



## **The True Meaning of the Chinese Air Force's Flying Transport Aircraft Near Malaysia: Airborne Units in Power Projection**

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***Translator's note:** Below is a translation of a paper that was published by the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force's (JASDF) Center for Air and Space Power Strategic Studies (CASPSS) and that was also published in a JASDF journal in July 2021. I have had the pleasure of routinely exchanging opinions and research material with Lt. Col. Aita and his colleagues at CASPSS, and when I read the draft of the following paper, I decided that it would be valuable to introduce it to an English-speaking audience. When a large formation of transport aircraft of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) flew near territory that is disputed between Malaysia and China in May 2021, the dominant speculation was that this activity was a political message to Malaysia. I believe that the value of Lt. Col. Aita's paper lies in questioning that speculation, analyzing the PLAAF's activity from a purely operational perspective while simultaneously analyzing the significance of the same beyond Sino-Malaysian relations. Although few are likely to remember the incident at hand now, Lt. Col. Aita's paper reminds us not to be satisfied with the seemingly obvious explanation for events and to broaden our perspectives when analyzing events. I have attempted to reproduce the paper as closely to the original as possible. Any unnaturalness in the language and any inaccuracies or other problems in the translation should be attributed to me.*

### 1. Introduction

The behavior of China, which is increasing its military presence in the South China Sea, is exacerbating the dispute in the region with its overt expansionism and has become an object of great concern to the countries surrounding the South China Sea. The difference in military power between China and Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, which will be dealt with below, and the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei Darussalam, etc. is now clear, so these countries are struggling to respond to China's tough stance making full use of its power.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the facts and aims of China's inscrutable activity from a geopolitical perspective and using various sources because this will form the premise of a

response. As will be shown in detail below, the recent incident with Malaysia has typical characteristics for deciphering Chinese actions up to the present. In order to respond to actions by China, which hides the true meaning of its own actions and avoids responsibility for those actions, one must first decipher the truth and intentions of those actions.

However, it must be said that sufficiently persuasive reasoning has not been conducted in the various news reports and discussions up to the present. Such reasoning calls for specialist knowledge of military activity as well as perception based on an operator’s actual experience. It is with this underlying idea that the true meaning of China’s military action will be deciphered in this paper.

On May 31, 2021 the Royal Malaysian Air Force detected a “suspicious” flight of 16 radar flight tracks (aircraft) entering the Kota Kinabalu Flight Identification Region (FIR) and approaching Malaysian airspace.<sup>1</sup> As a result of the Malaysian military’s scrambling interceptors and making visual identification, those 16 flight tracks were determined to be a formation that was composed of Il-76 and Y-20 transport aircraft belonging to the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force, also known as the PLAAF (Figure 1).

The formation was composed of 16 aircraft and flew in a trail formation with 60 nautical miles between each aircraft. The trail formation refers to a formation in which aircraft fly in a line at a certain distance from each other, and it can be understood as a formation that is used as the situation demands.

Twenty-four hours later, the Malaysian air force released the details of the incident, including a chart of the PLAAF formation’s flight path, on the social network service Twitter. Most foreign media quickly reported the PLAAF’s suspicious flight on the basis of the Malaysian air force’s tweet.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1. The Malaysian Air Force's tweet on June 1, 2021. Source: [https://twitter.com/tudm\\_rasmi/status/1399685724706770946](https://twitter.com/tudm_rasmi/status/1399685724706770946)

In response to Malaysia's criticism that the flight was a violation of Malaysian sovereignty, China merely countered that it had not entered Malaysian airspace, and because neither country produced new evidence, those involved remain as far apart as ever in the dispute over the facts.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, given that neither country will present new, objective facts, the discussion has not gone beyond talking about the incident in a political context as a problem between the two countries over territory in the South China Sea.

However, it seems that the reason why the 16 large transport aircraft flew in a trail formation, separated by 60 nautical miles, has not been deeply analyzed. What does this flight activity by the PLAAF mean?

As it will be stated below in the following section, there has been various speculation about why the PLAAF formation conducted such a flight.<sup>4</sup> The majority of the speculation was that the flight was navigation training or that it was for intelligence collection. However, such speculation has not sufficiently analyzed the true significance of the Chinese military action that is contained in the PLAAF formation's flight path and its flight in a trail formation. Therefore, concerning the question of what this flight activity by the PLAAF means, we are still without a correct assessment. Moreover, when one considers that large transports such as the Y-20 and the Il-76 are constituent elements of power projection, it is likely impossible to have a proper debate about how the territorial dispute in the South China Sea relates to this incident.

Thus, in this paper, after analyzing the flight path of the PLAAF formation, it will be shown that this incident was actually training for airborne operations by the PLAAF's transport aircraft. The significance of this paper lies in its use of this incident to consider the possibilities of strategic power projection<sup>5</sup> by elements of air power such as large transport aircraft, thereby deciphering the true meaning of China's military activity. This paper will take the following structure. First, in Section 2, after straightening out the facts of this incident in which PLAAF transports approached Malaysian airspace, the points that are necessary for analysis will be extracted in light of the related countries' responses. Then, in Section 3, after establishing the hypothesis that the flight was training for airborne operations, the mission of the PLAAF formation will be analyzed using its flight path. In Section 4, the way that the airborne corps is perceived and the trend in how it is reported on in China will be analyzed, and then the hypothesis that the incident was training for airborne operations will be examined.

As for the method of research, not only Malaysian but also Chinese official sources and high officials' statements, as well as discussions within the PLA will receive primary focus. However, Chinese sources are always limited. Details regarding the PLA, in particular, are often not released to the public. Therefore, in this paper, while conducting a detailed analysis of the facts of the incident using news reports in Chinese domestic media, analysis will be conducted in light of Western debate and news media reports.

## 2. The Incident in which PLAAF Transport Aircraft Approached Malaysian Airspace

In this section the facts of the incident that occurred on May 31, 2021 will be straightened out.

## (1) The Facts According to Malaysia<sup>6</sup>

The situation in this incident was publicized as follows on Twitter. At 11:53 AM on May 31, 2021 a radar of the Royal Malaysian Air Force detected 16 flight tracks (aircraft) approaching Malaysian airspace.

These flight tracks approached while maintaining separations of 60 nautical miles (111 kilometers) between each other,<sup>7</sup> flying at 23,000 to 27,000 feet at a speed of 290 knots.<sup>8</sup> The detected aircraft did not respond to repeated calls by an air traffic controller.

The flight tracks passed through Singapore's Flight Information Region (FIR) into the Malaysian Maritime Zone (Malaysian: Zon Maritim Malaysia),<sup>9</sup> then into the Kota Kinabalu FIR, and at the point when they approached within 60 nautical miles of the shore of Sarawak, the Malaysian Air Force judged that there was a threat to national sovereignty and responded by scrambling aircraft.<sup>10</sup> In accordance with the regulations of the International Civil Aviation Organization<sup>11</sup> and with the Malaysian National Air Defense Strategy (Malaysian: Strategi Pertahanan Udara Nasional<sup>12</sup>), at 1:33 PM the 6<sup>th</sup> Squadron at Labuan Airbase scrambled Hawk 208 light combat aircraft.<sup>13</sup>

As a result of the interceptors' observing the aircraft against which they were scrambled, the flight tracks were determined to be a formation of 16 aircraft, composed of Il-76 and Y-20 transports, that belonged to the PLAAF and that were flying in a trail formation at separations of 60 nautical miles.<sup>14</sup>

Later, the Malaysian Foreign Ministry demanded from China an explanation of this flight activity by the PLAAF.<sup>15</sup> The flight path of the PLAAF's transport aircraft is indicated on the Malaysian Air Force's Twitter account, and according to that account, the formation of PLAAF aircraft passed through the Malaysian Maritime Zone and an area just next to the South Luconia Shoals (Malaysian: Gugusan Beting Patinggi Ali),<sup>16</sup> which Malaysia claims as its territory (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Part of the Beting Patinggi Ali Shoals. Source: <https://sarawakvoice.com/2016/04/01/beting-patinggi-ali-selamat-untuk-nelayan-tempatan-panglima-tldm/>

