

PLA Air Force and Its Efforts At Strategic Transformation

Si-Fu Ou
Research Fellow

Division of Chinese Politics, Military and Warfighting Concepts

Just ahead of its 72nd anniversary on November 11, 2021, the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) released a promotional video titled “Above the Sky” on November 9 to boast about the B-6K bomber patrolling around Taiwan. The next day, it announced news of the full combat-ready training of the latest WZ-7 UAV to demonstrate its ambition to build a world-class air force.¹

Three-step Strategic Transformation

The PLA Air Force said on August 31 that it has historically crossed the

threshold into becoming a strategic air force. It accelerated its transformation in accordance with the strategic objectives of consolidating air/space and offense/defense operations with deployments and upgrades of J-20, Y-20, domestically built ground-to-air missiles, strategic early warning, airstrike, air defense and anti-missile, information warfare, airborne operations, strategic projection, and all-aspect security capabilities to effectively fulfill the mission needs of the new era.²

According to the three-step goals announced by the PLA Air Force, becoming a strategic air power is just the first step. The next step will be building

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1. “WZ-7, J -16D and Other New Domestically Produced Air Force Aircraft Entered Combat Training,” *China Military Network*, November 11, 2021. http://www.81.cn/big5/kj/2021-11/11/content_10106802.htm.
 2. “China's Air Force to Show Strategic Transformation Achievements at Airshow China as the 81-Red Eagles Play Sky Ballet,” August 31, 2021,” *Xinhua*, August 31, 2021. http://www.news.cn/mil/2021-08/31/c_1211352116.htm

a new air force system and significantly elevating its strategic capabilities. In the near future, the PLAAF will update its theory foundation, organization, personnel and weaponry to complete the transformation, evolving into a modernized strategic air force with high-level operational capabilities by 2035. The third step is to build a world-class strategic air force by the middle of this century to become a powerful aerospace military branch with the strength to support China as a great country and its national revival.³

Series of “branded” combat training

Due to its more realistic combat training, the PLA Air Force has built up capabilities of patrolling the East China Sea, the South China Sea, the western Pacific, as well as circumnavigation of islands. In recent years, it has organized

the Red Sword (system contest), Blue Shield (air defense and anti-missile), Golden Helmet (free air combat), Golden Dart (surprise attack and penetration), and Thunderbolt (electronic warfare) series of exercises that are very similar to the real situations. The Golden Helmet drill, for example, has led to an overall improvement of fighter pilots’ aerial combat skills.

The abovementioned training titles cover core combat capabilities, including air superiority, ground strike, air defense, electronic warfare and more; the Red Sword is a systematic exercise that amalgamates all these capabilities. In addition, the PLAAF also holds joint drills and training with foreign forces frequently, such as Shaheen (Eagle) with Pakistan, the Falcon Strike with Thailand and conducting joint strategic air/maritime cruises with Russia. These exercises allow the PLAAF to stay on par with the world in terms of both combat and training concepts.⁴

3. “Good News Announced in the 72nd Anniversary of PLA Air Force,” *Xinhua News*, Nov. 11, 2021. http://www.news.cn/mil/2021-11/11/c_1211441686.htm.

4. Ditto to the previous note.

WZ-7 UAV enters combat training

The WZ-7 has been blended into the current combat training system. In a multi-aircraft exercise, the WZ-7 took off and took advantage of its high-altitude, long-range capability to quickly plan for its reconnaissance positions and set the optimum mission course to take a full grasp of the battlefield situation and acquire the target status.

Later the WZ-7 uploaded the acquired information to the command post to provide supports for the airborne fighters to launch penetrative surprise attacks. Previously known as Xianglong, the WZ-7 is an advanced high-altitude, long-range UAV developed by Chengdu Aircraft Group. Similar to the US Air Force's RQ-4 Global Hawk, the WZ-7 is capable of performing continuous high-altitude surveillance, monitoring and intelligence gathering missions. With a size slightly smaller than RQ-4, the WZ-7 has a take-off weight of 7,500kg, cruising

speed of 700km/h, 10 hours of loitering time at the 20,000m altitude and a combat radius of 2,500 km.⁵ It's been reported that a WZ-7 had intruded into Taiwan's southwest ADIZ on March 15, 2021, which is the first time that China has sent a reconnaissance aircraft of this type to Taiwan, but Taiwan's Air Force Command is unwilling to confirm whether the WZ-7 has disturbed Taiwan.⁶

The PLA Air Force is attempting its transformation into a first-class strategic air force. In addition to the commissioning of the latest combat planes such as the J-20 and Yun-20, new UAVs are also joining the combat training to enhance China's denial capability in the island chain. These increasing threats are all noteworthy to Taiwan's defense observers.

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5. "Xianglong Becomes WZ-7, the Air Force's New Eyes in the Sky," *Takungpao News*, December 28, 2020. <http://www.takungpao.com/news/232108/2020/1228/536167.html>.

6. "PLA Sent WZ-7 UAV to Disturb Taiwan for the First Time," *Apple Daily*, March 16, 2021. <https://tw.appledaily.com/headline/20210316/GEPRKOIYSFGTNIF73URMKPZEXM>.