



“Command of the Air”

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Although the 2004 white paper is the first of the PRC’s defense white papers to note what it calls “command of the air,” identified in the Chinese version as *zhikongquan* (制空权), the concept for the PLAAF dates back to the 1960s.¹ Although the 2015 Defense White Paper, which focused on PLA strategy, did not have a single entry, the Academy of Military Science’s 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* has the term *zhikongquan* 15 times. Information from this book is located at the end of this discussion. No PLAAF sources use the terms “air superiority,” “air supremacy,” or “air dominance” to refer to itself.

In addition, the PLAAF rarely uses the term “airpower” in reference to itself. When discussing foreign air forces, such as the USAF or Russian Air Force, the PLAAF does translate airpower from its writings as *kongzhong lilian* (空中力量) or *kongjun shili* (空军实力).

Different Chinese military dictionaries have the English terms “air domination,” “air superiority,” and “air supremacy.”² The dictionaries are not consistent with their translation for each of these terms and mix the following three sets of Chinese characters: *zhikongquan* (制空权), *kongzhong youshi* (空中优势), and *kongzhong baquan* (空中霸权). It is important to keep in mind that these dictionaries translate the English terms. They are not translating the Chinese term into English. Furthermore, none of them provide a definition.

¹ While the *Air Force Dictionary* and the *Chinese Military Encyclopedia* translate *zhikongquan* as command of the air, other Chinese military dictionaries translate it as control of the air, air supremacy, air superiority, and air domination. Zhu Rongchang, p. 13. Song Shilun and Xiao Ke, eds., *Chinese Military Encyclopedia* (中国军事百科全书), Beijing: Academy of Military Science Publishers, July 1997, Volume 3, p. 811. Xu Hezhen, ed., *Chinese-English and English-Chinese Military Dictionary* (汉英英汉军事大辞典), Beijing, Xueyuan Press, November 2002, p. 644. Zhang Qiliang, ed., *A Chinese-English Dictionary of Military Terms* (汉英军事词典), Beijing, Haiyang Press, December 2001, p. 1012.

² Li Gongzhao, ed., *An English-Chinese Military Dictionary* (英汉军事大辞典), Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Press, December 2006, p. 75, 97. Wu Yifu, et al, eds., *The Chinese-English and English-Chinese Military Dictionary* (汉英英汉军事大辞典), Beijing: Xueyuan Press, November 2002, p. 716. Cui Changqi, ed., *A New English-Chinese and Chinese-English Dictionary of Military Terms* (新编汉英英汉军事词典), Beijing: National Defense Industry Publishers, October 1999, p. 19.

Therefore, one must first look at the definition in English of these terms as noted in JP 1-02 as follows to see if it fits the Chinese meaning:³

- Air Superiority: That degree of dominance in the air battle of one force over another that permits the conduct of operations by the former and its related land, sea, and air forces at a given time and place without prohibitive interference by opposing forces.
- Air Supremacy: That degree of air superiority wherein the opposing air force is incapable of effective interference.
- Air Dominance: JP 1-02 does not have a definition for air dominance. The only time the term dominance is noted is in definitions about superiority, as in the definition for air superiority shown above.

Most PLAAF writings on its missions focus on what it calls “command of the air” (*zhikongquan*; 制空权), as well as various types of campaigns, including “air offense campaign” and “air defense campaign”.⁴

In 1959, the PLAAF created a Regulations Committee that wrote more than 300 regulations, including the first elements of China’s air force theory.⁵ In 1962, the committee published the draft *PLAAF Combat Regulations (Zhongguo Renmin Jiefangjun Kongjun Zhandou Tiaoling 中国人民解放军空军战斗条令)* that laid out the concepts for the mission of command of the air (*zhikongquan* 制空权), which is divided into two types: (1) strategic command of the air (*zhanlue zhikongquan* 战略制空权), and (2) campaign and tactical command of the air (*zhanyi zhanshu zhikongquan* 战役战术制空权).⁶

The PLAAF defines strategic command of the air as “the ability to influence a war by conducting command of the air for the entirety of the war or for a specific period of time at a particular location or for locations over a sustained period of time.” It defines campaign and tactical command of the air as “the ability to influence a battle by conducting command of the air over a critical or limited area for a short period of time.”⁷

³ Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, Joint Publication 1-02, 12 April 2001 (As Amended Through 13 June 2007).

