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China's Air Force Modernization: 'Unprecedented in History'

The Pentagon's annual report on China says that the scale of the PLAAF's modernization is "unprecedented in history."

By Zachary Keck
June 06, 2014

The People Liberation Army Air Force's (PLAAF) ongoing modernization is taking place at a rate unprecedented in history, the U.S. Department of Defense said on Thursday.

"The PLAAF is pursuing modernization on a scale unprecedented in its history and is rapidly closing the gap with Western air forces across a broad spectrum of capabilities including aircraft, command and control (C2), jammers, electronic warfare (EW), and data links," the Pentagon said in its annual report on China's military modernization, which was released on Thursday. This claim is new this year and was not included in the annual report in 2013.

Indeed, the report's section on the PLAAF was one of the most expanded parts of the report and seemed to indicate growing concern in Washington over China's air capabilities. After stating that the PLAAF is the largest Air Force in Asia and third largest in the world, the report noted that it is made up of "approximately 330,000 personnel and more than 2,800 total aircraft, not including unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV)." Of these 2,800 total aircraft, around 1,900 are combat aircraft, 600 of which are modern.

The increasingly modern PLAAF aircraft seemed to be the top concern of the Pentagon in the new report. Last year, for instance, the report noted that, although China is fielding more and more 4th generation aircraft, “the force still consists mostly of older 2nd and 3rd generation aircraft, or upgraded variants of those aircraft.” By contrast, the report this year stated that although the PLAAF continues to operate 2nd and 3rd generation aircraft, it will likely become a majority 4th generation Air Force within the next several years.

The report also noted for the first time China’s efforts to procure Su-35 aircraft from Russia, along with its “advanced IRBIS-E passive electronically scanned array radar system.” If Beijing is successful in purchasing these aircraft, the Pentagon assesses that they will likely enter service between 2016 and 2018. As Peter Wood wrote in *The Diplomat* back in November, the Su-35 should significantly enhance China’s ability to project air power in the South China Sea.

The section on China’s bomber fleet was also updated this year, although this seemed to reflect Washington having acquired greater information on the H-6 bomber fleet. For instance, last year’s report noted that China continued to upgrade its H-6 bomber fleet, “with a new variant that possesses greater range and will be armed with a long-range cruise missile.”

This year’s report helped fill in the details by noting, “China has developed the H-6K variant with new turbofan engines for extended range. It is believed to be capable of carrying six LACMs. Modernizing the H-6 into a cruise missile carrier has given the PLA Air Force a long-range stand-off offensive capability with precision-guided munitions.” This was consistent with the previously reported new monograph by American military analysts that noted that China has made significant progress in modernizing and expanding its cruise missiles and delivery systems.

The report’s focus on the PLAAF’s accelerating rate of modernization is consistent with the more important and senior roles Air Force officers are taking within the PLA military brass.

On the other hand, the new report pushes back the timeline by which the U.S. expects China to produce its first domestically built aircraft carrier. Last year’s report suggested that this would likely be operational sometime in the second half of this decade. The new report says that China’s first domestically built aircraft carrier will not be operational until early next decade.