

What the J-15 Radar Illumination Incident Reveals About the Chinese Military's Culture: Why Does Unprofessional Behavior Persist?

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Introduction

On December 6, 2025, over international waters southeast of Okinawa, two F-15 fighter jets of the Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF), conducting airspace intrusion interception operation, received radar illumination from J-15 fighter jets launched from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy aircraft carrier Liaoning. Japan's Ministry of Defense announced the facts early the following morning, the 7th, and lodged a protest with China, stating it was "a dangerous act exceeding the limits necessary for the safe operation of aircraft¹."

With regard to this incident, some media reports cite expert analysis assessing that the radar illumination was consistent with the use of a "fire-control radar (FCR).²" FCR illumination is a pilot procedure immediately preceding the launch of an air-to-air missile. In nations experiencing high tensions, it constitutes a critical act that could directly lead to hostile actions.

Interestingly, China's response to this radar illumination incident has lacked a consistent explanation from the outset, with internal accounts becoming increasingly contradictory. First, on the afternoon of December 7, a spokesperson for the PLA Navy asserted that "the Japanese side interfered with China's routine training exercises," shifting the blame for the incident onto Japan's actions³. Later that same evening, Chinese Defense Ministry officials at an official press conference countered that the Liaoning Fleet's training exercises were routine operations and that Japan had interfered⁴, but they stubbornly avoided addressing the crucial issue of the radar illumination itself. However, on the following day, December 8, a spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the State Council explained that the radar used by the Chinese side was "search radar."⁵

What should be noted here is that search radar is standard equipment routinely used in aircraft operations, regardless of military or civilian use, and there is originally no need to specifically explain its operation itself. Nevertheless, the fact that Foreign Ministry specifically referred to it as a "search radar" suggests an intent to evade the point Japan is protesting.

Meanwhile, the PLA, as the military actor involved, avoided any mention of whether radar was illuminated or the type of radar used immediately after the incident occurred.⁶ As a result, an ironic scenario emerged where the Foreign Ministry, which had mentioned the “search radar,” shifted the focus to argue that “it was the approach by Japanese fighter jets that was the problem⁷.” This unnatural explanation from the Foreign Ministry, far from dispelling doubts, instead gave the international community the impression that it was an explanation implicitly premised on Japan’s claims.

However, the core issue in this case does not lie in the political dispute itself. The essence of the problem is the fact that the radar illumination, which could directly lead to hostile actions, was continuously conducted by PLA Navy Air Force (PLANAF) for approximately 30 minutes. Such persistent harassment is internationally absurd and must be regarded as unprofessional behavior that grossly deviates from the dignity expected of a military organization.

The author believes this unprofessional behavior should not be treated as an individual incident. Rather, it should be understood as part of a continuum with past cases such as the following.

- The collision by a Chinese J-8 fighter jet with a U.S. Navy EP-3 surveillance aircraft in 2001
- Intimidation of a U.S. Navy P-8 patrol aircraft by a Chinese J-11 fighter jet performing a barrel roll maneuver in 2014
- Harassment by Chinese J-16 Fighter Jets Deploying Chaff Against Australian P-8 Aircraft in 2022

All of these actions are carried out by PLANAF and, as detailed below, are situated within a clear institutional and cultural continuity. That is to say, this radar illumination incident must be understood as a structural phenomenon born from the behavioral culture deeply rooted within them.

Based on the above premises, this paper first outlines the details of 1) The recent J-15 radar illumination incident, and 2) The EP-3 collision incident near Hainan Island in 2001. Then, it clarifies the institutional and cultural mechanisms within the PLANAF that have enabled the reproduction of such unprofessional behavior. In conducting this study, I will analyze using Chinese materials and PLA doctrine manuals on pilot training, while also referencing Western research and media coverage as necessary.

1. Overview of the Radar illumination Incident by J-15 Fighter Jet

1) Incident Date and Time, etc.

On December 6, 2025, over international waters southeast of Okinawa Island within Japan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ), J-15 fighter jets launched from the Chinese aircraft carrier Liaoning and flew. In response, JASDF F-15 fighters scrambled as a countermeasure to the airspace violation. During the response process, PLANAF J-15s in the relevant airspace illuminated JASDF F-15s with radar

on two separate occasions. The first illumination lasted approximately three minutes from around 16:32 to around 16:35, during which the J-15 intermittently illuminated a JASDF F-15. The first incident involved intermittent radar illumination lasting approximately three minutes, from around 16:32 to 16:35, conducted by a PLA Navy J-15 against a JASDF F-15. More serious was the second incident, occurring between approximately 18:37 and 19:08 on the same day, during which prolonged radar illumination—lasting approximately 30 minutes—was conducted against a different JASDF F-15⁸.

