

## Essay

# Understanding the Actions of the PLA Air Force and Regional Reactions in East Asia

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**I**t is always difficult to describe China's military service in today's context because of the lack of information or transparency on its abilities, holdings, and budget, as these are not in the public domain. There is always an element of exaggeration of its abilities by its adversaries, both on the positive and negative side. People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) is a prominent wing of the Chinese armed forces that poses a similar challenge to those trying to evaluate it. The lack of clarity permeates all domains and is coloured by the glass one wears. This essay attempts to briefly assess the PLAAF's holdings, budgets, roles, and real-world behaviour on its red lines in the context of East Asia, to predict its actions in a conflict.

### PLAAF— Designated Role

The PLAAF has an approximate strength of 398,000<sup>1</sup> officers and men. The PLA has significantly downsized the active force of the PLA Army (PLAA), maintained that of the PLAAF at a steady number, moderately increased that of the PLA Navy (PLAN) and PLA Rocket Force (PLARF), and optimized the force structures of all services and arms.<sup>2</sup> The PLAAF's current stated role in national security and military strategy, is brought out in its Defence White Paper of 2019. It states that by "integrating air and space capabilities as well as coordinating offensive and defensive operations, the PLAAF is accelerating the transition of its tasks from territorial air defense to both offensive and defensive operations, and improving its capabilities for strategic early warning, air strikes, air and missile defense, information countermeasures, airborne operations, strategic projection, and integrated support."

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The PLAAF comprises aviation, airborne, ground-to-air missile, radar, electronic countermeasures (ECM), and communications forces. In all there are five Theatre Commands (TC) and each has an Air Force Headquarter (HQ) under it, also popularly referred a TCAF HQs and PLAAF HQ directly supervises control over the airborne Corps. Under the TCs, there are air bases, aviation (divisions) brigades, ground-to-air missile (divisions) brigades and radar brigades. In line with the strategic requirements to build a strong and modernized air force, the holdings projection provides an indication of its capabilities in the current context and hence its ability to support the strategic objectives set for the military and the nation. The PLAAF and PLAN Aviation together constitute the largest aviation force in the region and the third largest in the world, with over 2,800 total aircraft of which approximately 2,250 are combat aircraft (including fighters, strategic bombers, tactical bombers, multi-mission tactical, and attack aircraft).<sup>3</sup>

To understand the way PLAAF along with the other military services would be called upon to perform their roles, it is necessary to enumerate the national defense aims as stated by the People's Republic of China (PRC) which can be interpreted for relevance to the PLAAF.<sup>4</sup> These could further be interpreted as the so-called "red lines".

- (a) To deter and resist aggression;
- (b) To safeguard national political security, the people's security and social stability;
- (c) To oppose and contain "Taiwan independence";
- (d) To crackdown on proponents of separatist movements such as "Tibet independence" and the creation of "East Turkistan";
- (e) To safeguard national sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and security;
- (f) To safeguard China's maritime rights and interests;
- (g) To safeguard China's security interests in outer space, electromagnetic space and cyberspace;
- (h) To safeguard China's overseas interests;
- (i) To support the sustainable development of the country.

Besides contestation of land boundaries with India, China’s enumerated sovereignty and territorial interests are with Taiwan, Japan (Senkaku Islands), and the South China Sea geography. To understand the PLAAF capabilities, its actions in East Asia need to be understood as it has been using the region as a testbed for both expanding its roles, training, and enforcing the Communist Party of China’s (CPC) vision.

### The Weight of Numbers

It is important to grasp the numbers of platforms and the diversity which the PLAAF possesses in order to understand the complexity and abilities of the missions it can perform in pursuit of PRC’s aims. The PLAAF, over the last few years, has produced and bought potent platforms to perform the roles it has been assigned. Some of these have been Sukhoi series of fighters which form a basis of their fighter fleet, air to air refuellers such as the IL-76, bombers of the Tupelov-16 series, which form the basis of the H-6 series, as the as well as air defence weapons -- both SAMs (Surface to Air Missiles) in the HQ-9 series as well as S-400s and the latest induction of J-20s and Y-20s. However, in the Indian sub-continental appreciation these have been often overlooked. The sheer numbers, as well as technically advanced airborne platforms and ground-based equipment that PLAAF has produced and accumulated, has resulted in counter acquisitions by affected countries such as Taiwan and Japan to minimize and offset their impact in case of a conflict. Table 1<sup>5</sup> provides the numbers of platforms with broad roles they fall under.