⁴ Zhu Rongchang, ed., *Air Force Dictionary* (空军大词典), Shanghai: Shanghai Dictionary Publishing House, September 1996, 13-14. Yao Wei, ed., *Chinese Air Force Encyclopedia* (中国空军百科全书); Beijing, Aviation Industry Press, November 2005, p. 39.

⁵ Hua Renjie, Cao Yifeng, and Chen Huixiu, ed., 1991, 310. The majority of this book discusses the history of U.S. and Soviet air force theory before discussing the history of the PLAAF’s theory from pages 294-331.

⁶ Hua Renjie, Cao Yifeng, and Chen Huixiu, ed., *History of Air Force Theory*, 1991, 316. The term *zhanyi* (战役) can be translated as campaign or operational, depending on the context. Some PLA and PLAAF publications translate *zhikongquan* (制空权) as command of the air. The authors cite the military volume of the *Chinese Encyclopedia* (中国百科全书), published in 1988 for the types of command of the air and their definitions. According to the *Air Force Dictionary*, command of the air can be divided into three types: strategic, campaign, and tactical, but no specific definitions were given. See Zhu Rongchang, ed., *Air Force Dictionary*, Shanghai: Shanghai Dictionary Publishing House, September 1996, 13-14.

⁷ Hua Renjie, Cao Yifeng, and Chen Huixiu, ed., *History of Air Force Theory*, 1991, 316.

In the past, however, these concepts pertained primarily to areas around China's airfields, because their aircraft did not have long legs and their SAM coverage was limited. Since China began acquiring better weapon systems during the 1990s, the PLA is now better able to implement these concepts beyond simply its airbases, to China's periphery and beyond.

The PLAAF has been slow in drafting various combat regulations.⁸ For example, in 1962 the PLAAF issued its first "draft" *Combat Regulations* that laid out the concepts for the mission of command of the air. Eighteen years later in 1980, the PLAAF published the "trial" volume of *Combat Regulations*. The only difference between the 1962 "draft" and the 1980 "trial" document is the latter includes the role of the PLAAF's AAA and SAM troops in securing command of the air. Still another "draft" was issued for discussion in 1989.

Bottom Line

Whenever possible, when dealing with the PLA, we should strive to understand them through a PLA lens and use the term command of the air for them and define it. When dealing with a USAF audience about the PLA and use air superiority or air supremacy for the PLAAF, then the audience will say, "oh, I understand it because they are like us," which is not necessarily the case. Therefore, CASI prefers to use the Chinese term and define it to the USAF audience, which makes them pause and actually think about the term. This goes for every term, not just this one.

That being said, the term "command of the air" (制空权) is used in a sense that is basically the same as our "air superiority," referring to superiority in at a specific time and a particular place. They don't talk about air dominance, and they haven't needed to define degrees of control of the air, as the U.S. has. Thus, they only use more relative terms like 空中优势 when translating U.S. doctrine and document.

1988 Science of PLAAF Campaigns

The 1988 *Science of PLAAF Campaigns*, which discusses air defense, air offensive, and combined-arms campaigns, but does not mention air blockade, airborne, or joint-service campaigns, devotes separate chapters to air campaigns relative to command of the air, electronic countermeasures, and operations under chemical, biological, and nuclear conditions.⁹

According to the 1988 book, for those operations that could have a decisive impact on the progress of the campaign, such as air mobility, seizing the command of information and command of the air, ground attack and defense, we should prepare multiple scenarios.

