

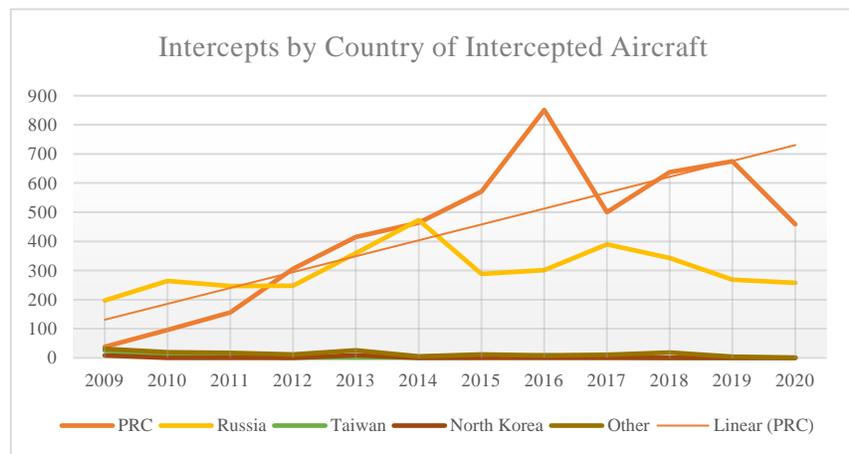
## Beijing's 'New Normal' in the Skies around Japan

Derek Solen

At the beginning of March, it was reported that Japan's Defense Ministry has been limiting the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force's (JASDF) scrambling of aircraft.<sup>1</sup> The JASDF has been scrambling its aircraft many times more than the U.S. Air Force and the air forces of NATO do, raising the possibility that this relatively small air force would exhaust its pilots and aircraft.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, limiting the JASDF's scrambling of aircraft is a prudent measure to preserve the force, but it will not solve Japan's predicament.

### Increasing Flights around Japan

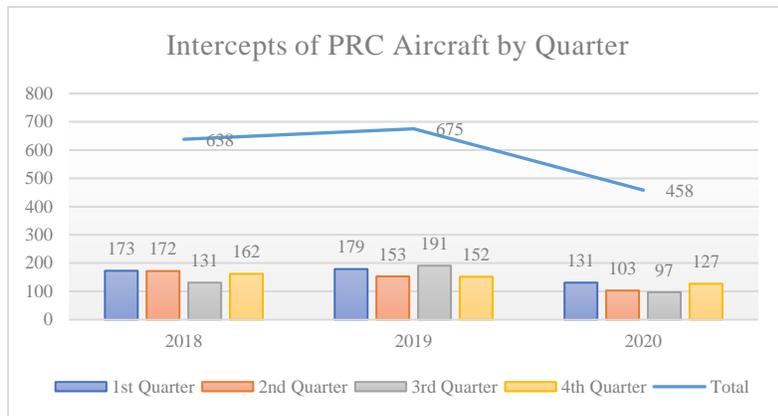
The JASDF scrambles fighters when an unidentified aircraft enters Japan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ). An ADIZ is a zone that a country establishes over an area beyond its territorial waters in order to identify aircraft before they enter its airspace. A country requires aircraft that will enter its



Source: Joint Staff of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces

ADIZ to file a flight plan with the proper authorities, but there is no international law or agreement concerning ADIZs and flight within them. A country usually scrambles fighters to intercept and identify any unidentified aircraft that enters its ADIZ and to warn the aircraft against entering that country's airspace. It is worth mentioning that besides Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the People's Republic of China (PRC) have established ADIZs, all of which overlap.

Beginning in the Japanese fiscal year of 2010 (April 2010 to March 2011), the total number of times that the JASDF scrambled aircraft began increasing significantly, going from an average of 210 in the previous decade to a high of 1,186 in fiscal year 2016 before leveling off at numbers above 900 thereafter.<sup>3</sup> The increase is due to the number of times that the JASDF scrambled



Source: Joint Staff of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces

against PRC aircraft, which increased from 38 in fiscal year 2009 to 675 in fiscal year 2019.<sup>4</sup> In fiscal year 2019, after PRC aircraft began sortieing from an airbase nearer the Senkaku Islands, which Beijing claims and calls the Diaoyu Islands, Tokyo bolstered its response by scrambling fighters as soon as PRC aircraft were detected leaving the airbase.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the JASDF began scrambling four fighters for each interception mission instead of the