2) The Technical Implications of radar illuminating

Regarding this matter, as mentioned above, some media reports cite expert analysis assessing that the radar illumination was consistent with the use of a “fire-control radar (FCR).”⁹ FCR illumination signifies that the fire control system has acquired a specific target and entered a state ready for missile guidance and is therefore considered a “sign of hostile intent”. Hence, incidents occurring twice on the same day within the same airspace, with one lasting over 30 minutes, are extremely unusual by international standards and must be regarded as unprofessional behavior.

3) Analysis

If the J-15 illuminate radar, it would allow the opponent to collect critical electromagnetic signals. Therefore, it would be unrealistic to view this as a reckless act based solely on the pilot's personal judgment. On the other hand, it is also unlikely that Xi Jinping, Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), issued such specific instructions. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that this matter was decided within the ambiguity zone between political directives and operational judgment. However, this ambiguous zone is central to understanding PLANAF's unprofessional behavior. In an environment lacking clear control standards, pilots and field commanders refer to the culture and practices accumulated within the organization, and their actions tend to be determined by cultural norms.

To understand this point, it is necessary to look back at the EP-3 collision incident in Hainan Island in 2001.

2. Overview of the Hainan Island EP-3 Collision Incident

Understanding the unprofessional behavior of PLANAF requires examining the EP-3 collision incident near Hainan Island in April 2001 as a crucial reference point. I myself began my first airspace intrusion interception operation as a JASDF fighter pilot at Naha Air Base just before this EP-3 collision incident occurred near Hainan Island, and it remains vividly in my memory. The footage of the incident released by the U.S. Navy can still be widely viewed online, and I recommend watching it at least once to understand the circumstances at the time¹⁰.

On April 1, 2001, a U.S. Navy EP-3 electronic reconnaissance aircraft that had taken off from Kadena Air Force Base was intercepted by two PLANAF J-8 fighter jets while conducting a reconnaissance flight over

international waters approximately 100 km south-southeast of China's Hainan Island. This J-8 formation approached the EP-3 and monitored its actions, but one of the fighters came abnormally close to the EP-3, resulting a collision between both aircraft. The J-8 that made an abnormally close approach was severely damaged and crashed into the South China Sea, with its pilot, Wang Wei, going missing¹¹. The U.S. Navy EP-3 also sustained significant damage to its propeller and airframe, making flight difficult. It barely managed to make an emergency landing at Lingshui Military Airport on Hainan Island, within Chinese territory.

Here is how the collision occurred. The EP-3 turboprop aircraft's cruising speed was considered low for the jet-powered J-8. Consequently, the J-8 lowered its flaps and attempted to fly alongside the slower EP-3, while pilot Wang Wei continuously signaled for the EP-3 to leave. As can be seen from the publicly released footage, the J-8 had entered a state of near stall, completely losing controllability. It rapidly closed in on the lower left side of the EP-3, colliding with the engine propeller and nose section before crashing to the ocean. Only the J-8 crashed¹².

The J-8's angle of attack became excessive, and it had entered the so-called "backside zone, where control response is lost while thrust remains insufficient—a fact obvious to any pilot in the world. The J-8's behavior had completely exceeded aerodynamic limits. As pointed out by Admiral Blair of the U.S. Navy at the time, the cause of the accident was essentially a self-inflicted collision due to the pilot's inadequate flying skills¹³.

It was analogous to a case of road rage in which an aggressive driver, while attempting to intimidate another vehicle, ends up causing a single-vehicle accident.

3. The Moment the J-8 Fatal Accident Was Transformed into a "Hero's Tale"

Immediately after the Hainan Island EP-3 collision incident, the Chinese Communist Party leadership, led by Jiang Zemin, refused to acknowledge it as a J-8 self-inflicted accident¹⁴. Instead, they vehemently blamed the United States¹⁵ and proceeded to glorify the pilot Wang Wei, who died in the crash, as a martyred hero¹⁶.

Eventually, a monument was built, and the story was incorporated into formal education, solidifying its place in the national memory as that of a "brave martyr who feared no danger."¹⁷ The crucial point here is that a value system emerged in which even dangerous flights were positively evaluated as embodying "bravery" and "a spirit of external combat." The mindset that justifies even unprofessional behavior as "patriotic practice" fostered a culture within the PLANAF that not only avoided dangerous flying but actively glorified and encouraged it.

