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What We Know About China's New Bomber

Beijing is working on a plane designed to strike targets far from home.

By Kyle Mizokami
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The head of the Chinese Air Force has confirmed rumors that the country is working on a new long-range bomber. The plane would replace China's fleet of bombers based on antiquated Cold War designs. It probably will have a large payload, long range, and a stealthy radar profile—but likely won't carry nuclear weapons.

The People's Liberation Army Air Force—the official name of the Chinese Air Force—has relied upon the Xian Aircraft Industrial Corporation's H-6 bomber for 60 years. Originally a copy of the Soviet Tu-16 "Badger" long-range nuclear bomber, the H-6 has soldiered on in Chinese service since the late 1950s. Apart from bombing frozen rivers to get them flowing again, the H-6 has never actually seen combat. You can think of the H-6 as roughly comparable to the American B-52, but with an inferior bomb payload and range.

Although it has been updated numerous times, including the -K model that entered service in 2009 and came equipped with cruise missiles, the elderly bomber is clearly obsolete. There have been rumors China was working on a replacement bomber, but no confirmation until now, via PLAAF General Ma Xioatian. Ma declared China's intention to develop the new plane during the Air Force's annual Aviation Open Day celebration on September 2.

Here's a video of General Ma making the announcement, which also includes footage of the H-6.

There are virtually no details available about the new bomber, but we can make some informed guesses. China's bombers are given the prefix "H"—for bomber—so let's think about what a new "H-X" bomber might look like.

First of all, the aircraft is not likely to be nuclear-capable. China has a nuclear "No First Use" policy, meaning it won't be the first side in a conflict to use nukes. As a result, it has a nuclear arsenal tied to the idea that the country would survive a first strike without enough nukes left to deal a punishing blow to the enemy. Bombers are vulnerable to surprise attack. Unless China were to keep an expensive force of nuclear bombers in the air 24/7, then making them nuclear-capable wouldn't be worth it.



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H-X will almost certainly be aimed at countering American forces in the Western Pacific. China has pursued a strategy of "anti-access, area denial" to keep American aircraft carriers and other

major assets from loitering off the coast of Asia. The new bomber will carry air-to-ground missiles, particularly anti-ship cruise missiles to attack aircraft carriers and their escorts. China will use them in conjunction with its "carrier killer" ballistic missiles and attack submarines to create a triple threat that would overwhelm a carrier battle group's defenses.

The new bomber will carry cruise missiles instead of conventional bombs, in part because H-X will be expensive to develop and purchase, and flying it directly over a (heavily defended) target would be risky. Unlike the H-6, which carries cruise missiles on its wings, the bomber would carry long-range cruise missiles on internal rotary launchers to preserve its stealth profile. The plane will likely carry at least eight cruise missiles such as the DH-10 in order to overwhelm enemy defenses—and justify the bomber's development cost.



Chengdu J-20 fighter.

H-X needs to be stealthy because America and its allies have radar all over the Pacific, and many of them are well positioned to pick up a flight of heavy bombers heading out from China to targets unknown. China probably would choose to make the aircraft roughly in the shape of its J-20 fighter, an airplane with a conventional layout but stealthy features to defeat enemy radar. A tailless, flying wing design such as the B-2 Spirit is much better at this task, but probably too complicated a design for China at this point.

As far as range, if the H-X is not a nuclear-capable bomber then it doesn't need the ability to reach the United States. But it does need to reach out across the Western Pacific. Anti-ship ballistic missiles such as the Dong Feng ("East Wind")-26 have a range of about 3,000 miles, so we can assume that's about the baseline for the bomber's range. This will also allow it to carry out strikes against Japan, the East China Sea, American bases on Guam, and even Australia.

How soon will we see this new bomber? China plays it pretty conservatively when it comes to announcing new military projects, so we can assume that if a public announcement has been made the airplane will break cover relatively soon. We'll likely see a public unveiling within the next year. Actually getting the aircraft to operational status is a different matter, though. The J-20 was first spotted in 2011, and five years later it's only now entering low-rate production.