



CHINA'S MILITARY MODERNISATION AND PLAAF CAPABILITIES AGAINST INDIA

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China's rapid economic growth has also led to rapid modernization of China's military. Quoting from the Pentagon report of June 2014 on China, the speaker argued that China's strong military force poses continuous threat to China's neighbours. China's increasing assertiveness in the East China Sea and South China Sea, has made a grave situation for the countries of this region including India as there is a fear of China being aggressively assert its territorial claims. Although the main focus of China's military modernization was seen to be directed towards Taiwan and to its geopolitical competitor USA, yet one cannot deny the challenge Chinese military modernization poses to India. China's repeated border incursions and supply of missile and nuclear weapons technology to Pakistan, a known adversary to India can be a clear indicative of China's threat against India. However, after analysing China's military modernization process, the speaker argued the Chinese air force will have limitations in launching air operations against India. The discussion also focused on the issue of whether India can counter attack China, if any future war takes place between India and China.

The discussion covered four important issues which are China's Defence Budget, Military modernisation (PLA Army, PLAN and PLAAF), Chinese Conventional Ballistic & Cruise Missile Threat, and Analysis of PLAAF limitations against India.

Since 2000, China's defence budget is rising continuously. In 2014 China's defence budget was \$132 billion. China's budget is almost 3 times that of India. China has been investing a substantial amount for the modernization of Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA). It has introduced

new air defence equipment which includes surface to air missiles (SAM) HQ-15 – (a copy of the Russian TOR M-1 SA-15 and the indigenous HQ-16 medium range missile (with a range of 40 km at low level). PLA forces have inducted new attack helicopters, the Z-10 and Z-19. With its modern military equipment China has the capability to mobilise almost 26 divisions against India. However, the speaker argued that we cannot underestimate Indian Air Force, India with its firepower with new ultra-light howitzers, Brahmos and Prahar missiles can always compete with PLA.

The discussion proceeds to discuss about Peoples' Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). PLAN's first aircraft carrier was Liaoning. China's J-15 fighters (Chinese version of Russian SU-33) have carried trials out at sea from the Liaoning. China has also launched a new aircraft J-16, for carrier operations. China is planning to build more indigenous aircraft carriers in the next 5 to 10 years period. PLAN is also expanding its submarine force. However, the speaker explained that PLAN does not pose a major threat to India at present. In fact, India has advantage in Indian Ocean region as India can use its naval and air power from bases in Andaman & Nicobar Islands.

The main focal point of the presentation was Peoples' Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF). China's air force has improved significantly in the last ten years. Although the combat aircraft strength has decreased from 3520 in 2000 to 1693 in 2012, China's fourth generation aircrafts has increased significantly. PLAAF has multirole fighter strength of 513 aircraft of SU-27/SU-30/J-10/J-11 class. By 2020 PLAAF can be expected to have about 1000 4th/ 5th generation fighters. If we compare Indian Air force with PLAAF, we can see IAF has strength of 384 SU-30/Mig-29/Mirage-2000/ Mig-21 Bison aircraft which have the capability to launch beyond visual range (BVR) air to air missiles. SU-30MKI of the IAF is superior to the Chinese SU-30MKK.

China's air force is well equipped with Stealth Fighters (S-8). J-20 and J-31 are the two high profile stealth projects of PLAAF. The IAF also have the Fifth Generation Fighter Aircraft (FGFA) which is jointly being developed by Russia and India is planned for induction in 2022. In the last ten years China has established a vigorous air defence system with nationwide integrated air defence system (IADS), large inventory of advanced long range S-300 SAMs, new indigenous AWACS KJ-2000 and AEW KJ-200. IAF will have to invest heavily in advanced SEAD/DEAD systems to penetrate PLAAF's air defence system. Along with IADS PLAAF also

possess H-6K bombers. Which carries Chinese air launched cruise missiles YJ-63, range 200km. The H-6K entered service in June 2013. Since the last decades PLAAF became highly organised and eloquent with some major doctrinal changes. In 2004 the Central military commission issued new doctrinal guidelines for PLAAF titled “Integrated Air and space Operations, Simultaneous Offensive and Defensive Operations.” It is clear that PLAAF has shifted from being mainly a territorial air defence force to one with equal emphasis on offensive strikes and defensive missions. China has a large ballistic and cruise missile force and China’s Second Artillery Force (SAF) is responsible for it. China has 85–95 medium range missiles with DF-21C system, the estimated range for which is 1750 km plus. It also has Short Range ballistic Missiles with the strength of 700-900 and the estimated range for the same is 300 km. China also own Ground launched cruise missile with a system of DH-10 and the strength for the same is 200 – 500. It also has Air Launched Cruise Missile YJ-63. Ballistic and cruise missiles will be a major threat to the IAF. The best defensive strategy against China’s missiles is to deter them by developing similar capabilities so that India can strike counterforce targets in China. Meanwhile we need to develop passive means to absorb the attack. Modern means of runway repair material in the form of aluminium mats need to be explored to keep the runway down time to minutes instead of hours. Another passive method is to have modern hardened aircraft shelters (HAS) to park fighter aircraft safely.

The last section of the presentation dealt with the possibilities of PLAAF vulnerabilities against India. China has two military regions opposite India, Lanzhou and Chengdu. Lanzhou covers Xinjiang region opposite Ladakh and Chengdu covers Tibet region opposite Eastern India.

China has a large number of airfields but most of them are far away from our border. They have very few military airfields in Tibet and South Xinjiang. The airfields in Tibet are mostly at height of more than 3000 m. At these high altitudes aircraft operations suffer from payload penalties due to the reduced density of air. This will be a limitation for PLAAF considering that their tanker fleet is also limited.

The main military airfields in Tibet are Kongka Dzong, south of Lhasa, and Hoping, east of Lhasa. In Xinjiang the military airfield is Hotan and Kashgar is a civil airfield. Gargunsa, Pangta and Linzhi are mainly civil airfields. The speaker noted that infrastructure of PLAAF at present

does not have adequate facilities at their airbases in Tibet, and China's airfields in Western Tibet are located for administrative reasons and not for sustained air operations.

The speaker pointed out some loopholes in China's military modernization process. China's defence industry has made great strides in making advanced weapons for the PLA. The main weak areas are aerial refuelling and high performance aero engines. But, they are being addressed incrementally. India needs to invest in R&D and improve our defence production capabilities.

Finally, the speaker commented that although China's military modernisation may pose a serious security threat to India, India need not to worry about it. In any future conflict with China, air power will play a dominant role but with the present state of airfield infrastructure in Tibet, it does not appear that PLAAF has the capability to achieve air superiority against IAF.

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