Furthermore, this norm formation is deeply intertwined with Ethos permeating the entire PLA¹⁸. During the Korean War, the PLA shared values such as "fearless of sacrifice" and "fearless of death,"¹⁹ viewing the

act of throwing oneself into danger as a virtue in itself²⁰. The PLA doctrine manuals on pilot training also emphasize that such values became ingrained as the pride of PLA pilots²¹.

Thus, because of distortions in the very structure of risk perception, a value system prioritizing “bravery” over risk avoidance was encouraged. The heroization of the EP-3 incident near Hainan Island institutionalized unprofessional behavior toward foreign aircraft.

4. Mechanisms that reproduce unprofessional behavior

Based on these cultural mechanisms, the PLANAF has continued to engage in similar dangerous flights even after the EP-3 incident.

For example, in July 2014, a PLANAF J-11 fighter performed a barrel roll maneuver directly above a U.S. Navy P-8 aircraft²², constituting an act of intimidation. The U.S. Department of Defense publicly released details and blamed the Chinese side through a press conference by U.S. Navy Admiral John Kirby (Press Secretary) in August 2014. According to Admiral Kirby, the incident occurred in international airspace 135 miles (217 km) east of Hainan Island. A PLANAF J-11 fighter “passed beneath the P-8 once at a distance of just 50 to 100 feet (15 to 30 meters).” The J-11 then passed by again while displaying its armament. Subsequently, the J-11 flew directly below and alongside the P-8, closing to within 20 feet (6 meters) wing tip to wing tip. It then performed a barrel roll maneuver over the P-8, passing within 45 feet (14 meters)²³.

From 2022 to 2025, multiple incidents occurred involving PLANAF J-16 fighter jets intentionally deploying chaff²⁴ in front of Australian P-8 aircraft and making abnormally close approaches²⁵. This act constitutes an extremely deliberate and malicious act of harassment, as it involves knowingly and willfully performing an action despite full awareness of the dangers posed when a jet engine sucks in metal fragments. Additionally, an incident involving an abnormal close approach to a Canadian Forces CP-140 patrol aircraft was similarly confirmed in 2023²⁶.

Despite differing times and locations, the remarkable consistency in the nature and direction of actions demonstrates that the PLANAF's behavior is not accidental but supported by cultural and institutional mechanisms deeply rooted within the organization.

Whenever such incidents occur, they are often explained as China's external show of force and interpreted as “political signals.” However, this alone does not fully explain the situation. The primary cause should be seen as the cultural inertia deeply ingrained within the PLA Naval Aviation, where unprofessional dangerous flying itself is evaluated as “correct behavior.” In other words, the martyrdom of Wang Wei, elevated to heroic status, and the emphasis on a fearless spirit have become intertwined with the organization's unspoken values, shaping the PLA Navy's behavioral patterns.

Furthermore, institutional factors are also thought to reinforce their behavioral patterns. For the PLANAF specifically, the chain of command may span three tiers: fleet command, aviation command, and theater command. Consequently, it is considered difficult to clearly define the Rules of Engagement (ROE). Moreover, there is almost no evidence of internal punishment for the dangerous flights conducted by the PLANAF thus far. Instead, it is highly likely that an unspoken practice has emerged where those who adopt a hardline posture externally are rewarded.

As a result, an inverting incentive structure has emerged within the organization where engaging in dangerous flights is rewarded more than avoiding them. This structure is the root cause that has institutionally reproduced unprofessional dangerous flying within the PLANAF.

Conclusion

This paper reveals that dangerous flying practices by the PLANAF are reproduced through cultural norms and institutional practices shared within the organization. The heroic narrative symbolized by Wang Wei's death in the line of duty has formed a value system that positively evaluates actions disregarding danger, influencing on-site judgment and decision-making.

Frequently, such dangerous military actions by China are reduced to external intentions like "political signals" or "demonstrations of force." However, as examined in this paper, such observations alone are insufficient. Rather, what is crucial is that within the PLANAF, shared cultural norms and values fostered by heroic narratives intertwine with the authoritarian regime, reproducing unprofessional and dangerous actions as an inevitable structural behavior.

Once, the China scholar Alastair Ian Johnston pointed out that historically, China has been rooted in a mindset that tends to view the use of force as a legitimate policy tool²⁷. While his argument deals with strategic culture at the state level, it is not unnatural for such values to permeate the culture of military organizations over time and manifest as patterns of behavior on the ground.

