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Xinjiang Military Region: Air Assets to Monitor

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India and China de-escalation talks have made little progress. China has refused to move back troops and hold firm at some tactically critical ground points-Pangong Tso¹ has been the only point of disengagement. During the talks, India has insisted on disengagement at all the friction points, and to move back to positions that existed before the current face-off. Also, there is a need to restore peace and tranquillity all along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

Chinese People's Liberation Army's (PLA) Western Theatre Command (WTC)² covers a geographical area larger than India. WTC headquarters is in Chengdu, which is well east of India. It shares borders with India, Central Asia, Western Mongolia, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Within China, WTC jurisdiction includes many regions, with Tibet and Xinjiang being the largest, and both bordering India. For long, India mostly looked at military deployments in Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) for threat assessment. During the recent India-China showdown in Ladakh, the Xinjiang region came into focus, because Chinese occupied Aksai Chin is part of Xinjiang. Xinjiang

is also important because of significant air assets at the two major PLA Air Force (PLAAF) air bases at Hotan and Kashgar.

Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR)

Xinjiang is the largest province-level division of China, covering 1.6 million square kilometres, equivalent to the eighth largest country. The Aksai Chin and Trans-Karakoram Tract regions, both administered by China, are claimed by India. The Aksai Chin is a snowy plateau region at elevations of around 5,200 meters. Xinjiang is China's largest natural gas-producing region. Chinese feel, and are concerned that the region is under influence of radical Islam. In the last few decades, the region has seen unrest due to East Turkestan independence and separatist movement. Chinese government came down with a heavy hand, and set up internment and reeducation camps to indoctrinate local Muslim Uyghur population. Human rights agencies have accused the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of sinicization³ of Xinjiang and abuses, mistreatment, rape, and torture in these camps.

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Major Airbases in Xinjiang

There are three PLAAF airbases facing Eastern Ladakh; Kashgar, Hotan and Ngari Gunsa. The first two being in Xinjiang. Kashgar is approximately 615 km from Leh⁴ and is at an elevation of 4,529 ft / 1,380 m. H-6 bombers have been deployed at this dual-use airbase with a 3,200m long runway⁵ with near east-west orientation of 08/26, and with a concrete surface. A large number of civil flights operate from here, connecting to the provincial capital Urumqi, national Capital Beijing, Chengdu, the HQ of WTC, and to Ngari Gunza in Tibet, not too far from Galwan. The airbase has seen expansions. New large hangars have come up. These could most likely be for H-6 bombers and airborne early warning (AEW) aircraft. Also, seen are 12 hardened aircraft shelters for fighter class of aircraft. Hotan airbase,⁶ once a dual use airport, is now a dedicated PLAAF base. It is around 384 kilometres from Leh, and around 300 kilometres from Galwan. At an elevation of 4,672 ft / 1,424 m above mean sea level, it has a concrete runway with orientation 11/29. Two new runways of around 4 km length and 60 m width, have now come up south of the earlier airstrip, as seen in the satellite latest pictures.⁷ Also, visible are PLAAF deployments of AEW aircraft, and J-8 and J-11 fighters. CH-4 UAVs have also been secured in a newly built hangar. PLAAF J-20 stealth aircraft were deployed for around two days.

China Upgrades Forces along Border

With negotiations remaining stalemated, and the summer already here, there is a growing feeling that things may heat up. Minor face-offs continue to occur between the troops in the "no-patrolling zone" at Galwan Valley,⁸ though the same are being refuted by the government sources. For long military deployments and modernisation in Xinjiang were on low priority, as the thrust was in South China Sea and areas facing Taiwan and Japan. Xinjiang's borders with all other neighbours were relatively secure, with no direct threat of cross-border intrusions. The Xinjiang Military District, which now is part of the reconstituted

Western Theatre Command, has been receiving greater attention because of its close location to strategic regions like Afghanistan, where the Americans are withdrawing from. Also, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passes through the region. Due to the recent stand-off with India the PLA has upgraded by inducting new equipment, including combat vehicles.⁹ In the past Xinjiang had a much lower priority than Tibet. Xinjiang is also close to a very important geostrategic region of the world because of great power action in Afghanistan, Iran, India and Pakistan. PLA is strengthening military infrastructure and upgrading its forces. Three new weapon

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systems have been inducted.¹⁰ These are the Type 08 armoured vehicle, a 122mm-caliber self-propelled howitzer, and the PHL-03 long-range multiple

rocket launcher system with extended range. China deploys long-range rocket launchers in western theatre command as a deterrent to India.¹¹ The brigade is reportedly located 5,200m above sea level in the Xinjiang. PLA also commissioned amphibious rescue vehicle,¹² 'useful in Galwan-like terrain'. The Xinjiang Military Command has inducted new Type-15 light tanks¹³ that can manoeuvre well the plateau regions. These tanks are also deployed in Tibet, covering important points on India border. Xinjiang also got the new HQ-17A anti-aircraft air defence missile system.¹⁴ They also inducted the new ZBL-09 infantry fighting vehicle,¹⁵ which can carry anti-tank guided missiles. PLA has been actively exercising with new equipment in the region.

