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Chinese Air Force's Long-Distance Training over Water Continues to Increase and Expand

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In November and December 2017, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force* conducted at least nine long-distance training flights over maritime areas along China's periphery, continuing a trend that began in 2015.¹ Since 2015, long-distance over-water training has become more frequent, featured a greater variety of aircraft, and extended into areas in which the air force had not previously operated.² The long-distance over-water training is part of a broader PLA Air Force effort to transition from a service focused on territorial air defense to one capable of conducting offensive and defensive operations beyond China's coast.³ This training likewise reflects senior Chinese military leaders' emphasis on the importance of maritime operations for the PLA Air Force.⁴ Mark R. Cozad and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga of the RAND Corporation write that "overwhelmingly, China's leaders recognize that the nation's interests—along with the major threats to them—reside in the maritime domain."⁵

These training activities serve various purposes, many of which impact U.S. interests: (1) improving the PLA Air Force's capability to execute maritime missions in contingencies involving countries along China's maritime periphery—many of which are U.S. allies and partners—and the United States; (2) gathering intelligence against the militaries of neighboring countries and other foreign militaries operating along China's maritime periphery; and (3) reinforcing Beijing's claims over portions of the East and South China seas and pressuring Taiwan.

An Uptick in Training Flights

The PLA Air Force began increasing long-distance over-water training in 2015, conducting six flights that year.⁶ In March 2015, PLA Air Force aircraft flew over the Bashi Channel (between Taiwan and the Philippines) to the Western Pacific for the first time.⁷ It was also the first time the PLA Air Force had flown past the first island chain.[†] That year, the PLA Air Force crossed the first island chain three more times (including flying for the first time over the Miyako Strait, which is between the southwestern Japanese islands of Miyako and Okinawa), flew to the East

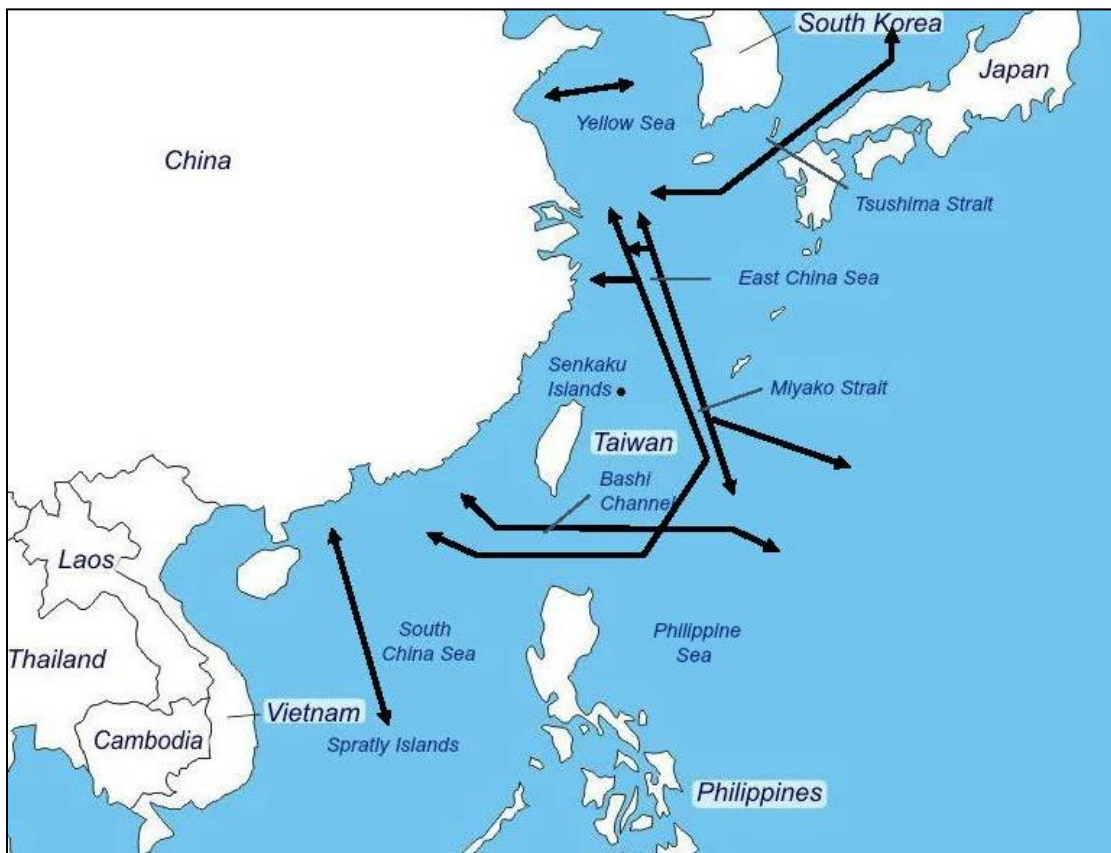
* While this issue brief does discuss Chinese naval aviation, it is primarily focused on Chinese air force long-distance training over water.

