

# China's Expanding Airpower in the Western Indian Ocean

AMB. DAVID H. SHINN, RET.

## Abstract

This article analyzes China's evolving airpower posture across the Western Indian Ocean, highlighting how Beijing couples infrastructure investment and defense partnerships to expand its regional influence. While China's most substantial aviation ties center on proximate or well-resourced states—Pakistan, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt—longstanding economic engagement often precedes military cooperation, including in aviation. Despite deep Gulf reliance on Western suppliers, China leverages unmanned aerial vehicle sales and training initiatives to penetrate these markets. Farther afield, Beijing employs heavy transports to support exercises, UN operations, and crisis evacuations, signaling growing expeditionary capabilities without yet requiring new dedicated air bases. The likely near-term deployment of a People's Liberation Army Navy carrier strike group into the region would underscore China's emergence as a global military actor and could precipitate additional basing arrangements. These developments continue to raise strategic concerns in Washington and New Delhi, underscoring the Western Indian Ocean's transformation into a more contested maritime-aviation theater.

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China's influence in the Western Indian Ocean has expanded markedly since the start of this century, a development well documented across the diplomatic and academic literature. This engagement has centered chiefly on energy, trade, investment, and infrastructure—sectors that form the backbone of Beijing's economic strategy. Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative has accelerated these advances, targeting a region that includes several major suppliers of oil and natural gas. Although arms sales and contributions to UN peacekeeping missions have long been features of China's security posture, its military engagement in the Western Indian Ocean has largely been dominated by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). Since 2008, when China began deploying naval task forces to combat piracy in the Gulf of Aden and later established a naval base in Djibouti, maritime operations have remained the centerpiece of its regional military presence.

By contrast, the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) aviation footprint in the Western Indian Ocean remains limited and has received comparatively little analytical scrutiny. This article examines the emerging and potential roles of the PLA Air Force (PLAAF), PLAN aviation units, the PLAN Marine Corps (PLANMC)

aviation brigade, and the PLA Army's air assault formations. Together, these forces represent a growing, though still modest, airpower capability that could reshape China's future posture in this critical theater. The analysis also explores how these engagements might evolve—whether through expanded arms transfers, more complex joint exercises, or stepped-up deployments that support PLAN operations or protect Chinese nationals and investments.

China's airpower initiatives in the region already encompass a wide spectrum: construction of military airfields and associated infrastructure, direct sales or donations of aircraft, joint aviation drills, pilot and technician training, and participation in regional air shows. These efforts involve not only traditional fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters but also an increasingly sophisticated portfolio of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV). Moreover, China's integration of space-based capabilities—such as satellite navigation and surveillance—has become an essential enabler of its airpower ambitions, underscoring a broader, multi-domain strategy.

For the purposes of this study, the Western Indian Ocean includes the west coast of India and Pakistan; the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman littoral states; the Gulf monarchies; the Red Sea and Indian Ocean littorals stretching from Egypt to South Africa; and the independent island nations of Maldives, Seychelles, Comoros, Madagascar, and Mauritius. Other major military stakeholders in this region include the United States, with its extensive network of air and naval bases, along with the United Kingdom and France, which maintain forward positions on Réunion and Mayotte. With the exception of these established Western powers and India—China's principal military competitor in the Indian Ocean—most countries in the region are potential security partners for Beijing.

Strategically, the Indian Ocean ranks below the Pacific in China's hierarchy of military priorities, and the Western Indian Ocean lies still further down that scale due to sheer distance. Nonetheless, Beijing views secure sea lanes for energy and trade, access to Africa's critical minerals, protection of Chinese citizens and assets, the expansion of political influence, and robust intelligence collection as vital interests that increasingly demand a military backstop. Without local bases, Chinese aircraft must either secure overflight rights paired with refueling stops or rely on aerial refueling to operate effectively in this space. Alternatively, the PLAN's carriers and large surface combatants offer a maritime-based airpower option. The vast distances of the Western Indian Ocean favor an integrated approach combining aerial refueling, dispersed land-based staging, and cooperative airfield access agreements. For now, however, the PLA's limited regional air capabilities place it

at a distinct tactical disadvantage, constraining Beijing's ability to project power or respond rapidly in a crisis.<sup>1</sup>

## **China's Theoretical Ability to Project Airpower to the Far Seas**

China's evolving ability to project airpower beyond its immediate periphery—and into far seas regions such as the Indian Ocean—stems directly from lessons it drew watching US operations in the 1991 Gulf War and subsequent campaigns in Iraq. Those conflicts demonstrated the decisive impact of integrated airpower on modern battlefields, prompting Beijing to overhaul the PLA Air Force (PLAAF). By the early 2000s, the PLAAF had transitioned from a force focused almost exclusively on homeland air defense to one guided by an independent doctrine emphasizing conventional deterrence and long-range offensive operations. This strategic shift aligned closely with the PLAN's expanding maritime requirements, pushing Chinese air strategy beyond East Asia to encompass distant theaters, including the Indian Ocean. Today, the PLAAF is expected to furnish air cover for any expeditionary activities undertaken by the PLAN, even if it has yet to conduct large-scale missions in the Western Indian Ocean. Notably, however, PLAAF activity in this broader region has increased in both frequency and complexity.<sup>2</sup>

As of early 2024, the combined fleets of the PLAAF and remaining PLAN aviation elements constituted the third-largest air force in the world, fielding over 3,150 aircraft—excluding trainers and unmanned systems. Of these, roughly 2,400 platforms were dedicated combat assets, spanning fighters, strategic and tactical bombers, multirole attack aircraft, and specialized strike variants. Critically, the PLAAF has developed limited but growing aerial refueling capabilities, employing a small number of IL-78 Midas tankers and newer Y-20U variants of its Y-20 heavy transport. These tankers significantly extend the reach of Chinese fighters and bombers equipped with refueling probes, potentially enabling sustained operations in the Western Indian Ocean without direct reliance on foreign airfields for fuel.

The Y-20 platform also underpins a suite of emerging capabilities, supporting airborne command and control, long-range logistics, paratroop insertion, strategic

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<sup>1</sup> David Brewster, "Cold War Offers Clues about China's Plans for the Indian Ocean," *The Strategist*, 25 August 2022, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/>; and Diptendu Choudhury, "Convergence of the Indo-Pacific with the Indian Ocean—Is a Maritime-Centric Approach Enough?: An Indian Perspective," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 7, no. 3 (May/June 2024), 19–20, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

<sup>2</sup> Joshy M. Paul, *China's Air Power and Maritime Strategies Towards the Indian Ocean Region* (London: Routledge, 2025), 6–11.

reconnaissance, and humanitarian or disaster response missions. Parallel efforts to field advanced stealth bombers and fifth-generation fighters underscore China's determination to approach—and in selected domains match—US airpower standards.<sup>3</sup> Taken together, these developments reflect a systematic effort to transform the PLAAF into a force capable not just of regional denial, but of global reach, tailored to support Beijing's interests in increasingly contested maritime spaces like the Indian Ocean.

By 2023, the PLA had completed the transfer of most PLAN aviation units to the PLAAF, consolidating China's fixed-wing combat airpower under a single service. However, the PLAN retained control over its helicopter forces, UAV units, and—critically—its carrier-based aviation.<sup>4</sup> As a result, any Chinese effort to project sustained airpower into the Western Indian Ocean will rely heavily on the PLAN's evolving carrier capabilities, which have yet to operate in this region.

