Zachary Cohen, Barbara Starr, and Ryan Browne, “U.S. B-1 Bombers Fly near North Korea,” CNN, June 20, 2017. For Russia, see Anders Corr, “Nuclear-Capable Russian Bombers Fly near U.S. to Intimidate America,” Forbes, April 22, 2017.
occasionally fail to comply with U.S.-China agreements intended to ensure the safety of air-to-air encounters. Moreover, Chinese bomber pilots in particular have discussed being intercepted by foreign aircraft on flights in the South China Sea and the western Pacific, and there have been reports of potentially dangerous behavior in China-Japan air interactions over the Miyako Strait, so discussions with Chinese counterparts should seek to minimize the potential for miscalculation and inadvertent escalation.

To prevent such an undesirable outcome, the United States and its partners could flag concern over the bomber flights in military-to-military dialogues with Chinese interlocutors. Japan’s recent establishment of the Maritime and Aerial Communication Mechanism with China is a welcome step toward institutionalized crisis stability tools, similar to the 2015 U.S.-China agreement. Although this would be a good model for other affected countries to adopt with Beijing, it is unlikely they will do so for political or military reasons. Moreover, Chinese flights near Japan have not stopped, with a flight just two days after Tokyo and Beijing signed the agreement. This highlights the need for the United States to support increased dialogue between the SDF and PLA to ensure recent the air-air agreement is followed.

China’s quasi-embrace of freedom of navigation allows the United States and its allies and partners in the region to reiterate this international norm back to Beijing when China sets a double standard by complaining about similar foreign military activities. Historically China has not been concerned with this appearance of a double standard. PLAN ships sailed within U.S. territorial waters off the coast of Alaska in September 2015, and PLAN ships have operated within the U.S. EEZ off the coast of Hawaii during the Rim of the Pacific exercise 2014, which other Chinese ships participated in, and within the U.S. EEZ near Alaska in July 2017. This extends to the Asia-Pacific region, where PLAN ships operated off the coast of Australia during a U.S.-Australia naval exercise in July 2017. These are all activities for which China frequently

criticizes foreign countries.\footnote{Steve Mollman, “Chinese Military Ships Are Popping Up Everywhere—and Highlighting an Embarrassing Double Standard,” Quartz, July 24, 2017; Ankit Panda, “Are Chinese Navy Spy Ships Within Exclusive Economic Zones Soon to Be a Fact of Life?” Diplomat, July 24, 2017.} Now that Chinese bombers are flying farther from China’s shores through international airspace, Washington has the opportunity to highlight these events when explaining to Beijing why similar activities by the United States and its allies and partners should be accepted. China is unlikely to change its approach to such activities on the part of the United States and other countries, but the inconsistency between its objections to such foreign activities and its own similar actions will serve to highlight this double standard in following international norms.

The United States could also work with allies and partners to devise a strategy for dealing with these flights, particularly with any future flights that could be more provocative than those to date. More provocative flights could include flying closer to or even directly over countries’ land territory, flying around other countries like Guam or Japan, or conducting maritime targeting practice closer to other countries’ territories. One effective means of discouraging increasingly provocative flights could be to conduct joint intercepts with Japan to signal U.S. resolve under Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Alliance to defend Japan and its territorial claims. Another would be to conduct and publicize joint air defense and counter-LACM exercises with affected countries, especially Japan and potentially Australia, to reinforce extended deterrence and signal China that the United States and its allies will not be intimidated. Further improving the air defenses and training of U.S. bases in Asia—especially in Guam—against ALBMs and LACMs might also be considered.

Additionally, Washington could consider increasing USAF bomber flights in the region to respond to or even match PLAAF flights. Although Chinese bomber activity appears to be consistent with international norms, when it is intended to coerce U.S. allies and partners, it nonetheless has the potential to challenge the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence and increase tensions in the region. Responsive USAF flights, potentially with fighter escorts from U.S. allies to reinforce solidarity and improve joint operations, would demonstrate U.S. commitment to allies and partners.

Increased awareness of PLAAF activities through greater foreign and U.S. government transparency could also be an important step. Only Japan consistently releases details about Chinese flights. Taiwan has reported some flights.\footnote{Hsiao, 2017.} In December 2017, however, Taiwan announced that it would no longer publicize Chinese military operations around Taiwan, including bomber flights and naval activities. These PLA activities are increasingly seen as routine, according to media reports, and the Taiwanese Ministry of National Defense has indicated that it will not highlight them publicly unless something unusual takes place. Feng
Shih-kuan, then-minister of National Defense, said this change was made “because the Ministry will not dance to China’s tune as it tries to use psychological warfare against Taiwan.”

