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### JAPAN IS BOLSTERING AIRPOWER CAPABILITIES TO DETER CHINA

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As a country under the US security umbrella, Japan has been able to continue its pacifist-oriented security policy for a long time, however, this is now changing due to regional and extra-regional circumstances. Japan's security partner the US is now not in a position to provide a full-spectrum security umbrella for Tokyo because of the US' other security commitments as well as its 'inward-looking' economic and security policies, apart from China's military might in East Asia. China's military might and its assertiveness on territorial disputes is a concern for Japan and other regional countries, while Beijing's ability to prevent the US Navy's manoeuvrability in the western Pacific is a challenge to the US military dominance in the Indo-Pacific. In this regard, the US has adopted an 'active denial' strategy- denying the Chinese military's manoeuvrability from going beyond its periphery- while Japan is looking for being a 'normal' military power. In this regard, Tokyo is increasingly focusing on strengthening airpower capabilities to deter China.

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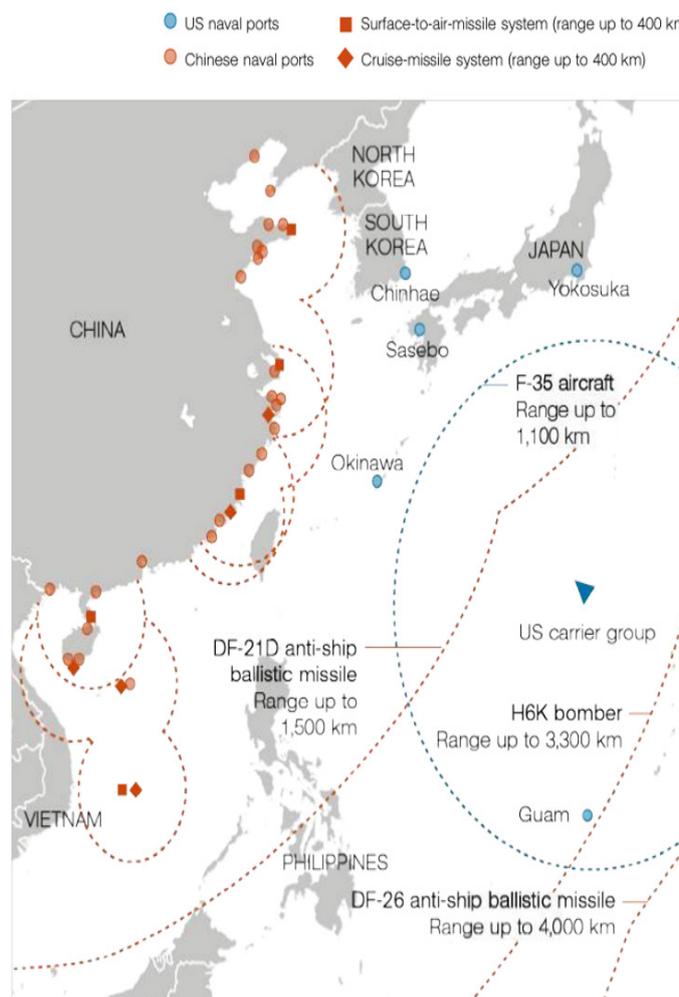
#### **China's Airpower Might in East Asia**

Through the military modernisation program launched more than two decades ago, China has strengthened its aerial capabilities and has attained a level of maturity both quantitatively and qualitatively to challenge the mighty US military in the East Asian theatre. China's offensive/defensive strategy against the US has been a combination

of cruise missiles, surface-to-air and air-to-air missiles, short-to-intermediate range ballistic missiles, and fourth/fifth generation fighter aircraft and bombers. According to the US Department of Defence's report of 2023, China possesses around 2000 theatre missiles (short and medium range) and 500 Intermediate Range (3000-5500 km) Ballistic Missiles (IRBM). The IRBMs of DF-21 and DF-26 are specifically developed to neutralise the US Carrier Strike Groups (CSGs) from approaching the striking range in the western Pacific (Figure 1). The People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) and the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) together possess a total of 1,900 fighter aircraft of which 1300 are fourth-generation fighters.<sup>1</sup> China has already built three aircraft carriers and may acquire a minimum of six carriers by 2035.<sup>2</sup> The PLAAF's fifth-generation fighter inventories are around 100 J-20 A stealth fighters,<sup>3</sup> and plans to induct 500 J-20s by 2035-38 period.<sup>4</sup> Besides, Beijing is reportedly developing beyond-visual-range air-to-air missiles and exploring missile capabilities that improve target-selection and make the missiles more resistant to countermeasures.<sup>5</sup>