† The first island chain refers to a line of islands running through the Kurile Islands, Japan and the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, the Philippines, Borneo, and Natuna Besar. The second island chain is farther east, running through the Kurile Islands, Japan, the Bonin Islands, the Mariana Islands, and the Caroline Islands. Bernard D. Cole, *The Great Wall at Sea: China's Navy in the Twenty-First Century*, Naval Institute Press, 2010, 166.

China Sea to conduct a “distant sea patrol” of China’s air defense identification zone (ADIZ),* and flew an additional long-distance over-water training mission to an unspecified location.⁸

The number of flights increased in each of the subsequent two years.⁹ The paths of these PLA Air Force training flights have also expanded to include the South China Sea and, most recently, the Yellow Sea, the Tsushima Strait, and the Sea of Japan in December 2017.¹⁰ Another new flight path was established in November 2016 when PLA Air Force aircraft flew around Taiwan—first flying south of Taiwan over the Bashi Channel, then flying north, and returning to China over the Miyako Strait to the northeast of Taiwan.¹¹ Since then, flights following this path or its reverse have become a regular occurrence.¹²

Figure 1: PLA Air Force and Navy Long-Distance Training Flights over Water



Source: Adapted from D-maps.com. http://www.d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=78&lang=en and Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense, *2017 National Defense Report*, December 26, 2017, 38. Translation. goo.gl/mZURKW. With additional information from Xinhua, “Chinese Aircraft Conduct Drills in Yellow Sea, East China Sea,” December 4, 2017. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/04/c_136800352.htm; CCTV-7, “Military Report,” Television, November 20, 2017. Translation. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oszcUuNYY30>; Xinhua, “Chinese Military Aircraft Patrol South China Sea,” August 6, 2016. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-08/06/c_135570247.htm; Peter Wood, “Chinese Military Aviation in the East China Sea,” *China Brief*, October 26, 2016. <https://jamestown.org/program/chinese-military-aviation-east-china-sea/>.

* An ADIZ is a publicly declared area, established in international airspace adjacent to a state’s national airspace, in which the state requires that civil aircraft provide aircraft identifiers and location. Its purpose is to allow a state the time and space to identify the nature of approaching aircraft before those aircraft enter national airspace in order to prepare defensive measures if necessary. China established an ADIZ in the East China Sea in November 2013. An ADIZ does not have any legal bearing on sovereignty claims. Michael Pilger, “ADIZ Update: Enforcement in the East China Sea, Prospects for the South China Sea, and Implications for the United States,” *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, March 2, 2016. https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/ADIZ%20Update_0.pdf.

H-6K bombers have participated in the majority of the flights.¹³ The first two long-distance PLA Air Force flights over water in 2015 were conducted by H-6K bombers alone.¹⁴ However, most of the subsequent flights included other aircraft types, such as electronic warfare aircraft, electronic intelligence aircraft, early warning and control aircraft, fighters, and tankers.¹⁵

PLA Naval Aviation Long-Distance Training over Water

During this period of increasing PLA Air Force long-distance training over water (from 2015 to the present), the PLA Navy's Naval Aviation Branch also has been training along China's maritime periphery in most of the same areas as the PLA Air Force. PLA Naval Aviation training flights have included bombers, electronic warfare aircraft, intelligence gathering aircraft, early warning and control aircraft, and fighters.¹⁶

Although Commission research has not found evidence of PLA Air Force and PLA Naval Aviation integrated joint operations training,^{*} it does appear air force aircraft have conducted training with PLA Navy surface combatants.¹⁷

China's Objectives and Implications for the United States, Allies, and Partners

The PLA Air Force is conducting long-distance over-water training to prepare the PLA Air Force for combat missions in support of Taiwan Strait, East China Sea, and South China Sea contingencies. These training flights have simulated or included long-range precision strike, maritime strike, reconnaissance, early warning, and aerial refueling.¹⁸ This type of activity would be consistent with training to increase China's capability to strike an adversary's forces—including U.S. bases in the Asia Pacific and U.S. ships approaching China—farther from mainland China during a contingency operation.