The PLAN's first carrier, the *Liaoning*, a refurbished Ukrainian hull with a ski-jump deck, carries an air wing of roughly 30 fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters. Its successor, the *Shandong*, built domestically, supports a slightly larger complement of 40 aircraft, including 36 J-15 fighters. Thus far, both carriers have operated exclusively with these fourth-generation multirole jets. The PLAN's most advanced carrier, the *Fujian*, began sea trials in 2024 and features three electromagnetic catapults—a significant departure from ski-ramp designs. This catapult system will enable launch operations for heavier platforms, such as the KJ-600 airborne early warning aircraft and the carrier-adapted FC-31 stealth fighter, greatly expanding the PLAN's at-sea airpower envelope.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, a fourth carrier under construction at Dalian is expected to be nuclear-powered with four catapults, marking a

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<sup>3</sup> *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024* (Washington: US Department of Defense, 18 December 2024), 59–63, <https://media.defense.gov/>. For descriptions and pictures of aircraft in the PLAAF inventory, see *PLA Aerospace Power: A Primer on Trends in China's Military Air, Space, and Missile Forces*, 4th ed. (Maxwell AFB, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, June 2024), 14–19, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>; and Kris Osborn, “Chinese YU-20 Tanker Aircraft Refuel Carrier-launched J-15s,” *Warrior Maven*, 31 October 2024, <https://warriormaven.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> Rod Lee, “PLA Naval Aviation Reorganization 2023,” China Aerospace Studies Institute, July 2023, 1–2, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

<sup>5</sup> *PLA Aerospace Power*, 27–33; Ronald O'Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 16 August 2024), 28–36, <https://www.congress.gov/>; and Anil Chopra, “Six Aircraft Carriers by 2035—China's Ambitious Plan for PLA-N As It Looks to Counter U.S. & Cut Indian Influence,” *EurAsian Times*, 10 March 2024, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/>.

technological leap that should place PLAN carrier aviation on par with the US Navy's most capable supercarriers.<sup>6</sup>

While most fixed-wing combat assets now fall under PLAAF control, the PLAN retained its shore-based special mission aircraft—dedicated to maritime patrol, airborne early warning, surveillance, and antisubmarine warfare—as well as its UAV squadrons. Notably, at least one KJ-500 airborne early warning platform has been modified with an aerial refueling probe, signaling an intent to extend its operational reach. The PLAN has also experimented with small vertical take-off and landing aircraft from a variety of surface combatants, enhancing distributed intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities.

Rotary-wing operations remain integral to the PLAN's concept of operations. Its fleet includes domestically produced Z-9 and Z-8/Z-18 helicopters and Russian-built Helix models, which serve aboard destroyers, frigates, and the PLAN's expanding class of Yushen landing helicopter assault ships. These amphibious vessels can carry up to 30 helicopters alongside 900 marines, providing a flexible platform for vertical envelopment and sea-based logistics. The PLAN continues to advance its UAV programs for maritime ISR, with multiple models deployed for persistent over-the-horizon targeting.<sup>7</sup>

In 2024, the PLAN commissioned the *Sichuan*, the first of its Type 076 amphibious assault ships, analogous in design to the US Navy's *America*-class. This vessel can operate fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters, and a full suite of amphibious systems and may evolve into China's first dedicated drone carrier—further broadening the range of maritime-based airpower options available to support operations deep into the Western Indian Ocean.<sup>8</sup>

The PLANMC maintains a modest but expanding aviation arm, equipped primarily with Z-8 and Z-9 helicopters tailored for vertical assault and amphibious landing operations. Established as an aviation brigade in 2017, this force comprises

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<sup>6</sup> Ritu Sharma, "China Developing 'World's Biggest' Aircraft Carrier That Could Compete with USS Gerald R. Ford, Satellite Shows," *EurAsian Times*, 3 March 2025, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/>. The configuration of a PLAN carrier battle or strike group is still open to question. In an early test run, a Type 055 and a Type 052D destroyer, a Type 054A frigate, and a Type 901 supply ship accompanied the *Liaoning*. In 2024, an exercise in the South China Sea by the *Liaoning* and the *Shandong* included three Type 055 destroyers, five Type 052D destroyers, a Type 054A frigate, and two Type 901 supply ships. Cai Yi, a Taiwanese expert, believes the battle group for the PLAN's most recent carrier, the *Fujian*, will include two Type 055 destroyers, two Type 052D destroyers, two Type 054B frigates, and two Type 095 attack nuclear submarines. See "The Dream Combination of China's Aircraft Carrier Battle Group," *Chinese Arms*, 16 April 2024, <https://www.china-arms.com/>.

<sup>7</sup> *PLA Aerospace Power*, 30–33.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Suci, "China's Massive New Drone Carrier Is Almost Here," *National Interest*, 13 January 2025, <https://nationalinterest.org/>.

at least two flight squadrons and a dedicated aircraft maintenance group. As China accelerates the PLANMC's modernization, the brigade is expected to grow with additional helicopters and trained pilots, reinforcing its capacity to execute rapid ship-to-shore maneuvers. The PLAN's fleet of landing helicopter assault ships will likely serve as the principal platforms for PLANMC rotary-wing deployments, offering flexibility for amphibious insertions, casualty evacuation, and logistics. Although the PLANMC still lacks meaningful experience with large-scale expeditionary operations, Beijing clearly envisions it as a versatile tool for safeguarding China's overseas interests—whether through noncombatant evacuation operations, port security missions, or coercive shows of force.<sup>9</sup>

The PLA Army's (PLAA) aviation branch similarly anchors its capabilities in rotary-wing assets. Designed primarily to support ground operations within China and across the Taiwan Strait, the PLAA's aviation component provides close air support, reconnaissance, and airlift for air assault units and special operations forces. Today, the PLAA fields roughly 15 army aviation brigades, operating an estimated 1,000 to 1,500 helicopters, including as many as 400 medium-lift variants.<sup>10</sup> While these formations are structured for regional contingencies, their scale and growing proficiency conceivably position them to undertake limited expeditionary missions as far afield as the Western Indian Ocean—particularly in scenarios requiring rapid insertion of light forces or evacuation of Chinese nationals.

China's burgeoning space partnerships further reinforce its ability to project airpower and exercise strategic influence in the Western Indian Ocean. The so-called Space Silk Road—a component of the broader Belt and Road Initiative—aims to establish a cutting-edge civil and commercial space infrastructure that also delivers latent military advantages. Under this framework, China has launched satellites for Egypt, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia, cementing technological dependencies that extend well beyond terrestrial domains.<sup>11</sup> Of these partnerships, China's relationship with Egypt stands out as particularly deep, spanning multiple satellite launches and collaborative ground station operations.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, the United Arab Emirates (UAE)

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<sup>9</sup> *PLA Aerospace Power*, 35; Jeff Schogol, "China Is Expanding Its Marine Corps, But How Capable Is It?" *Task & Purpose*, 25 January 2024, <https://taskandpurpose.com/>; P.R. Shankar, "China Has a Formidable Marine Corps but PLA's UN Peace-Keeping Fiasco Shows It's Not Battle-Hardened," *EurAsian Times*, 15 January 2024, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/>.

<sup>10</sup> *PLA Aerospace Power*, 57–61; Asian News International, "China's PLA Enhances the Capability of Its Helicopter Fleet," *DTNEXT*, 8 April 2024, <https://www.dtnext.in/>.

<sup>11</sup> Zhang Ming, "The Space Silk Road and China-Arab States Space Cooperation: A Chinese Perspective," *MEI Insights*, no. 309, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore, 11 June 2024, <https://mei.nus.edu.sg/>.

<sup>12</sup> Mustapha Iderawumi, "Egypt and China Strengthen Space Alliance with MisrSat-2 Protocol Signing," *Space in Africa*, 20 March 2024, <https://spaceinfrica.com/>.

has balanced its engagement, pursuing lunar research, education, and launch activities with both China and the United States. Notably, China's Long March 2C rocket carried the UAE's first observation satellite into orbit, signaling Beijing's growing role as an alternative launch provider.<sup>13</sup>

The strategic dimension of these partnerships becomes even clearer through initiatives like the International Lunar Research Station, a joint project involving China, Russia, Egypt, Pakistan, Djibouti, and South Africa. This endeavor positions itself as a potential counterweight to the NASA-led Artemis program, underscoring the geopolitical stakes embedded in space exploration and technology sharing.<sup>14</sup>

At the operational level, most Western Indian Ocean states have joined China's BeiDou global navigation network, reducing their reliance on the US Global Positioning System. This shift holds particular significance for a region where GPS coverage can be uneven and where Beijing seeks to insulate partner nations from American technological leverage. BeiDou underpins China's Digital Silk Road and serves critical military functions, supplying precision navigation and timing data to PLA aircraft, submarines, missiles, and space assets. In any future conflict, BeiDou would enhance China's ability to maintain command and control while potentially disrupting US or allied systems. More broadly, the spread of BeiDou infrastructure strengthens Beijing's capacity to coerce states within its spheres of influence and to complicate US contingency planning and counterintervention efforts in strategically vital corridors like the Indian Ocean.<sup>15</sup>

Despite its advances, the PLA still confronts formidable challenges in projecting airpower into the Western Indian Ocean. Chief among these is the absence of regional air bases. Any aircraft operating from mainland China must either secure multiple overflight and landing permissions for refueling or rely on aerial refueling over vast distances—both of which expose PLA movements to tracking, diplomatic leverage, and potential interdiction by rivals. While China's close military relationship with Pakistan offers a likely staging and refueling option, this corridor alone cannot compensate for the broader absence of forward-deployed infrastructure.