### Figure 1: China's A2/AD Capabilities and the Operational range of US CSGs

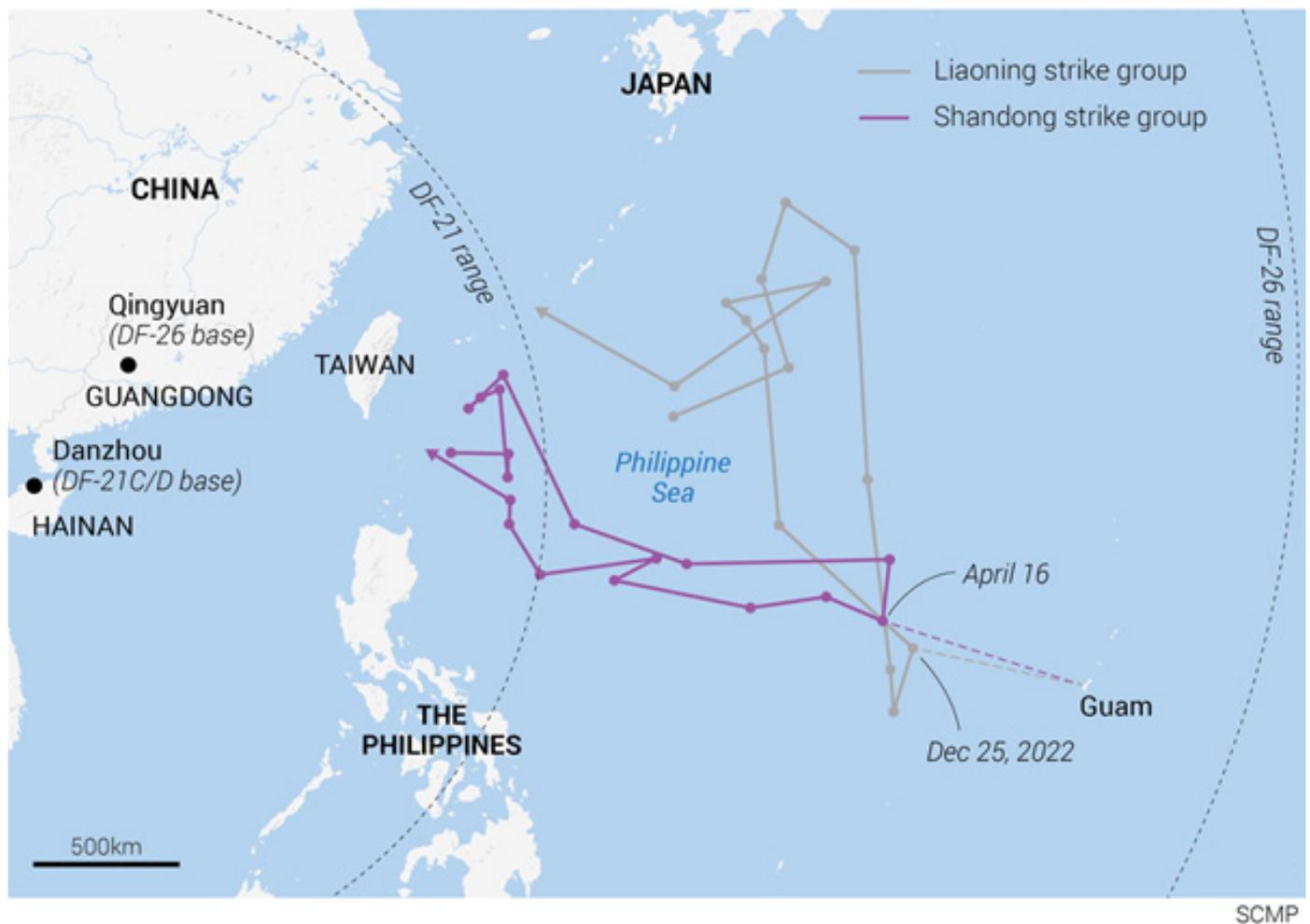
CHINA'S CAPABILITIES FOR ANTI-ACCESS/ AREA DENIAL (A2AD) IN THE EAST AND SOUTH CHINA SEAS



Source: Luigi Laffranchi, "Chinese Strategy in the South China Sea: The A2/AD Bubbles" December 5, 2022, <https://iari.site/2022/12/05/la-strategia-cinese-nel-mar-cinese-meridionale-le-bolle-a2-ad/>. Accessed on February 14, 2024.

