



## China's Air Force Preparing for Contingencies in the Skies Over Ladakh

Although current clashes along the Line of Actual Control between India and the People's Republic of China (PRC) are contained to hand-to-hand fighting as of mid-June 2020, the death of several dozen soldiers on 15 June reveals the potential for the skirmish to escalate in scale. As Indian and PRC soldiers continue to clash along the border, the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) is also preparing its own forces in the region. Although we cannot determine whether these measures are precautionary, intended for deterrence, or preparatory for future initiative operations, we can at least identify the new state of PLAAF capabilities in the region.



Normally, the PLAAF maintains roughly twelve unidentified FLANKER variants at Hotan Air Station (和田场站) and an unknown number of CH-4 UAVs. An air defense battalion garrisoned in Hotan provides the PLAAF with additional air defense capabilities in the region. To augment these forces already in theater, the PLAAF deployed a number of additional assets in early June 2020. Unverified handheld photography from early June 2020 and overhead electro-optical imagery from 14 June 2020 shows that the PLAAF has deployed an additional 24 aircraft to Hotan (see table below).

Aircraft	Normal Presence/Additional Deployment
Unidentified FLANKER (possibly J-16) fighter	12 / 12
J-8 (possibly J-8DF) fighter	0 / 6
Y-8 (possibly Y-8G electronic warfare variant)	0 / 2
KJ-500 early warning and control aircraft	0 / 2
Mi-17/171 Hip helicopter	0 / 2
CH-4 Medium Altitude, Long Endurance UAV	? / ?

This mix of aircraft provides the PLAAF with a wide range of capabilities should tensions escalate. PLAAF aircraft currently in theater are capable of conducting defensive and offensive counter air missions as well as limited ground attack missions. The various special mission aircraft and UAVs also provide ample electronic warfare as well as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities for both air and ground forces.





## China: PLAAF Deployments to Hotan Airport

14 June 2020



The PLAAF also has the ability to command and control air operations in theater. Hotan is [host of the PLAAF's Hotan Command Post](#) (和田指挥所). PLAAF command posts are division-level command elements that can [provide command and control over air operations](#) within a designated air space. Although the PLAAF disbanded most of these entities during the recent series of structural reforms, they retained a handful of these lower-level command elements in sensitive and remote areas like Hotan. Thus, despite Hotan's remote location, there is already an on-scene command element present to oversee local operations.

The PLAAF is now prepared for a wide range of contingencies, regardless of the probability of escalation along the Sino-Indian border. This preparation is borne from a reality that any escalation between India and the PRC may not necessarily be restricted to the mountain passes of the Line of Actual Control. PLAAF forces in theater may already be providing local PLA ground forces with airborne ISR and are almost certainly acting as a quiet conventional deterrence force looming in the background.

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