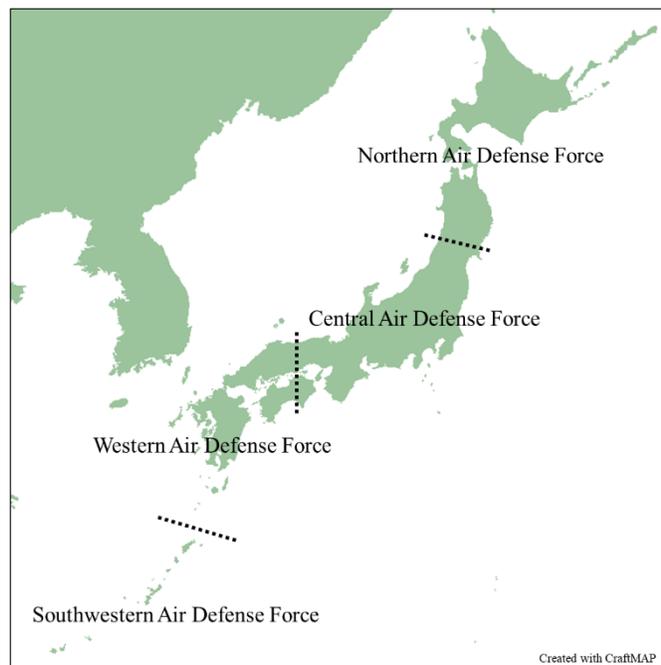
usual two.<sup>6</sup> The total number of times that the JASDF scrambled against PRC aircraft increased by 37 between fiscal years 2018 and 2019.<sup>7</sup>

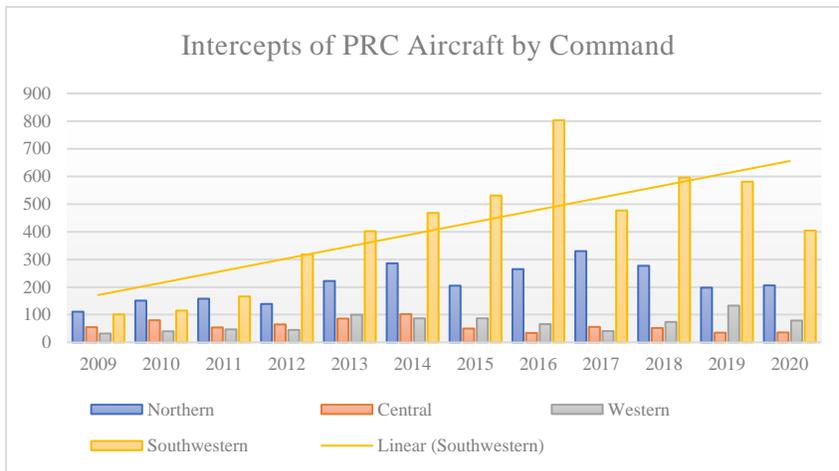
However, in fiscal year 2020 the JASDF scrambled against PRC aircraft fewer times throughout the entire year. This is likely due to the Japanese Defense Ministry’s new policy limiting interceptions to those aircraft that seem “likely” to violate Japan’s airspace.<sup>8</sup> In a comparison of the fiscal years 2019 and 2020, the difference between the number of times that the JASDF has scrambled against PRC aircraft decreased each quarter to a total of 217 fewer times.<sup>9</sup> The difference between fiscal years 2018 and 2020 is still 180 fewer times.<sup>10</sup>

### Reason for the Increase

Because the majority of interceptions have occurred over the East China Sea, and because the increase is coincident with renewed Sino-Japanese strife over the Senkaku Islands since 2012, when Tokyo purchased the islands from their private owner, it is easy to conclude that Beijing is sending military aircraft into Japan’s ADIZ in order to wear Tokyo down and to press its claim to the islands, much as it seems to be doing with its coast guard at sea.<sup>11</sup> After all, Beijing seems to have used its military aircraft to harass Tokyo before. In 2005 Sino-Japanese relations reached their lowest point in decades when anti-Japanese riots occurred across China throughout April. In fiscal year 2005, which began in April, the number of times that the JASDF scrambled against PRC aircraft increased from 13 in the previous year to 107, after which the number decreased to an average of 32 in the subsequent three years.<sup>12</sup>