China's airpower has now become a formidable one in East Asia. It can deter the CSGs from approaching the second island chain area and also can strike the US base of Guam. China's H-6 bombers have a combat range of 3000 km and in 2022 three H-6 bombers (two H-6J and one H-6K) flew past Miyako Strait into the Pacific Ocean, to take part in PLA's coordinated air and naval exercise in the western Pacific.<sup>6</sup> Demonstrating China's ability to strike the US base of Guam, in April 2023, the PLA conducted a coordinated exercise of its Rocket Force and the Shandong carrier strike group in the western Pacific, about 400 nautical miles (741km) northwest of Guam (figure-2).

**Figure 2: China's Carrier Strike Groups' Exercises off Guam**



Source: : Minnie Chan, "China says PLA Rocket Force joined Shandong carrier group in drills near US base in western Pacific", South China Morning Post, May 10, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3219989/china-says-pla-rocket-force-joined-shandong-carrier-group-drills-near-us-base-western-pacific>

Besides, in December 2023 China set up its fifth command, the Near-Space Command, under the Central Military Commission, alongside the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Rocket Force of the PLA for high-latitude surveillance and intelligence gathering.<sup>7</sup> The command will use solar-powered drones, robotics, and spy balloons for intelligence gathering. This will enable the PLA to get an early warning about the launch of missiles and fighter aircraft against China and can conduct pre-emptive strikes against US military assets in

East Asia and the Pacific.

## US' 'Active Denial' Strategy Against China

An aircraft carrier, the most powerful system on surface water, is the main weaponry of the US military in the western Pacific theatre but is now vulnerable to China's anti-access area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities, especially the 'carrier killer' DF-21/26 missiles. To counter the Chinese challenge, Washington has adopted a two-pronged approach: a long-range attack against Chinese bases and command and control centres from Guam, and helping bolster the regional ally's offensive capabilities, known as the 'active denial' strategy. The 'active denial' or 'deterrence by denial' strategy emphasises maintaining the US military's forward presence in the region and leveraging allies strengths, including geographic position, as well as current or potential niche military capabilities.<sup>8</sup> Australia is getting nuclear-powered attack submarine under the AUKUS (Australia-United Kingdom-United States) deal, and Japan is developing a 6th generation stealth fighter aircraft. Even though the US is not a participant in the Global Combat Air Program (GCAP), Italy and the UK, both NATO members, are involved in the program. South Korea also intends to bolster its aerial strike capabilities with additional 20 F-35A fighter aircraft by 2028, albeit to counter the North Korean threat but would be an added aerial capacity against China, given the strong US-South Korea defence partnerships.<sup>9</sup> The US seeks to constrain China within its periphery by bolstering the aerial capabilities of its allies, especially Japan. It is also developing an anti-hypersonic missile defence system to be placed in Guam and land-based long-range attacking weapons, as well as enhancing the range of Tomahawk cruise missiles.<sup>10</sup>

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## 6th Generation Fighter Program to Bolster Japan's Airpower Capabilities

In its efforts to bolster airpower capabilities, Japan, joined with the United Kingdom and Italy, is developing 6th generation stealth fighter aircraft, named GCAP.<sup>11</sup> For a long time, Japan has been attempting to induct a new generation of fighter aircraft into the Japanese Self Defence Air Force (JSDFAF), replacing the decades-old F-2 developed with the United States in the mid-to-late 1980s. A decade back, Japan had approached the US to purchase its fifth generation stealth fighter aircraft F-22 Raptor but US politics denied permission to the export of F-22, citing the reason "to keep the technology exclusive with the US."<sup>12</sup> Tokyo then, in 2020, planned to develop a home-grown designed and developed stealth aircraft on a hybrid model of the F-22 and F-35 through a collaboration between the US' Lockheed Martin and Japan's Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, at the cost of US \$40 billion.<sup>13</sup> However, this proposal was also shot down by the US, citing the reason that sharing of the F-35's technologies with states outside the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) and Five Eyes alliance systems is prohibited.<sup>14</sup>

Now, these three countries have divided the top positions, with the UK hosting the governmental and commercial headquarters. The first chief executive officer of the government body will come from Japan, and the first head of the industry organisation will be from Italy. Japan is likely to be the major customer of the aircraft as well as the finance contributor and may also host the assembling units, however, engine and technology will come from the European countries. From the commercial side, Japan's Mitsubishi Heavy Industry, Britain's BAE Systems PLC, and Italy's Leonardo are the partners to build the new aircraft.