Malaysia and China had already been disputing sovereignty over the Spratly Islands, including the South Luconia Shoals. In March 2016 the dispute between the two countries

intensified when more than 100 Chinese fishing vessels anchored in waters off the South Luconia Shoals.<sup>17</sup> In April 2020, in order to monitor an oil exploration ship that the Malaysian government had hired, China sent 10 vessels, including Chinese Coast Guard and maritime militia vessels, all the way to waters near Malaysia.<sup>18</sup>

In September of the same year, the Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe<sup>19</sup> visited Kuala Lumpur, and in discussions with the prime minister and defense minister of Malaysia, he had just had a positive exchange of views about the relationship between the two countries' armed forces and about their problems in the South China Sea.<sup>20</sup>

In this context, the incident at hand occurred on May 31, 2021, and just 24 hours later the Malaysian Air Force released the details of it, including a chart of the aircrafts' flight path, on the social network service Twitter (Figure 1).<sup>21</sup> Most media based their reporting on the information that the Malaysian Air Force released through Twitter, immediately reporting a suspicious flight by the PLAAF, and because Malaysia's position was emphasized, they used words such as "incursion"<sup>22</sup> or "intrusion"<sup>23</sup> as they reported the "incursion by China."

There were also media outlets that reported that there was a dispute between the two countries over the facts of the incident. According to Taiwanese media, while the Malaysian foreign minister criticized China, saying that Malaysia "would not compromise on national security," the Chinese ambassador to Malaysia explained the flight away, saying, "These Chinese military aircraft did nothing more than conduct normal training, and they strictly followed international law, so they did not intrude into another country's airspace."<sup>24</sup> In addition, the United Kingdom's BBC reported that the South Luconia Shoals, over which Malaysia has sovereignty, are located within China's nine-dash line demarcating its territorial claim.<sup>25</sup> These reports put the differences between the two countries' stances into stark relief. However, because Malaysia quickly raised this problem with international society, the way that international society views this incident was directed by Malaysia. In other words, it can be said that Malaysia succeeded in the war of public opinion, and it was able to achieve some results.

## (2) The Chinese Reaction

In contrast with Malaysia's reaction, it was undeniable that China seemed to have lost the initiative in its response. Two days after the incident, during the Chinese Foreign Ministry's regular press conference on June 2, the press secretary Wang Wenbin, in response to a question from a reporter from Bloomberg, attempted to settle the matter by thus explaining: "The Chinese air force did nothing more than conduct normal training over an area of the Spratly Islands, and the training did not target any country. The Chinese air force strictly obeyed international law and did not intrude into another country's airspace" (Figure 3).<sup>26</sup>

This remark by the Chinese foreign ministry's press secretary was obviously shorter than any other answer to the questions that he was asked at the same press conference, and it merely parallels the (aforementioned) remarks by the Chinese ambassador to Malaysia. Moreover, in contrast, China's defense ministry, which is responsible for releasing information from the PLA, never released a statement about this incident. China's response, which undeniably seems to be reactive, may be due to a lack of horizontal coordination between the defense and foreign ministries. It is likely that because the PLA did not expect its training to cause an uproar from international society, the defense ministry did not coordinate with the foreign ministry.



Figure 3. The Chinese Foreign Ministry's spokesman holding a press conference about the incident. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eNT84j56Q2c>

In the past there have been instances in which it was thought that there was insufficient horizontal coordination between the defense and foreign ministries. A representative example is that of Hu Jintao's apparent surprise when then-U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who was visiting China, asked the then-general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party about the first flight of the PLAAF's J-20 stealth fighter on January 11, 2011.<sup>27</sup>

The evasiveness of the Chinese media stands out. For instance, on June 4, the official *Global Times* did not go beyond mentioning that the PLAAF's large transport aircraft had been deployed to deliver COVID-19 vaccine to surrounding countries and that it was a constant mission. Moreover, the newspaper quoted a Chinese military specialist who said that it was entirely natural for the PLAAF to conduct flight training over the South China Sea because it is necessary for it to simultaneously carry out strategic air transport missions and humanitarian aid missions, thereby avoiding directly mentioning the incident at hand.<sup>28</sup> It was not only official media that thus shifted the focus of the discussion. On June 3 Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post* also quoted a defense analyst at *Janes* who said that "it was unlikely that China would have sent 16 transport planes on one mission."<sup>29</sup>

However, with the appearance of objective information from a third party on June 14, the truth about the number of aircraft is coming to light. The spokesman of the U.S. Pacific Air Forces stated that the number of PLAAF aircraft was "closer to what the Royal Malaysian Airforce is tracking."<sup>30</sup> In addition, the commander of the U.S. Pacific Air Forces, General Kenneth S. Wilsbach, even came to criticize the PLAAF's activity off the shores of Malaysia, saying that it would bring about destabilization.<sup>31</sup>

### (3) Summary

Let's summarize Part 2. In response to the PLAAF's approaching Malaysia with 16 large transport aircraft flying in a trail formation at separations of 60 nautical miles, even as Malaysia demanded an explanation from China through diplomatic channels, it raised the problem with international society using a social network service. The dispute between Malaysia, which claims that its sovereignty has been violated, and China, which claims that it is strictly obeying international law, continued with neither releasing new objective facts. While the Chinese defense

ministry has not released a statement concerning the incident, some Chinese media have reported that Malaysia's claim of 16 aircraft being involved is a stretch, and information that can be interpreted to mean that Malaysia's claim is more reliable also appeared out of a third country.

Either way, the information that Malaysia posted to social media has dominated the view of this incident in international society, and it can be said that Malaysia made good use of public opinion warfare. On the other hand, it can be interpreted from the facts that the Chinese foreign ministry was continually forced to react and that the defense ministry kept silent the entire time that China, in which horizontal coordination was not conducted, was on the back foot in the public opinion battle.

### 3. Analysis

In this part, a hypothesis will be established from what is known about the incident, and then analysis and examination will be conducted from the standpoint of military operations.

#### (1) Preliminary Discussion: Malaysia and a Tough-Minded Aspect of China

With respect to sovereignty in the South China Sea, the relevant countries' claims and intentions are intricately intertwined, and there was a background that is difficult to understand clearly.<sup>32</sup> Even in such a context, it was wise that Malaysia immediately used a social network service and overseas media to spread the fact that disputes over the sovereignty of the Spratly Islands exist.

In recent years China has taken a forceful attitude over the sovereignty of the South China Sea. However, as stated before, with respect to this particular incident, it seemed that China passively attempted to calm things down or even change the focus of the discussion. In contrast to the foreign ministry, which struggled to respond, the defense ministry never indicated its own public view to the end. This phenomenon, in which it seems that horizontal coordination was poor between the foreign and defense ministries, stood a tough-minded aspect of modern China's decision-making system in stark relief.

On the other hand, there are political circumstances in which Malaysia cannot continue to take a hardline stance against China. As proof, immediately after this incident occurred on May 31, during the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Summit that was held in Chongqing City, China from June 7 to June 8,<sup>33</sup> there is no trace of the Malaysian representatives' protesting to the Chinese representatives.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps the Malaysian representatives put the matter aside or conveyed their concerns to China in a nonpublic meeting. To Malaysia, China has been its greatest trading partner for 12 consecutive years as well as a provider of vaccines for COVID-19.<sup>35</sup> Each time that there has been a dispute like the incident at hand, there has been a tendency for the nationalism of the Malaysian people to intensify, and while they take a stance of protecting Malaysia's interests in the South China Sea, at the same time, they have had to promote the relationship with China.<sup>36</sup> Thus the Malaysian government has had difficulty responding as it balances between both sides.