The dangerous flying seen among PLA Navy aircrew can also be understood as the result of a mindset formed at the national level, which has settled into operational practices through the mediation of organizational culture. Furthermore, this structure likely represents one facet of a behavioral culture that runs deep throughout the entire PLA, despite differences between military branches and service specialties. Indeed, in January 2013, an incident occurred where a PLA Navy destroyer directed its FCR at a Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force destroyer, demonstrating that this pattern of behavior is not limited solely to the aviation domain²⁸.

Standing from this perspective, the prolonged radar illumination incident involving the J-15 is by no means an unusual occurrence; it is an instance where the PLA's cultural inertia manifested in its most readily understandable form. The root of the problem lies not in the merits of individual actions, but in the organizational culture that enables, justifies, and at times even glorifies them.

The challenges facing neighboring countries also come down to precisely this point. The PLA is highly likely to repeat similar unprofessional behavior in the future, and relying solely on the traditional two-way crisis management mechanism is increasingly reaching its limits. Just as addressing road rage through public awareness campaigns alone is insufficient, such dangerous flying is also a highly recurrent behavior shaped by organizational culture and institutional structures. Therefore, it will be necessary to establish a medium-to-long-term risk management system. This system should include recording evidence such as video footage, making incidents visible to the international community, building counter-discourse, and establishing new countermeasure standards.

¹ “Regarding the Chinese military aircraft's radar illumination of Japanese Self-Defense Forces aircraft [中国軍機による自衛隊機へのレーダー照射について],” *Ministry of Defense, Japan* [防衛省], December 7, 2025,

https://www.mod.go.jp/j/press/news/2025/12/6a.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com, accessed on December 14, 2025.

² “What is radar illumination? Former JASDF officer: “Use for fire control means lock-on” [レーダー照射とは 空自元幹部『火器管制用使用はロックオンを意味』],” *Asahi Shimbun* [朝日新聞], December 7, 2025,

<https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASTD70TXCTD7UTIL005M.html>, accessed on December 14, 2025.

³ “Navy Spokesperson Releases Information on Liaoning Carrier Strike Group's Long-Range Training [海军新闻发言人就辽宁舰航母编队远海训练发布消息],” *China Military Online* [中国軍網], December 7, 2025,

http://www.81.cn/yw_208727/16425781.html, accessed on December 14, 2025 ; “Japan should immediately cease

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https://english.news.cn/20251207/fe29825950b34b83964a16970cfae678/c.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com, accessed on December 14, 2025.

⁴ “Spokesperson for Defense Ministry Zhang Xiaogang Responds to Journalists' Questions Regarding Japan's Hype Over Radar Illumination by Aircraft Carrier-Based Aircraft of China's Liaoning Carrier Strike Group [国防部新闻发言人张晓刚就日炒作我辽宁舰航母编队舰载机雷达照射答记者问],” *Defense Ministry Official Website* [国防部网], December 7, 2025,

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https://j.people.com.cn/n3/2025/1208/c94474-20399595.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com, accessed on December 14, 2025.

⁵ “Foreign Ministry questions Japan over ‘radar illumination’: ‘Did you intentionally interfere and create tension?’ [『レーダー照射』で外交部が日本に反問『意図的に妨害し、緊張を作り出したのではないのか』],” *People's Daily Online Japanese Edition* [人民網日本語版], December 10, 2025, https://j.people.com.cn/n3/2025/1210/c94474-20400534.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com, accessed on December 14, 2025.

⁶ The PLA account “Chinese Military News” on the Chinese SNS media platform WeChat made some mention of search radars, but the Chinese Defense Ministry's official press conference did not address them.

⁷ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Remarks on Japan's Accusation of Chinese Naval Carrier-Based Aircraft Conducting “Radar Illumination” on Japanese SDF Fighter Jets,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*

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⁹ “What is radar illumination? Former JASDF officer: “Use for fire control means lock-on” .

¹⁰ “US-EP3 and China-F8 air collision at south china sea in 2001,” Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUjX17ZIE>, accessed on December 14, 2025.

¹¹ “Resolutely implementing President Jiang’s important instructions, we have dispatched additional ships and aircraft to conduct an all-out search for the parachuting pilot [堅決貫徹江主席重要指示_我增派艦船飛機全力搜尋跳傘飛行員] ,” *People’s Daily* [人民日報], April 4, 2001.

¹² Amanda Shaw, “DET 206: EP-3 Collision Incident, 2001,” AR/695, *United States Naval History and Heritage Command*, 6 April 2001 – 16 October 2001, p. 2, https://www.history.navy.mil/content/dam/nhhc/research/archives/collections/ncdu-det-206/finding_aids/AR_695_DET_206_EP_3_Collision_Finding_Aid.pdf, accessed on November 29, 2024.