⁸ Hua Renjie, Cao Yifeng, and Chen Huixiu, editors, *History of Air Force Art and Thought* (空军学术思想史), Beijing: PLA Publishers, 1991, p. 315-316.

⁹ *Science of PLAAF Campaigns* (中国人民解放军空军战役学), Beijing: Jiefangjun Publishers, November 1988.

Providing support and supplies for the airborne landing force is almost exclusively dependent on air corridors. Hence, among all the support activities, the most important is seizing local command of the air. Without command of the air, all other support will be not only difficult to carry out, but also much less effective. Thus, it can be said that without command of the air, there will not be any victory in an airborne landing campaign.

Under modern high-tech conditions, seizing information dominance (*zhi xinxi quan*; 制信息权) and command of the air are basic prerequisites for ensuring the smooth execution of an airborne campaign.

2000 NDU Science of Campaigns

The PLA National Defense University's 2000 issue of *Science of Campaigns* uses the term "command of the air" 22 times.¹⁰ It uses the Chinese term for "air superiority" (*kongzhong youshi* / 空中优势) only twice, both of which refer to foreign air forces. The translated version does not use the term "air supremacy" or "air dominance."

2006 NDU Science of Campaigns

In 2006, the National Defense University published an updated version of the 2000 *Science of Campaigns*.¹¹ In this volume, it used the term *kongzhong youshi* (空中优势), which the USG translated version translated as "air superiority" several times in conjunction with "command of the air". The following two sentences provide examples of how the term was used. One paragraph stated, "seizing information dominance is mainly as a service to seizing air dominance, one achieves superiority in the electromagnetic battlefield; seizing air dominance is mainly to create conditions for sea and land operational activities; in seizing sea dominance, one must seize air dominance at-sea, otherwise, at-sea superiority cannot be brought into play due to the air threat, so the so-called sea dominance should include air superiority at-sea." A follow-on sentence stated, "During engagements, one must concentrate the use of fighter aviation forces to unfold air combat with the enemy's raiding aircraft, or penetrate the enemy area to seek and annihilate the enemy's aircraft with initiative in order to seize and maintain air superiority."

Altogether, the Chinese version of the 2006 book had the term *zhikongquan* (command of the air) 87 times, which the USG translation of this book translated as "air superiority" 32 times and "air dominance" 55 times. The USG version did not translate the term as "command of the air" at all. As a result, the USG translated version provided a misconception of the Chinese term and concept.

¹⁰ Wang Houqing and Zhang Xingye, ed., *Science of Campaigns*, Beijing: PLA National Defense University, May 2000.

¹¹ Zhang Yuliang, ed., *The Science of Campaigns* (战役学), Beijing: PLA National Defense University, September 2006.

2013 Science of Military Strategy

The Academy of Military Science's 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* has the term *zhikongquan* 15 times. Specifically, the book states: "From 1956 to the 1980s, Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and the older generation of revolutionaries and strategists attached high importance to building and development of the People's Air Force, and stressed placing Air Force building in a precedential position within national defense building. In 1979, Deng Xiaoping said, 'In the future battles to be fought, not having an Air Force will not do, and not having command of the air will not do. The Army needs cover and assisting support by the Air Force, and the Navy also cannot do without cover by the Air Force, since our main task is offshore operations. Without command of the air, the enemy's aircraft can run amuck. No matter what future operations will be like, the Air Force will be first. Among the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force, first of all we need to have a powerful Air Force, with which we need to gain command of the air. Otherwise, we will not be able to fight any kind of battle. I see the future key points placed on developing the Air Force. The key points for investment should be placed on the aircraft industry and developing the Air Force.'" In addition, "In the 1990s, our Air Force's main strategic mission was to conduct air-border defense, so as to ensure seizing command of the air. Under the guidance of the new era's military strategic concept, and under the driving force of the worldwide new military transformation, the CCCPC and CMC put forth even stricter requirements for the Air Force's strategic application and building. In 1997, Jiang Zemin pointed out that the Air Force needed to reinforce the building of offensive air power and of the corresponding full sets of equipment, and to progressively realize the conversion from a homeland air defense type to a type with both attack and defense [capability]. In 1999, he also stressed the following: 'The Air Force undertakes major missions in maintaining national sovereignty and security, and its position and role in future high-tech war will be unusually important. We must build a powerful People's Air Force with both attack and defense [capability] and having Chinese characteristics.' On the basis of Air Force strategic studies that unfolded in the mid-to-late 1980s, the Air Force also put forth the strategic thought and mentality of 'air-border defense' and 'Air Force transformational building'; formulated the building objectives, principles, and measures for conversion from a 'homeland air defense type to a 'type having both attack and defense [capability];' accelerated the adjusted-coordinated development of Air Force strategic capability toward attack and defense capability; and propelled the progress of informationized building of the People's Air Force."