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<sup>13</sup> Naomi Kantor Itzhayek, Yoel Guzansky, and Galia Lavi, "China-UAE Space Cooperation: Risk or Opportunity for Israel?," *Strategic Assessment* 27, no. 1 (April 2024): 111–18, <https://www.inss.org.il/>.

<sup>14</sup> "13 Countries Joined Russia, China in Lunar Station Project," *Sputnik News*, 29 April 2025, <https://sputnikglobe.com/>; and Andrew Jones, "South Africa Joins China's Moon Base Project," *SpaceNews*, 7 September 2023, <https://spacenews.com/>.

<sup>15</sup> Sean Gorman, "America Is Losing Its GPS Dominance to China's BeiDou Satnav," *SpaceNews*, 8 April 2024, <https://spacenews.com/>; Namrata Goswami, "The Economic and Military Impact of China's BeiDou Navigation System," *The Diplomat*, 1 July 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/>; Michael Listner, "China's Beidou Global Navigation System," *Defense Policy*, 3 August 2022, <https://www.defensepolicy.org/>; and Sarah Sewall, Tyler Vandenberg, and Kaj Malden, *China's BeiDou: New Dimensions of Great Power Competition* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, February 2023), <https://www.belfercenter.org/>.

Operational experience remains another critical limitation. The PLAAF has accumulated substantial peacetime hours but remains largely untested beyond East Asia. To date, Beijing's approach in the Indian Ocean has been cautious and defensive, with the far seas mission primarily carried out by the PLAN. Although China's aerial systems—from long-range bombers to stealth fighters and advanced tankers—now rival Western platforms in many technical respects, they have yet to prove their effectiveness under combat conditions. Moreover, persistent doubts surround the PLA's antisubmarine warfare capabilities and their capacity to protect PLAN surface groups in contested environments, a vulnerability that could directly undermine the utility of any air cover deployed to the region.<sup>16</sup>

The PLA fully recognizes the importance of joint operations and continues to overhaul its organizational structures to enhance cross-service integration. However, these reforms remain incomplete.<sup>17</sup> In the aviation domain, joint training still centers primarily on integrated air defense within China's immediate periphery, with scant evidence that the PLA has developed robust protocols for coordinating potential far seas operations among the PLAAF, PLAN aviation, and PLANMC aviation units. This gap in joint expeditionary proficiency could prove a significant liability if China were ever required to mount a synchronized, multi-domain operation as distant as the Western Indian Ocean.<sup>18</sup>

Thus far, China has carefully avoided any kinetic military activity in the Western Indian Ocean, restricting the use of force largely to its immediate neighborhood, most notably along India's northern border. Beijing appears determined to continue avoiding direct military engagements in this maritime space for the foreseeable future. Instead, the more plausible scenarios involving Chinese airpower in the region include missions to protect or extract endangered Chinese personnel attached to UN peacekeeping operations, noncombatant evacuation operations, delivery of disaster relief, or long-range ISR sorties to bolster maritime domain awareness.

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<sup>16</sup> Joshy M. Paul, "China's Air Power Capabilities in the Indian Ocean: Challenges and Opportunities," *Air Power Journal* 18, no. 3 (July–September 2023), 40–44, <https://capsindia.org/>; Jonathan G. McPhilamy, "Air Supremacy: Are the Chinese Ready?," *Military Review* (January–February 2020): 56–61, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/>; Chad Peltier, "China's Logistics Capabilities for Expeditionary Operations," *Jane's* (15 April 2020): 36–37; and S.P. Singh, "Indo-Pacific: Scramble for Dominance and Role of Air Power," *Chanakya Forum*, 3 May 2023, <https://web.archive.org/>.

<sup>17</sup> Joel Wuthnow, "A New Step in China's Military Reform," *Joint Force Quarterly* 117, no. 2 (2025): 4–13, <https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/>; and "Assessment of the PLA's Joint Operations Capabilities," *Indian Military Review*, 15 December 2022, <https://imrmedia.in/>.

<sup>18</sup> Derek Solen, "PLA Army Air Defense Units Improve Effectiveness, Resiliency, and Jointness," *China Aerospace Studies Institute*, March 2021, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>; and Peter Wood, "Chinese Military Exercises Highlight Improvements in Joint Operations," *Foreign Military Studies Office*, 1 March 2023, <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/>.

China has already demonstrated a nascent capacity to execute such missions beyond its home region. In 2011, the PLAAF dispatched four IL-76 transport aircraft from northwest China to east-central Libya to aid in the evacuation of nearly 36,000 Chinese nationals, staging through Khartoum for refueling and airlifting some 1,700 citizens out of Libya to Sudan.<sup>19</sup> Today, similar missions would likely employ the newer Y-20 heavy transports, supported by Y-20U tankers to extend their operational reach. For ISR, China could integrate its expanding constellation of remote-sensing satellites with KJ-500 airborne early warning and control aircraft, again relying on aerial refueling to sustain coverage over such a vast theater. These capabilities reflect a measured but steadily advancing toolkit that allows Beijing to safeguard its overseas interests without committing to a permanent kinetic footprint in the Western Indian Ocean.<sup>20</sup>

### **Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, and Arabian Sea**

India views China as a principal security competitor, a perception shaped by repeated confrontations along their contested northern border and by intensifying naval rivalry in the Indian Ocean—a maritime domain New Delhi unequivocally regards as its strategic backyard. Unlike China's deep military supply relationships across much of Asia and Africa, Beijing plays no role in arming India. Instead, the bulk of India's roughly 2,000 military aircraft—across its air force, army aviation, navy, and coast guard—comes from suppliers such as Russia, France, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany. China is not one of the suppliers.<sup>21</sup> This inventory includes India's most advanced platforms, notably the 36 Rafale multirole fighters delivered by France between 2020 and 2022.<sup>22</sup> India's pursuit of modern air and naval capabilities is driven in no small part by the imperative to deter Chinese advances in the Indian Ocean.<sup>23</sup>

India currently operates two conventionally powered aircraft carriers, each equipped with ski-jump ramps and capable of embarking 25 to 30 fixed-wing aircraft. How-

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<sup>19</sup> Gabe Collins and Andrew S. Erickson, "Implications of China's Military Evacuation of Citizens from Libya," *China Brief* 11, no. 4 (10 March 2011): 8–10, <https://jamestown.org/>.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas R. McCabe, "Chinese Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Systems," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 8 March 2021, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

<sup>21</sup> "List of Indian Military Aircraft: A Detailed Overview," *Warriors Defence Academy*, 13 March 2024, <https://warriorsdefenceacademy.com/>.

<sup>22</sup> Rishi Iyengar, "A Tale of Four Fighter Jets," *Foreign Policy*, 8 May 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.

<sup>23</sup> Tanuj Pandey and Swaim Prakash Singh, "Indian Military Air Base in Africa: A Futuristic Vision," *Air Power* 18, no. 2 (Summer 2023), 191–92, <https://capsindia.org/>.

ever, New Delhi has opted against acquiring a third carrier, instead channeling resources toward expanding its submarine fleet to bolster undersea deterrence.<sup>24</sup>

To counter China's growing naval and prospective air footprint in the Western Indian Ocean, India has adopted a multifaceted strategy. It leads the 23-member Indian Ocean Rim Association, aiming to limit Chinese sway in regional political and economic affairs. Although India also participates in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with the United States, Japan, and Australia—a grouping unified by shared concerns over China's assertiveness—the Quad's focus remains tilted toward the Pacific theater.

New Delhi has nevertheless deepened its operational engagement across the Indian Ocean. It has increased antipiracy patrols in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, emerged as a primary source of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief throughout the region, and is extending its naval reach to chokepoints such as the Mozambique Channel.<sup>25</sup> To secure greater access, India is actively negotiating expanded port rights. Meanwhile, the Indian Air Force conducts bilateral exercises with Egypt, the UAE, and Oman, complementing the Indian Army's and Navy's wide slate of drills with Western Indian Ocean partners.<sup>26</sup> Significantly, India is constructing new air and naval facilities on Agaléga, a pair of Mauritian islands northeast of Madagascar, to strengthen its forward presence and project power deeper into the southern Indian Ocean.<sup>27</sup>

Unsurprisingly, China's most extensive airpower collaboration in the Western Indian Ocean centers on Pakistan, a neighbor with which Beijing shares both a border and a longstanding strategic partnership. Between 2020 and 2024, China accounted for an overwhelming 81 percent of Pakistan's arms imports, underscoring the depth of this defense relationship. Of all the states in the region, Pakistan stands out as China's closest military aviation partner.

