



NATO Foundation
Defense College

CHINA October 2018

China boasts new advanced strike aircrafts

China's official state-run television channel has confirmed the designation of the country's newest long-range strategic bomber, with analysts suggesting that it is expected to make its first flight soon. In parallel the J-20 has achieved operational air-to-air refuelling. Both trends indicate the actual expansion of the combat radius of the most advanced Chinese fighter and the development of strategic stealth bombing capabilities in the near future, with obvious implications in terms of nuclear deterrence (the PRC could have a more credible triad) and of attack against the network of US bases and carrier battle groups in the Indo-Pac.

A documentary shown on China Central Television (CCTV) has referred to the "Hong-20" as the "*new long-range strategic bomber*" under development for the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) and added that great progress is being made on its development, although it did not provide other details. "Hong" is the standard abbreviation for the term "Hongzhaji," or bomber in Chinese, although this is usually shortened to just the "H" in Western literature.

The new bomber is being developed by the Xi'an Aircraft Company and is expected to be a stealthy flying-wing design with an internal weapons bay and nested engines within its body to enhance low observability.

The bomber is expected to complement the nuclear strike capable Xian H-6K in Chinese service. A development of the Soviet-era Tupolev Tu-16 Badger (retired from service in the Russian Air Force in 1993 and dating to the Fifties), the H-6K features more powerful engines and a totally revised, modern avionics suite. It is also capable of launching cruise missiles, a typical weapon upgrade for an aged platform.

Another important innovation, also shown on CCTV, is China's new J-20 fighter jet, which is now capable of air-refuelling for long range missions. Chinese military experts believe that it can now rival US top fighter jets, like the F-22 Raptor and F-35 Lightning II.

The Chinese warplane was developed by the Chengdu Aerospace corporation, which began testing them in 2011 before the first planes entered service in March 2017. The F-22 Raptor was developed by Lockheed Martin for the exclusive use of the US Air Force and it entered service in December 2005. Both single-seat fighters similar capabilities although the J-20 has a longer combat radius (1.100 vs. 800 km of the F-22). The USAF is planning to upgrade the fighter in future but for now it remains, along with the Chinese J20, one of the most advanced fifth generation fighters in the world.

The F-22 production was axed in 2011 because of its high cost – US \$62 billion for the whole project, which equates to approximately US \$339 million per aircraft. The J-20's research and development cost was estimated to be more than 30 billion yuan (US \$4,4 billion), with a cost per aircraft of US \$100-110 million.

Elenoire Laudieri Di Biase – *Sinologist and Chief Analyst on Chinese Affairs at Nato Defense College Foundation. Foreign affairs writer for international magazines and publications.*