



ENHANCING CAPABILITY FOR SUSTAINED OPERATIONAL PRESENCE OVER THE DISPUTED WATERS

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01 January 2018

Among the series of continuing military developments, the latest is the announcement by China that their Y-9 military transport plane is operationally ready for the role of flying-in supplies to the disputed South China Sea islands/reefs where China maintains military presence.¹ Another is the recent footage showing the deployment of the J-11B fighters in Woody Island and the continuing PLAAF bomber/fighter patrols in the East and South of China Sea.² It is not too hard to see where China is heading. The Chinese are attempting to enhance their long range off-shore operational capability to project power and assert stronger military control over the disputed area.

The necessity to secure the sea lanes in and around the first and second island chains, both from the air and on the surface, has remained an operational priority for the PLA since the beginning of this century. PLA has been working all this time to plug the gaps in technology, strategy, tactics, training and infrastructure to improve long range off-shore operational capability. China has made sustained efforts for a long time to strengthen and enforce their territorial claims in the ESC and SCS area. Their coast guard has maintained presence in some of the islands/reefs controlled by them for nearly two decades now. However, in the last three years, backed by a more modern military, China has increased its activities by way of patrols by PLAAF aircraft and PLAN vessels. The frequency of these patrols has increased since the establishment of the controversial Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ).

Since early 2015, the nature of air patrols saw a dramatic turn with the deployment of the H-6K stand-off strike aircraft formations with fighter escorts and other support aircraft.³ In the East China Sea region most of the PLAAF patrols went through the Miyako Strait which is one of the approaches to the US controlled island of Guam. Even recently, four H-6K aircraft, each armed with two KD-20

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ALCMs, and one Y-8G ECM aircraft undertook a patrol through the Miyako Strait which was monitored by the Japanese Self Defence Force.⁴ The fact that there were no fighter escorts, indicates that this was a less aggressive routine exercise.

Barely few days after this patrol, PLAAF undertook a more provocative flight around Taiwan where the formation included armed J-11A and Su-30MKK fighter escorts, two H-6K each armed with two KD-20 ALCM, Y-8G ECM, Tu-154 ELINT plane and tankers.⁵ This patrol took a flight path through the Miyako Strait and the Bashi Channel. These type of routine flyovers have also included refuelling tankers and other support aircraft from time to time. Compared to 2016, the frequency of these patrols has increased and has become a routine affair in the area.

After three years from starting these long range bomber patrols, the PLAAF should now be familiar with such missions as well as the area. With no islands under control of China in the east, the PLAAF has resorted to modify its long range combat platforms to undertake further longer range missions. A couple of months ago an H-6K was found to be equipped with a refuelling probe⁶ that would allow the bomber to extend its operational range with in-flight refuelling.

There were similar bomber patrols in the South China Sea region as well, but not as frequently as it is on the Eastern Sea front. However, in the south, China controls three islands/reefs - the Woody Island, Fiery Cross Reef and Johnson Reef where it has built airbases. Very recently, a CCTV footage revealed the deployment of J-11B fighters on Woody Island. The footage shows a thermo stabilised hangar that could protect the fighters from high temperature, humidity and sea climate induced corrosion.⁷ Satellite image shows that the hangars, though made of concrete, do not look hardened enough to withstand precision strikes.

Subi Reef (22/9/2016)



Source: Google earth pro. Image date: 22/9/2016. Aircraft shelter structure and dimension is standard across all the reefs in SCS

Given the type of special hangars, there is a high likelihood for regular deployments of fighters and bombers in the future. This speculation is based on the fact that, despite promises not to further militarise the region, the country continues to build infrastructure on the reefs to support military aircraft deployment. Unlike Woody Island, the air bases in Spratly reefs have bomber shelters in addition to fighter hangars. There are a total of 66 fighter hangars and 11 bomber/transport/support aircraft shelters and some construction was in progress on Mischief Reef as observed in the imagery dated 22 September 2016.⁸ This means that the three reefs together could maintain more than a regiment of fighters in the area. In addition, it is reported that China has built radar/communication facilities and has deployed high frequency radars on the reefs.⁹

Until now, most of the patrol sorties were flown from the Chinese mainland. With the deployment of fighters and other aircraft in the Paracel and Spratly islands, the future sorties could be flown from the disputed location itself which would enable China to assert greater control over the area as such sorties would enable longer on station/cruise time in the disputed area.

China is also making efforts to improve the supply bridge to the islands controlled by it in the SCS. The islands are equipped with port facilities for the ships to bring in supplies for construction and for base facility maintenance. Recently, PLAAF announced the operationalization of the Shaanxi Aircraft Corporation (SAC) built Y-9 medium size transport aircraft for long range mission to the SCS islands. The aircraft undertook a long range mission to the Spratly Islands from the mainland and performed simulated airdrop and returned back to its base in Sichuan.¹⁰ This was the first such mission.