2015 Defense White Paper on Military Strategy

This White Paper does not use the English term air superiority or air supremacy. Nor does it have any entries for command of the air. It only has one entry for the PLAAF as follows:

In line with the strategic requirement of building air-space capabilities and conducting offensive and defensive operations, the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) will endeavor to shift its focus from territorial air defense to both defense and offense, and build an air-space defense force structure that can meet the requirements of informationized operations. The PLAAF will boost its capabilities for strategic

early warning, air strike, air and missile defense, information countermeasures, airborne operations, strategic projection and comprehensive support. 空军按照空天一体、攻防兼备的战略要求，实现国土防空型向攻防兼备型转变，构建适应信息化作战需要的空天防御力量体系，提高战略预警、空中打击、防空反导、信息对抗、空降作战、战略投送和综合保障能力。

2019 Defense White Paper

This White Paper does not have any English entries for air superiority or air supremacy. Nor does it have any entries for command of the air. The only relevant entries for the PLAAF are as follows:

The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) has strengthened systematic and all-airspace training based on operational plans. It has conducted combat patrols in the South China Sea and security patrols in the East China Sea, and operated in the West Pacific. It has completed a series of regular system-vs.-system exercises such as Red Sword. 空军加强体系化实案化全疆域训练，组织南海战巡、东海警巡、前出西太，常态化开展“红剑”等系列体系对抗演习。

The PLAAF plays a crucial role in overall national security and military strategy. It comprises aviation, airborne, ground-to-air missile, radar, ECM, and communications forces. Under the PLAAF, there are 5 TC air force commands and one airborne corps. Under the TC air forces, there are air bases, aviation brigades (divisions), ground-to-air missile brigades (divisions) and radar brigades. In line with the strategic requirements of integrating air and space capabilities as well as coordinating offensive and defensive operations, the PLAAF is accelerating the transition of its tasks from territorial air defense to both offensive and defensive operations, and improving its capabilities for strategic early warning, air strikes, air and missile defense, information countermeasures, airborne operations, strategic projection, and integrated support, so as to build a strong and modernized air force. 空军在国家安全和军事战略全局中具有举足轻重的地位和作用。包括航空兵、空降兵、地面防空兵、雷达兵、电子对抗部队、信息通信部队等，下辖 5 个战区空军、1 个空降兵军等。战区空军下辖基地、航空兵旅（师）、地空导弹兵旅（师）、雷达兵旅等部队。按照空天一体、攻防兼备的战略要求，加快实现国土防空型向攻防兼备型转变，提高战略预警、空中打击、防空反导、信息对抗、空降作战、战略投送和综合保障能力，努力建设一支强大的现代化空军。

Ken Allen was the inaugural Research Director for the China Aerospace Studies Institute. After his retirement in 2019, he has continued to serve and contribute as a CASI Associate. Derek Solen is a Senior Research for CASI. Dr. Brendan Mulvaney is the Director of CASI.

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