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## PLAAF: INCREASING PRESENCE BEYOND THE FIRST ISLAND CHAIN

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The PLAAF had recently deployed more than forty different aircraft to the Western Pacific as a show of force.<sup>1</sup> The mission was large in scale in terms of the number of aircraft and distance covered. The formation flew, passing the first Island chain to the second via the Miyako Strait.<sup>2</sup> Japan is reported to have scrambled its fighters to monitor the PLAAF formation. It later released photographs of the Chinese aircraft. Notable is that the formation had a large contingent of H-6K aircraft with support aircraft. China has been very active in this region ever since it established its Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ).

This PLAAF exercise was one of the biggest shows of force ever since China established the Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ). However, this is not the first time PLAAF has flown such missions beyond the First Island Chain; in fact it has been doing it since early 2015. The significance of this mission is the huge number of aircraft deployed, which is exactly forty, including H-6K, fighters, mid-air refueller tanker, ELINT and AWACS. The mission did not

undertake any provocative action against Japan as it did not violate the Japanese airspace. The PLAAF stated that it was a "routine drill on the high seas".<sup>3</sup>

It was further stated that "The regular Western Pacific drills and ADIZ patrols are necessary to safeguard national sovereignty, the country's security and maintain peaceful development".<sup>4</sup> The statement and the mission appears to emphasise the point that such missions would continue in the future and that it would be normal and routine and should not be considered provocative. The whole exercise appears to be to get Japan and its allies used to such patrol missions.

Japanese media mentions that there were eight H-6K bombers that were part of the formation that flew into the Second Island Chain region via the Miyako Strait. Chinese media reports, also confirmed by the Japanese media, mention that there were two formations each containing four H-6k bombers. The type of aircraft that participated were the H-6K, Su-30



fighters, KJ-2000 AWACS aircraft, Y-8CBELINT/EW aircraft and one Tu-154 ELINT aircraft.<sup>5</sup>Given the type of aircraft that had been deployed, the mission profile appears to be primarily for land attack simulation.

Photographs of the mission, as revealed by the Chinese media and Japanese media, show the H-6K carrying two cruise missiles each under its centre wing hard-point (Image 1). In one particular close-up photo the missile variant can be identified to be the KD-20 ASCM (Image 2). This missile is the air launched variant of the land based DH-10 missile. The KD-20 is primarily for land targets and is believed to have a maximum range of 2500km. The missile belongs to the same class as the Kh-55 and the US AGM-86. There were reports in the media earlier stating that an anti-ship variant of the missile, with the designation YJ-100, was in the making. However, it is not known if it had entered service.

Image 1



Source: [http://www.nikkei.com/news/image-article/?R\\_FLG=0&ad=DSXMZO0760992025092016100003&dc=1&ng=DGXLASF525H1P\\_V20C16A9PE8000&z=20160925](http://www.nikkei.com/news/image-article/?R_FLG=0&ad=DSXMZO0760992025092016100003&dc=1&ng=DGXLASF525H1P_V20C16A9PE8000&z=20160925)

Image 2



Source:

[http://slide.mil.news.sina.com.cn/k/slide\\_8\\_193\\_45492.html#p=3](http://slide.mil.news.sina.com.cn/k/slide_8_193_45492.html#p=3)

Another photograph released by the PLAAF shows a Su-30MKK aircraft that was part of the mission getting refuelled mid-air which means that the tanker ought to be the relatively new Il-78 acquired from Ukraine (which is also clearly identifiable from the refuelling hose), and not the H-6U.

Image 3



Source:

[http://slide.mil.news.sina.com.cn/k/slide\\_8\\_193\\_45492.html#p=7](http://slide.mil.news.sina.com.cn/k/slide_8_193_45492.html#p=7)

The PLAAF now operates three Il-78s, which are capable of refuelling the Su-30MKK, but the number is not sufficient for high intensity war time operational tempo. The immediate

future of China's refuelling tanker options are not known except for the speculation that China might build some refuellers out of the Y-20 aircraft in the near future. Some of the additional objectives of this mission were probably mid-air refuelling, surveillance, integrated operation with AWACS and possibly electronic warfare support from the Tu-154 and Y-8CB.

Such strike packages are usually allotted for long range strikes. Earlier, in December 2015, a similar mission was undertaken by the PLAAF which included eight H-6K bombers and other support aircraft including ELINT.<sup>6</sup> The aircraft had flown in four group formations and one such group had flown 1000 km into the second island chain which, from certain approaches, brings the US military airbases in Guam within reach of the KD-20 ASCM. However, the size of the mission package was smaller compared to the recent mission. In addition, there are other vital counter-air targets such as airbases in Japan. It is to be noted that the H-6K can carry a total of six KD-20 on its external pylons.

One other deduction that can be drawn from this is that the mission saw the use of Russian made Su-30MKK as fighter escorts for the H-6K, with the Su-30MKK carrying only air-to-air weapon load (as observed from the released photographs) like all other previous missions of similar profile since 2015, which points to the fact that PLAAF would likely depend on the Su-30MKK as fighter escorts for H-6K

strike missions in the future and not the reverse engineered Flanker variants. Further, the use of Russian made Su-30MKK might also indicate that the data links for communication between aircraft-to-aircraft and with the AWACS and ELINT are of Russian origin or reverse engineered Russian equipment.

In addition to this the other priority of similar missions in the future would be long range stand-off maritime strike against surface targets such as aircraft carriers. The anti-ship carrier variant of the KD-20 – the YJ-100 – might not be the weapon of choice against aircraft carriers as this missile is slow – it travels at high sub-sonic speeds only. An aircraft carrier is, by design, built with sealable compartments to sustain multiple cruise missile strikes above the waterline. Hence, the preferred weapon selection would be air delivered supersonic missiles such as the Russian Klub variants in a saturation attack mode.

In the future, PLAAF will likely undertake more such missions into the western Pacific as a show of force and for mission and area familiarisation for its pilots. There might be frequent patrols in the region in future and PLAAF might also launch simulated long range maritime strike missions, though with different weapon loads in the H-6K and possibly the Su-30MKK. It is believed that there are two regiments of H-6K bombers and one of them is the 28Regiment based in Anqing.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless,

there are serious chinks in the PLAAF's long range maritime strike capabilities. PLAAF's maritime EW capabilities are believed to be relatively weak which will leave its bombers vulnerable to sea-based and land based air-defence. There is a possibility that China might either buy or partner with Russia to plug this gap in the future.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>“解放军 40 多架战机出西太平洋演练检验远海实战能力”,<http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/china/2016-09-25/doc-ixwewmc5448922.shtml>, 25 September 2016

<sup>2</sup> “More than 40 PLAAF planes flew over Miako strait”,  
<http://www.cna.com.tw/news/acn/201609250197-1.aspx>, 25 September 2016

<sup>3</sup> “PLAAF deploys 40 aircraft to western Pacific in show of strength”,<http://www.janes.com/article/64114/plaaf-deploys-40-aircraft-to-western-pacific-in-show-of-strength>, 27 September 2016

<sup>4</sup> “Japan Scrambles jets as China warplanes fly through Okinawa strait”,<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/09/26/national/politics-diplomacy/fighter-scrambled-near-okinawa-china-air-force-planes-pass-miyako-strait/#.WDcfSdV97Dc>, 26 September 2016

<sup>5</sup> No.3

<sup>6</sup> “Chinese bomber exercise affirms air-defence identification zone, penetrates second Island chain”,  
<http://www.janes.com/article/56327/chinese-bomber-exercise-affirms-air-defence-identification-zone-penetrates-second-island-chain>, 01 December 2016

<sup>7</sup>ibid