With respect to the incident at hand, in reaction to Malaysia's criticism that its sovereignty had been violated, China has only responded that it did not enter Malaysia's airspace, and the two countries remain as far apart as ever while neither produces new evidence.<sup>37</sup> From this, it cannot be expected that China or Malaysia will later produce any new objective facts. Therefore, all that can be done in order to investigate the problem of what the flight by the PLAAF formation means is to carefully examine the existing evidence and make conjectures.

## (2) Formulating a Hypothesis: Using the Logic of Military Operational Planning

### A. The Debate around the Meaning of the Flight by the PLAAF Formation

The question of what the flight by the PLAAF formation meant has been debated to some degree. The majority speculated that it was navigation training.<sup>38</sup> In addition, according to Dr. Adam Leong Kok Wey of the Centre for Defence and International Security Studies of Malaysia's National Defence University, it is possible that the flight was to test the air defense capability of the Malaysian Air Force and to collect electronic intelligence on Malaysia's radars and on the air force's reaction time.<sup>39</sup>

On the other hand, there were those who indicated the possibility that the flight was for Chinese power projection. Collin Koh, a China researcher at Singapore's Nanyang Technology University, indicated that there is a high probability that it was to demonstrate China's acquisition of new power projection capabilities.<sup>40</sup> Koh was not the only person to have pointed to such a demonstration by China. As a service member would, the retired Lieutenant Colonel Ahmad Abu-Hassan of Malaysia hinted at "China's strategic aim." In other words, given that as many as 16 aircraft participated, and based on a scenario in which large-scale air transportation is necessary, he suggested that the flight was training for an airdrop of as many as 3,000 paratroopers.<sup>41</sup>

### B. Defining the Problem and Establishing the Hypothesis

Although the hypothesis that it was navigation training itself cannot be refuted, an aircraft is, in the first place, something that navigates as it flies. Therefore, this hypothesis cannot sufficiently explain what the flight by the PLAAF formation means. To begin with, in a modern society in which flight simulation technology has developed, the explanation that the purpose of 16 large transport aircraft flying like a feudal lord's procession was merely for navigation training is unrealistic. This is because it would not be worth the considerable labor and cost that are necessary to launch and fly a formation of 16 large transport aircraft.<sup>42</sup> Adam Wey conjectured that the PLAAF's purpose was to collect electronic intelligence on Malaysia's radars and the Malaysian air force's response time.<sup>43</sup> However, this explanation is also insufficient. Like with navigation training, from the standpoint of cost performance, it is impossible to find a need to mobilize as many as 16 aircraft. If there is only one realistic conjecture that is worth analyzing and considering, it is that of Abu-Hassan. As a service member would, he speculated that the Chinese aim for which large-scale air transport is necessary could be practice for deploying paratroopers.<sup>44</sup> From this, it is necessary to discern the motive for the PLAAF's mobilizing as many as 16 transport aircraft.

From the above debate, the problem is stated as "what did the PLAAF formation's flight mean." Given that it seems that there was on the Chinese side consciousness of a problem for which the fast-acting means of mobilizing paratroopers was necessary, the hypothesis is that the PLAAF, using large transport aircraft, conducted training to take the disputed region with paratroopers. Analysis and examination of this hypothesis will now be attempted.

### (3) The PLAAF's Mission as Conjectured from the Flight Path

From the discussion up to this point, it is necessary to consider what mission was given to the PLAAF formation. Given that military operations always have a purpose, the formation's flight path and the formation itself will be examined again.

Figure 4 is the flight chart that was released on Twitter, enlarged in order to analyze the PLAAF's activity.<sup>45</sup>

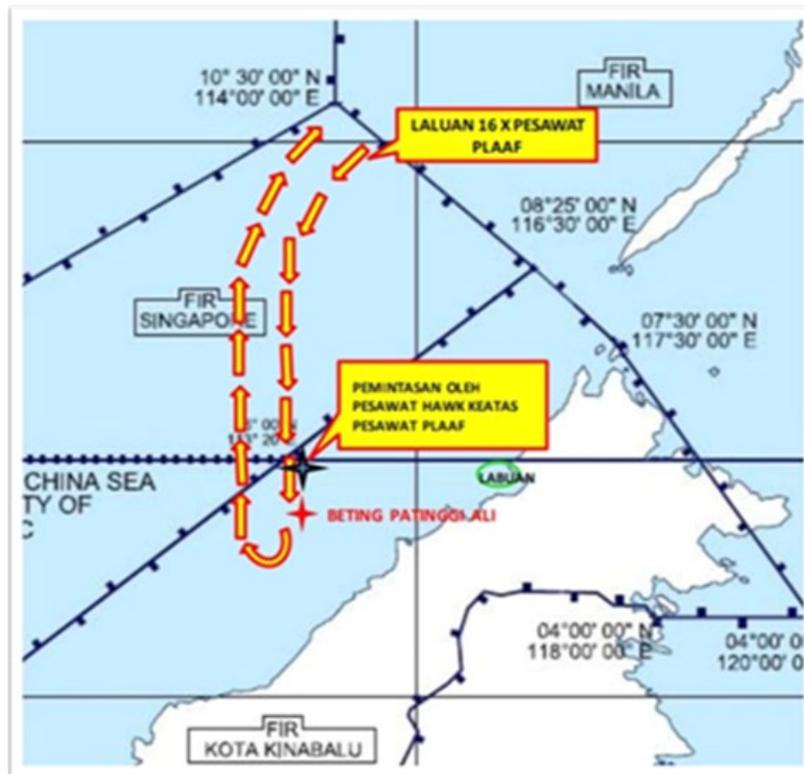


Figure 4. Enlarged chart centering on the PLAAF formation's flight path. Source: [https://twitter.com/tudm\\_rasmi/status/1399685724706770946](https://twitter.com/tudm_rasmi/status/1399685724706770946)

According to the chart, the formation that was detected by radar flew with each aircraft flying at separations of 60 nautical miles. Flying from a single point, the formation entered the Singapore FIR, and then after entering the Kota Kinabalu FIR, it flew right past the South Luconia Shoals.<sup>46</sup> Each aircraft then immediately changed its heading north, by and large appearing to leave the area, passing through the intersection of the Singapore, Manila, and Ho Chi Minh FIRs at 10° 30' 00" N 114° 00' 00" E.

Why did the 16 PLAAF aircraft adopt the trail formation with separations of 60 nautical miles? If the aircraft maintained the aforementioned speed of 290 knots, in a simple calculation, the transport aircraft would proceed at a speed of 4.8 nautical miles per minute. This means that each transport aircraft, flying the same route, was passing through the same point at separations of 12 minutes and 30 seconds.<sup>47</sup> Needless to say, this action was an intricately planned flight. With 16 aircraft flying in a trail formation at 60 nautical-mile separations, one can imagine the situation in which the formation flew in a great procession extending as far as 900 nautical miles. Rather than a formation flight in which the lead aircraft commanded the aircraft behind it, it can be said

that this was a group activity in which the flight was planned with each aircraft taking off at certain separations.<sup>48</sup> This would mean that it is very likely that each aircraft had practiced the basic actions of this flight. It is natural to think that each aircrew flew a set route and was getting used to the topography of the area around the South China Sea as it practiced various procedures.

#### (4) For Where Was the Airborne Operation Planned?

For what reason would the aircrews familiarize themselves with the surrounding topography? Why were as many as 16 aircraft thrown into the flight? Let's compare the chart of their flight path with a map to locate their flight paths.<sup>49</sup> Figure 5 [next page] is the flight path of the PLAAF formation over a map of the Spratly Islands at the same scale. According to this analysis, one can see that there is an island called Itu Aba Island that is located 15 nautical miles northeast from the point where the PLAAF formation entered the Singapore FIR.

Itu Aba Island is also known as Taiping Island (which has a 1,200-meter runway<sup>50</sup>), over which Taiwan exercises sovereignty. There is a high probability that the PLAAF formation passed right by Taiping Island as it entered the Singapore FIR. This is an important discovery that brings home the point that this incident is not a bilateral problem between Malaysia and China over the South Luconia Shoals. Although the Malaysian and Taiwanese governments have not released precise position-locating flight data, considering the speed and the route in which the formation flew at an altitude of approximately 25,000 feet, it is conceivable that the PLAAF formation flew near Taiping Island.