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Table 1

	Fighters	Transport	Heli-copters	Support aircraft	UAV	Trainer	Manpower
China	1771*	312	81	60	26 HALE	1012	398,000
Taiwan	411	33	17	26	-	97	35,000
Japan	335	56	44	61		248	46,900

\*The number of aircraft indicated in Table 1 are only with the PLAAF; they do not include PLAA and PLAN aircraft. However, it does include the assets of the airborne forces as they are under the PLAAF.

The data depicted in Table 1 is only that of the air forces of the countries and does not cater for the assets of the other services. In addition, Japan has a large complement of US forces (55,300) from all the services and with huge air resources positioned in the country. The support aircraft encompass varied platforms and roles such as Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR), Electronic Warfare (EW), Command and Control, early warning, air to air refueling, and search and rescue. These support aircraft when employed in conjunction with each other and offensive aerial platforms, provide manifold force enhancement -- also referred to as force multipliers.

### Massive Flow of Funds

The next aspect in understanding the comparative strengths and weaknesses of the air forces are the defence budgets of the previous five years, as the results of that spending would start appearing in the future. Table 2<sup>6</sup> lists the defense budgets of the three countries from 2016 onwards.

Table 2

In Billion of US dollars

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
<b>China</b>	203.9	216.5	229.2	240.3	244.9
<b>Taiwan</b>	10.4	10.5	10.3	11	11.6
<b>Japan</b>	47.3	47.4	47.4	47.6	48.2

Source: China Power Project, CSIS

The quantum of funds allotted to defence by the countries provides an overview of the procurements, Research and Development (R&D), industry, and priority in political calculations. The figures are derived from SIPRI and are at variance with officially released figures of China; however, they do provide a trend as well as means of comparison with the resources allotted by Taiwan and Japan. An important part of the defence budget is the fund allocation for equipment purchase, as this provides the muscle to the military body; the other two components of a military budget, as per UN accounting, are personnel and sustainment. The service-wise expenditure of Chinese and Taiwanese defence budgets is not available; however, that of Japan is available. The PLA armed forces have, over a period, increased their allocation for equipment

purchases and it currently stands at approximately 40% of the total military budget.<sup>7</sup> In the case of Taiwan's defence budget the total procurement expenditure was 3.23 billion dollars<sup>8</sup>, while Japan in 2020 spent 9.2 billion dollars on capital procurements of which about 2.7 billion was on procurements by Japan Air Self-Defence Force (JASDF).<sup>9</sup>

Just comparing the numbers of the air force does indicate the magnitude of the challenge which is faced by countries such as Taiwan and Japan if they are to provide a challenge to the aggressive behavior of the Chinese air force. The numbers and the diversity of the platforms are thus continuously reinforced because of higher financial allocation by China, resulting in an increasing gap between capabilities.

### Impact on Taiwan

The threat or constant harassment posed by China's PLAAF to Taiwan and Japan in the past year provides us with an insight into the way the Chinese use their air force and how these two countries are attempting to contain it. The PLAAF by violating air spaces on the fringes is probing for possible reactions by the Taiwan and Japan air forces and gathering Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) information and updating its database on radars and missile systems of these countries. It is strengthening its counter-air and land-strike capabilities for any future action and attempting to deter, by show of force, neighbouring and extra-regional countries from interfering. The other motivations in the psychological game of the PRC are to use the PLAAF for intensifying training and exercises in Taiwan's neighbouring waters so as to "sharpen the effectiveness of their chain of command and joint operations and build up their area denial capability" as also military intimidation.

