

China's Air Force is Implementing an Advanced Integrated Strike and Air-Denial System

Over the next 12 to 24 months, China will transition from delivering individual modernization programs to fielding the early stages of a networked strike and air denial system across the Western Pacific. We have high confidence that the combined effect of a sixth-generation fighter, long-range missiles, and stealth combat drones will compress warning time for regional air defenders, threaten the support aircraft that enable extended air operations, and place fixed regional bases under high risk during any crisis.

We assess with high confidence that Beijing will move the Chengdu J-36 from flight testing into limited operational service before the end of 2027, paired with stealth wingmen acting as scouts and shooters, narrowing the qualitative edge that has supported allied air superiority assumptions in the region faster than any sixth-generation program currently tracked in open sources.

- According to 19FortyFive (January 2026), four distinct J-36 prototypes have flown since the program's December 2024 debut, an unusually rapid prototype turnover that indicates an accelerated test cadence rather than a single demonstrator effort.
- A December 2025 U.S. Department of War assessment cited by Army Recognition placed both the J-36 and the Shenyang J-50 in active flight testing progressing simultaneously.
- Satellite imagery analyzed by The War Zone in November 2025 placed both prototypes at a remote test airfield near Lop Nur, indicating the program has moved past initial demonstration into sustained operational evaluation.

The PL-17 long range air-to-air missile is changing which aircraft can be safely operated near contested airspace. Available evidence indicates that the missile, paired with airborne radar cueing, directly threatens the tankers, airborne early warning aircraft, and command jets that enable extended air operations, compressing reaction times and forcing those platforms to orbit at greater distances from any line of contact than current doctrine assumes.

- According to RUSI analysis combined with close-up imagery published by analyst Andreas Rupprecht in January 2026, the PL-17 measures roughly 6m long with a range exceeding 400km, well outside the engagement envelope of current allied air-to-air missiles.
- A J-16 carrying the PL-17 has a combat radius nearly double that of the F-22 or F-35, allowing the launching aircraft to engage from outside typical fighter response range (Military Watch, January 2026).
- According to Geopolitical Monitor (March 2026), KJ-500 radar aircraft and J-20 fighters operating as forward spotters cue the PL-17, leaving targeted crews seconds rather than minutes to react and degrading the early-warning advantage that warfighters rely on.

Hypersonic air launched ballistic missiles, paired with the existing H-6 bomber fleet, place fixed regional bases under eminent threat. We judge with high confidence that the bomber force can now deliver hypersonic weapons from launch positions inside Chinese air defenses, while the PLA Rocket Force fields enough ground-launched hypersonic missiles to saturate single layer defenses, raising the risk of operating concentrated runways across the Western Pacific.

- According to Defense Security Asia (late 2025), China operates roughly 120 H-6K and H-6N bombers, each capable of carrying up to four KD-21 hypersonic missiles, generating a potential single-regiment salvo of 72 weapons against fixed targets.
- The Aviationist reported that during the April 2025 Strait Thunder exercise, an H-6K from the 10th Bomber Division was photographed carrying two operational KD-21s, the first confirmation that the missile is in frontline service rather than test inventory.
- Pentagon assessments cited in Defense Watch (November 2025) report that the PLA Rocket Force fields more than 250 launchers and 500 DF-26 missiles at 4,000-kilometer range, with the longer-range hypersonic DF-27 now entering service, multiplying the directions from which a single base can be threatened.

China's stealth combat drone program is allowing the PLAAF to scale combat mass without expanding its trained pilot pool. Recent trends indicate that the GJ-11, paired with crewed J-20 and J-16D fighters in a manned/unmanned teaming configuration, gives Beijing a way to add survivable strike and electronic warfare nodes faster than pilot training pipelines could otherwise sustain, easing a long-standing PLAAF constraint on force employment.

- According to Defense Security Asia, Chinese state media footage from November 2025 showed the GJ-11 flying in formation with a J-20 fighter and a J-16D electronic warfare jet, the first Chinese demonstration of crewed/uncrewed teaming in formation.
- Army Recognition and the South China Morning Post reported that a GJ-11 with visible folding wing hinges led an unmanned formation at the September 2025 Beijing Victory Day parade, indicating adaptation for the Type 076 amphibious assault ship and the Fujian carrier and extending unmanned mass beyond land based operations.
- RAND Corp. (August 2025) and Asia Times reporting (November 2025) indicate that PLA researchers have simulated missions in which a single J-20 or J-16 leads up to 16 drones to jam, strike, or scout enemy air defenses, suggesting both tactics and hardware are maturing.

The largest exercises in PLAAF history are the clearest indicator that these systems are being integrated into a combat network rather than fielded in isolation. We have high confidence that recent exercises move the PLAAF past the platform-delivery phase and into the integration problem of fighters, drones, bombers, and airborne radar operating together under realistic conditions, the step that turns individual capabilities into a connected air denial system.

- According to commercial satellite imagery analyzed by Navy intelligence and reported by Air & Space Forces Magazine (February 2026), the late 2025 Red Sword exercise was the largest in PLAAF history, lasting 5 weeks across 8 bases, involving roughly 200 aircraft.
- Dahm's analysis identified J-10, J-16, and J-20 fighters operating from the same airfields during Red Sword, indicating the PLAAF is developing tactics to combine 4th and 5th gen aircraft inside a single engagement rather than employing them in separate formations.
- According to Global Taiwan Institute and Jamestown Foundation reporting, the April 2025 Strait Thunder exercise rehearsed isolating Taiwan through dual layer chokepoint control, the first time the PLA practiced both blockade enforcement and live fire precision strikes in one operation.

The H-20 stealth bomber program is best read as an indicator of where Chinese air power is heading after this assessment window, not as a near-term operational capability. We have moderate confidence that the H-20 will not enter PLAAF service before 2028 but will move close enough to a public reveal during the assessment window to signal that Beijing intends to extend its reach from regional to intercontinental strike, framing planning assumptions for the period beyond 2027.

- According to 19FortyFive (January 2026), recent imagery of the H-20 shows two internal weapons bays and stealth features more advanced than the December 2024 Pentagon assessment projected.
- Lieutenant General Wang Wei, Deputy Commander of the PLAAF, stated in March 2024 that the H-20 is "almost here" and will move quickly to mass production after test flights, although no flight has been officially confirmed.
- U.S. Air Force Global Strike Command General Stephen Davis told 19FortyFive in March 2026 that the PLAAF is pursuing the H-20 aggressively but has not yet fielded it while U.S. intelligence projects service entry in the 2030s.

The combination of Chinese air force developments exercised under realistic conditions, almost certainly raises the difficulty of sustaining early warning systems within their traditional ranges, holding fixed forward bases under credible threat from multiple axes, and preserving the warning time that regional defenders have historically built their decision cycles around.

- Taiwan is likely to face a more contested close-in air environment in any crisis scenario, while Japan, the Philippines, and Australia will likely face higher risk approaches to forward operating bases.
- The shift is not driven by any single platform but by the integration of programs that were once tracked as separate modernization efforts, a trajectory that even partial maturation across the next 12 to 24 months will reinforce.