This analysis brings about other surprising discoveries. Even as the PLAAF formation flew south towards the South Luconia Shoals, as can be seen in Figure 5, it is possible that the formation flew in the area around Swallow Reef (which has a 1,367-meter runway), over which Malaysia exercises sovereignty. Moreover, even after the formation turned north, it appears to have flown near Spratly Island (which has a 550-meter runway).<sup>51</sup> These flight paths ultimately seem to have exited the Singapore FIR by flying over the manmade Fiery Cross Reef (which has a 3,125-meter runway), which China claims, and then it is possible that, considering the formation's flight path and speed, the formation immediately passed next to the Philippines' Pag-asa Island (which has a 1,300-meter runway).

Adding these conjectures up, we can catch a glimpse of China's aim of driving home that the whole of the Spratly Islands is its territory. This kind of flight, which can be taken as a demonstration of strength by China, can be thought of as a scenario in which airborne forces are dropped on airfields on Taiwan's Taiping Island, Malaysia's Swallow Island, Vietnam's Spratly Island, and the Philippines' Pag-asa Island. It is likely that as a part of that, the crew of each aircraft practiced a basic flight profile including familiarizing themselves with the surrounding topography.

Let's look back at the writing of Abu-Hassan, who is the only one to have mentioned the possibility of an airborne operation. Realistically supposing that one transport aircraft can carry 100 paratroopers in full combat gear as well as other weapons and gear, in order to seize the multiple islands spread about in the South China Sea, the plan may have been for multiple transport aircraft to head for the islands that they were assigned beforehand. If that is so, then should the Central Military Commission of the Chinese Communist Party decide to conduct an airborne operation with 16 aircraft, then it becomes more realistic to reason that in a few hours approximately 1,600 paratroopers will parachute onto islands that China does not own in order to seize airfields and other facilities.<sup>52</sup>

## Comparison of the PLAAF Formation's Flight Path with a Map of the Spratly Islands

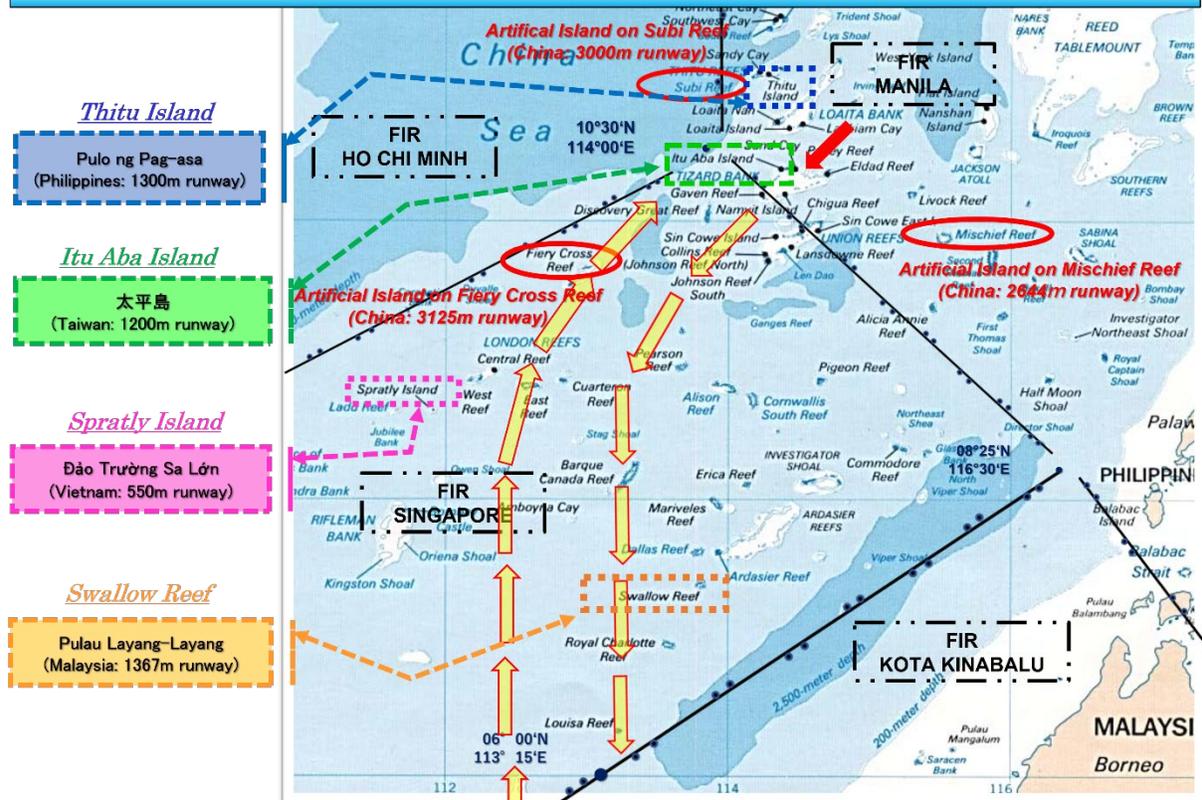


Figure 5. Comparison of the PLAAF formation's flight path with a map of the Spratly Islands. Sources: <https://gis.icao.int/icao/fir/>, [https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/spratly\\_islands.html](https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/spratly_islands.html)

### (5) Summary

Let's summarize Part 3. As a result of analyzing why the PLAAF formation flew in a trail formation along the same route, a significant fact was discovered, namely that the flight tracks passed through areas near Taiwan's Taiping Island, Malaysia's Swallow Island, Vietnam's Spratly Island, and the Philippines' Pag-asa Island. Hence, it is highly likely that each aircraft's crew practiced the basic flight profile and familiarized themselves with the topography of the area around the Spratly Islands.<sup>53</sup> This fact sufficiently substantiates the hypothesis that the PLAAF threw many transport aircraft into this operation and conducted basic training for seizing disputed territory by airborne operations. At any rate, that the flight tracks likely passed near Taiwanese, Malaysian, Vietnamese, and Philippine territorial islands underlines just how complicated the territorial problem in the South China Sea is.

### 4. Thoughts

In this part, the validity of the hypothesis that the flight was training for airborne operations will be bolstered with the statements of Chinese strategists and China's domestic news reports.

## (1) Large Transport Aircraft as a Means of Power Projection

Until now the possibility of airborne operations in the area of the Spratly Islands was analyzed based on the flight path of the formation of PLAAF transports. Of course, as long as new information is not produced by both China or Malaysia, it forever cannot be conclusively determined whether the flight was training for airborne operations or not. Nevertheless, adding the circumstantial evidence up and proving a hypothesis is what research in military science is about.

In his paper “Civil Transport in PLA Power Projection,” published in 2019, Conor M. Kennedy of the Naval War College’s China Maritime Studies Institute pointed out that large transport aircraft like the Y-20 and the Il-76 are achieving a useful place as assets that will be used for strategic power projection.<sup>54</sup> In the PLA, “strategic power projection” is defined as “comprehensively utilizing various means of transportation to throw forces into an area of operations or crisis.”<sup>55</sup> In addition, in the military doctrine *The Science of Strategy*, the statement that the “PLA must strengthen its power projection capability” was stated along with the need to protect China’s enlarging “overseas interests.”<sup>56</sup> Thus statements of the need to strengthen power projection capability have always been paired with statements concerning the protection of China’s national interests overseas.

