
China's Long Range Bombers a Strategic Challenge to the Region

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Introduction

The Long Range Strike Bomber (LRSB) fleet is a legacy left behind by the Cold War era when trans-regional and inter-continental range bombers were part of the nuclear triad. The United States (US) and Soviet Union maintained LRSBs primarily to support nuclear missions but during the height of the Cold War, these bombers were also kept ready for conventional missions. China has been working for long to develop LRSBs to put in place a credible nuclear triad.

China has redefined its strategic boundaries and is asserting to break the myth of the 'first and second island chains' to project power beyond these geographical bottlenecks through maritime and air power. The strategic bombers give China flexibility to gain access to the Western Pacific and north-south movement along the Asian seaboard to complement its Anti-Access/Area Denial (AA/AD) strategy.¹ In view of this, the modernised H-6K bomber of China has a combat radius of roughly 2,200 miles (3,541 km), just adequate to reach the proximity of Guam, the US maritime base.² The H-6K was designed primarily

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as a cruise missile carrier. The bomber is considered to be purely for conventional use rather than as part of the nuclear triad. It can carry six CJ-10K or YJ-12 long-range land attack and anti-ship cruise missiles on its wings and potentially several more inside its weapon bays. That makes it a threat to not only the US and allied shipping, but also to bases on the islands and the mainland.³ After years of speculation, the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) Commander, General Ma Xiaotian, publicly confirmed in September 2016 that China was developing a "next generation, long-range strike bomber".⁴

This will be accomplished by designing the H-20 in the flying wing layout to mirror the stealth advantages that the US and next-generation Russian bombers derive from this configuration.⁵ Second, the bomber will be capable of conducting "ultra-long range" missions. The new bomber (H-20) has an intercontinental flying range of more than 10,000 km and combat radius of over 5,000 km.⁶ Stealth technology continues to play a key role in the development of these new bombers, which probably will reach initial operational capability by 2025.⁷ In view of this, there is a need to examine the current and future capabilities of the LRSBs of China to assess the implications in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

Strategic Signalling

The 2018 RAND Report notes that in 2015, the PLAAF flew the LRSB that was described as a major milestone of breaking through the first and second chains of islands and flying into the Western Pacific region.⁸ It was a departure from the defensive approach to an assertive PLAAF that carried out combat air patrols over disputed territories in the South China Sea including the Fiery Cross Reef, Scarborough Shoal, Mischief Reef and Woody Island.⁹ These flights were a demonstration of the PLAAF's willingness to challenge the US and its allies in the region and to break the geographical and strategic containment in the Western Pacific Ocean.

The decision to publicise the PLAAF's flights in the South China Sea was significant because of the message being conveyed to both the internal and external audience.¹⁰

Furthermore, the RAND report also flags certain important implications of these flights over the first and second chains of islands and Western Pacific Ocean. The report suggests it to be a strategic signalling; a step towards making the PLAAF a world class force to deal with future security challenges and an indication that China is acquiring capabilities to bring the US strategic locations in the Pacific Ocean within the range of its LRSBs. Therefore, the US needs to take all possible measures to dissuade China from such a coercive policy and also build consensus among its regional allies to mitigate the negative impacts of these flights undermining the US policy of containment of China within the first and second chains of islands.

China has demonstrated the ability to conduct over the sea operations against any perceived encirclement or containment by regional and extra-regional powers. This is also a direct message to the US and its regional allies that it is now capable of employing LRSBs if Chinese sovereignty is questioned over the disputed territories in the South China Sea and East China Sea. At the same time, China will continue to develop capabilities to bring the US island territories of Guam and Hawaii within the range of the LRSBs in the near future. It could also be a signal that China will be in a position to establish the Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the disputed territories as soon as it is confident of its capabilities to use force against nations that violate the ADIZ.

With the increasing Chinese economic activities across Asia, Africa and island countries in the IOR, China will be compelled to increase its military footprints to protect Chinese strategic and economic interests. Therefore, China would require power projection capabilities to secure its interest. China may create maritime and land bases in the littoral states in the IOR, however, this would require long range bombers to assert its dominance and capabilities. Long range bombers comprise not only

a platform for power projection but also for dual usage of integration of nuclear and conventional capabilities. The PLAAF claims that the LRSB remains vulnerable at this critical juncture and, thus, there is a need to move from quantitative accumulation to qualitative change and from being a big force to a strong force.”¹¹ Furthermore, it argues, “The new-generation LRSB will considerably improve China’s strategic attack capability and make the PLAAF a strategic air force in the true sense.”¹²

The major lesson that China has conveyed through its policy of increasing LRSB flights is that the policy of the US to contain China within the first and second chains of islands is now a fatigued idea. China cannot be contained militarily by the US or its allies on land, sea and even air. The PLA Navy is already in the process of achieving power projection capabilities and now it is the turn of the PLAAF to be strengthened and converted into a “strategic air force” status. What the US and allies must do is develop the capability to mitigate the threat by developing systems and synergy among allies to ensure that any long range flights either by the H-6K or, in future, the H-20, remain vulnerable to ground, air and sea-based air defence systems. From an institutional perspective, the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) of China continues to remain the “core force for strategic deterrence”.¹³ The LRSB is not a replacement for the nuclear capable missile but will give options to China for using the air in addition to the land-based and sea-based nuclear and conventional missiles.