Regional Commands of the JASDF





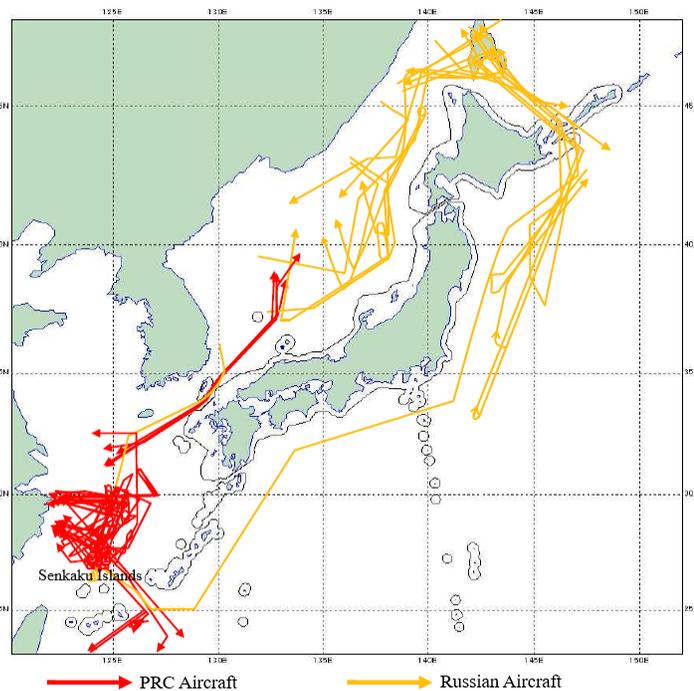
Source: Joint Staff of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces

However, although wearing Tokyo down may indeed have entered Beijing's calculations, that is unlikely to be the sole—or even the primary—reason for the increase in the PRC air arms' activities over the East China Sea in the last decade. The number of vessels that sailed in the vicinity of the Senkakus and the number of times that the JASDF scrambled against PRC

aircraft over the East China Sea both abruptly increased in 2012, and both numbers also spiked in 2016, but there are no other correlations between the PRC's activities on and over the East China Sea.<sup>13</sup> Overall, the number of times that the JASDF intercepted PRC aircraft began increasing in 2009, and both that number and the number of times that the JASDF intercepted aircraft over the East China Sea were on upward trends from 2009 to 2019. Moreover, the flight paths of the PRC aircraft that flew over the East China Sea did not concentrate on the Senkakus.<sup>14</sup>

The PRC military's increasing number of flights over the East China Sea and around Japan is more consistent with its intensifying efforts in the last decade to enhance its training and to improve its combat readiness than the number is with events in Sino-Japanese relations. The PRC military, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), has two air arms: the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) and the aviation branch of the PLA Navy (PLAN).<sup>i</sup> In the past, long-distance and overwater flights were major weaknesses of the PLA's air arms. Until the 2010s, even the PLAN's aircraft rarely ventured far from shore. The PLA had been gradually improving its training and

Flight Paths of PRC and Russian Aircraft in 2016



Source: Joint Staff of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces

<sup>i</sup> The PLA Army's aviation branch is being excluded because it mainly operates rotary-wing aircraft (helicopters) in support of operations on land. In other words, its units operate like the army's other maneuver elements, whereas the PLAN's aviation branch employs its units for missions other than support to the PLAN's surface and submarine forces, i.e., the same missions as those of the PLAAF.

developing its capabilities before Xi Jinping became the PRC's supreme leader in late 2012, but Xi significantly accelerated that trend.

Much more than his predecessors, Xi Jinping has emphasized the danger of war and the need for a stronger military to secure the PRC's interests and to attain Beijing's goals. The capability to fly long distances over the sea is necessary for the PLA to "defend" the territory that Beijing claims in the East and South China Seas as well as to repel any forces intervening in Beijing's blockade or invasion of Taiwan. Xi immediately began demanding realistic training so that the PLA "can win battles"—a backhanded criticism of the PLA's capabilities that was encapsulated in a slogan.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the PLAN's first flight beyond the first island chain was conducted in 2013; the PLAAF's was conducted one year later, and the PLAAF began "regular high seas training" in 2015.<sup>16</sup> Such flights have not only become routine; they are also being conducted under more difficult, i.e., realistic, conditions. Now reports of overwater flights that were conducted at night or in poor weather conditions often appear in PLA media.<sup>17</sup>

## No Easy Solutions

Japan's predicament, and the increasing difficulty of defending Japan's airspace, is underlined by the fact that the increase in the PLA air arms' activity around Japan is not due to the vagaries of Sino-Japanese relations. While the number of flights that PLA aircraft make in Japan's ADIZ may not increase significantly for some time, it is almost certain that they will not decrease either. To borrow one of Beijing's oft-used phrases, the current situation is the "new normal," one that improved Sino-Japanese relations will not affect.<sup>ii</sup> And given the vast disparities in both human and material resources that exist between Japan's and the PRC's air forces, nor can Tokyo hope that the JASDF could intercept every PRC aircraft that enters Japan's ADIZ without incurring huge costs, not just the costs to its personnel and aircraft, but also the cost in time to be used for regular training. Therefore, it is prudent of Tokyo to have decided to limit the JASDF's scrambling of aircraft.

