



STATE OF THE GAME

BUILDING PACAF'S COMPETITIVE MINDSET

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PLAAF PILOTS STILL A WEAK LINK IN THE CHAIN

The Chinese military's latest training program seeks to make up ground by teaching basic formation combat skills.

China's Air Force has a problem with its pilots. Although the People's Liberation Army Air Force's (PLAAF) growing fleet of advanced combat aircraft is impressive, the pilots in the cockpits of these aircraft are not quite as imposing. The PLAAF's pilot training program suffers from risk aversion and a disconnect from the realities of modern air combat.

Until recently, PLAAF trainee pilots going through their equivalent of the USAF's Specialized Undergraduate Pilot Training (SUPT) pipeline learned only basic flying skills. This is partially because many flight instructors at PLAAF training units have virtually no experience in operational units. This meant that when new PLAAF pilots arrived at their operational units, they were entirely unprepared for the realities of real-world flight operations.

Last year, the PLAAF began trying to fix this problem by blending basic tactical concepts and

more autonomy into its SUPT-equivalent pipeline. Now under the tutelage of new flight instructors with experience serving in operational units, PLAAF pilot trainees learn to fly in multiple positions within a flight formation, among other practical flight skills. However, this is still not nearly enough transition training to adequately prepare new pilots for their first operational assignments.

China's pilot training program demonstrates that while its military hardware has rapidly modernized in recent decades, its human capital is still lagging behind. The PLAAF is aware of their deficiencies relative to the US in pilot independence and skill and is in the midst of a culture-wide drive to improve pilot performance. To maintain our operational edge, our aircrew and the airmen who support them must continue to train, innovate, and show initiative against a professionalizing PLAAF.

DOCTRINAL ISSUES THREATEN PLA PROGRESS

Operational flexibility is critical to meeting military objectives — do PRC commanders have it?

On June 22, the 35th Fighter Wing and the Japanese 3rd Air Wing executed a joint, bilateral "Elephant Walk" at Misawa Air Base. With minimal guidance, commanders were able to execute this under their own authority, validating our doctrine of centralized control and decentralized execution. Accomplished on short notice and under COVID restrictions, it demonstrated agility and our ability to quickly generate airpower.

The PLAAF is unable to execute an event like this because authorities are held at the highest level and their commanders are not empowered to make decisions like these. [According to RAND](#), the PLA's "tendency to avoid decision making at lower levels and push decisions up the chain of command restricts the ability of lower-ranked actors to exercise operational initiative."



U.S. Air Force Col Kristopher Struve, left, 35th Fighter Wing commander, and Koku-Jieita Maj. Gen. Takahiro Kubota, 3rd Air Wing commander, shake hands in front of aircraft participating in an "Elephant Walk" at Misawa Air Base, June 22, 2020.

U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO BY TECH. SGT. TIMOTHY MOORE

CHINA'S MILITARIZATION OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA THREATENS FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC

Fiery Cross, with its 1.9 mile runway, is just one of China's several military outposts that provide an advantage.



Despite their claims to the contrary, there is no contesting that the People's Republic of China (PRC) has militarized the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. While the Chinese claim these reefs are within their "centuries-old" territory, international law says otherwise, and these outposts provide their military the ability to base aircraft, resupply ships, and long-range missiles. Clearly, the true purpose is to assert dominance in disputed waters using the threat of military force.

China's actions in the South China Sea have been controversial for decades, but a recent shift in the US's official position makes more explicit what other administrations have implied. On July 13, Secretary

of State Mike Pompeo [announced](#) that "Beijing's claims to offshore resources across most of the South China Sea are completely unlawful, as is its campaign of bullying to control them."

Why it Matters: The PRC's militarization campaign pushes the PLA's threat bubble hundreds of miles closer to US allies in southeast Asia and subverts the rules-based international order by creating spurious territorial claims with a clear message of willingness to use force to back them.

THE SPARK

Information to grow knowledge of China and spark curiosity about the Indo-Pacific region

During election season, the US Department of Defense reminds servicemembers it is an apolitical force, our oath is to the US Constitution, and there are limitations on our political activities. In the PRC, every PLA unit has a political commissar, charged with providing political training and ensuring military commanders' decisions are aligned with the Chinese Communist Party. They say the PLA is the army of the people, but it is really the army of the party.

COMPETE DAILY

Want to learn more? The Strategic Competition Team recommends:

- What options are on the table in the South China Sea? [Read the latest](#) from Bonnie Glaser at the China Power Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.
- Learn more about China's enlisted force [here](#).
- Want even more? Visit the [Strategic Competition Team's NIPR Intelink page](#).



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