Likewise, the United States should consider whether it is feasible and appropriate to publicly release additional details about PLAAF activities and flight paths. Recent statements by DoD officials to U.S. media reflect greater openness to discuss PLAAF training objectives, and this would improve public discourse on such activities. The U.S. government can also disclose more information on the strategic and political intentions of Chinese bomber flights over disputed territories and the consequences of such provocative actions, especially noting that military and political coercion of rival claimants violates international norms for peacefully resolving territorial disputes. Similarly, increasing U.S. information sharing with allies and partners in the region, publicly or privately, about Chinese bomber flights would serve to reassure allies and likely bolster support for the U.S. presence in the region.

We fully recognize that there are persuasive counterarguments to several of these points. Intercepting every bomber flight, for example, could reduce the shock and awe factor and simply lead to a routinization of Chinese H-6K flights—which, one might contend, became the case between the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War. A potential compromise, then, might be to only intercept some flights and not others, in effect adding a measure of uncertainty to China’s calculations as it conducts future flights. Greater uncertainty might temper Chinese risk-taking. Moreover, disclosing further information could unnecessarily unnerve the population of regional countries, specifically in the case of Taiwan. However, we believe that enhanced transparency is preferred because it helps keep regional and international focus on Beijing’s increasingly provocative behavior.

Finally, and more generally, because Chinese bomber flights occur through international airspace and are thus legal, some observers have suggested it is reasonable for U.S. government decisionmakers to ignore the issue entirely. In fact, it is fair to argue that paying an undue amount of attention to these flights would suggest that Washington is uncomfortable with them, which could enable Beijing to use flights as a new pressure point in the relationship. However, our research suggests that U.S. decisionmakers should consider adopting an active approach in response to Chinese bomber flights. Absent U.S. attempts to mitigate the negative effects of these flights, Beijing might be increasingly emboldened to take greater risks, and U.S. allies and partners might feel less assured. Indeed, the lack of a response by the United States over a sustained period of time would probably exacerbate the concerns of allies and partners that U.S. influence in the Asia-Pacific is receding and that such partners will inevitably have to accommodate China’s vision of the regional order. There could also be consequences in terms of future Chinese bomber flights aimed at highlighting China’s growing ability to reach more distant targets, including other U.S. allies’ territories and U.S. territory. New capabilities such as

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207 Copp, 2017.
the H-20 and aerial refueling of H-6 bombers might be employed more often to demonstrate China’s ability to threaten Guam, and perhaps one day Alaska, Australia, Hawaii, and the continental United States with both conventional and nuclear weapons.

Going forward, the key objective should be to determine how the United States and its allies and partners might mitigate any negative effects of Chinese bomber flights, which appear set to become an increasingly regular occurrence in the region. Flights will almost certainly continue to increase in range and complexity over time.
## Appendix A. A Full List of PLA H-6 Long-Range Bomber Flights over Water