¹³ ABC News : The Hainan Island Incident EP-3 Spy Plane caught by CHINA 2001,” Youtube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XNtT_7oc7sU, accessed on December 14, 2025.

¹⁴ “China lodged a solemn representation and protest with the U.S. side over the incident where a U.S. reconnaissance aircraft collided with and destroyed a Chinese military aircraft over the South China Sea [就美軍偵察機在南海上空撞毀我軍用飛機事件中方向美方提出嚴正交涉和抗議] ,” *People’s Daily* [人民日報], April 3, 2001.

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¹⁶ Li Yun [黎云] , Zhang Mumu [張汨汨] , “The Heroic Figure Wang Wei: An Immortal Monument in the Skies Over the South China Sea [數風流人物王偉：南海上空的不朽丰碑] ,” *Xinhua* [新華社] , June 12, 2021.

¹⁷ Sun Zhiying [孫智英] , “Wang Wei: An Eternal Monument Over the South China Sea [王偉：南海上空的不朽丰碑] ,” *Xinhua* [新華社] , June 12, 2021.

¹⁸ Wang Shoude [汪守德] , “Chinese Soldiers and the Chinese Spirit [中國軍人與中國精神] ,” *PLA Daily* [解放軍報] , June 12, 2015.

¹⁹ Research Center for Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era National Defense University [國防大學習近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想研究中心] , Drawing spiritual momentum for the great struggles of the new era from the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea [從抗美援朝戰爭中汲取新時代偉大鬥爭的精神動力] , *Guangming Daily* [光明日報] , October 25, 2020, https://www.qstheory.cn/llwx/2020-10/25/c_1126654053.htm, accessed on December 14, 2025.

²⁰ “Monument: The Great Spirit of the War of Resistance | Episode 4: Victory is Certain [丰碑·偉大抗戰精神 | 第四集 必勝] ,” *Xinhua* [新華社] , December 7, 2025, <http://www.news.cn/20251207/b913f047ed51484aa0399d83e4b4c891/c.html>, accessed on December 14, 2025.

²¹ Bai Chongming [白崇明] , Ji Changguo [籍長國] , *Strategic Transformation of the Air Force and Innovation in Aviation Talent Education* [空軍戰略轉型與飛行人才教育創新] , Blue Sky Publishing [藍天出版社] , 2010, pp. 312-313.

²² A barrel roll is an aerobatic maneuver in which an aircraft rotates 360 degrees in a spiral while maintaining its direction of travel. While performed during training or aerobatics with sufficient safety altitude and separation, executing it near another aircraft is an extremely dangerous act that can lead directly to collision.

²³ Rear Admiral John Kirby, Press Secretary, “Department of Defense Press Briefing by Admiral Kirby in the Pentagon Briefing Room,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, August. 22, 2014, <https://www.war.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/606919/departments-of-defense-press-briefing-by-admiral-kirby-in-the-pentagon-briefing/>, accessed on December 14, 2025.

²⁴ Chaff is an assembly of metal fragments or metal-coated fibers dispersed by aircraft to disrupt missile or radar tracking. While primarily used as defensive electronic warfare equipment, intentional dispersal near other aircraft poses a serious safety hazard by potentially causing engine intake or visual disruption.

²⁵ Dzirhan Mahadzir, “Chinese Fighter Harassed Australian Surveillance Aircraft Over South China Sea, Official Say,” *USNI/News*, February 13, 2025, https://news.usni.org/2025/02/13/chinese-fighter-harrasses-australian-surveillance-aircraft-over-south-china-sea-officials-say?utm_source=chatgpt.com, accessed on December 14, 2025.

²⁶ Thomas Wilkins, “By accident or design—or designed accident? China’s unsafe air intercepts,” *The Strategist*, July 1, 2022, https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/by-accident-or-design-or-designed-accident-chinas-unsafe-air-intercepts/?utm_source=chatgpt.com, accessed on December 14, 2025; Chris Panella, “US allies say China’s fighter jets are using dangerous tactics to warn off aircraft — like popping flares and chaff,” *Business Insider*, Feb 15, 2025, <https://www.businessinsider.com/chinas-ways-of-warning-off-foreign-aircraft-is-dangerous-2025-2>, accessed on December 14, 2025.

²⁷ Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*, New Jersey; Princeton University Press, 1995, pp. 61-154.

²⁸ “Chinese Navy directs fire-control radar at Japanese naval vessel; suspected act of intimidation [中国海軍、海自艦に射撃レーダー照射 威嚇目的か],” *Nikkei* [日本経済新聞], February 5, 2013.

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