



China's Air Force Wraps Up Large Force Exercise—Very Likely “Red Sword 2020”

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Starting in June 2020, the Chinese People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) likely held a large force exercise in and around the Gobi Desert area in northwest China. This exercise involved multiple branches of the PLAAF, including PLAAF aviation, mobile radar, and surface-to-air missile (SAM) units. Based on our understanding of observable activities associated with various PLAAF exercises, this event very likely was the PLAAF's “Red Sword 2020” (红剑-2020) exercise which probably started in mid-June and ended sometime in early August.

PLA media sources reported in July and August 2020, that at least one Southern Theater Command Air Force (STCAF) mobile radar unit recently maneuvered from southern China to the Gobi Desert for military exercise.¹ This unit transported its equipment and travelled thousands of kilometers by rail and road.² It took the unit several days before they reached the pre-determined location in the Gobi Desert for military exercise.³ Separate PLA media reporting indicates that a STCAF SAM unit also maneuvered for thousands of kilometers by rail and road, eventually arriving at the Gobi Desert to carry out a “real combat” exercise.⁴



(A STCAF mobile radar unit is seen arriving at Gobi Desert for exercise⁵)



(A STCAF SAM unit is seen conducting exercise in Gobi Desert⁶)

Official sources also reported field training activities by STCAF aviation units likely in Yinchuan Xincheng Air Base (38.482222, 106.008333, Ningxia) and Dingxin Shuangchengzi Air Base (40.402006, 99.785576, Gansu), both located near the Gobi Desert.⁷ Satellite imagery shows a large number of large aircraft (likely bombers and special mission aircraft) and small aircraft (likely various types of tactical aircraft) parked at Yinchuan Air Base between mid-June and August. Additional reporting in August confirms that a Central Theater Command Air Force (CTCAF) H-6K bomber unit conducted exercise there sometime in the summer.⁸ Compared to baseline aircraft activity at Yinchuan, this large number of aircraft indicates that unusual activity is occurring that is consistent with large force exercises.⁹ Satellite imagery also show a significant increase in the number of aircraft parked at the Dingxin Air Base during the same period.¹⁰



(A STCAF aviation unit is seen conducting exercise in Dingxin airfield¹¹)



(A CTCAF H-6K bomber unit is seen conducting exercise in Yinchuan airfield¹²)



(A CTCAF bomber unit is seen conducting exercise in Yinchuan airfield¹³)

The evidence provided above—the presence of various STCAF and CTCAF units involved in an unspecified military exercise in Gobi Desert and the unusually high number of aircraft at Yinchuan and Dingxin air bases during the same timeframe—indicates that a large force exercise took place during the summer of 2020. These activities are consistent with known information from “Red Sword 2018” which occurred in the summer of 2018.¹⁴ Taken together, the PLAAF very likely conducted the “Red Sword 2020” military exercise during the period from mid-June to early- or mid-August.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ 乘风破浪！雷达兵千里机动一路向“战”，Air Force News, WeChat, July 28, 2020, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/AcjdesIo6R9oYZoq-EKh6w>; 黄沙百战穿金甲！大漠驻训的战味与诗意, Southern Theater Command Air Force, WeChat, August 12, 2020, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/BKh30EaR0iz3EVIVms5jyQ>. These are likely two separate mobile radar units since the unit in the second source did not use rail as a means of transportation and travelled by road only for several hundred kilometers. Whereas the radar unit in the first source traveled by both rail and road and for much longer distance (thousands of kilometers).
- ² 乘风破浪！雷达兵千里机动一路向“战”，Air Force News, WeChat.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ 千里奔袭！地导兵，出击！, Southern Theater Command Air Force, WeChat, July 25, 2020, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/LaCJUT2cx_GXm1Uhmhm-rQ.
- ⁵ 乘风破浪！雷达兵千里机动一路向“战”，Air Force News, WeChat.
- ⁶ 千里奔袭！地导兵，出击！, Southern Theater Command Air Force, WeChat.
- ⁷ 一举“击落”！这种战斗方式很空军, Air Force News, WeChat, July 3, 2020, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/5UMiLZsE2PB7-LJZef1N0Q>; 谢中武 et al., 大漠练兵，长空砺剑！Southern Theater Command Air Force, WeChat, July 9, 2020, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/6zGAWk_nzN2MUQJI8IXuyw; 周赞 范振洋 彭程, 云霄之上 剑拔弩张, South Theater Command Air Force, WeChat, July 15, 2020, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/TfLD7W1x7phoiY73905Syw>; 谢麒麟 et al., 任凭风沙劲，战斗热情高！Southern Theater Command Air Force, WeChat, August 19, 2020, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/LE0VHbRPQjVMLjXRI_Q1-Q.
- ⁸ [军事报道]在习近平强军思想指引下 我们在战位报告“战神”砺剑 锻造长空重拳, CCTV, August 24, 2020, <https://tv.cctv.com/2020/08/24/VIDEQNt4etEmqvC2iY8raAMq200824.shtml>. Information provided in the report and the H-6K bomber aircraft's new yellow bort number (4127X) displayed indicate that the exercise took place in Yinchuan airfield recently in the summer of 2020; and the unit participated in the exercise is almost certainly the CTCFAF 36th Bomber Division. For more information, see video segments: 01:30, 02:29, and 06:06; and google satellite imagery at 38.485655, 106.007348.
- ⁹ Satellite images show very few aircraft parked on the Yinchuan air base from April to early June 2020, indicating little activities conducted there during this period. Beginning in mid-June, there has been a significant increase in the number of large and small aircraft parked on the base, thus indicating a large force exercise of some sort likely took place there. A drawdown of military activities likely occurred in early August as fewer aircraft were observed on the base. As of 21 August 2020, no clear imagery is available for the Yinchuan base since 9 August, 2020.
- ¹⁰ Similar to the Yinchuan air base, satellite images show few aircraft parked on the Dingxin air base from April to early June 2020, indicating little activities conducted there during this period. Beginning in mid-June, there has been a significant increase in the number of large and small aircraft that parked on the base, thus indicating a large force exercise of some sort likely took place there. In early August, the base showed fewer aircraft parked on the base in comparison to the period of mid-June to July.
- ¹¹ 谢麒麟 et al., 任凭风沙劲，战斗热情高！Southern Theater Command Air Force, WeChat.
- ¹² [军事报道]在习近平强军思想指引下 我们在战位报告“战神”砺剑 锻造长空重拳, CCTV.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ See 燃！空军“红剑－2018”体系对抗演习大片来袭, PLA Daily, July 19, 2018, http://www.chinamil.com.cn/tzjy/2018-07/19/content_8092971.htm. Images from the source showed various PLAAF units participated in the exercise. 空军“红剑－2018”演习致力提升体系制胜能力, Xinhua, May 24, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-05/24/c_129879430.htm. Source indicates that Red Sword 2018 started on May 23, 2018 and involved the participation of randomly selected PLAAF aviation, radar, and SAM units.