There is little more that Tokyo can do. Other means of enforcing Japan's ADIZ are sometimes raised. One idea is to lock onto unidentified aircraft with ground- and sea-based fire control radars in order to scare the aircraft away, but this would cause more problems than it would solve. Doing this would be hypocritical because Tokyo has protested Chinese and South Korean ships' doing the same to Japanese reconnaissance aircraft. Tokyo protested because it is one thing to identify and warn an aircraft, and it is quite another to threaten even a fighter in international airspace. Besides, after a few times, just locking onto aircraft without firing upon them would be taken as the empty threat that it is, making Tokyo seem weak. Another idea is to use unmanned aircraft to enforce Japan's ADIZ, but an unmanned aircraft with the requisite speed and armament does not exist. However, there is one more thing that Tokyo can do—and is likely to do out of necessity anyway: as the JASDF procures fifth-generation aircraft, it would also be prudent to

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<sup>ii</sup> It should be noted that the current situation is not unprecedented. Beginning in the late 1970s and continuing throughout the 1980s, the JASDF scrambled aircraft almost as many times as it does now. The numbers decreased to previous levels between 1989 and 1993, when the USSR disintegrated. 統合幕僚監部 [Joint Staff], "2020年度3四半期までの緊急発進実施状況について" [Concerning the status of the conduct of scrambles through the third quarter of fiscal year 2020], January 22, 2021, 8, accessed March 10, 2021, [https://www.mod.go.jp/js/Press/press2021/press\\_pdf/p20210122\\_01.pdf](https://www.mod.go.jp/js/Press/press2021/press_pdf/p20210122_01.pdf).

retain a fleet of fourth-generation aircraft with which to enforce Japan's ADIZ. Doing so would not only help preserve the JASDF's fifth-generation aircraft, but it would also hinder the PLAAF's and the PLAN's efforts to collect intelligence on the JASDF and its most advanced aircraft.<sup>iii</sup>

The USA has no role to play in enforcing Japan's ADIZ. The US-Japan security treaty only obligates the USA to take active measures to defend Japan when Japan has been attacked, and unidentified aircraft flying in Japan's ADIZ do not constitute an attack. Moreover, Japan is a sovereign country, one that has only been occupied once in its history—by the USA—so Tokyo would likely be sensitive to the implications of American help to enforce its ADIZ. But now, in addition to Russia and North Korea, Japan faces a hostile and increasingly militarily capable PRC. Japan needs its ally for its defense, just as the USA cannot hope to deal with any military contingency in the region without Japan. Therefore, the U.S. Air Force can and should seek to help the JASDF enhance its combat capabilities as well as to increase interoperability between the two services. Only combined efforts can ensure that the skies above Japan and our other regional allies and partners remain secure.