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of Operation</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Aircraft Involved</th>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Official PRC Coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 8, 2013</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>2x H-6</td>
<td>PLANAF</td>
<td>Flew through the Miyako Strait.</td>
<td>None.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 25, 2013</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>2x H-6, 2x Y-8 AEW</td>
<td>PLANAF</td>
<td>Flew through the Miyako Strait.</td>
<td>None.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 26, 2013</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>2x H-6, 2x Y-8 AEW</td>
<td>PLANAF</td>
<td>Flew through the Miyako Strait.</td>
<td>None.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 27, 2013</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>2x H-6, 2x Y-8 AEW</td>
<td>PLANAF</td>
<td>Flew through the Miyako Strait.</td>
<td>None.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 9, 2014</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>2x H-6, 1x Y-8 intel</td>
<td>PLANAF</td>
<td>Flew through the Miyako Strait.</td>
<td>None.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 6, 2014</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>2x H-6, 2x Y-8 AEW, 1x Y-9</td>
<td>PLANAF</td>
<td>Flew through the Miyako Strait.</td>
<td>None.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 7, 2014</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>2x H-6, 2x Y-8 AEW, 1x Y-9</td>
<td>PLANAF</td>
<td>Flew through the Miyako Strait.</td>
<td>None.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 10, 2014</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>2x H-6, 1x Y-9 intel, 2x Y-8 AEW</td>
<td>PLANAF</td>
<td>Flew through the Miyako Strait.</td>
<td>None.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 11, 2014</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>2x H-6, 1x Y-9 intel, 2x Y-8 AEW</td>
<td>PLANAF</td>
<td>Flew through the Miyako Strait.</td>
<td>None.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 30, 2015</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>H-6K</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Flew through the Bashi Channel; first PLAAF training flight into the western Pacific.</td>
<td>Announced by Shen Jinke on March 30, 2015.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 21, 2015</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>H-6K</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>First PLAAF flight through the Miyako Strait.</td>
<td>Announced by Shen Jinke on May 21, 2015.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 10, 2015</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>H-6, various fighter aircraft</td>
<td>PLANAF</td>
<td>Flew through the Bashi Channel into the western Pacific.</td>
<td>Announced by PLAN spokesperson Liang Yang on June 19, 2015; PLAN...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of Operation</td>
<td>Region</td>
<td>Aircraft Involved</td>
<td>Service</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Official PRC Coverage</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 29, 2015</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>2x H-6, 1x Y-8 AEW, 1x Y-9 intel</td>
<td>PLANAF</td>
<td>Flew through the Miyako Strait.</td>
<td>Weibo post on the same date.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 30, 2015</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>2x H-6, 1x Y-8 AEW, 1x Y-9 intel</td>
<td>PLANAF</td>
<td>Flew through the Miyako Strait.</td>
<td>Announced by Japanese MOD.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 14, 2015</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>H-6K</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Flew through the Bashi Channel.</td>
<td>Announced by Shen Jinke on August 14, 2015.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 27, 2015</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>8x H-6K, 1x Tu-154, 1x Y-8 intel, 1x Y-8 AEW</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Four H-6Ks, the Tu-154, and the Y-8 intel flew through the Miyako Strait, while the remaining Y-8 AEW and four H-6Ks did not cross the Miyako Strait.</td>
<td>Announced by Shen Jinke on November 27, 2015.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2016</td>
<td>South China Sea</td>
<td>H-6K</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Flew over Fiery Cross Reef.</td>
<td>Unannounced by PLAAF; CCTV depicted the flight briefly with Fiery Cross visible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 18, 2016</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>1x Y-8 AEW, 2x H-6</td>
<td>PLANAF</td>
<td>Flew through the Tsushima Strait.</td>
<td>None (?). Mentioned in passing without reference to H-6s in August 19, 2016, Liberation Army Daily article.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of Operation</td>
<td>Region</td>
<td>Aircraft Involved</td>
<td>Service</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Official PRC Coverage</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 19, 2016</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>1x Y-8 AEW, 2x H-6</td>
<td>PLANAF</td>
<td>Flew through the Tsushima Strait.</td>
<td>None (?). Mentioned in passing without reference to H-6s in August 19, 2016, Liberation Army Daily article.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 12, 2016</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>H-6K, Su-30, AEW, tankers</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Flew through the Bashi Channel</td>
<td>Announced by Shen Jinke on September 12, 2016.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 25, 2016</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>4x H-6K, 1x Tu-154 intel, 1x Y-8 intel, two fighters (presumed)</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Flew through the Miyako Strait. The flights were part of a large-scale exercise involving 40 aircraft of various types.</td>
<td>Announced by Shen Jinke on September 25, 2016.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 25, 2016</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>2x H-6K, 2x Su-30, 1x Y-8 intel, 1x Tu-154</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Circumnavigated Taiwan through Bashi Channel, then Miyako Strait (Su-30s only transited Miyako Strait). First circumnavigation.</td>
<td>Announced by Shen Jinke on November 26, 2016.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2016</td>
<td>South China Sea</td>