On the other hand, the concept of China’s “overseas interests” is gradually broadening. As it gradually expands beyond just Chinese people and resources to include the safety of maritime lines of communication, it is necessary to turn one’s eyes towards the discourse of “overseas interests.” In 2018 PLA strategists said that the PLA should build a “cross-border and trans-oceanic long-distance power projection capability.”<sup>57</sup>

Moreover, within the units that have the new transport, the Y-20, which will be thrown into airborne operations, it is necessary to pay attention to the fact that preparations to project power are gradually being expanded. According to *People’s Daily*, the Y-20 was only delivered to the PLAAF in July 2016, but by May 2018 airborne operations with the Y-20 had already begun, and by April 2019 far-seas navigation training had already begun, so its operational readiness is being improved.<sup>58</sup> In addition, in September 2020 the Y-20 was used for the first time in a military exercise that was held by Russia, and the Y-20’s performance in air transport was praised as an achievement in the exercise.<sup>59</sup>

While strategic air transport with the Y-20 and the Il-76 is thus becoming important in China’s power projection, among Chinese strategists, debate is deepening about the concrete tactical points of power projection. Kennedy raised the alarm about a Chinese strategist’s statement that “strategic air transport should be used to secure the PLA’s relative superiority on disputed territory as it uses air transport to quickly concentrate forces in decisive places and thereby deliver a mental shock to the enemy.”<sup>60</sup> While the Chinese strategist that Kennedy cited, Mi Binbin, developed this statement in the PLA’s official newspaper *Liberation Army News*, he emphasized that in the environment of modern informationized war in which temporal and spatial windows are easily limited, “conducting strategic power projection with strong air power is the only means of fighting timely and effectively.”<sup>61</sup> This is just the kind of remark that indicates a consciousness of the gray zone even in peacetime.

Judging from the reasoning of these Chinese strategists, it can be thought that China, which is continuing to penetrate the oceans, has developed the motive to seize disputed islands in order to secure the safety of its sea lines of communication and thereby protect its “overseas interests.” Large transport aircraft like the Y-20 and Il-76 are being counted on as means of effective power

projection, and it is thought that attention is being paid to airborne units as a means of rapid action. It is in that context that the incident at hand occurred.

## (2) Increasing Coverage of the Praised Airborne Corps

Let's validate whether the incident at hand really was a flight with an airborne operation in mind or not by looking at the airborne force.<sup>62</sup>

Within *Liberation Army News* and other news media that is operated by the Political Work Department of the CMC,<sup>63</sup> one will notice a peculiar phenomenon, namely that reports praising the airborne corps are increasing. Of course, it is not as if there were no reports about the airborne corps before.<sup>64</sup> From August to September 2020 there were reports featuring the airborne corps, but most of those were articles glorifying the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the airborne corps.<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, with respect to reporting since 2021, articles reporting the state of the airborne corps' training are gradually increasing, and since the time when the incident at hand occurred on May 31, 2021, the trend in the increase has been remarkable.<sup>66</sup>



Figure 6. Airborne-related article in the June 1, 2021 issue of *Liberation Army News*. Source: [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/1/2021-06/01/12/2021060112\\_pdf.pdf](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/1/2021-06/01/12/2021060112_pdf.pdf)

The content of some of the reports in this phenomenon includes articles such as one in which paratroopers were praised for conducting a low-altitude, low-opening jump after being guided to the drop zone by pathfinders who had infiltrated the area of operations<sup>67</sup> and another one reporting that the airborne corps conducted “tactical power projection” by dropping paratroopers from multiple aircraft.<sup>68</sup> There is also a tendency to emphasize the “achievements” of jumps over water and nighttime jumps.<sup>69</sup> The increase in nighttime training is attributable to CMC Chairman Xi Jinping’s ordering the PLA to become a world-class military. In order to realize that goal, each service is pursuing “realistic training,” and as a part of that, “nighttime military operations” are increasing.<sup>70</sup> A phenomenon that is more worthy of attention is the reporting on the day following the incident at hand, as pictured in Figure 6 [previous page]. On page 12 of the June 1, 2021 issue of *Liberation Army News*, more than half of the page was given over to pictures of paratroopers boarding a Y-20 and then jumping from it under the headline, “Land-air cooperation, crack troops descend from sky.”<sup>71</sup>

Despite the fact that the incident at hand had drawn that much attention from international society, and that the foreign ministry was having trouble responding, one cannot but get the impression that there is a difference in the degree of concern between the foreign ministry and the CMC’s Political Work Department, which thus praised the airborne corps.

However, looking from a different perspective, while they praise the transport units that completed the long-distance formation flight in the South China Sea with as many as 16 aircraft, they may be implicitly praising the airborne corps, which would be the real star.

But during the defense ministry’s regular press conference on June 24<sup>72</sup> (press conferences are held once per month at the end of the month), defense ministry spokesman Senior Colonel Ren Guoqiang made no statement about the incident at hand (see Figure 7).<sup>73</sup>

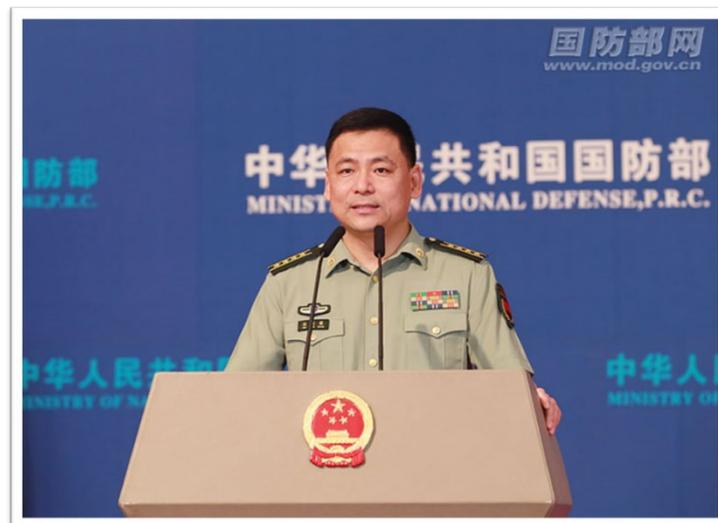


Figure 7. National Defense Ministry spokesman who did not mention the incident. Source: [http://www.mod.gov.cn/info/2021-06/24/content\\_4888067.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/info/2021-06/24/content_4888067.htm), accessed on June 25, 2021

## (2) Airborne Forces as a Means of Power Projection

This section will analyze the changes in how, and how frequently, the topics of the PLA’s airborne corps and power projection have been reported by Chinese Military Online, a website operated by the CMC Political Work Department.

All the reports that appeared since January 2020 when searching for the keyword “airborne corps” on Chinese Military Online were collected and listed in the reference list. Figure 8 is a chart that adds those articles as well as those that appeared in the same time frame when searching for the keyword “power projection.” In Figure 8, the blue bar graph represents the numbers of reports containing “airborne corps” and the red line graph represents those containing “power projection.”

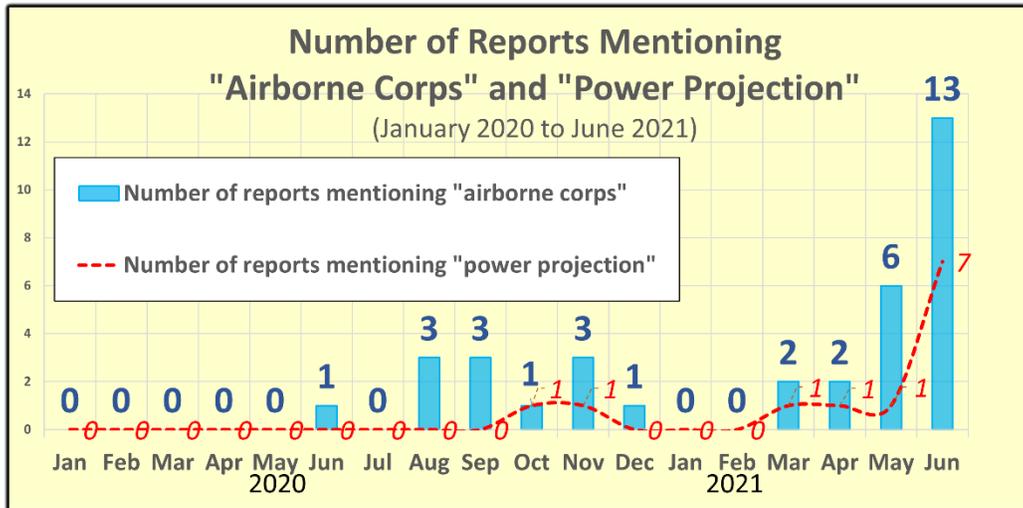


Figure 8. Number of reports mentioning "airborne corps" and "power projection"

When one analyzes Figure 8, one sees that from just before the incident occurred on May 31, 2021, reporting about the “airborne corps” and “power projection” increased suddenly. Reports concerning the “airborne corps,” in particular, increased notably from six in May 2021 to thirteen in June 2021. Moreover, one can see that the number of reports about “power projection,” of which there was only one in May 2021, increased to six in June 2021, immediately after the incident.