This cooperation dates back to 1965, when China supplied the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) with 253 F-6 fighters—its variant of the Soviet MiG-19—marking

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<sup>24</sup> Bhaswar Kumar, "India Decides It Will Not Operate a Third Aircraft Carrier. Here is Why," *Business Standard*, 4 February 2025, <https://www.business-standard.com/>.

<sup>25</sup> Harsh V. Pant and Sayantan Haldar, "How Should India Tackle China's Expanding Reach in the Indian Ocean?," *Business Standard*, 25 June 2025, <https://www.business-standard.com/>; Sanchari Ghosh, "Why the Indian Ocean, Not the Indo-Pacific, Must Anchor India's Strategy," *The Diplomat*, 26 March 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/>; and Suyesha Dutta, "Explainer: What's Behind India's Shift from 'Non-Alignment' to 'Strategic Alignment' in the Indian Ocean?," *Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada*, 29 January 2025, <https://www.asiapacific.ca/>.

<sup>26</sup> "List of Military Exercises of India 2024-25, Participating Countries," *PWOnlyIAS* (blog), 2025, <https://pwnlyias.com/>.

<sup>27</sup> Samuel Bashfield, "Agalega: A glimpse of India's remote island military base," *The Interpreter*, 2 March 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/>.

the start of a sustained flow of aircraft that would see China become the dominant source of Pakistan's combat aviation inventory by the early 1970s. By 1990, Chinese deliveries comprised more than half of Pakistan's fighter and support fleet. The partnership took a significant leap forward in 2007 when China and Pakistan jointly developed the fourth-generation JF-17 Thunder. Today, the PAF operates roughly 120 of these multirole fighters and has integrated China's Wing Loong II medium-altitude long-endurance UAVs into its inventory, enhancing both strike and ISR capabilities.<sup>28</sup>

The depth of this collaboration was thrown into sharp relief during an aerial engagement over Kashmir in May 2025. Pakistan claimed that its Chinese-supplied J-10C fighters shot down five Indian aircraft—three French-made Rafales, a MiG-29, and a Sukhoi Su-30—though India contested these accounts on social media. Independent confirmation indicates that at least one Rafale and one MiG-29 were lost, lending credence to Pakistan's assertions. The engagement was notable not only for its immediate tactical stakes but also because the PAF became the first foreign operator of the J-10C. Pakistan initially ordered 36 of these advanced fighters and has inducted at least 20, with reports suggesting plans to expand the fleet to as many as 60. The apparent performance of the J-10Cs in this clash could accelerate Chinese fighter sales to other regional players, including Egypt, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, although the incomplete picture of the engagement tempers definitive conclusions about the aircraft's capabilities.

Looking ahead, the PAF has signaled interest in acquiring China's fifth-generation J-35 stealth fighter, derived from the FC-31 prototype. Pakistani media further report that PAF pilots are already undergoing training on the J-35 in China, suggesting Islamabad may seek to anchor its future airpower modernization around Chinese technology.<sup>29</sup> This evolving partnership underscores how Beijing leverages deep, longstanding defense ties with Pakistan to consolidate its strategic position in the Western Indian Ocean and to showcase its advanced platforms to prospective buyers across the broader Middle East and North Africa.

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<sup>28</sup> Anil Chopra, "China-Pakistan Aerospace Nexus: Implications for India," *Indian Defence Review*, 1 January 2024, <https://indiandefencereview.com/>; Seong Hyeon Choi, "Kashmir Conflict: The Chinese Warplanes and Weapons Used by Pakistan," *South China Morning Post*, 14 May 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/>; and Sameer P. Lalwani, *A Threshold Alliance: The China-Pakistan Military Relationship*, Special Report no. 517 (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, March 2023), 7–10, <https://www.usip.org/>.

<sup>29</sup> Choi, "Kashmir Conflict"; Iyengar, "A Tale of Four Fighter Jets"; Gabriel Honrada, "China's Jets and Missiles Make Pakistan a Winner over India," *Asia Times*, 12 May 2025, <https://asiatimes.com/>; Leela Jacinto, "Chinese Weapons Pass Combat Test in India-Pakistan Clash – with Flying Colours," *France24*, 14 May 2025, <https://www.france24.com/>; and Justin Bronk, "Key Questions about the India-Pakistan Aerial Clashes," *RUSI*, 2 June 2025, <https://www.rusi.org/>.

A cornerstone of China–Pakistan air force collaboration has been the annual *Shaheen* (“Eagle”) exercise, which the two countries have conducted since 2011. Over the years, these drills have grown in scale and sophistication, incorporating larger opposing formations, combined-arms scenarios, unscripted elements, and operations across challenging terrain to approximate the complexities of modern combat. In 2024, this deepening partnership culminated in Exercise Indus Shield, designed explicitly to test and validate the interoperability of the PAF and PLAAF under realistic combat conditions. The exercise brought together PLAAF J-16 and J-10C fighters alongside Pakistan’s J-10Cs and JF-17s, underscoring how joint training has evolved beyond symbolic gestures into rigorous preparations for integrated air operations. These engagements are carefully structured to hone tactical proficiency, foster shared operational concepts, and reinforce the practical ties that underpin the China–Pakistan security axis.<sup>30</sup>

China’s aviation cooperation with Pakistan also extends into the civilian sector, though with clear strategic undertones. A prime example is the new international airport at Gwadar—a USD 240-million project financed by China and built by a Chinese company—completed in October 2024. Despite its completion, the facility has yet to see passenger or commercial airline activity, fueling speculation that it serves Chinese strategic interests as much as, if not more than, Pakistan’s. Given Gwadar’s position near the mouth of the Persian Gulf and its integration into the Belt and Road Initiative, the airport could eventually support PLA air logistics or evacuation operations under the guise of civilian infrastructure.<sup>31</sup>

The depth of this partnership was further underscored during a 2025 visit to Beijing by Pakistan’s Air Force Chief of Air Staff, Zaheer Ahmad Babar. In discussions with Chinese Defense Minister Dong Jun, Babar characterized the China–Pakistan relationship as “the cornerstone of Pakistan’s foreign policy,” emphasizing that Islamabad places exceptional value on its longstanding strategic friendship with Beijing.<sup>32</sup> This convergence of military and political commitments ensures that Pakistan will remain China’s most reliable partner for projecting airpower—and by extension, influence—into the Western Indian Ocean.

Turning to Pakistan’s western neighbor, Iran relied heavily on Chinese arms after Iraq’s 1980 invasion triggered an eight-year war of attrition. During that

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<sup>30</sup> Chopra, “China-Pakistan Aerospace Nexus”; Lalwani, *A Threshold Alliance*, 13–17; and TN Web Desk, “PAF Holds ‘Indus Shield-Chinese’ Exercise to Validate Interoperability with China,” *The News International* (Pakistan), 5 November 2024, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/>.

<sup>31</sup> Riazat Butt, “No passengers, no planes, no benefits. Pakistan’s newest airport is a bit of a mystery,” *Associated Press*, 23 February 2025, <https://apnews.com/>.

<sup>32</sup> “Chinese Defense Minister Meets Chief of Air Staff of Pakistan Air Force in Beijing,” *Global Times*, 8 April 2025, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/>.

conflict, Tehran acquired roughly 100 Chinese J-6 fighters and an unknown number of F-7s, Beijing's variant of the MiG-21, to offset losses and sustain operational tempo. While Chinese arms sales to Iran tapered off in the late 1980s, they surged again in 1991 when Iran purchased 72 additional F-7s, seeking to rebuild its air force amid international isolation. However, subsequent aircraft deliveries from China dwindled and all but ceased after the UN Security Council imposed sanctions on Iran in 2015.

The lifting of the UN arms embargo in 2021 briefly revived prospects for renewed cooperation. That year, China and Iran signed a sweeping 25-year strategic agreement that included provisions for joint production of fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters. Yet this framework has proven slow to materialize on the ground, hampered by financial constraints, sanctions overhang, and Iran's own evolving defense priorities.<sup>33</sup>

In the unmanned sector, however, ties have been more pragmatic. China supplies components for Iran's robust indigenous UAV industry, though it stops short of delivering complete systems. In 2023, the United States sanctioned five Chinese firms for providing drone parts to Iran, underscoring how Beijing has skirted the margins of direct arms transfers while still enabling Tehran's drone capabilities.<sup>34</sup> On the manned combat aircraft front, Iran explored acquiring up to 36 J-10Cs, but negotiations faltered over financial terms. In 2024, seeking alternative options, the commander of Iran's air force traveled to Islamabad to discuss a potential purchase of the China–Pakistan–produced JF-17 Thunder. As of this writing, no formal agreement has emerged.<sup>35</sup>

Taken together, Iran's interactions with China in the air domain reveal a partnership driven less by shared strategic vision and more by opportunistic procurement and hedging. While the two states have laid the groundwork for deeper cooperation, especially through the 25-year pact, actual integration of Chinese airpower platforms into Iran's order of battle remains tentative and constrained by economic realities and Tehran's preference for developing indigenous solutions wherever possible.