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<sup>iii</sup> It has been reported on the website of Forbes that the JASDF will employ the F-35 for intercept missions, but the reporter seems to have jumped to this conclusion because Tokyo plans to deploy F-35s to Japan's southernmost main island, Kyushu. The squadron of F-35s that will be deployed there will operate from a base that is subordinate to the JASDF's Western Air Defense Force, which conducts relatively few intercept missions. Moreover, the squadron will operate the short take-off and vertical landing F-35B, and it will be training to operate from short airfields and Izumo-class "destroyers," which are more like amphibious assault ships, for the defense of Japan's more isolated islands. The new squadron will not be scrambling to intercept PRC aircraft in Japan's ADIZ. David Axe, "Japan is about to waste its F-35s shadowing Chinese planes," *Forbes*, April 2, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2021/04/02/japan-is-about-to-waste-its-f-35s-shadowing-chinese-planes/>; "「離島防衛の切り札」ステルス戦闘機 F 3 5 B、宮崎・新田原基地に配備へ" ['Trump card for defense of isolated islands,' F-35B stealth aircraft to be deployed to Miyazaki's Nyutabaru Base], *読売新聞* [Yomiuri Shimbun], April 4, 2021, accessed April 6, 2021, <https://news.yahoo.co.jp/articles/d809e3b98f6481402e8a4d976cd69d44171ce3b4>.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> “対中緊急発進「総量抑制」” [‘Controlling total number’ of scrambles against China], 共同通信 [Kyodo News], March 3, 2021, accessed March 10, 2021, <https://this.kiji.is/739588495626059776>; “Japan scrambling jets less against China as more F-35 deployment eyed,” Kyodo News Plus, March 3, 2021, accessed March 10, 2021, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2021/03/ef1d2ba18bec-japan-scrambling-jets-less-against-china-as-more-f-35-deployment-eyed.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Brad Lendon and Yoko Wakatsuki, “Japan's air force faces a ‘relentless’ burden, imposed by China,” CNN, July 29, 2020, accessed March 11, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/28/asia/japan-china-fighter-jet-scrambles-intl-hnk-dst/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup> 統合幕僚監部 [Joint Staff], “2020年度3四半期までの緊急発進実施状況について” [Concerning the status of the conduct of scrambles through the third quarter of fiscal year 2020], January 22, 2021, 8, accessed March 10, 2021, [https://www.mod.go.jp/js/Press/press2021/press\\_pdf/p20210122\\_01.pdf](https://www.mod.go.jp/js/Press/press2021/press_pdf/p20210122_01.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> “緊急発進実施状況” [Status of the conduct of scrambles], e-Stat, February 16, 2021, accessed March 11, 2021, <https://www.e-stat.go.jp/stat-search?page=1&toukei=00700013>. In 2014 the JASDF scrambled against Russian aircraft more times than it did against Chinese aircraft.

<sup>5</sup> “対中国機、即時に緊急発進” [Instantly scrambling against Chinese aircraft], 共同通信 [Kyodo News], July 19, 2020, accessed March 10, 2021, <https://this.kiji.is/657198097557029985>; “Japan now instantly scrambles jets against China's from Fujian,” Kyodo News Plus, July 19, 2020, accessed March 10, 2021, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2020/07/c0f33e803562-japan-now-instantly-scrambles-jets-against-chinas-from-fujian.html>.

<sup>6</sup> “Japan now instantly scrambles jets against China's from Fujian.”

<sup>7</sup> “緊急発進実施状況” [Status of the conduct of scrambles].

<sup>8</sup> “対中緊急発進「総量抑制」” [‘Controlling total number’ of scrambles against China]; “Japan scrambling jets less against China as more F-35 deployment eyed.”

<sup>9</sup> 統合幕僚監部 [Joint Staff], “令和元年度の緊急発進実施状況について” [Concerning the status of the conduct of scrambles in fiscal year 2019], April 9, 2020, 4, accessed March 12, 2021,

[https://www.mod.go.jp/js/Press/press2020/press\\_pdf/p20200409\\_01.pdf](https://www.mod.go.jp/js/Press/press2020/press_pdf/p20200409_01.pdf); 統合幕僚監部 [Joint Staff], “2020年度における緊急発進実施状況” [The status of the conduct of scrambles in fiscal year 2020], April 9, 2021, 1, accessed April 9, 2021, [https://www.mod.go.jp/js/Activity/Scramble/Scramble2020/sc20210409\\_04.pdf](https://www.mod.go.jp/js/Activity/Scramble/Scramble2020/sc20210409_04.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> 統合幕僚監部 [Joint Staff], “平成30年度の緊急発進実施状況について” [Concerning the status of the conduct of scrambles in fiscal year 2018], April 12, 2019, 4, accessed March 12, 2021, [https://www.mod.go.jp/js/Press/press2019/press\\_pdf/p20190412\\_01.pdf](https://www.mod.go.jp/js/Press/press2019/press_pdf/p20190412_01.pdf); 統合幕僚監部 [Joint Staff], “2020年度における緊急発進実施状況” [The status of the conduct of scrambles in fiscal year 2020].

<sup>11</sup> Approximately 55 percent of all interceptions that the JASDF conducted between 2009 and 2019 were conducted by the Southwestern Composite Air Division, which became the Southwestern Air Defense Force in 2017. The East China Sea is primarily the Southwestern Air Defense Force’s area of responsibility. 統合幕僚監部 [Joint Staff], “平成21年度の緊急発進実施状況について” [Concerning the status of the conduct of scrambles in fiscal year 2009], April 15, 2010, 2, accessed March 12, 2021,

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<sup>12</sup> “緊急発進実施状況” [Status of the conduct of scrambles].

