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China's development of stealth fighter takes U.S. by surprise

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A few weeks ago, grainy photos surfaced online showing what several prominent defense analysts said appeared to be a prototype of a Chinese stealth fighter jet that could compete with the best of America's warplanes, years ahead of U.S. predictions.

Days later, the commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet disclosed that a long-awaited Chinese anti-ship missile, designed to sink an American aircraft carrier, was nearly operational.

As Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates heads to China this weekend, analysts are expressing concern about Chinese military advances, which appear to have taken the U.S. by surprise. The Pentagon had predicted that China wouldn't have a stealth fighter for a decade or more and Defense officials had given no previous indication the anti-ship missile, which had long been tracked by the U.S., was close to fruition.



The assertions came as Gates on Thursday outlined plans to cut \$78 billion in projected growth from the Pentagon's budget over the next five years and cut the number of troops on active duty.

Gates is expected to meet stiff resistance from contractors and military officials who have long been accustomed to annual budget increases and development of new hardware systems in response to warnings of new foreign threats.

"We have been pretty consistent in underestimating the delivery ... of Chinese technology and weapons systems," Vice Adm. David J. "Jack" Dorsett, deputy chief of naval operations for information dominance, told reporters Wednesday. "They enter operational capability quicker than we frequently project."

Dorsett acknowledged that the stealth fighter was real, but said it would be years before the jet could be deployed. "Developing a stealth capability with a prototype and then integrating that into a combat environment is going to take some time," he said.

China watchers disagree about the extent to which the U.S. should worry about China's steadily increasing military power, which remains well behind American war technology. But there is one emerging consensus: After a three-decade buildup and a raft of technological secrets stolen through espionage, China has closed the capabilities gap enough to pose a threat to U.S. freedom of action in the western Pacific Ocean.

"It is true that China is doing some things that we need to be very concerned about, and it's also true that they are in no danger of matching U.S. capabilities," said Christopher A. Ford, a former State Department official and author of "The Mind of Empire: China's History And Modern Foreign Relations." "Their immediate game is simply to make sure that it becomes vastly more complicated for us to do what we might want to do in a crisis in their particular neighborhood."

The anti-ship weapon, described as a mobile, land-based ballistic missile capable of hitting a moving target 2,000 miles away, could do that. Defense watchers were startled when Adm. Robert F. Willard, who heads the U.S. Pacific Command, told a Japanese newspaper last month that China had achieved an "initial operational capability" for the missile.

The U.S. currently has no good defense against such a weapon, said Richard Fisher of the

International Assessment and Strategy Center think tank in Alexandria, Va., who has tracked China's armed forces for decades.

Some analysts believe China wants to end U.S. naval superiority so it can dominate its neighbors, including U.S. allies Japan, South Korea and Singapore.

In July, when U.S. diplomats rejected China's claim that the entire South China Sea was part of its "core interests," the Chinese foreign minister reportedly stared at a Singaporean diplomat and said, "China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact."

In September, when Japan detained a Chinese captain caught fishing in disputed waters, China cut off exports of key minerals to the nation. And in November, after North Korea shelled a South Korean island, China criticized the U.S. decision to send the carrier George Washington to the Yellow Sea, off China's coast.

A 2008 study by Rand Corp. asserts that, based on current trends, the U.S. by 2020 would lose a military conflict with China over Taiwan. A recent war game by an Australian think tank confirmed that finding, assessing that the number of Chinese planes would overwhelm U.S. forces, Aviation Week magazine said.

Skeptics argue that the U.S. has little to fear militarily from a country that is its second-largest trading partner and biggest debt holder. They also note that China still lags in certain key technologies: It hasn't been able to produce its own fighter jet engines, for example, and still buys them from Russia.

But the Pentagon is concerned about China's expanding military prowess. In little-noticed remarks last month, Assistant Secretary of Defense Wallace "Chip" Gregson said China "is pursuing a long-term, comprehensive military buildup that could upend the regional security balance."

The U.S. military's biggest worry, he said, is what are known as China's "anti-access and area-denial" weapons, including submarines and the anti-ship missile, designed to prevent the U.S. from operating without fear in the Western Pacific.

Those weapons go beyond China's defensive needs and "threaten our primary means of projecting power: our bases, our sea and air assets, and the networks that support them," Gregson said.

Vice Adm. Dorsett said it was unclear when the aircraft would be operational.

"They have been able to invest in a military buildup, and a stealth fighter is just one aspect of that," he said. "The fact they are making progress in that should not be a surprise."

Dorsett said he was more troubled by China's advances in space weapons and cyberwarfare capabilities. In 2007, China demonstrated that it could shoot a satellite out of low Earth orbit. And for years, corporate and government computer systems in the U.S. and elsewhere, including

those of American defense contractors, have been hit by cyberattacks traced to China, though a link to the Chinese military hasn't been publicly established.

Some experts believe Chinese military hackers already have the ability to take down U.S. power grids and disrupt the financial system.

China is also developing and fielding "large numbers of advanced medium-range ballistic and cruise missiles, new attack submarines equipped with advanced weapons [and] increasingly capable long-range air defense systems," says the U.S. military's 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review.

"It's China's goal to have a globally deployable military by the 2020s," said Fisher, of the Virginia think tank. "We have to understand that what the Russians teach them they are absorbing well. They are becoming military technology innovators, not just copiers."

China has nuclear weapons and a modern air force, but it doesn't have an aircraft carrier or bases abroad; its main military focus has been Taiwan, the island allied with the U.S. that China considers a province, despite it being ruled separately since the end of a civil war in 1949. But China is building as many as five aircraft carriers, analysts say, and is increasingly turning its focus to projecting power beyond the Taiwan Strait.

China is the world's second-largest military spender after the U.S., though the gap is large. China put its 2010 defense budget at nearly \$80 billion. The sum is less than a fifth of the U.S. level of about \$530 billion, which doesn't include costs in Iraq and Afghanistan, but the U.S. believes the amount spent by China is higher.