This trend of a notable increase can be taken as being compatible with the established view in Chinese military science that, as Kennedy pointed out, airborne operations are an effective means of power projection. In other words, this means that there is in the CMC, which operates Chinese Military Online, an underlying recognition that airborne operations are an effective means of power projection. The trend that articles praising the airborne corps thus increase and their tone is linked to power projection implicitly substantiates the truth of the incident in which PLAAF aircraft approached Malaysian airspace: namely, that it was a part of training for airborne operations.<sup>74</sup> The CMC may have let the foreign ministry attempt to settle things down while the defense ministry maintained silence in order to keep this incident from gaining any further attention.

### (3) Summary

Let’s summarize the discussion up to here. China’s “strategic power projection,” which is defined as “an action to insert forces into an area of operations or a crisis by comprehensively utilizing various means of transport in order to attain a certain strategic goal,” is gaining more attention as China’s “overseas interests” expand. Likely underlying the actions of China, which continues pushing into the far seas, was the goal of solidifying China’s “overseas interests” by seizing islands over which disputes exist with surrounding countries at a time when Beijing deems it necessary to do so—even at a peacetime, gray zone stage—in order to secure China’s sea lines

of communication. The airborne corps garnered attention, and large transport aircraft like the Y-20 and the Il-76 also garnered attention as a means of power projection.

Under this premise, it is possible that the CMC, not wanting the world to detect China's readiness to seize the disputed territory by means of airborne operations, strategically let the foreign ministry attempt to settle things down as the defense ministry maintained silence, and this possibility is irrefutable.

Put simply, the above hypothesis that the PLAAF used large transport aircraft to conduct preliminary training to seize disputed territory through airborne operations should be seen as valid.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, in light of the incident in which 16 PLAAF transport aircraft approached Malaysian airspace, the question of what the flight by the PLAAF formation means was posed, and with the hypothesis that the PLAAF used large transport aircraft to conduct preliminary training to seize disputed territory by means of airborne operations, analysis was attempted with limited information.

As a result of successive analysis, it was found that it is likely that the PLAAF is considering a scenario in which, as a means of power projection, it uses multiple transport aircraft to conduct airborne operations against the islands spread throughout the Spratly Islands that China does not yet control. Specifically, it can be conjectured that airborne operations are being planned to seize airfields on Taiwan's Taiping Island, Malaysia's Swallow Island, Vietnam's Spratly Island, and the Philippines' Pag-asa Island. For that purpose, it is likely that each aircrew practiced the basic flight profile of flying in a trail formation at 60 nautical-mile separations, familiarizing themselves with the surrounding topography. This was the PLAAF transport formation's very mission.

Chinese strategists like Mi Binbin have stated, "conducting strategic power projection with strong air power is the only timely and effective means of fighting in an environment of [modern informationized warfare] in which time and spatial windows [excellent opportunities] are easily limited."<sup>75</sup> As the concept of China's "overseas interests" expands, this statement will probably gain increasing support domestically. This means that, at the same time, there is a consequent risk of similar military activities increasing without coordination with the foreign ministry. In consideration of the discussion in China, it can be understood that likely underlying China's actions was the goal of solidifying China's "overseas interests" by seizing islands over which disputes exist with surrounding countries at a time when Beijing deems it necessary to do so—even at a peacetime, gray zone stage—in order to secure China's sea lines of communication. It is indisputable that large transport aircraft like the Y-20 and the Il-76 are garnering attention as means of power projection and that China's airborne corps is garnering attention as a means of rapid action. It is necessary for international society to know that the incident in which the PLAAF formation approached Malaysian airspace occurred in this context.

Upon deepening this research, the author became acutely aware that this incident was not merely a bilateral problem between China and Malaysia. In addition, the fact that international society's view of this incident was influenced by Malaysia proves that public releases on social network services are an effective means against great powers that behave aggressively, and it can be said that, from that perspective, Malaysia effectively used public opinion warfare. On the other hand, it can probably be concluded that China, whose response was passive, became disadvantaged

in the public opinion war because the foreign and defense ministries did not coordinate with each other, but by deepening the research, another conclusion was discovered. That is, there is an irrefutable possibility that the CMC, not wanting the world to detect China's readiness to seize the disputed territory by means of airborne operations, let the foreign ministry attempt to settle things down as the defense ministry maintained silence so that the incident would garner no further attention.

Be that as it may, assuming that if airborne operations against islands in the South China Sea, which can be called a Chinese blitzkrieg,<sup>76</sup> were to occur, it is necessary to be aware of the possibility that they will occur from a peacetime stage in which it is difficult to predict them. It may be difficult to predict such an action, but it may be possible to observe some kind of indication, such as an increase in articles about the airborne corps.

As was done in this paper, thinking back using the logic of operational planning is useful in seeking out the true significance of China's military activities, which thus contain many points of debate.

Opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Japanese Air Command and Staff College, the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force, the Japanese Defense Ministry, or any other Japanese government entity, nor do they necessarily represent the views of Air University, the Department of the Air Force, the Department of Defense, or any other U.S. government agency. Cleared for public release: distribution unlimited.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Royal Malaysian Air Force, Twitter post, June 1, 2021 (7:14 a.m.), accessed June 1, 2021, [https://twitter.com/tudm\\_rasmi/status/1399685724706770946](https://twitter.com/tudm_rasmi/status/1399685724706770946).

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Sipalan, “Malaysia to summon Chinese envoy over ‘suspicious’ air force activity,” Reuters, June 1, 2021, accessed June 2, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/malaysia-says-chinese-military-planes-came-close-violating-air-space-2021-06-01/>.

<sup>3</sup> Laura Zhou, “South China Sea: Chinese warplanes near Malaysia ‘aimed at showing dominance,’” South China Morning Post, June 5, 2021, accessed June 12, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3136133/south-china-sea-chinese-warplanes-near-malaysia-aimed-showing>.

<sup>4</sup> Euan Graham, “Aerial Manoeuvres in the South China Sea,” International Institute for Strategic Studies, June 9, 2021, accessed June 29, 2021, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2021/06/aerial-manoevres-south-china-sea>.

<sup>5</sup> It will be discussed later, but in China, “strategic power projection” (战略投送) is defined as “the action of projecting power to an area of operations or crisis by comprehensively using various means of transport in order to achieve a certain strategic goal.” 全军军事术语管理委员会 [Joint military terminology management committee], “战略投送” [strategic power projection], 中国人民解放军军语 [Military terminology of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army] (Beijing: 军事科学出版社 [Military Science Publishing House], 2011), 58.

<sup>6</sup> Royal Malaysian Air Force, Twitter post, June 1, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> The Malaysian Maritime Zone refers to Malaysia’s exclusive economic zone.

<sup>10</sup> Royal Malaysian Air Force, Twitter post, June 1, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> “SARPs - Standards and Recommended Practices,” International Civil Aviation Organization, November 7, 2019, accessed June 12, 2021, <https://www.icao.int/safety/safetymanagement/pages/sarps.aspx>.