<td>H-6K</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Flew along the Nine-Dash Line.</td>
<td>Possibly same flight as the one described below; only Fox News and Reuters reported it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 10, 2016</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>2x H-6K, 2x Su-30, J-10, 1x Y-8 intel, 1x Tu-154</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Circumnavigated Taiwan through Miyako Strait then Bashi Channel (Su-30s only transited Miyako Strait).</td>
<td>Reported by Taiwan media, indirectly acknowledged by Shen Jinke on December 15, 2016. Potentially response to Trump phone call to Tsai.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 1, 2017</td>
<td>South China Sea</td>
<td>Presumably H-6K</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Not reported by PLAAF. Anonymous Reuters source claims a flight took place on January 1, 2017.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 7–8, 2017</td>
<td>South China Sea</td>
<td>Presumably H-6K</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Flew around the Spratly Islands.</td>
<td>Unannounced by PLAAF, reported by Reuters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 9, 2017</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>6x H-6, 1x Y-9, 1x Y-8</td>
<td>PLANAF</td>
<td>Flew through the Tsushima Strait</td>
<td>Unannounced by PLANAF.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of Operation</td>
<td>Region</td>
<td>Aircraft Involved</td>
<td>Service</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Official PRC Coverage</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2, 2017</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>Presumably 6x H-6, 6x unknown fighter, 1x Y-8</td>
<td>PLANAF</td>
<td>Flew through the Miyako Strait and conducted exercises with naval vessels.</td>
<td>Multiple violations of Republic of Korea ADIZ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 13, 2017</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>4x H-6K</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Circumnavigated Taiwan through Bashi Channel, then Miyako Strait.</td>
<td>Announced by Shen Jinke on July 15, 2017.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 20, 2017</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>4x H-6K, 1x Y-8 intel, 1x Y-8 EW</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Circumnavigated Taiwan through Bashi Channel, then Miyako Strait.</td>
<td>Possible indirect acknowledgment by PLAAF. Confirmation via PLAAF Weibo post on July 20, 2017.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 20, 2017</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>4x H-6K</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Circumnavigated Taiwan through Miyako Strait, then Bashi Channel.</td>
<td>Possible indirect acknowledgment by PLAAF. Confirmation via PLAAF Weibo post on July 21, 2017.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 24, 2017</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>4x H-6K</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Circumnavigated Taiwan through Bashi Channel, then Miyako Strait.</td>
<td>Not reported by PLAAF.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 5, 2017</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>H-6, Y-8</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Flew near Taiwan’s ADIZ, according to Taiwan media.</td>
<td>Not reported by PLAAF.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 12, 2017</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>2x H-6K, 1x Y-8 EW</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Circumnavigated Taiwan through Bashi Channel, then Miyako Strait.</td>
<td>Not directly reported by PLAAF; implied on August 14, 2017, by PLAAF Weibo post.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of Operation</td>
<td>Region</td>
<td>Aircraft Involved</td>
<td>Service</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Official PRC Coverage</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 24, 2017</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>6x H-6K</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Flew through Miyako Strait, then proceeded north to airspace near Japan’s Kii Peninsula for the first time before returning along the same flight path.</td>
<td>Announced via PLAAF Weibo post.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 19, 2017</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>4x H-6K, 1x Tu-154, 1x Y-8</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Flew through Miyako Strait; Y-8 turned around shortly after, but Tu-154 and H-6K continued into western Pacific.</td>
<td>Reported by Japanese MOD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 23, 2017</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>4x H-6K</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Flew through Miyako Strait; Y-8 likely circumnavigated Taiwan on same day in opposite direction, so does not appear to have flown with H-6K.</td>
<td>Reported by Japanese MOD and confirmed by PLAAF.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 23, 2017</td>
<td>South China Sea</td>
<td>6x H-6K, fighters and tankers</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Flew over South China Sea (Mischief Reef and Subi Reef), at least some planes carried missiles.</td>
<td>Reported by PLAAF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 23, 2017</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>H-6K, Su-30, and tankers</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Flew through Bashi Channel.</td>
<td>Reported by PLAAF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 7, 2017</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>4x H-6, 1x Y-8</td>
<td>PLANAF</td>
<td>Flew through Miyako Strait, H-6K turned around shortly after but Y-8 likely continued around Taiwan.</td>
<td>Japanese MOD report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 9, 2017</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>4x H-6K, 1x Y-8</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Flew through Miyako Strait, Y-8 turned around shortly after but H-6Ks continued.</td>
<td>Reported by PLAAF, Japanese MOD report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 11, 2017</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>2x H-6K, 1x Y-8, 1x Tu-154, Su-30, J-11, tanker</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Circumnavigated Taiwan through Miyako Strait, then Bashi Channel; fighters turned around shortly after passing through Miyako and did not circle Taiwan</td>