**Out of the defence budget of US\$56 billion for the financial year 2024-25, Japan plans to spend more than US\$5 billion for building a fleet of standoff missiles, nearly US\$9 billion will go toward enhancing the country's air and missile defence systems, and around US\$500 million will be invested as the first instalment of the GCAP.**

This comes after shelving individual programs of Japan and the UK-Japan's Mitsubishi F-X to succeed the retiring F-2s and the UK's Tempest. The new aircraft will be ready for deployment by 2035. The new aircraft most likely will be a fighter for air superiority like the US Air Force's F-22 Raptor because Japan has already ordered 105 multirole F-35s (63 F-35As, 42s F-35Bs) with a total cost of US\$23 billion and the deployment will begin this year itself.<sup>15</sup> Currently, Japanese Air Self Defence Force possess 519 combat capable fighter aircraft, while 63 F-35As will be inducted within few years.<sup>16</sup> Besides, Japan's Maritime Self Defence Force operates four aircraft carrier type destroyers, and the F-35Bs will be operating from these vessels.

By releasing the latest National Security Strategy in December 2022, Fumio Kishida administration revealed its plan to spend 2 per cent of the GDP on defence, double the self-imposed cap it has maintained since the 1960s.<sup>17</sup> The government has earmarked nearly US\$320 billion for a five-year plan through 2027 to bolster deterrence against armed attack on Japan.<sup>18</sup> Out of the defence budget of US\$56 billion for the financial year 2024-25, Japan plans to spend more than US\$5 billion for building a fleet of standoff missiles, nearly US\$9 billion will go toward enhancing the country's air and missile defence systems, and around US\$500 million will be invested as the first instalment of the GCAP. Tokyo also plans to set up a Space-based missile defence system with 50 satellites in a low Earth orbit to track next-generation hypersonic missiles capable of evading current missile defence systems.<sup>19</sup> The satellite system will be useful for gathering information for precision strikes on enemy bases.

The five-year plan for defence spending will also go for developing longer-range missiles, such as improved Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Type 12s, Kongsberg Joint Strike Missiles, and Lockheed Martin Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missiles, that can strike distant warships and land targets in China or North Korea. Besides, Japan is acquiring 400 improved US-made Tomahawk Land Attack Cruise Missiles (LACM), consisting of

200 Block IV and 200 Block V, while also designing its own hypersonic rockets.<sup>20</sup> Tomahawk's latest version Block V has a range of 1600 kilometres which can hit Chinese and North Korean bases and the missile will be deployed by 2025. In a US-China confrontation, Japanese military bases, airports, seaports, and other logistical hubs could also be tempting targets for Chinese air and missile strikes because they would be staging grounds for the US forces.

**New Delhi should leverage the strong India-Japan defence partnership to enhance Indian Air Force's offensive capabilities.**

Moreover, policymakers and security analysts in Japan believe that the year 2027 will be a defining moment in the East Asian security landscape. China celebrates the centennial of the founding of the PLA in 2027, and on 15 July 2023, President Xi, in an address to party members within the military, called for the CCP leadership "to provide a strong political guarantee for achieving the centennial goal of the PLA."<sup>21</sup> Even though the centennial goals have not been revealed, analysts believe that it could be an invasion of Taiwan by China.<sup>22</sup> In this regard, Japan needs to prepare to face the contingency in a post-2027 scenario, given the context of a territorial dispute between Tokyo and Beijing over the Senkaku islands and PLA's provocations in the East China Sea.

### **Options for India**

India and Japan are secondary states in the hierarchy of the military power index in which China is an emerging great power. Balance of power in international relations theory propounds that secondary states necessarily collaborate and balance against the rising power. Both India and Japan already have a strong defence engagement through military exercises like Malabar and JIMEX for the navy and Veer Guardian for the air force, as well as bilateral Coast Guard exercises. However, defence technology cooperation is the one area the relationship is lacking. In this regard, New Delhi should leverage the strong India-Japan defence partnership to enhance Indian Air Force's offensive capabilities. Currently, Japan cannot export its military equipment other than to the licensees, but it is mulling changing the laws, ostensibly to sell the 6th generation fighters to third countries.<sup>23</sup> Japan has a strong ecosystem in the defence manufacturing sector, involving about 1,100 companies in the manufacture of fighter aircraft, about 1,300 companies in the production of tanks, and about 8,300 companies in building destroyers.<sup>24</sup> New Delhi should seek technical collaboration with these Japanese sub-contractors in the production of defence equipment and create a strong defence ecosystem in India.

## Notes:

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- <sup>3</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, 'Military Balance 2023', p. 242.
- <sup>4</sup> Anil Chopra, “China Plans 500 J-20 Stealth Jets By 2035-38, Should India Consider Su-75 Checkmate Till AMCA Arrives,” *The Eurasian Times*, August 6, 2023, [https://www.eurasiantimes.com/china-plans-500-j-20-stealth-jets-by-2035-38-should-iaf-consider/#google\\_vignette](https://www.eurasiantimes.com/china-plans-500-j-20-stealth-jets-by-2035-38-should-iaf-consider/#google_vignette). Accessed on January 12, 2024.
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