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<sup>33</sup> John S. Park and Cameron Glenn, "Iran and China," *Iran Primer*, 11 October 2010, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/>; and Christopher S. Chivvis and Jack Keating, *Cooperation between China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia: Current and Potential Future Threats to America* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024), <https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/>.

<sup>34</sup> Lucas Winter, Jason Warner, and Jemima Baar, "Instruments of Chinese Military Influence in Iran," *Military DIME Research Project*, 13 December 2023, <https://oe.tradoc.army.mil/>.

<sup>35</sup> Boyko Nikolov, "Iran's Air Force Chief in Pakistan: Talks Begin on JF-17 Jet Deal," *Bulgarian Military*, 28 October 2024, <https://bulgarianmilitary.com/>; and Przemyslaw Jurasek, "Iran eyes Chinese JF-17 jets to bolster aerial capabilities," *Daily Wrap*, 30 December 2024, <https://dailywrap.net/>.

Historically, the Iraqi Air Force (IAF) depended on the Soviet Union to supply its combat aircraft, a reliance that shifted to the United States following the ouster of Saddam Hussein. China never figured prominently in Iraq's airpower inventory. However, Beijing has steadily increased its footprint in Iraq's broader defense sector, providing significant quantities of tanks, artillery systems, and other ground combat platforms. More recently, Iraq has turned to China for unmanned capabilities, acquiring an undisclosed number of Cai Hong-4 and Cai Hong-5 UAVs. These purchases signal a growing Iraqi confidence in Chinese military technology and simultaneously bolster Beijing's reputation as a credible arms supplier across the Middle East.

Persistent reports indicate that Baghdad is now exploring deeper aviation ties with China and Pakistan through interest in the JF-17 Thunder—a fourth-generation multirole fighter jointly produced by Islamabad and Beijing. In 2024, senior IAF officials traveled to Pakistan for discussions that reportedly culminated in agreements to procure 12 MFI-17 Mushshak trainers and 12 JF-17s.<sup>36</sup> If finalized and executed, these deals would mark the first meaningful introduction of Chinese-linked manned combat aircraft into Iraq's inventory, potentially opening the door for broader aviation cooperation.

In contrast, the Kuwait Air Force continues to rely almost exclusively on aircraft sourced from the United States, Germany, and France. Chinese platforms are entirely absent from its order of battle.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, Kuwait does maintain modest defense ties with China, including collaboration on military education and training initiatives and a joint venture operating a weapons and ammunition manufacturing facility. To date, however, this cooperation has not extended into the realm of military aviation.<sup>38</sup>

The Royal Saudi Air Force fields one of the most formidable air fleets in the Middle East, composed almost entirely of aircraft sourced from the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Italy. Chinese platforms are conspicuously absent from its inventory.<sup>39</sup> Riyadh remains deeply reliant on Western suppliers—especially

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<sup>36</sup> "Iraqi Air Force," *GlobalMilitary.net*, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>; "Iraq Acquires Chinese CH-5 Killer Drones: Reports," *Defense Mirror.com*, 23 September 2023, <https://www.defensemirror.com/>; "Iraq Boosts Air Capabilities with Chinese CH-5 Medium-altitude Combat Drone," *Global Defense News*, 27 May 2024, <https://armyrecognition.com/>; and Ritu Sharma, "Pakistan's JF-17 Thunder Bags Another Fighter Deal, Media Says; India's LCA Tejas Banks on Massive IAF Contract," *EurAsian Times*, 12 May 2024, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/>.

<sup>37</sup> "Kuwait Air Force," *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

<sup>38</sup> "Official Commends Kuwait and China Military Cooperation," *Kuwait Times*, 29 July 2024, <https://kuwaittimes.com/>.

<sup>39</sup> "Royal Saudi Air Force," *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

Washington—not only for combat aircraft but also for sustainment, advanced munitions, and critical training pipelines. This dependency makes Saudi Arabia understandably cautious about jeopardizing its longstanding strategic relationships by turning to China for manned aviation systems.

However, unmanned platforms present a different calculus. Saudi Arabia has increasingly looked to China to diversify its UAV capabilities outside Western export control regimes. In 2014, Riyadh purchased CH-4 drones from China, later supplementing them with the more advanced and lethal Wing Loong II systems. To date, Saudi Arabia has imported approximately 70 combat UAVs from China and has signaled interest in acquiring as many as 285 more—a scale that underscores how Beijing has become a key partner in fulfilling Riyadh's growing appetite for armed drones. Further embedding this relationship, China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation has established a drone manufacturing facility inside the Kingdom, deepening technological ties that could evolve into more autonomous local production over time.<sup>40</sup>

China has also leveraged high-profile defense exhibitions to expand its footprint. In 2024, Saudi Arabia hosted the World Defense Show outside Riyadh, where 36 Chinese firms mounted an aggressive campaign to court buyers, many from Western Indian Ocean littoral states. Chinese exhibitors occupied more floor space than any other national contingent, with armed and unarmed UAVs dominating their displays. To punctuate this presence, China dispatched its Bayi Aerobatic Team, which performed precision routines using J-10 fighters refueled in flight by a PLAAF YU-20U tanker. This mission marked the first instance of China employing its aerial refueling capability to support a long-distance demonstration, signaling both growing technical confidence and an intent to showcase expeditionary competencies before a strategically consequential audience.<sup>41</sup>

The United States remains the principal supplier of aircraft to the Royal Bahraini Air Force, while France, the United States, and Italy collectively dominate the inventory of the Qatar Emiri Air Force. Chinese platforms are entirely absent from both fleets.<sup>42</sup> In 2024, China and Bahrain announced a “comprehensive strategic

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<sup>40</sup> Abhishek Kumar Darbey, “China's Increasing Global Drone Footprint – Analysis,” *Eurasia Review*, 24 November 2024, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/>.

<sup>41</sup> Guo Yuandan and Leng Shumei, “PLA Bayi Aerobatic Team's J-10 Fighter Jets Depart for Saudi Arabia World Defense Show,” *Global Times*, 29 January 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/>; and Tim Martin and Agnes Helou, “China Makes Presence Felt at Saudi Arabian Defense Show, Outpacing US, Russia,” *Breaking Defense*, 9 February 2024, <https://breakingdefense.com/>.

<sup>42</sup> “Royal Bahraini Air Force,” *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>; and “Qatar Emiri Air Force,” *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

partnership,” reflecting a steady, if modest, deepening of economic ties.<sup>43</sup> However, this relationship has yet to extend into the military aviation sphere. Similarly, Qatar has expanded its economic and trade engagement with China and issued joint pledges to promote military cooperation.<sup>44</sup> Thus far, these declarations have not translated into tangible collaboration between the Qatari and Chinese air forces.

Among the Gulf states, the United Arab Emirates stands out for developing the most substantial military aviation ties with China, even as the United States and France continue to supply the core of the UAE Air Force. In 2023, the UAE signed an agreement to purchase 12 Chinese L-15A advanced jet trainers, with an option for 36 more. By 2025, at least two were in active service, signaling the UAE’s willingness to diversify its procurement sources.<sup>45</sup> The UAV sector reveals an even deeper relationship. The UAE first acquired at least five Wing Loong I drones in 2011, then became China’s inaugural export customer for the more capable Wing Loong II in 2017. Between 2008 and 2018, China exported 181 combat drones and 163 strike-capable UAVs globally—22 percent of which went to the UAE.<sup>46</sup> To solidify these ties, the UAE’s International Golden Group partnered with China’s Norinco to establish the China-Emirates Science and Technology Innovation Laboratory, a joint venture focused on drone research and development.<sup>47</sup>

Chinese strategic ambitions in the UAE have also drawn scrutiny from Washington. According to leaked American intelligence assessments, the United States suspected that the PLA was constructing a military facility—known to Beijing as “Project 141”—at Khalifa Port. Under heavy diplomatic pressure from Washington, Abu Dhabi reportedly suspended the project.<sup>48</sup> As of this writing, there is no evidence of a Chinese base on Emirati soil.