**The PLAAF by violating air spaces is probing for possible reactions by the Taiwan and Japan air forces and gathering ISR information.**

The PLAAF, along with the PLAN's aviation assets, has provoked Taiwan's air force on a regular basis. In 2020 and 2021, the PLAAF has flown innumerable times in an area designated (South-West) by Taiwan as its Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ), without taking clearance from her. The "intrusions" have been done several times, and with the scale and variety of the assets the PLAAF has attempted to intimidate Taiwan. Even though the territorial airspace of Taiwan has not been violated, constant maneuvers inside the Taiwan designated ADIZ (which has no legal sanctity) have drawn

reactions from Taiwan, which faces the threat of China for reunification. The Taiwanese describe these intrusions in their ADIZ as an attempt to intensify PLA's surveillance and reconnaissance activities, probe and disturb ROC's air defense measures, squeeze reaction ability in time and airspace, and threaten the aerial security of the Taiwan Strait. The extent of such actions can be gauged from the fact that between September 2020 and September 2021, PLA military aircraft entered Taiwan's ADIZ on nearly 250 days,<sup>10</sup> and Taiwan air force scrambled 2,972 times in 2020 against intruding Chinese aircraft at a cost of T\$25.5 billion (\$886.49 million). In 2021, the PLAAF had undertaken over 940<sup>11</sup> incursions into the ADIZ of Taiwan. Almost all these incursions occurred in the southwestern part of the ADIZ near Taiwan-held Dongsha Island. Many of the larger-scale incursions were preceded by some development related to US-Taiwan relations or Taiwan's politico-diplomatic activities.

### Tensions with Japan

Besides the historical animosity between Japan and China, and China's memory of its 'century of humiliation', the two countries also have overlapping claims over both their continental shelves and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) in the East China Sea. The East China Sea contains natural gas and oil -- though hydrocarbon reserves are difficult to estimate. Japan maintains that an equidistant line from each country should separate the EEZs, while China claims an extended continental shelf beyond the equidistant line to the Okinawa Trench. Beijing also continues to claim sovereignty over the Japan-administered Senkaku Islands.<sup>12</sup> Their disagreements have spilled over from the ocean to the air domain. In addition, the presence of the American forces in Japan and freedom of navigation issues regarding China's unilaterally drawn 9-dash line in the South China Sea are a constant source of friction. The conflicting and overlapping ADIZ in East China Sea is another area for contestation, as depicted in image 1.<sup>13</sup>

**The PLAAF has consistently undertaken provocative manoeuvres towards the Japanese Air Self-Defense Forces.**

In this region, again, the PLAAF has consistently undertaken provocative manoeuvres towards the Japanese Air Self-Defense Forces. The number of air missions (scrambles) undertaken by Japan against China from 2016 to 2020 are as per Table 3<sup>14</sup>:

Image 1



Table 3

Japan Air Self Defence Force Scrambles

2016	851
2017	500
2018	638
2019	675
2020	458

Lessons Learnt

Airpower today provides both lethality and compression of time for out of proportion outcomes. This analysis has attempted to capture the PLAAF's attributes in peacetime and its power to act and get its opponents to respond. Japan and Taiwan are in the process of finding solutions to China's aggressive behavior through newer and

faster response mechanisms, purchase of better equipment and training. Air power is a lethal but expensive option, and not providing a kinetic response to a provocation may also be an action because it negates certain aims of the adversary. This is also borne out by the reduced scrambles of both countries to the number of incursions by PLAAF.

The Chinese have built an asymmetric force in terms of numbers and diversity in the air domain in East Asia much like what they have achieved in the naval domain. The steady stream of incursions provides training and exposure to its pilots. The PLAAF uses its platforms to gather intelligence and probe the responses of the opponents. It also provides the Chinese political and military leadership the ability to capture events and take its decisions by studying the responses at various levels—both domestically, and of the military, populace, and decision makers in the targeted countries, as well as of the wider group of nations.

The imbalance that numbers have created in favour of China, puts enormous pressure on the countries being challenged in terms of budgets and internal public opinion, and thus may lead to unintended consequences which need mitigation. The rapidity of the Chinese air intrusions needs to be understood and an appropriate response presented. The chorus for increasing budget allocation to mount an appropriate response to China would rise, and thus, misallocation of resources or conflicts within society may lead to internal discontent. In addition, the reactive scenarios to violations by the PLAAF aircrafts played out in Japan and Taiwan has exposed to China, to an extent, the playbook these countries would follow in the event of an outbreak of hostility, and thus provides greater freedom of action to the aggressor.

A country has many instruments of kinetic power to defend itself and inflict damage on the adversary. The PLA is using its Air Force to further its national aims by reinforcing its red lines. Decision makers and practitioners in other Asian states need to draw lessons from Chinese actions in East Asia and the reactions to them, to be better prepared.

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