<td>Reported by PLAAF; Japanese MOD report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 18, 2017</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>2x H-6K, 2x Su-30, 1x Tu-154, 1x Y-8</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Flew through East China Sea, then through Tsushima Strait between Korea and Japan; fighters may not have transited strait.</td>
<td>Reported by PLAAF; Japanese MOD report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of Operation</td>
<td>Region</td>
<td>Aircraft Involved</td>
<td>Service</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Official PRC Coverage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 23, 2018</td>
<td>Western Pacific</td>
<td>4x H-6K, 1x Tu-154, 1x Y-8, 2x Su-30</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Flew through Miyako Strait to western Pacific; fighters did not transit strait and Y-8 turned around shortly after strait.</td>
<td>Reported by PLAAF, Japanese MOD report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 23, 2018</td>
<td>South China Sea</td>
<td>H-6K, Su-35, other aircraft</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Flew into South China Sea.</td>
<td>Reported by PLAAF.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 27, 2018</td>
<td>South China Sea</td>
<td>12x H-6K, other aircraft</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Flew into South China Sea; flew over Alison Reef (occupied by Vietnam).</td>
<td>Reported by PLAAF.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 18, 2018</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>2x H-6K</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Circumnavigated Taiwan through Miyako Strait, then Bashi Channel.</td>
<td>Japanese MOD report; acknowledged by PLAAF after next flight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 19, 2018</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>2x H-6K, Su-30, J-11, 1x Tu-154, 1x Y-8</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Circumnavigated Taiwan through Miyako Strait, then Bashi Channel.</td>
<td>Reported by PLAAF; Japanese MOD report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 20, 2018</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>2x H-6K</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Circumnavigated Taiwan through Miyako Strait, then Bashi Channel.</td>
<td>Japanese MOD report; acknowledged in passing by PLAAF.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 26, 2018</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>2x H-6K, fighters, 1x Tu-154, 1x Y-8</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Circumnavigated Taiwan through Miyako Strait, then Bashi Channel.</td>
<td>Reported by PLAAF; Japanese MOD report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 11, 2018</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>2x H-6K, 2x Su-35</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Circumnavigated Taiwan through Miyako Strait, then Bashi Channel; Su-35 flew through Miyako but not around Taiwan.</td>
<td>Reported by PLAAF; Japanese MOD report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 11, 2018</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>2x H-6K, 1x Tu-154, 1x Y-8 (PLAAF reported KJ-2000)</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Circumnavigated Taiwan through Miyako Strait, then Bashi Channel.</td>
<td>Reported by PLAAF; Japanese MOD report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 18, 2018</td>
<td>South China Sea</td>
<td>H-6K, possibly other bombers</td>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>Flew into South China Sea; landed at Woody Island.</td>
<td>Reported by PLAAF.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: PLAAF statements, Chinese state-run media, Western media, and Japanese MOD. Adapted from Cozad and Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2017.
NOTE: Table current as of October 1, 2018. Number and type of aircraft unknown unless specified. The Y-8 and KJ-200 are early warning aircraft; the Tu-154 is a reconnaissance plane; and the J-10, J-11, Su-30, and Su-35 are fighters. Flights through the East China Sea ADIZ in November 2015 and September 2016 were likely part of larger formations that flew the same day near Japan, and both instances are listed above as flights in the Western Pacific. The December 2016 ADIZ flight is assumed to have occurred under similar circumstances. Neither the September nor December 2016 ADIZ flights made noticeable detours while on their way to fly through the Miyako Strait to constitute a patrol similar to the first one conducted in November 2015, according to Japanese MOD descriptions of their flight.
paths. RAND is unable to corroborate other flights in the region, including December 7, 10, and 11, 2016 (identified by Peter Wood), and an August 2017 PLAAF flight into the South China Sea. For Wood’s flights, see Peter Wood, “Chinese Military Aviation in the East China Sea,” *China Brief*, October 26, 2016.
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This report examines the key drivers behind China’s strategic bomber flights throughout the Asia-Pacific region, assessing Chinese commentary on flights and leveraging a number of sources, including interviews in Taipei and Tokyo, to better understand and gauge regional reactions. The report recommends specific responses for consideration by the U.S. Air Force and U.S. policymakers, as well as allies and partners, offering an in-depth analysis of the key issues driving top Chinese leaders to move in the direction of conducting these overwater bomber flights.

Since March 2015, the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) has sent its strategic bomber on long-range overwater flights on at least 38 separate occasions to important areas throughout the Asia-Pacific region. Chinese leaders seek to achieve at least four key objectives with PLAAF bomber flights throughout the region: First, bombers enable Beijing to send a deterrence message or to signal resolve in the conventional military domain to defend its maritime territorial claims. Second, overwater flights significantly enhance realistic training for PLAAF operators. Third, successful bomber flights offer Chinese leaders the opportunity to play up their achievements for domestic consumption, highlighting progress toward the building of “world-class” military forces. And fourth, the increased operational tempo of PLAAF bomber flights around Taiwan appear to be designed, at least in part, to ratchet up pressure against Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen, as she has refused to acknowledge the 1992 Consensus, also known as the One China Consensus, since taking office in May 2016.