The UAE is also unique among Gulf Cooperation Council members in conducting bilateral air force exercises with China. The first Falcon Field exercise in 2023 and a follow-on in 2024 were both held in China’s Xinjiang province. The UAE

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<sup>43</sup> Robert Mogielnicki, “A Flurry of Activity in Bahrain-China Relations,” *Arab Gulf States Institute*, 15 July 2024, <https://agsi.org/>.

<sup>44</sup> Ashraf Siddiqui, “Qatar: Chinese Envoy Highlights Strengthened China-Qatar Relations and Shared Global Commitments,” *Asian Telegraph*, 29 December 2024, <https://asiantelegraphqatar.com/>; and “China, Qatar Agree to Promote Military Cooperation,” *Xinhua*, 22 May 2024, <https://english.news.cn/>.

<sup>45</sup> “United Arab Emirates Air Force,” *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>; and “UAE Receives First Batch of Chinese L-15 Falcons,” *The Aviationist*, 8 November 2023, <https://theaviationist.com/>.

<sup>46</sup> Darbey, “China’s Increasing Global Drone Footprint.”

<sup>47</sup> Eleonora Ardemagni, “In GCC-Asia Rising Ties, Defence Industry Is the Key,” *ISPI*, 18 June 2024, <https://www.ispionline.it/>.

<sup>48</sup> John Hudson, Ellen Nakashima, and Liz Sly, “Buildup Resumed at Suspected Chinese Military Site in UAE, Leak Says,” *Washington Post*, 26 April 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

deployed at least six Dassault Mirage 2000-0DAD/EAD ground attack aircraft alongside supporting transport assets, signaling a deliberate choice to expand defense ties with Beijing even under the watchful eye of Washington. These exercises demonstrated Abu Dhabi's independent strategic calculus and raised concerns within US defense circles about the UAE's long-term orientation.<sup>49</sup>

Meanwhile, Chinese defense firms have leveraged regional arms expos to further penetrate Gulf markets. At recent International Defense Exhibition and Conference events in Abu Dhabi, Chinese manufacturers prominently showcased systems ranging from the FC-31 stealth fighter to an array of armed drones, underscoring Beijing's ambitions to expand its aviation footprint across the Gulf.<sup>50</sup>

Western suppliers continue to furnish virtually all aircraft operated by the Royal Air Force of Oman, leaving Chinese platforms entirely absent from its inventory.<sup>51</sup> While Muscat has signaled interest in developing a "strategic partnership" with Beijing, this initiative appears primarily aimed at enhancing economic ties rather than forging a substantive security relationship.<sup>52</sup> Reports have circulated that China explored establishing a military facility—likely naval—in Oman, but no such project has come to fruition.<sup>53</sup>

Oman's recent defense diplomacy underscores its preference for balanced, non-aligned engagement. Illustrating this posture, Muscat has expressed interest in deepening cooperation with the PAF and exploring opportunities tied to Islamabad's defense production sector. At the same time, Oman conducted a joint air combat exercise with the Indian Air Force, reinforcing its commitment to maintaining broad, diversified security ties across competing regional actors.<sup>54</sup> His carefully managed neutrality allows Oman to engage a wide array of partners without becoming overly reliant on or aligned with any single power—China included.

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<sup>49</sup> Albert Vidal Ribe and Joseph Dempsey, "More Than a Mirage: UAE Combat Aircraft in China," *Military Balance* (blog), 22 July 2024, <https://www.iiss.org/>.

<sup>50</sup> Liu Xuanzun and Ma Jun, "Chinese Defense Firms Exhibit Record-breaking Products at Industry Expo in UAE," *Global Times*, 20 February 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/>; and Cui Haipei, "Chinese Tech Shines at UAE Defense Expo," *China Daily*, 18 February 2025, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/>.

<sup>51</sup> "Royal Air Force of Oman," *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

<sup>52</sup> Yousuf bin Hamed al Balushi, "Opportunity Oman: Strategic Partnership with China," *Oman Observer*, 7 January 2024, <https://www.omanobserver.om/>.

<sup>53</sup> "China in Talks to Build Military Base in Oman: White House," *The Cradle*, 8 November 2023, <https://thecradle.co/>.

<sup>54</sup> "Oman Eyes Pakistan's Indigenous Defense Production, Deeper Air Force Ties," *Arab News*, 7 February 2025, <https://www.arabnews.com/>; and "Oman, India Take Part in Joint Air Force Drills," *Middle East Monitor*, 22 February 2022, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/>.

## Red Sea and Gulf of Aden

Yemen remains mired in conflict—at war first with its neighbors and now largely with itself. The territory controlled by Houthi rebels in Sanaa experienced repeated Saudi and Emirati Wing Loong II drone and air strikes until 2022. In response, the Houthis launched their own drone and missile attacks, initially targeting Saudi Arabia and later striking international shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden as an expression of support for Hamas operations in Gaza. These Houthi drones were either supplied directly by Iran or assembled locally using Iranian technology.<sup>55</sup> The Yemeni Air Force, for its part, consists mostly of aging Soviet-era aircraft but has cultivated a growing indigenous drone capability.<sup>56</sup>

China has carefully balanced its relationships between the Houthi authorities in Sanaa and the internationally recognized government based in Aden. In a notable diplomatic maneuver, Beijing reportedly secured Houthi assurances to exempt Chinese-affiliated shipping from drone and missile attacks—a carve-out that may help explain the Houthis’ selective targeting. Meanwhile, the United States sanctioned two Chinese firms for supplying “dual-use” components that bolstered the Houthis’ capacity to produce more advanced missiles and UAVs, underscoring how Beijing’s commercial or gray-market transfers can carry direct security implications in already volatile theaters.<sup>57</sup>

Turning north, the Egyptian Air Force (EAF) stands as one of the most capable air forces in the Middle East, with a fleet predominantly composed of American, French, and Soviet/Russian platforms. However, Egypt has increasingly diversified its suppliers. The EAF operates 118 K-8 light attack and jet trainers jointly produced by China and Pakistan,<sup>58</sup> and in 2025, it received its first batch of J-10CE fighters from China. This procurement represents a significant strategic pivot, enabling Cairo to hedge against Western political conditions often tied to arms sales.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, Egypt employs Chinese-supplied Wing Loong II drones in

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<sup>55</sup> “Six Houthi Drone Warfare Strategies: How Innovation Is Shifting the Regional Balance of Power,” *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*, 6 August 2024, <https://acleddata.com/>; and Darbey, “China’s Increasing Global Drone Footprint.”

<sup>56</sup> “Yemeni Air Force,” *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

<sup>57</sup> Tegaswini Deshmukh, “Red Sea Crisis: China’s Secret Deal with Yemen’s Houthi Rebels,” *Regtech Times*, 3 January 2025, <https://regtechtimes.com/>.

<sup>58</sup> “Egyptian Air Force,” *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

<sup>59</sup> Taha Sakr, “Chinese J-10CE Jets Arrive in Egypt, Marking Shift in Air Superiority Strategy,” *Daily News Egypt*, 13 February 2025, <https://www.dailynewsegyp.com/>; and Ahmed Aboudouh, “Egypt’s Purchase of a Chinese Fighter Jet Is a Reminder Cold War Tactics Are Back in the Middle East,” *Chatham House*, 12 October 2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/>.

counterinsurgency operations against militant networks in northern Sinai, integrating Beijing's systems into active combat roles.<sup>60</sup>

In 2024, the PLA Air Force demonstrated its growing operational ambitions in North Africa when a Y-20 transport aircraft conducted flight maneuvers and several J-10 fighters from the Bayi Aerobatic Team were showcased on static display at the inaugural International Aviation and Space Exhibition in al Alamein, Egypt.<sup>61</sup> This was followed by a far more substantive engagement in 2025, when six PLAAF Y-20 transports arrived at an Egyptian air base for the first bilateral exercise between the two air forces, designated *Eagles of Civilization 2025*. During the drills, Chinese and Egyptian units coordinated flights and executed joint tactical training. The PLAAF deployed J-10C/S fighters alongside a KJ-500 airborne early warning and control aircraft, marking the first occasion it fielded these assets in an international exercise. This evolving China–Egypt air force relationship highlights Beijing's intent to project airpower into the Middle East and raises broader questions about shifting alignments in a region traditionally dominated by US and European security partnerships.<sup>62</sup>

Meanwhile, Sudan remains fractured by a civil war that erupted in 2023 and continues to splinter the country. The Sudanese Air Force still operates a fleet largely comprised of aging Soviet-era aircraft, much of it supplied by China over past decades. Unconfirmed reports suggest Khartoum is weighing a potential acquisition of J-10C fighters, particularly after Egypt's decision to integrate these platforms into its own force structure.<sup>63</sup>

Unmanned systems have become an increasingly prominent feature of Sudan's conflict landscape. The Sudan Armed Forces employ Turkish and Iranian drones, while the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces relies on Wing Loong II and FH-95 UAVs procured via the UAE—highlighting how Chinese drone technology continues to diffuse through proxy channels even where Beijing is not directly involved.<sup>64</sup>

China has also maintained a longstanding peacekeeping footprint in Sudan. It contributed two successive PLA Army helicopter detachments to the UN mission

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<sup>60</sup> Darbey, "China's Increasing Global Drone Footprint."