<sup>12</sup> “AS kecam pesawat tentera China terbang di ruang udara Malaysia [US criticizes Chinese aircraft flying in Malaysian airspace],” Malaysiakini, June 5, 2021, accessed June 12, 2021, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/577677>.

<sup>13</sup> Mike Yeo, “China sends 16 military aircraft over disputed South China Sea shoals near Malaysia,” Defense News, June 1, 2021, accessed June 2, 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2021/06/01/china-sends-16-military-aircraft-over-disputed-south-china-sea-shoals-near-malaysia/>. It is unclear whether the Malaysian air force’s F/A-18s or Su-30MKMs participated in the interception or not. Dzirhan Mahadzir, “Chinese Air Force Fly 16 Aircraft Through Malaysian Airspace in Large-Scale Exercise,” USNI News, June 1, 2021, accessed June 2, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/06/01/chinese-air-force-fly-16-aircraft-through-malaysian-air-space-in-large-scale-exercise>.

<sup>14</sup> Royal Malaysian Air Force, Twitter post, June 1, 2021. It is still unknown how many of each type of aircraft there were.

<sup>15</sup> Royal Malaysian Air Force, Twitter post, June 1, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> The Western media outlet *The Diplomat* reported the name of the shoals as the “South Luconia Shoals.” Adam Leong Kok Wey, “Chinese Overflight Highlights Malaysia’s Need for a Stronger Military Deterrent,” *The Diplomat*, June 3, 2021, accessed June 10, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/chinese-overflight-highlights-malaysias-need-for-a-stronger-military-deterrent/>.

<sup>17</sup> The South Luconia Shoals are 80 nautical miles from Malaysia’s State of Sarawak. Mohd Noor Affandi, “Beting Patinggi Ali selamat untuk nelayan tempatan – Panglima TLDM,” Sarawakvoice, April 1, 2016, accessed June 2, 2021, <https://sarawakvoice.com/2016/04/01/beting-patinggi-ali-selamat-untuk-nelayan-tempatan-panglima-tldm/>.

<sup>18</sup> Wey, “Chinese Overflight.”

<sup>19</sup> Wei Fenghe, who is China’s Minister of National Defense, was appointed as the chief of staff of the PLA’s strategic missile force, the Second Artillery, in 2006. During the Chinese Communist Party’s 17<sup>th</sup> party congress, he was selected as an alternate member of the party’s central committee. He has held his current post since 2018. “魏鳳和” [Wei Fenghe], 新华网 [Xinhua News Agency Online], March 19, 2018, accessed June 2, 2021, [http://www.mod.gov.cn/big5/leaders/2018-03/19/content\\_4807295.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/big5/leaders/2018-03/19/content_4807295.htm). During the Shangri-La Dialogue that was held in Singapore on June 2, 2019, in a speech, Wei stated in the context of trade friction that “if you want dialogue, the door is open; if you want a fight, then we’ll fight. We’re prepared.” He is known as a hawk. “米との貿易摩擦

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『戦う準備できている』中国国防相” [Chinese defense minister says ‘ready to fight’ in trade friction with U.S.], 日本経済新聞 [Nihon Keizai Shimbun], June 2, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> “马来西亚总理穆希丁会见魏凤和” [Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin meets Wei Fenghe], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], September 8, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Royal Malaysian Air Force, Twitter post, June 1, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> “Chinese Airspace Incursion Prompts Malaysian Fighter Scramble,” *Aviation Week*, June 1, 2021, accessed June 2, 2021, <https://aviationweek.com/defense-space/chinese-airspace-incursion-prompts-malaysian-fighter-scramble>.

<sup>23</sup> Kristin Huang, “Malaysia’s claim that 16 Chinese warplanes took part in South China Sea ‘intrusion’ greeted with scepticism over numbers involved,” *South China Morning Post*, June 3, 2021, accessed June 5, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3135937/malysias-claim-16-chinese-warplanes-took-part-south-china-sea>.

<sup>24</sup> “16 架軍機闖空域威脅主權 馬來西亞要召喚中國大使” [16 military aircraft rush through aerial area, threatening sovereignty, Malaysia will summon Chinese ambassador], 自由時報 [Liberty Times], June 2, 2021, accessed June 2, 2021, <https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/world/breakingnews/3554580>.

<sup>25</sup> “South China Sea dispute: Malaysia accuses China of breaching airspace,” BBC News, June 1, 2021, accessed June 2, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57328868>.

<sup>26</sup> “2021 年 6 月 2 日外交部發言人汪文斌主持例行記者會” [Foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin holds regular press conference on June 2, 2021], 中国外交部 [Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs], June 2, 2021, accessed June 2, 2021, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/fyrbt\\_673021/jzhsl\\_673025/t1880857.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/jzhsl_673025/t1880857.shtml).

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Scobel, “The J-20 Episode and Civil-Military Relations in China,” RAND Corporation, March 10, 2011, accessed June 12, 2021, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/2011/RAND\\_CT357.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/2011/RAND_CT357.pdf). The deep stovepipes in the bureaucracy were pointed out at the time in 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Liu Xuanzun, “PLA aircraft training in S.China Sea abide by intl law without entering others’ airspace,” *Global Times*, June 2, 2021, accessed June 4, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202106/1225171.shtml>.

<sup>29</sup> Huang, “Malaysia’s claim.” [The original version of this paper confused who made this remark. This has been corrected in this translated version.]

<sup>30</sup> Nawaljeet Singh Rayar, “Chinese plane incident — Malaysia caught between a rock and a hard place,” *Today*, June 14, 2021, accessed June 15, 2021, <https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/chinese-plane-incident-malaysia-caught-between-rock-hard-place>.

<sup>31</sup> John Power, “US general says China seeks return to era of vassal states,” *South China Morning Post*, June 4, 2021, accessed June 12, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3136041/us-general-says-china-seeks-return-era-vassal-states>.

<sup>32</sup> A recent example is when over 200 Chinese fishing vessels were anchored at Whitsun Reef (known in Manila as Julian Philippe Reef) on March 7, 2021. The Philippines claims the reef, which is close to the western Philippine state of Palawan in the South China Sea. Wey, “Chinese Overflight.”

<sup>33</sup> 田中一誠 [Tanaka Issei], “重慶市で中国・ASEAN 外相会議開催、防疫協力や南シナ海巡る協議加速で認識を共有” [China-ASEAN foreign ministers summit held in Chongqing, consensus on accelerating dialogue on epidemic control and South China Sea], Japan External Trade Organization, June 14, 2021, accessed June 16, 2021, <https://www.jetro.go.jp/biznews/2021/06/b8635644488e7f26.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Shotaro Tani, “ASEAN meets with China as progress on Myanmar consensus stalls,” *Nikkei Asia*, June 7, 2021, accessed June 12, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Myanmar-Coup/ASEAN-meets-with-China-as-progress-on-Myanmar-consensus-stalls>. [The author of this article was wrong in the original version of this paper. His name has been corrected in this translated version.]

<sup>35</sup> Malaysia plans to receive 12 million doses of the Sinovac vaccine from China in the coming several months.

<sup>36</sup> Nawaljeet Singh Rayer, “Chinese plane incident — Malaysia caught between a rock and a hard place,” *Today*, June 14, 2021, accessed June 16, 2021, <https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/chinese-plane-incident-malaysia-caught-between-rock-hard-place>.

<sup>37</sup> Zhou, “Chinese warplanes near Malaysia.”

<sup>38</sup> Huang, “Malaysia’s claim”; Yeo, “China sends 16 military aircraft.”

<sup>39</sup> Wey, “Chinese Overflight”; Graham, “Aerial Manoeuvres.”

<sup>40</sup> Zhou, “Chinese warplanes near Malaysia.”

<sup>41</sup> Ahmad Ghazali Abu-Hassan, “Beting Patinggi Ali incident - PLAAF testing the waters?” *Malaysiakini*, June 2, 2021, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/577311>.

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<sup>42</sup> The number of maintainers and support personnel that are necessary to launch a transport aircraft are much greater than most imagine. Besides, if one also figures in the Chinese ships that would be mobilized for search and rescue in case of emergency, this activity by as many as 16 aircraft cannot be considered mere navigation training.

