

# E. Asia's Changing Dynamics and the Role of Air Power

**E**ast Asia's strategic template is shifting toward a mix of asymmetrical anti-access/area-denial threats, low-high intensity conventional conflicts,

and a range of nontraditional security challenges.

Selected actors, in particular China, Japan and South Korea, and to a lesser degree, Taiwan, are improving power-projection capabilities and demonstrating the political willingness to use them.

Indeed, for the first time since Japan's attempt to assert its regional strategic presence in the first half of the 20th century, East Asian states can pursue national security strategies based on advanced power-projection capabilities. China is overhauling its military

to regain its historical geopolitical role in the region; Japan is aiming to overcome the limitations posed by its pacifist postwar constitution and the Yoshida Doctrine; South Korea seeks to offset any future crises stemming from great power rivalries; and Taiwan wants to sustain its deterrence vis-à-vis China.

It is for these reasons that aerospace and naval assets, standoff precision weapons, ballistic and cruise missiles, and space-based C4ISR systems are increasingly becoming the platforms of choice to overcome the "tyranny of geography."

Despite the ongoing debate about its intents and capabilities, China's People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) is making rapid and relatively significant progress in transforming not only its airpower assets but its strategic priorities, force structures and operational concepts.

In just over a decade, the PLAAF has retired most of its 1950s-era Soviet-designed combat aircraft and replaced them with more than 400 fourth-generation fighters (J-10, J-11 variants) armed with advanced air-to-air missiles and precision-guided munitions, and capable of flying in all-weather conditions. China's first domes-

tically produced airborne warning and control system aircraft and a new generation of long-range air defense systems are operational.

Perhaps most importantly, China's defense aviation industry accelerated its research, development and testing programs, from the carrier-based multirole fighter (J-15), the fifth-generation J-20 and J-31 stealth fighters, heavy transport aircraft to future-oriented UAV and hypersonic vehicle systems.

While important technological hurdles exist, these have not precluded the PLAAF from conceptualizing long-term visions of air power.

By 2030, Chinese air power doctrine envisions conducting independent air campaigns within a 3,000-kilometer radius of China's periphery, shifting its primary missions from land-based air defense, interdiction and close-air support operations toward deterrence and strategic strike at sea.

In this context, PLAAF's concept of "integrated attack and defense," joint counter-air strike campaigns in conjunction with the Second Artillery's anti-ship ballistic missile capabilities, are seen as vital in defending China's territorial and sovereignty claims and limiting action by potential

adversaries (the US).

## Strategic Ramifications

While reactions to China's rise on the global stage have varied, virtually none of the regional actors has been comfortable with China's increasing military capabilities and more assertive policies, particularly those in disputes over selected islands in the South China Sea and East China Sea. Indeed, none of the regional actors could oppose Chinese strategic ambitions without the support of the US.

China's military challenge poses significant dilemmas, particularly for Japan, which has been constrained by historical, political and legal predicaments of the US-Japan alliance. In recent years, however, Japan has taken steps toward more robust security policy (dynamic defense) that seeks greater strategic and operational flexibility. Japan's Self Defense Forces are gradually shifting their stance from traditional static defense toward more power-projection and deterrent capabilities, with the procurement of MV-22 Ospreys, F-35 fighters, Global Hawk drones and amphibious troop carriers.

Similarly, South Korea's ongoing defense reforms have aimed

not only to strengthen capabilities vis-à-vis North Korea, but also to develop joint air and naval capabilities that would complement a long-term US strategic presence in East Asia.

To this end, South Korea's future force modernization programs are likely to include the procurement of F-35 stealth fighters, multirole helicopters, submarines, destroyer experimental vessels, surface-to-air missiles, early warning systems, precision-strike assets and next-generation C4ISR.

East Asia's changing strategic realities coupled with the diffusion of next-generation airpower, maritime and space-based weapon technologies will increasingly constrain the US ability to shape the regional security environment. China's greater power-projection capabilities and efforts to regain what it views as its "rightful" strategic presence in East Asia will greatly complicate crisis management by the US and its allies. □



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