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SINGAPORE AIRSHOW:

East Asia's Changing Security Dynamics: The Role of Airpower

By Michael Raska

Synopsis

As Singapore prepares to host Asia's largest aerospace and defence exhibition, East Asia's strategic realities are shaped by hybrid types of conflicts that increase requirements for advanced airpower capabilities.

Commentary

EAST ASIA'S strategic template is shifting toward a mix of asymmetric anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) threats, low-high intensity conventional conflicts, and a range of non-traditional security challenges. Selected actors in particular such as China, Japan, South Korea, and to a lesser degree Taiwan are acquiring new and more extensive power projection capabilities and demonstrating the political willingness to use them for different strategic reasons.

Indeed, for the first time since Japan's attempt to assert its regional strategic presence in the first half of the 20th century, East Asian states have the ability to pursue national security strategies based on advanced power projection capabilities.

China's airpower transformation: a game changer?

China is pursuing a comprehensive force modernisation to regain and reassert its historical geopolitical role in the region; Japan is aiming to overcome the limitations posed by its pacifist postwar constitution and the Yoshida Doctrine; South Korea seeks to offset any potential future crises stemming from great power rivalries, and Taiwan to sustain its deterrence vis-à-vis China.

It is for these reasons, that aerospace and naval assets in combination with standoff attack precision weapons, ballistic and cruise missiles, and space-based C4ISR systems, are increasingly becoming the "platforms of choice" as they enable key regional powers to overcome the "tyranny of geography" – or the traditional geopolitical entrapment of shared historical path dependence.

Despite the ongoing debate on its capabilities, intents, strategic and technological deficiencies, China's PLA Air Force (PLAAF) is making rapid and relatively significant progress in transforming not only its airpower assets, but also its strategic priorities, force structures and operational concepts.

In just over a decade, the PLAAF has retired most of its obsolete 1950s-era Soviet-designed combat aircraft (J-6 and J-7s), and replaced them with over 400 fourth-generation fighters (J-10, J-11 variants), armed with advanced air-to-air missiles, precision guided munitions, and capable of flying in all-weather conditions. China's first domestically produced airborne warning and control system aircraft (KJ-2000) and a new generation of long-range air defense systems (HQ-9) are now operational.

Perhaps most importantly, China's defence aviation industry accelerated its research, development and testing programmes - from the carrier-based multirole fighter (J-15), the fifth-generation J-20 and J-31 stealth fighters, heavy transport aircraft (Y-20), to future-oriented unmanned aerial vehicles, and hypersonic vehicle systems.

While important technological hurdles still exist, notably in the development of indigenous advanced, high-thrust turbofan engines (WS-10A), these have not precluded the PLAAF from conceptualising long-term visions of airpower.

By 2030, Chinese air power doctrine envisions conducting independent air campaigns within 3000 km radius of China's periphery – shifting its primary missions from traditional land-based air defence, interdiction, and close air support operations, toward deterrence and strategic strike at sea. In this context, PLAAF's concept of "integrated attack and defence" – joint counter-air strike campaigns in conjunction with the Second Artillery's anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM) capabilities are seen as vital in defending China's territorial and sovereignty claims, as well as in limiting potential adversaries (US) strike, access options, and manoeuvre capabilities.

Strategic ramifications

While reactions to China's cumulative rise on the global stage have varied, virtually none of the regional actors have been comfortable with China's increasing military capabilities and more assertive policies, particularly in the deepening territorial disputes over selected islands in the South China Seas and East China Sea. Indeed, none of the regional actors currently have the capability to unilaterally oppose Chinese strategic ambitions without the support of the US.

China's military challenge poses significant dilemmas particularly for Japan, which has been constrained by historical, political, and legal predicaments of the US-Japan alliance. In recent years, however, Japan has taken steps toward more robust security policy ("Dynamic Defence") that seeks greater strategic and operational flexibility in responding to regional contingencies.

Japan's Self Defence Forces are gradually shifting their mission templates from traditional static defence posture toward more power projection and deterrent capabilities - with the procurement of MV-22 Ospreys, F-35 fighters, Global Hawk drones, and amphibious troop carriers.

Similarly, South Korea's ongoing defence reforms have aimed not only to strengthen capabilities vis-à-vis North Korean asymmetric threats, but also developing joint air and naval capabilities that would complement long-term US strategic presence in East Asia. To this end, South Korea's future force modernisation programmes are likely to include the procurement of F-35 stealth fighters, multirole helicopters, submarines, destroyer experimental vessels, surface-to-air missiles, early warning systems, independent precision-strike assets, and next generation of C4ISR.

Ultimately, East Asia's changing strategic realities coupled with the diffusion of next-generation airpower, maritime, and space-based weapons technologies will increasingly constrain the US ability to shape the regional security environment. China's greater power-projection capabilities and efforts to regain what it views as its "rightful" strategic presence in East Asia will greatly complicate crisis management by the US and its allies.

Michael Raska is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.