<sup>61</sup> Liu Jimei and Gao Sifeng, "Chinese Air Force Planes Participate in Air Show in Egypt," *China Military Online*, 5 September 2024, <http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/>.

<sup>62</sup> Darek Liam, "China, Egypt Begins Inaugural Joint Air Exercise 'Civilization Eagle 2025'," *Military Africa*, 20 April 2025, <https://www.military.africa/>; and Ying Yu Lin, "What a China–Egypt Military Training Reveals About the PLA's Combat Readiness," *The Diplomat*, 20 May 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

<sup>63</sup> "Sudan Plans to Purchase Chinese J-10C Fighter Jets," *Global Defense Corp*, 24 February 2025, <https://www.globaldefensecorp.com/>.

<sup>64</sup> Kathryn Tyson, "Drones Over Sudan: Foreign Powers in Sudan's Civil War," AEL, January 2025, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/>.

in Darfur, which concluded in 2020, and has since deployed five successive helicopter units to support UN operations along the Sudan–South Sudan border. Each rotation involved four Mi-17 helicopters, reflecting Beijing’s steady commitment to showcasing its expeditionary logistics and rotary-wing capabilities under multilateral mandates.<sup>65</sup> At the onset of the current civil war, China evacuated approximately 1,300 nationals by land and sea but did not deploy PLAAF assets for the mission—underscoring both the limits of China’s willingness to employ its airpower in unstable environments and its continued preference for measured, risk-averse interventions.<sup>66</sup>

The Eritrean Air Force remains exceedingly small, consisting mainly of a handful of Soviet-era aircraft originally provided by China, along with four Chinese-supplied Y-12 helicopters.<sup>67</sup> Although Asmara maintains cordial diplomatic ties with Beijing, there is no substantive cooperation in the military aviation sector.

Djibouti’s air force is even more modest, comprising just three Chinese helicopters and a few aging Soviet-era aircraft gifted by China decades ago.<sup>68</sup> In stark contrast, Beijing has made extensive strategic investments in Djibouti, highlighted by the establishment of a major PLA Navy base that became operational in 2017. This facility, guarded by PLANMC units, includes a helicopter pad and is capable of supporting Chinese aircraft carriers. However, Djibouti lacks the infrastructure to host meaningful fixed-wing operations: its commercial airport remains under Djiboutian control, the runway is too short for Y-20 heavy transports, and China cannot base fighter aircraft there. As a result, Djibouti’s practical utility as a platform for projecting Chinese airpower remains limited.<sup>69</sup>

In 2023, Djibouti announced a USD 1-billion initiative to construct Africa’s first orbital spaceport in partnership with two Chinese-affiliated firms: the Hong Kong Aerospace Technology Group and Touchroad International Holdings Group. While this project carries potential military applications, it has become entangled in legal disputes, and its future is uncertain.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> “Chinese Peacekeeping Helicopter Unit to Sudan’s Darfur Awarded UN Peace Medals,” *Xinhua*, 18 July 2019, <http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/>; and “China’s 4<sup>th</sup> Peacekeeping Helicopter Unit to Abeyi Completes One-year Mission,” *China Military Online*, 2 January 2025, <http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/>.

<sup>66</sup> Ming-Shih Shen, “The Evacuation Operation in Sudan and PLA’s Capability of Long Distances Military Power Projection,” *INDSR Newsletter*, 28 August 2023, <https://inders.org.tw/>.

<sup>67</sup> “Eritrean Air Force,” *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

<sup>68</sup> “Djibouti Air Force,” *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

<sup>69</sup> Mike Sweeney, “Challenges to Chinese Blue-Water Operations,” *Defense Priorities*, 30 April 2024, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/>.

<sup>70</sup> Diksha Jain, “The Upcoming Djibouti Spaceport Project,” *CESCUBE*, 3 October 2023, <https://cescube.com/>; and Lauren Ploch Blanchard, “China’s Engagement in Djibouti,” Congressional Research Service, 6 June 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/>.

Somalia once operated a fleet of 30 Chinese F-6C fighters, but decades of internal conflict following 1991 led to the collapse of its air force. Today, Somalia possesses neither operational aircraft nor trained pilots, and persistent security challenges preclude its consideration by Beijing as a venue for airpower collaboration.<sup>71</sup> In 1991, the northern region of Somalia declared independence as Somaliland, maintaining its own government ever since. However, in 2020, Somaliland and Taiwan exchanged liaison offices, effectively severing Beijing's engagement with the breakaway territory and aligning Hargeisa more closely with Taipei in a manner directly at odds with China's strategic preferences.

### **Africa's East Coast and Western Indian Ocean Island Countries**

With the notable exception of Tanzania, this region has attracted relatively limited attention from Chinese strategists focused on airpower projection. The Kenya Air Force (KAF) maintains a modest contingent of Chinese hardware, operating 10 Y-12 transport aircraft and approximately six Z-9WA armed helicopters.<sup>72</sup> In 2024, the KAF commander attended the 8th International Military Flight Training Conference hosted by the PLAAF, as well as the 15th Zhuhai Air Show—engagements that reflect Nairobi's interest in maintaining cordial ties with Beijing.<sup>73</sup> Beyond these exchanges, Kenya and China have agreed to expand military collaboration through training programs, technology transfer, and prospective joint exercises, although concrete outcomes in the aviation domain remain limited.<sup>74</sup>

By contrast, Tanzania stands out as a long-established partner in China's African security engagements. From its inception, the Tanzania Air Force Command (TAFC) has relied predominantly on Chinese aircraft. Today, its fleet includes 14 J-7Gs—an upgraded Chinese derivative of the MiG-21—six K-8 jet trainers, and two Y-12 transport planes. In 2011, Tanzania modernized its air force by replacing aging J-7s with new J-7G variants.<sup>75</sup> China's support extends beyond platforms:

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<sup>71</sup> Abraham Mahshie, "Somalia Hopes to Reconstitute Its Air Force with Renewed US Partnership," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 27 January 2022, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/>.

<sup>72</sup> "Kenya Air Force," *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

<sup>73</sup> "Commander KAF at the 15<sup>th</sup> China International Aviation and Aerospace Exhibition," *Ministry of Defense News*, 14 November 2024, <https://www.mod.go.ke/>.

<sup>74</sup> Eric Biegon, "Kenya and China Explore Enhanced Defence Cooperation," *KBC Digital*, 20 February 2025, <https://www.kbc.co.ke/>.

<sup>75</sup> "Tanzania Air Force Command," *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>; and Oscar Nkala, "Tanzanian Air Force Takes Delivery of 14 New J-7G Fighter Jets," *Defence Web*, 25 November 2013, <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/>.

in the early 1970s, Beijing built and co-financed Tanzania's air force base at Ngerengere, later funding a USD 68-million reconstruction of the facility in 2017.<sup>76</sup>

This enduring partnership is further underscored by operational cooperation. Since 2000, China and Tanzania have conducted 19 joint military exercises, culminating most recently in the Peace-Unity-2024 exercise. For this event, a PLA battalion deployed to Tanzania with its equipment transported aboard two PLAAF Y-20 heavy transports—marking the first known instance of the Y-20 being used to airlift forces for such a bilateral engagement. This operation highlights how Beijing leverages longstanding defense ties with Tanzania to incrementally expand its logistical and air mobility footprint along Africa's east coast.<sup>77</sup>

Mozambique's air force remains small and shows no indication of any formal connection with the PLAAF or other Chinese aviation entities. By contrast, South Africa fields one of the continent's most capable air forces, with the majority of its aircraft procured from European suppliers.<sup>78</sup> In 2024, China sought to penetrate this market by prominently showcasing its Y-20A transport aircraft and newest helicopter models at the African Aerospace and Defence expo in South Africa, aiming to stimulate broader sales across the continent.<sup>79</sup> The following year, the chief of the South African National Defence Force visited Beijing for high-level discussions with China's defense minister, where both parties pledged to deepen military cooperation—though without specific references to air force collaboration.<sup>80</sup> This suggests that while Beijing is eager to expand ties, South Africa continues to guard its procurement autonomy, especially in the critical aviation sector.