Limitations of Current Long Range Bombers of China

The concerns for China with regard to its LRSBs is that the current range limitations of PLAAF fighters would mean that the H-6Ks on trans-regional missions would not have fighters to defend them and would, therefore, “be *easy targets* for American, Japanese, and Taiwanese air defenders before they could get within range of Guam.”¹⁴ The range of the current fleet remains limited due to inadequate refuelling facilities in mid-air or bases on land. Another issue related with range is that even

if refuelling is carried out, the surprise and stealth of the mission gets compromised because the refuelling aircraft may not be able to hide the radar signatures and, thus, will become an easy target for air defence forces. Moreover, China is yet to master the technology of stealth and, as a result, the US bases along the “first and second chain of islands” continue to act as deterrence for over the sea operations. Currently, the US has the Aegis and Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) missile defences in Guam and at its Japanese bases, which pose a threat to China’s fleet of missiles and LRSBs. The US has no established defence against a stealth bomber, which China will seek to exploit with the H-20.¹⁵ However, the H-6K fleet, in the absence of air defence and electronic warfare escort, remains vulnerable to the US air, ground and sea-based air defence. China does not have the maritime or carrier battle group support for long range bombers in terms of air defence in the open sea.

China may have psychologically bounced the “first and second chains of islands” by flying over the sea, but to presume that it will be able to enforce AA/AD in the South China Sea and Western Pacific region is still a far cry. China is yet to develop it as a comprehensive system of systems that can deal with multiple challenges from the air, ground and sea, including kinetic and non-kinetic threats. The new aircraft of China will necessitate development of significant defensive capabilities, in particular with regard to the Find, Fix, Track, Target, Engage and Assess (F2T2EA) process.¹⁶ Moreover, the potential for the regional bomber to be employed in a deep, offensive counter-air role would likely necessitate the diversion of allied 5th generation aircraft from offensive operations to defend high-value assets.¹⁷ With the current available capabilities of the PLAAF, it is not possible for China to engage and divert the US stealth long range bombers and 5th generation aircraft, thus, employment of the H-6K or H-20 against the US and its allies may be fraught with risk in the absence of a credible air defence system that is able to deny penetration of US missiles and aircraft.

The PLAAF “does not currently have a nuclear mission”.¹⁸ The biggest capability gap in the LRSB is that it is incapable of penetrating through the air defence of the US and its allies along the first and second chains of island. Thus, these flights can at best be described as strategic signalling, training and dry rehearsals so that, in the future when the nuclear capable stealth long range bombers are introduced, the PLAAF is ready to operate them as part of the nuclear triad.

Implications for India

The new-generation LRSB will considerably improve China’s strategic attack capability and make the PLAAF a strategic air force in the true sense. China’s quest for the LRSB is not exclusively to break the encirclement/containment along the “first and second chains of islands” but also to bring the IOR and Australia within the range of the H-20. It will have security implications for India in the land, air and maritime domains. If deployed in mainland China, the range of the H-20 is sufficient to cover Japan, the Korean peninsula (if operating from Hainan), the South China Sea and the northern halves of Sumatra and Borneo plus the entirety of the Philippines; and from western or southern China, much of India and the Bay of Bengal.¹⁹ With the stated capabilities of the H-20, China will be in a position to extend its reach to all of India, the island territories including the Andaman & Nicobar and Lakshadweep Islands. The threat is not from the range but the stealth technology that is central to the development of the regional bomber (H-20) and it will employ many 5th generation fighter technologies that include an Active Electronically Scanned Array (AESA) radar and be capable of delivering precision-guided munitions.²⁰

Considering the threat China’s LRSBs will pose to India by 2025, there is an urgent need to assess the strategic and operational implications, especially at a time when the Indian Air Force does not have credible surveillance and air defence capabilities to engage stealth bombers. The

threat of the LRSBs is more in the strategic realm than in the operational or tactical domain. It will threaten India's critical military and non-military assets on land, sea and island territories. India not only requires dissuasive capability by developing credible air defence against stealth technology but will also need LRSBs to strike back with equal intensity, should the situation so warrant. In any case, India requires the LRSBs to possess a credible nuclear triad and a system that is dual purpose (nuclear and conventional) and multi-role to perform the task of ground attack, anti-ship, air defence (air-to-air missiles) electronic warfare and airborne early warning long range radar.

Conclusion

China is more focussed to make the Air Force a strategic force that has regional and intercontinental range. It gives China another option as far as nuclear triad is concerned, however, the PLARF remains the mainstay of China's strategic deterrence. China is making formidable strides in logistical and technological advancements in building the LRSBs, however, it still lacks combat experience, whereas the B-52 long range bombers of the US has been in service since 1955. That could prove to be its greatest hindrance to implement a successful long-range bomber strategy. "Today, China's military has an increasingly impressive high-tech arsenal, but its ability to use these weapons and equipment remains unclear. According to Timothy R. Heath, the Army (PLA) struggles under the legacy of an obsolete command system, rampant corruption, and training of debatable realism, among other issues."²¹ The editor-in-chief of the defence journal is sceptical about China's abilities to produce a modern long-range stealth strike bomber in a short period, considering that it would require "a state-of-the-art structure and aerodynamic configuration as well as a high-performance turbofan engine".²² There may be doubts about China in achieving technical capabilities, given the ambitious timelines to make the H-20 operational by 2025. However,

the reorganised People's Liberation Army (PLA) is certainly becoming more professional and focussed in the approach to achieve operational efficiency. The H-6K flights over the Western Pacific should be seen in the light of testing conceptual and training aspects so that when these flights are undertaken to implement the AA/AD or ADIZ, the PLAAF is not found wanting.

The development of the H-20 as the LRSB should not be seen only as a weapon system against the US—India is equally a potential target of this strategic weapon system. India can no longer afford to delay and defer building resilient air defence capabilities, keeping in mind the threat LRSBs will pose to our critical assets based on land, island territories and even carrier battle groups. The need for adding LRSBs in the Indian Air Force arsenal is imperative and undeniable.

Notes

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