<sup>13</sup> 海上保安庁 [Japanese Coast Guard], “尖閣諸島周辺海域における中国海警局に所属する船舶等の動向と我が国の対処” [Trends in the activity of vessels belonging to the Chinese coast guard in the waters around the Senkaku Islands and our country’s response], accessed March 12, 2021, <https://www.kaiho.mlit.go.jp/mission/senkaku/senkaku.html>; 統合幕僚監部 [Joint Staff], “2 0 2 0 年度 3 四半期までの緊急発進実施状況について” [Concerning the status of the conduct of scrambles through the third quarter of fiscal year 2020]. The Japanese Coast Guard’s statistics do not identify the nationality of the vessels that sailed in the vicinity of the Senkaku Islands, but it is safe to assume that other than some Taiwanese boats, the vast majority of the vessels were from the PRC.

<sup>14</sup> 海上保安庁 [Japanese Coast Guard], “尖閣諸島周辺海域における中国海警局に所属する船舶等の動向と我が国の対処” [Trends in the activity of vessels belonging to the Chinese coast guard in the waters around the Senkaku Islands and our country’s response]; 統合幕僚監部 [Joint Staff], “平成 2 1 年度の緊急発進実施状況について” [Concerning the status of the conduct of scrambles in fiscal year 2009]; 統合幕僚監部 [Joint Staff], “平成 2 2 年度の緊急発進実施状況について” [Concerning the status of the conduct of scrambles in fiscal year 2010]; 統合幕僚監部 [Joint Staff], “平成 2 3 年度の緊急発進実施状況について” [Concerning the status of the conduct of scrambles in fiscal year 2011]; 統合幕僚監部 [Joint Staff], “平成 2 4 年度の緊急発進実施状況について” [Concerning the status of the conduct of scrambles in fiscal year 2012]; 統合幕僚監部 [Joint Staff], “平成 2 5 年度の緊急発進実施状況について” [Concerning the status of the conduct of scrambles in fiscal year 2013]; 統合幕僚監部 [Joint Staff], “平成 2 6 年度の緊急発進実施状況について” [Concerning the status of the conduct of scrambles in fiscal year 2014]; 統合幕僚監部 [Joint Staff], “平成 2 7 年度の緊急発進実施状況について” [Concerning the status of the conduct of scrambles in fiscal year 2015]; 統合幕僚監部 [Joint Staff], “平成 2 8 年度の緊急発進実施状況について” [Concerning the status of the conduct of scrambles in fiscal year 2016]; 統合幕僚監部 [Joint Staff], “平成 2 9 年度の緊急発進実施状況について” [Concerning the status of the conduct of scrambles in fiscal year 2017]; 統合幕僚監部 [Joint Staff], “平成 3 0 年度の緊急発進実施状況について” [Concerning the status of the conduct of scrambles in fiscal year 2018]; 統合幕僚監部 [Joint Staff], “令和元年度の緊急発進実施状況について” [Concerning the status of the conduct of scrambles in fiscal year 2019].

<sup>15</sup> 中国人民解放军总政治部 [General Political Department of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army], 习近平关于党在新形势下的强军目标重要论述摘编 [Extracts of Xi Jinping’s important expositions concerning the party’s goal of strong armed forces in the new situation] (Beijing: 解放军出版社 [Jiefangjun chubanshe], 2014), 2.

<sup>16</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2018,” August 16, 2018, 119, accessed March 25, 2021, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Aug/16/2001955282/-1/-1/1/2018-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT.PDF>; China Aerospace Studies Institute, “Selling a Maritime Air Force: The PLAAF’s Campaign for a Bigger Maritime Role,” Ian Burns McCaslin and Andrew S. Erickson, 15.

<sup>17</sup> For a recent example, see 叱磊 [Chi Lei], 王洪 [Wang Hong], and 张文成 [Zhang Wencheng], “越难越要练! 这场大机群远程奔袭跨区机动超燃” [The more difficult it is, the more we must practice it! This large-force, trans-regional movement for a long-distance raid is super awesome], 中国军网 [Chinese Military Online], March 26, 2021, accessed March 26, 2021, [http://www.81.cn/kj/2021-03/26/content\\_10011242.htm](http://www.81.cn/kj/2021-03/26/content_10011242.htm).