



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

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CAPS FELLOW SEMINAR RAPPORTEUR'S REPORT

CHINA'S AEROSPACE SECTOR: ITS RISE AND DOCTRINES

Chairperson: Gp Capt Ashok Chordia, Senior Fellow' CAPS

Speaker: Temjenmeren Ao , Research Associate, CAPS

Discussant : Mr. Arjun Subramanian P, Associate Fellow, CAPS

Rapporteur: Ms. Shaheli Das, Associate Fellow, CAPS

Date: 24 July 2015

Although the origin of PLAAF can be traced to the year 1924 (during the first united front between Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party), yet it was formally established on November 11, 1949 with its headquarters in Beijing. PLAAF's primary responsibility then, was to ensure territorial air defence of the major cities of China.

Its command structure consists of the Central Military Commission (CMC) at the top, followed by the Ministry of Defence. To add to it there are four general departments namely, the General Staff Department, the General Political Department, the General Logistics Department and the General Equipment Department; with the last division being added in the year 1998.

Influenced by the Korean War, the Vietnam War and the Gulf War of the 1990s, China recognised the importance of Air Power in winning future wars. Thereafter, the importance of PLAAF



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gained ground and a need arose to develop the Aerospace Sector further. It was influenced markedly by the US air campaign and the US performance in the Gulf War.

Chinese views on deterrence and coercion differ considerably from the Western perspective. Chinese authors associate deterrence and coercion with the concept of stratagem—the art of winning political or military contest through deception and attack on an opponent’s cognitive processes.

Beijing’s military doctrine and its impact on PLAAF’s doctrine are best reflected in the transformation of China’s approach to military strategy. However, the concept of Active Defence has guided the country’s military strategy, since its establishment in 1949. Mention of the concept, in the White Paper on Defence (2015) is a case in point.

Today the three major schools of military thought prevalent in the PLA are: People’s War School, Local War School and the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) School. However, the Chinese Aerospace industry continues to experience certain deficiencies. The relocation of key aviation factories and research institutes, established in distant inland areas during the Mao era, to the more populated areas today, has been an expensive affair. Also, the PLAAF has been unable to achieve the objective of moving from defending the country’s air space to building an air force with simultaneous offensive and defensive capabilities. A major cause of this inability is the fact that PLAAF still lacks proper equipment, training and organisational structure.

The PLAAF is transitioning its forces, from one focused on defensive counter air to one that stresses suppression of enemy air defences and offensive counter air operations. China contemplates to modernise its Air Force on the following criteria: using the newest weapons and equipment already in the inventory; acquiring and employing weapons and equipment that provide meaningful military capability and ensure a high operational utilisation rate; using new technology and materials to



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upgrade existing equipment. However, while deciding which weapons and equipment to modernise, PLAAF should focus on six combat capabilities such as: air superiority, ground attack transporting troops and supply, air borne early warning and reconnaissance, electronic counter measures and maintenance and logistics.

Importantly, China's State Council in 2006 had launched the "National Medium and Long Term Program for Science and Technology Development (2006-2020)". It called for "indigenous innovations, leapfrogging in priority fields, enabling development and leading the future".

At the Third plenary session of the 18th Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee in November 2013, decision was undertaken to implement certain reforms. These included establishing Leading Group for Deepening Defence and Military Reforms, chaired by China's President Xi Jinping. Reforms also included raising the number of Navy, Air Force and Second Artillery Force personnel, particularly "new-type combat forces" like naval aviation, cyber and Special Forces.

China has been pursuing fifth generation fighter capabilities since 2009 and is the only country in the world other than the US to have a parallel Stealth Fighter programme. The third and fourth J-20 Stealth Fighter prototypes conducted their first flights in March and July 2014, respectively, and test flights with a fifth prototype may occur by the end of 2015. The Cox Committee Report of 1999 testified the involvement of Chinese entities in covert activities and stealing of high technology blueprints from Western defence labs. One area of concern for the PLAAF is pilot training and a new recruitment procedure is being considered.

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

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