Another objective of PLA Air Force long-distance over-water training is to collect intelligence on the militaries of neighboring countries and other foreign militaries operating along China's maritime periphery, almost certainly including air defense systems.¹⁹ Many of the flights have involved intelligence gathering or electronic warfare aircraft and have occurred near Taiwan and Japan.²⁰ An unnamed senior Taiwan Air Force official told Taiwan's Central News Agency that during these training flights the PLA is collecting intelligence on the parameters of the weapons of neighboring countries.²¹ In addition, Alexander Huang, assistant professor at Tamkang University's Graduate Institute of International Affairs and Strategic Studies, told the *Asahi Shimbun* that these training flights allow China to gauge "the reaction of the Taiwanese air force's aircraft and radar."²²

Beijing also uses these training flights to reinforce its territorial claims in the East and South China seas. Several of the flights have included patrols of China's East China Sea ADIZ, which includes the airspace over the Senkaku Islands.[†]²³ Japan claims and administers the islands, but China also claims them as Chinese territory. In 2016, the PLA Air Force also conducted several long-distance training flights in the South China Sea following the release

^{*} PLA Air Force and PLA Navy aircraft have conducted training in which they played the role of opposing forces. Mark R. Cozad and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "People's Liberation Army Air Force Operations over Water: Maintaining Relevance in China's Changing Security Environment," *RAND Corporation*, 2017, 52; Zhang Heng, "Navy-Air Force Aviation Branch Joint Training Deepens. 'Back-to-Back' Confrontation between Different Types of Aircraft Takes Place," *PLA Daily*, September 20, 2015. Translation. http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2015-09/20/c_128248675.htm.

[†] The Senkaku Islands are known as the Diaoyu in China.

by the intergovernmental Permanent Court of Arbitration of the ruling on a case on China's claims and activities there.*²⁴

Furthermore, some of these flights are part of a multi-faceted pressure campaign against Taiwan that Beijing began following Taiwan's election of President Tsai Ing-wen in January 2016.²⁵ Despite President Tsai's cross-strait policy of "maintaining the status quo," demonstrations of goodwill toward Beijing, and efforts to reassure her counterparts across the Taiwan Strait, Beijing has been displeased that she has not explicitly endorsed the "One China" framework[†] for cross-strait relations that Taipei and Beijing endorsed during the administration of her predecessor, Ma Ying-jeou.²⁶ The airspace around Taiwan appears to be an area of increased focus for Beijing's pressure campaign. In addition to the recent training flights, in January 2018 Beijing expanded a commercial air route over the Taiwan Strait and opened three extension routes without consulting with Taipei.[‡]²⁷

To further increase pressure on Taiwan, the PLA Air Force's training flights may expand to include aircraft crossing the center line of the Taiwan Strait—an informal demarcation dating to the 1950s that divides the strait into two sides that PLA and Taiwan military aircraft have largely refrained from crossing.²⁸ In addition, given the history of close encounters between military aircraft from China and other countries, the increase in PLA Air Force long-distance training along China's maritime periphery could raise the risk of an accident if Chinese pilots conducting the training react negatively to the monitoring or interception of their aircraft.²⁹

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* An arbitral tribunal ruled that China's claims to historic rights within the nine-dash line encompassing about 90 percent of the South China Sea it uses to delineate its claims have no legal basis. It also ruled that none of the Spratly Islands, all of which China claims, are an island capable of generating an exclusive economic zone. An exclusive economic zone is a 200 nautical mile zone extending from a country's coastline within which that country can exercise exclusive sovereign rights to explore for and exploit natural resources, but not full sovereignty. Caitlin Campbell and Nargiza Salidjanova, "South China Sea Arbitration Ruling: What Happened and What's Next?" *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, July 12, 2016. goo.gl/xNryW9; PCA Case No. 2013-19 in the Matter of the South China Sea Arbitration before an Arbitral Tribunal Constituted under Annex VII to the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea between the Republic of the Philippines and the People's Republic of China, Award, July 12, 2016, 117, 260. goo.gl/HLgwFM; David Lague, "Analysis: China's Nine-Dash Line in the South China Sea," *Reuters*, May 25, 2012. goo.gl/d5v8rd; UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, "Article 121: Regime of Islands;" UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, "Part 5: Exclusive Economic Zone."

[†] Beijing claims sovereignty over Taiwan and exerts great effort to promote unification between Taiwan and China. Beijing insists that cross-strait communication and talks be based on the "1992 Consensus," a tacit understanding reached at a meeting between representatives of Taiwan and China in 1992 that there is only "one China" and that effectively allowed each side to maintain its own interpretation of the meaning of "one China."

[‡] On January 4, 2018, China's Civil Aviation Administration announced the activation of the northbound path of the M503 route and three extension routes. Commercial airliners began using the northbound path of M503 and two of the three extension routes the same day. In 2015, Beijing also attempted to open M503 and the extension routes unilaterally, but later engaged in negotiations with Taipei and agreed to only allow southbound flights on M503. Taiwan's Civil Aeronautics Administration, "0105 Civil Aeronautics Administration Press Conference," January 5, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GNJwzuvY_3c; J. Michael Cole, "Analysis: China's New Air Routes near Taiwan: Why Now? To What End?" *Taiwan Sentinel*, January 11, 2018. <https://sentinel.tw/analysis-china-new-air-routes-tw/>.

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