There are a couple of significant aspects about this mission. First, the aircraft took off from a Sichuan province airbase which falls under the Western Theatre Command.¹¹ This might have been done to test the ability to mobilise multiple theatre commands for operations in the South of China Sea region. The earlier seven military regions were re-organised into five theatre commands specifically for the requirements of enhanced joint operational capability. Secondly, this is also the first time for the Y-9 aircraft to fly outside the Ground Control Intercept (GCI) on an unsupported independent mission at such distance. The aircraft accomplished the task without any ground drop-markings, weather data and no command guidance.¹² Such long range and unsupported missions are bound to continue in the future at higher frequency to prepare the pilots and the transport regiments for combat/supply operations.

The Y-9 can deliver up to 25 tonnes of supplies in a single sortie. The aircraft is a stretched version of the Y-8 platform with an increase range (7500 km) and payload capacity designed to exceed the US C-130J medium transport aircraft.¹³ There are improvements over the Y-8, viz. the flight control system, cockpit instrumentation and navigation electronics and engine.¹⁴ The platform has been modified to perform different roles such as AWACS (KJ-500), EW and ELINT which could also be deployed on a long range mission over the far off disputed waters.

Given the sufficient amount of runway length, the plane could also land on the runways at the island/reefs to deliver supplies. The aircraft will act as a rapid delivery air bridge for managing base operations in the three reefs in SCS. The Y-9 is capable of delivering a wide variety of military equipment and other replenishments like armoured vehicles, artillery and other weapons as well as ammunition, food and other logistics.¹⁵ There is also the possibility of the platform being modified for anti-submarine role which would immensely enhance Chinese ASW capability in the high broadband background noise littoral region when operating from the island as it could greatly enhance on-station time in the areas of interest.

Key operational issues concerning sustained presence in the area of interest are being slowly addressed. In the years to come, China will be capable of maintaining sustained presence in the contested waters in the East and more particularly the South of China Sea. In the East the emphasis will be to perform long range stand-off land attacks and anti-ship strikes beyond the first and second island chain, while in the South of China Sea, it will dominate the air and the regional waters with aggressive air patrolling and ASW operations and control the sea-lines of communication and sea-borne trade. This is clearly a major concern for other stakeholders in the region and to the freedom of navigation in the area.

(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

¹ "PLAAF declares Y-9 transport aircraft fully operational", <http://www.janes.com/article/76129/plaaf-declares-y-9-transport-aircraft-fully-operational>, 04 December 2017

² "China confirms deployment of fighters to South China Sea island for first time", <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/12/02/asia-pacific/china-confirms-deployment-fighters-south-china-sea-island-first-time/#.WkFGp2iWbIU>, 02 December 2017

³ "多架轰 6K 等战机飞赴南海战斗巡航的背后", http://www.sohu.com/a/206404436_203783, 24 November 2017

⁴ “China is flying bombers and spy planes near Japan and telling Japan to ‘not make a fuss’ about it”, <https://www.businessinsider.in/China-is-flying-bombers-and-spy-planes-near-Japan-and-telling-Japan-to-not-make-a-fuss-about-it/articleshow/61746640.cms> , 22 November 2017

⁵ “PLAAF sends fighters, bombers on ‘regular patrol exercise’ around Taiwan”, <http://www.janes.com/article/76373/plaaf-sends-fighters-bombers-on-regular-patrol-exercise-around-taiwan> , 14 December 2017

⁶ “Chinese Xian H-6K with refuelling probe suggests new missions”, <http://www.janes.com/article/73182/chinese-xian-h-6k-with-refuelling-probe-suggests-new-missions> , 18 August 2017

⁷ No.2

⁸ Data obtained from Google earth pro imageries of Subi, Fiery cross and mischief reef on 13 Dec 2017. Image date 22 September 2016

⁹ “China continues South China Sea buildup, think tank says”, <http://news.abs-cbn.com/overseas/12/15/17/china-continues-south-china-sea-buildup-think-tank-says> , 15 December 2017

¹⁰ “我军运 9 千里奔袭赴南海空投演习背后都有哪些进步”, <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/jssd/2017-12-05/doc-ifphxwa7965607.shtml>, 05 December 2017

¹¹ Ibid

¹² “中国空军运-9 机群奔袭数千公里长航程演练岛礁空投”, <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/2017-12-03/doc-ifphkhk9986267.shtml>, 03 December 2017

¹³ “Shaanxi Y-9”, <http://sinodefence.com/shaanxi-y-9/> , 15 August 2017

¹⁴ “运 9 机群奔赴南海岛礁练空投提高战区间快反能力” <http://mil.huanqiu.com/observation/2017-12/11419309.html>, 04 December 2017

¹⁵ “中国空军南海远训细节透重要信息 ... 转自多维新闻网”, <http://news.dwnnews.com/china/news/2017-12-05/60027730.html> , 05 December 2017