<sup>43</sup> Wey, “Chinese Overflight.”

<sup>44</sup> Abu-Hassan, “Beting Patinggi Ali incident.”

<sup>45</sup> Royal Malaysian Air Force, Twitter post, June 1, 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Bhavan Jaipragas, “South China Sea: Malaysia scrambles jets to intercept 16 Chinese military planes,” *South China Morning Post*, June 3, 2021, accessed June 5, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3135661/south-china-sea-malaysia-scrambles-jets-intercept-16-chinese>.

<sup>47</sup> This is a simple calculation, but it is the result of calculating that the formation flew at separations of 60 nautical miles divided by the speed of 4.8 nautical miles per minute, equaling 12.5 minutes.

<sup>48</sup> It is likely that at separations of 60 nautical miles each aircraft relayed radio communications to a headquarters using the VHF and UHF bands.

<sup>49</sup> Royal Malaysian Air Force, Twitter post, June 1, 2021.

<sup>50</sup> The Republic of China established a permanent base on Taiping Island in 1956. In 2000, 100 coast guard personnel were stationed there, and in 2008 a runway was built. Now the runway has been improved to a 1,200-meter one so that C-130 transport aircraft can operate there. Mira Rapp-Hooper, “Before and After: The South China Sea Transformed,” Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, February 18, 2015, accessed June 12, 2021, <https://amti.csis.org/before-and-after-the-south-china-sea-transformed/>.

<sup>51</sup> Due to the lack of precise flight data, this is pure speculation, but there is enough of a probability that the formation flew near the Philippines’ Pag-asa Island after the formation left the area.

<sup>52</sup> If they were to actually conduct an airborne operation, then the aircraft carrying paratroopers would likely descend and reduce their speed as they proceed to the drop zone, but at this point in time there is no information, so it is impossible to debate whether the 16 aircraft did this or not. On the other hand, if their flight parameters never changed, then that raises the probability that the flight was training for each crew to familiarize themselves with the surrounding area.

<sup>53</sup> This can be interpreted as meaning that this training was conducted in order to raise the experience of each aircrew for conducting airborne operations while gaining experience in the operation of multiple Y-20s outside of the country.

<sup>54</sup> China Maritime Studies Institute, “China Maritime Report No. 4: Civil Transport in PLA Power Projection,” Conor M. Kennedy, December 2019, 2-19.

<sup>55</sup> 全军军事术语管理委员会 [Joint military terminology management committee], “战略投送” [strategic power projection], 58.

<sup>56</sup> 军事科学院军事战略研究部 [Military Strategy Research Department of the Academy of Military Science], 战略学 [The Science of Military Strategy] (Beijing: 军事科学出版社 [Military Science Publishing House], 2013), 259.

<sup>57</sup> China Maritime Studies Institute, “China Maritime Report,” 2.

<sup>58</sup> “中国軍の大型輸送機「運-20」が初飛行から8年” [Eight years since first flight of Chinese military’s large transport ‘Y-20’], 人民網日本語版 [People’s Daily in Japanese], January 27, 2021, accessed June 12, 2021, <http://j.people.com.cn/n3/2021/0127/c94474-9813625.html>.

<sup>59</sup> “中国軍がロシアで戦略演習「コーカサス2020」に参加へ” [Chinese military headed to participate in Russian strategic exercise ‘Kavkaz 2020’], 人民網日本語版 [People’s Daily in Japanese], September 11, 2020, accessed June 12, 2021, <http://j.people.com.cn/n3/2020/0911/c94474-9759487.html>.

<sup>60</sup> China Maritime Studies Institute, “China Maritime Report,” 18.

<sup>61</sup> 米斌斌 [Mi Binbin] and 王圣立 [Wang Shengli], “现代战争需要强大“空中快递” [Modern war requires strong ‘aerial express delivery’], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], June 12, 2016.

<sup>62</sup> The majority of the PLA’s airborne forces are not a branch of the army but are a branch of the PLAAF and therefore belong to the PLAAF.

<sup>63</sup> “关于我们” [About us], 中国军网 [Chinese Military Online], accessed June 30, 2021, [http://www.81.cn/aboutus/node\\_73809.htm](http://www.81.cn/aboutus/node_73809.htm).

<sup>64</sup> For a typical article, see “空降兵加速转型迈向“合成军”” [Airborne corps accelerates transformation, marching toward ‘combined-arms force’], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], June 9, 2020.

<sup>65</sup> 李建文 [Li Jianwen], “换羽腾飞砥砺“胜战刀锋”” [Molting and soaring, honing ‘victory-gaining edge’], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], September 22, 2020.

<sup>66</sup> [The endnote in the original version of this paper has been removed in this translated version.]

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<sup>67</sup> 钟荣鹏 [Zhong Rongpeng], 李嘉澎 [Li Jiapeng], and 方超 [Fang Chao], “空降尖兵 立体突击” [Crack paratroopers in multidimensional assault], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], March 22, 2021, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-03/18/content\\_285093.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-03/18/content_285093.htm).

<sup>68</sup> 李卓骏 [Li Zhuojun], “图片” [Photograph], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], June 3, 2021, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-06/02/content\\_290751.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-06/02/content_290751.htm).

<sup>69</sup> 蒋龙 [Jiang Long], 段辛钰 [Duan Xinyu], 张朋倍 [Zhang Pengbei], and 张磊 [Zhang Lei], “老班长看着我们冲锋陷阵” [The old platoon leader is watching us charge and shatter the enemy lines], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], June 15, 2021, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-06/15/content\\_291614.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-06/15/content_291614.htm); 沈玲 [Shen Ling], 李旭洋 [Li Xuyang], 吴永飞 [Wu Yongfei], “鲲鹏展翅 尖兵天降” [Kunpeng spreads its wings, crack troops descend from sky], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], May 7, 2021, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-05/05/content\\_288568.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-05/05/content_288568.htm). [This sentence has been altered in this translated version of the paper to correct a misinterpretation in the original version.]

<sup>70</sup> 李宣良 [Li Xuanliang], “习近平：为实现党在新时代的强军目标 把人民军队全面建成世界一流军队而奋斗” [Xi Jinping: in order to realize the party’s goal of making the armed forces strong in the new era, struggle to comprehensively make the people’s armed forces world-class], 新华网 [Xinhua News Agency Online], October 26, 2017, accessed June 2, 2021, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/19cpcnc/2017-10/26/c\\_1121862632.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/19cpcnc/2017-10/26/c_1121862632.htm).

<sup>71</sup> 黄仁奇 [Huang Renqi], 闫星星 [Yan Xingxing], 韩成 [Han Cheng], “陆空协同 精兵天降” [Army-air force cooperation, crack troops descend from sky], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], June 1, 2021, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-06/01/content\\_290711.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-06/01/content_290711.htm).

<sup>72</sup> “2021年6月国防部例行记者会文字实录” [Transcript of the Ministry of National Defense’s regular press conference in June 2021], 国防部网 [National Defense Ministry Online], June 24, 2021, accessed June 25, 2021, [http://www.mod.gov.cn/info/2021-06/24/content\\_4888067.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/info/2021-06/24/content_4888067.htm).

<sup>73</sup> It is possible that questions from reporters were screened beforehand and that no questions about the incident were accepted.

<sup>74</sup> The reason why three articles were published in both August and September 2020 is clear, and that is that time was the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the airborne corps, so articles praising the airborne corps composed the majority.

<sup>75</sup> 米斌斌 [Mi Binbin] and 王圣立 [Wang Shengli], “现代战争需要强大“空中快递” [Modern war requires strong ‘aerial express delivery’].

<sup>76</sup> The maneuver warfare by Germany in its invasion of France during World War II is representative of such a doctrine, and it is called “blitzkrieg” because the German armed forces settled the war with France like a bolt of lightning, rapidly and in a short period of time.