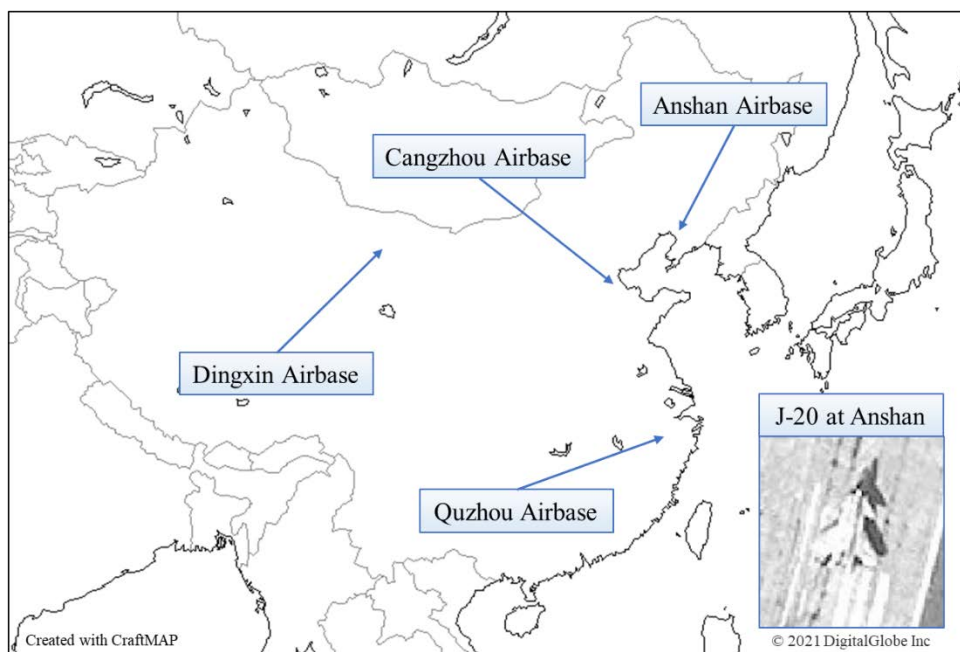


Second Combat Brigade of PRC Air Force Likely Receives Stealth Fighter

Derek Solen

Something unusual appeared in a satellite image of an airbase in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in early April 2021. In the image, a J-20 appears to be taxiing from the runway at Anshan Airport, a military-civilian, dual-use airport in northeastern China that is the home base of the 1st Aviation Brigade of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF).ⁱ The J-20 is China's fifth-generation fighter aircraft.ⁱⁱ Only three units are known to operate the J-20. Two of them are testing and training units, the 172nd Aviation Regiment at Cangzhou Airbase and the 176th Aviation Brigade at Dingxin Airbase; the third is a combat unit, the 9th Aviation Brigade, which is temporarily stationed at Quzhou Airbase. Therefore, it is unusual for a J-20 to operate from Anshan Airport, which is also known as Anshan Airbase.

There are a few possible reasons for the presence of the J-20 at Anshan. First, it is possible that the pilot was practicing long-distance flight and/or deployment from Quzhou and that he merely landed at Anshan to refuel before making his way back to his home base. The PLAAF does occasionally



ⁱ The author would like to thank Roderick Lee for bringing this to his attention.

ⁱⁱ The PRC defines aircraft generations differently than in the USA, categorizing what are known in the USA as fifth-generation aircraft as fourth-generation aircraft.

practice airfield-hopping for long-distance strikes, but these training events are rare, and given the advanced nature of the J-20, conducting such training with the J-20 would likely require specialized equipment and ground crewmen at each stop.¹ Second, it is possible that the J-20 was deployed from Cangzhou to participate in the 9th Aviation Brigade's air combat training, perhaps as an aggressor. However, individual pilots and entire PLAAF units regularly rotate in and out of Cangzhou and Dingxin, respectively, for training, so it is unlikely that the 172nd Aviation Regiment and the 176th Aviation Brigade would do the opposite for any single unit.

Instead, it is more likely that the J-20 that appeared in the satellite image was there because it is based there. Of course, the implication of this would be that the 1st Aviation Brigade would become the second combat brigade in the PLAAF that is known to operate the J-20. The 1st Aviation Brigade traces its lineage to the much-lauded 1st Aviation Division, which, like the 9th Aviation Brigade, was always one of the first units of the PLAAF to receive the force's most advanced aircraft,² so it would conform to past practice for the 1st Aviation Brigade to be next to receive the J-20 even if it does not seem strategically advantageous to deploy the J-20 to China's relatively secure northeast.

During the PRC National Defense Ministry's monthly press conference for January 2021, the ministry's spokesman was asked whether the J-20 was being fielded on a large scale.³ The spokesman's response emphasized the "objective laws" governing the research and development of an aircraft and the progressive testing that the J-20 has undergone.⁴ In effect, he answered negatively, but having another aviation brigade transition to the J-20 would suggest that his answer was not alluding to problems with the J-20. On the contrary, it would suggest that the PLAAF is satisfied with, and confident in, the capabilities of the J-20, and that more combat units are likely to receive the J-20 in the future.

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Endnotes

¹ For a recent example of such training, see 杨盼 [Yang Pan], "时刻准备战斗！战机远程跨区机动转场" [Always ready to fight! Fighter aircraft conduct long-distance, transregional, airfield-hopping movement], 中国军网 [China Military Online], April 1, 2021, accessed April 12, 2021, http://www.81.cn/tp/2021-04/01/content_10013023.htm.

² Andreas Rupprecht, *Modern Chinese Warplanes: Chinese Air Force – Aircraft and Units* (Houston: Harpia, 2018), 152, 187.

³ "2021年1月国防部例行记者会文字实录" [Transcript of the National Defense Ministry's regular press conference for January 2021], 国防部网 [Website of the National Defense Ministry], January 28, 2021, accessed April 12, 2021, http://www.mod.gov.cn/jzhzt/2021-01/28/content_4878227.htm.

⁴ Ibid.