Xinjiang Military District Air Force

Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, was earlier the HQ for Military Region Air Force (MRAF). It now comes under Theatre Commander Air Force which comes under Western Theatre Command Air Force (TCAF).¹⁶ Formerly the 9th Air Corps, now called Urumqi command post under the Western TCAF controls air assets in Xinjiang area.¹⁷ Hetian (Hotan) Command Post¹⁸ which was created in July 1962, as part of the Lanzhou MRAF in

Xinjiang, was downgraded to a maintenance airfield station in April 1967. In 2004, it remained as the Tangshan CP as a division leader-grade organization. Urumqi Base¹⁹ is known to have one Brigade (Korla-Xinjiang) with J-11s. One Brigade (Urumqi-South) with JH-7s. Brigade (Malan/Uxxaktal) with JJ-7A. One Brigade (Changji) with J-8F, and JJ-7A. The PLAAF Air Defence component in the WTC comprises of two Air Regiments (AR) of J-11 variants of 98th AR and 111th Brigade, and one joint Regiment of Su-27SK and J-11Bs (16th AR)²⁰. These are spread over Tibet and Xinjiang.

The PLARF has 646 Brigade near Korla,²¹ south of Urumqi, in Xinjiang region. The brigade was reportedly earlier equipped with DF-21C medium-range ballistic missiles. As per sources, the brigade may have been re-equipped with the DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missile. The PLA ground units are accompanied by command-and-control and reconnaissance vehicles, as well as medium-altitude drones in the air. The PLA's 84th Army Aviation Brigade based much north at Wujiagu, near Urumqi. They are equipped with the latest helicopters Z-20, and several Z-8G and Z-10 attack helicopters. Z-20 has been specially designed for high altitude operations. They can thus be best deployed against India in the Himalayan regions of Xinjiang and Tibet.

Main PLAAF Aircraft and Mission Generation

Indian Air Force (IAF) would primarily have to contend with four types of PLAAF fighter/bomber aircraft which have been seen to operate from Hotan and Kashgar. These are J-10, J-11, J-20 and H6K bombers. The Chengdu J-10 "Vigorous Dragon" is a single-engine, lightweight multirole fighter, mainly designed for air-to-air combat, but may also perform strike missions. China has around 450 of these. It was initially powered by Russian Lyulka-Saturn AL-31FN, but now is known to have Chinese WS-10 on J-10C variant.²² The aircraft has 11 external hard-points, and can carry 6,000 kg (Mirage 2000, 6,300 kg) of stores. Air-to-air missiles (AAM) include short-range PL-8 and PL-10, and

medium-range PL-12 and PL-15. It can carry precision guided munitions, and anti-ship and anti-radiation missiles. The aircraft has a combat range of around 900 kilometres. The J-10 was first offered to Pakistan in 2006. More recently, in September 2020, Pakistan was reportedly interested in the J-10CE.²³

The Shenyang J-11 is a Chinese copy of Russian twin-engine Sukhoi Su-27. China has around 440 of these. The J-11B as powered by the WS-10 in 2014. The aircraft has typical Russian avionics and weapons, and in most counts, including manoeuvrability, it is inferior to Su-30 MKI. In 2019, China revealed the J-11D "4++ generation" variant, which it claimed will surpass Russia's Su-35.²⁴

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China's indigenous, stealth, fifth-generation fighter, the Chengdu J-20 "Mighty Dragon" is an air superiority fighter with precision strike capability. Having first flown on 11

January 2011, the J-20 officially entered service in September 2017, and PLAAF today has over 50 aircraft. After the American F-22 and F-35, the J-20 is the world's third operational fifth-generation stealth fighter aircraft. It carries the PL-15 and PL-21 BVR long range AAMs. There continues to be doubts about its stealth capability.²⁵

The Xian H-6 is a licence-built version of the Soviet Tupolev Tu-16 twin-engine jet bomber. The newer variants have been heavily redesigned and capable of aerial refuelling and carrying air-launched cruise missiles. There are dedicated electronic warfare variants also. Aircraft has a combat range of 1,800 kilometres, and can carry six anti-surface or anti-shipping cruise missiles. China has built over 230 of these. The H-6 will continue to be the work-horse bomber of PLAAF well into the 2030s. Even though China is developing its first stealth bomber, the H-20, which is likely to induct around 2025, the H-6 will continue to remain a core PLAAF bomber.²⁶

Based on the known infrastructure, and distance from the area of action, Kashgar is likely to have the heavier aircraft like the H-6K bombers, the electronic warfare aircraft, and the AEW&C.

Essentially around one squadron of fighters can be based there. Hotan would be able to host two squadrons plus. With its larger number of runways, this will be the main base for PLAAF operations. Neutralising this base would severely dent the PLAAF operations. Both Kashgar and Hotan at somewhat similar altitude of around 4,500 feet. Comparatively Indian airfields in the Kashmir valley are at 5,300 feet elevation. At these altitudes there is a certain amount payload penalty. China has significant deployment of, and will use surface to surface rocket and missile attack. They will also use the air launched cruise missiles.

Options for India

The IAF has nearly 10 airbases within 350 kilometres of the area of action. Barring Leh and Thoise, which are at around 10,000 feet elevation like Ngari Gunza in Tibet, and the airbases in Kashmir valley at around 5,000 feet, remaining IAF bases are at altitudes below 2,000 feet. This will give IAF a clear advantage. IAF will be able to field much larger number of missions. IAF will use comparable aircraft of Rafale, SU-30 MKI, Mirage -2000 and MiG 29 class, among many others. It will be very important for IAF to neutralise Hotan and Kashgar airfields quickly. Also, there will be a need to defend IAF airbases from Chinese missile attacks. Overall, the IAF would be better placed in case of a localised attack.

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