Across the independent island nations of the Western Indian Ocean, air force capabilities remain minimal, though each possesses airports that could serve future military purposes. The Comoros maintains cordial relations with China, yet its air force lacks any combat-capable aircraft and has no history of engagement with Beijing in this domain.<sup>81</sup> Madagascar's air force operates a modest fleet of transport aircraft, helicopters, and trainers, primarily tasked with reconnaissance, transport, and maritime patrol. To date, there has been no Chinese collaboration with the

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<sup>76</sup> Alan Warnes, "The Rise and Rise of Tanzania's Air Force," *Times Aerospace*, 14 May 2018, <http://www.timesaerospace.aero/>.

<sup>77</sup> Jake Vartanian, "Peace and Unity: China's Growing Military Footprint in Tanzania," *China Landpower Studies Center*, 9 October 2024, <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/>; and Paul Nantulya, "The Growing Militarization of China's Africa Policy," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 2 December 2024, <https://africacenter.org/>.

<sup>78</sup> "South African Air Force," *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

<sup>79</sup> "Y-20A at AAD 2024: China's Strategic Transport Aircraft Seeks to Conquer African Market," *Defense News Aerospace*, 19 September 2024, <https://armyrecognition.com/>.

<sup>80</sup> "China, South Africa Vow to Strengthen Military Cooperation," *China Military Online*, 10 June 2025, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/>.

<sup>81</sup> "Malagasy Air Force," *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

Malagasy Air Force, though Madagascar's ports are occasionally cited as potential candidates for future visits by Chinese aircraft carriers.<sup>82</sup>

The Mauritius Coast Guard Maritime Air Squadron fields several lightly armed patrol aircraft but does not operate combat platforms, while the Seychelles People's Defence Force Air Wing similarly conducts patrol missions across its vast maritime domain without combat aircraft.<sup>83</sup> Notably, both Mauritius and the Seychelles have developed more substantial defense aviation ties with India than with China, reinforcing New Delhi's longstanding role as a security partner in this segment of the Indian Ocean.

Among the island nations of the Western Indian Ocean, the Maldives has attracted the greatest Chinese attention in the security sector, emerging as a focal point for sharp China–India competition. The Maldives Coast Guard Aviation Squadron operates a handful of helicopters and surveillance aircraft supplied by India and Germany.<sup>84</sup> In 2024, the Maldives Defence Force took an additional step by establishing an Air Corps, which currently consists solely of Turkish-made drones.<sup>85</sup>

That same year, newly elected President Mohamed Muizzu deepened the country's engagement with Beijing by signing a military agreement with China and ordering the departure of a small contingent of Indian troops stationed in the archipelago. However, Muizzu's overtures to China appear driven more by a strategy of balancing than outright replacement of the Maldives' traditional security ties with India.<sup>86</sup> This nuanced approach allows Male to extract benefits from both major partners while preserving strategic autonomy.

China's security interest in the Maldives has thus far focused more on maritime access than on aviation infrastructure. Nonetheless, Chinese companies have played a prominent role in shaping the country's air transport landscape, constructing and upgrading the Velana International Airport and, in 2024, securing a contract to expand the domestic airport at Kadhdhoo in the Laamu Atoll into an international facility.<sup>87</sup> These projects underscore how Beijing leverages economic initiatives that

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<sup>82</sup> Sarah Lesedi, "Mauritius Coast Guard Maritime Air Squadron (MAS) Arms Its HAL Do-228 MPA with Machine Gun Pods," *Military Africa*, 4 October 2018, <https://www.military.africa/>.

<sup>83</sup> "Seychelles People's Defence Force Air Wing," *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

<sup>84</sup> "Coast Guard Aviation Squadron," *GlobalMilitary.net*, 2025, <https://www.globalmilitary.net/>.

<sup>85</sup> Athaulia A. Rasheed, "Is Maldives Ready for Its Tactical Drones?," *The Diplomat*, 18 April 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

<sup>86</sup> Lea Thome, "China-Maldives Military Agreement: An Upgrade to the Bilateral Relationship," *9Dashline*, 16 April 2024, <https://www.9dashline.com/>; and Prateek Chakraborty, "Maldives Says India Has Withdrawn All Its Troops Ahead of May 10 Deadline," *India Today*, 10 May 2024, <https://www.indiatoday.in/>.

<sup>87</sup> "Chagos Islands, Indian Ocean Power Play, China and India," *StratNews Global*, 20 October 2024, <https://stratnewsglobal.com/>.

could, over time, enable dual-use access—reinforcing China’s strategic foothold in a location critical to Indian Ocean sea lanes.

## **Conclusion**

China’s approach to building airpower relationships in the Western Indian Ocean follows a clear pattern. Beijing has prioritized countries geographically proximate—such as Pakistan and Iran—or those with substantial air forces and the financial means to acquire advanced Chinese platforms, notably the UAE and Egypt. The farther a state lies from China and the smaller its indigenous air capabilities, the less Beijing has invested in direct airpower cooperation, with Tanzania standing out as a notable exception. Consistently, Chinese trade, investment, and infrastructure financing have paved the way for subsequent military-to-military engagements, including in the aviation sector.

For most Gulf states, deep-rooted airpower partnerships with the United States and Europe present formidable obstacles to Chinese ambitions. Yet Beijing is steadily advancing its position by marketing its latest generation of fighters and UAVs—systems that increasingly appear across the Western Indian Ocean. China’s willingness to sell armed drones without the political or human rights conditions often attached by Western suppliers gives it a distinct advantage. Outside of Turkey and Iran, China faces few serious competitors in this particular segment, positioning it to challenge Western primacy as the region’s preferred provider of military aircraft.

Looking ahead, Beijing will likely intensify efforts to secure airfield access agreements for the PLAAF, expand the participation of its aircraft in international air shows, and use heavy transports to deliver troops to exercises, support UN peacekeeping contingents, distribute humanitarian aid, or evacuate Chinese nationals in times of crisis. For now, there appears to be little strategic imperative to establish another dedicated PLA air base in the Western Indian Ocean; China can achieve its objectives through a combination of long-term arrangements and ad hoc access. Still, the establishment of the naval base at Djibouti—largely unexpected when announced—serves as a reminder that Beijing could again surprise analysts. While Gwadar in Pakistan remains the most frequently cited candidate for a future base, other plausible locations include the Maldives and Tanzania.

The most significant near-term development in China’s regional airpower posture will almost certainly be the first deployment of a PLAN aircraft carrier strike group—or potentially a large amphibious helicopter or drone carrier—into the Western Indian Ocean. This milestone, now likely within the immediate strategic horizon, would confirm Beijing’s determination to operate as a global military power and could sharpen the rationale for establishing additional naval facilities

beyond Djibouti. Regardless of the precise timeline, the steady growth of Chinese airpower activities across the Western Indian Ocean will continue to raise concerns in both Washington and New Delhi, underscoring the broader shift toward a more contested and multipolar maritime-aviation environment. 🦅

**Amb. David H. Shinn, Ret.**

Ambassador Shinn is a distinguished American diplomat, scholar, and author with deep expertise in African affairs. Currently an adjunct professor of international affairs at The George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs, his career has spanned decades of service in the US Foreign Service and influential work in academia.

Shinn is a triple alumnus of The George Washington University, where he earned his BA (1963), MA (1964), and PhD (1980) in political science. He also holds a certificate in African studies from Northwestern University.

His 37-year career as a Foreign Service Officer was marked by numerous challenging and significant assignments, primarily focused on Africa. His early posts included assignments in Lebanon, Kenya, and Tanzania. He later served as the Deputy Chief of Mission in Mauritania, Cameroon, and Sudan.

In 1987, President Ronald Reagan appointed him US Ambassador to Burkina Faso, a role he held until 1990. Following this, he held several key positions in Washington, DC, including serving as the State Department's Coordinator for Somalia during the US intervention in 1992–93 and later as the Director of the Office of East and Horn of Africa Affairs. In 1996, President Bill Clinton named him US Ambassador to Ethiopia, where he served until 1999.

Since retiring from the Foreign Service in 2000, Ambassador Shinn has been teaching at The George Washington University. He is a prolific writer and a sought-after commentator on contemporary African issues, with a particular focus on the Horn of Africa and China's engagement with the continent. He is the co-author of several books, including *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2012), *Historical Dictionary of Ethiopia* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), and *China's Relations with Africa: A New Era of Strategic Engagement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023). He also maintains an active blog where he shares his analysis on current events.

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