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Satellite Imagery Suggests a New Operational Concept for China's Airpower：*Tracing the Origins of Obsolete Fighter Aircraft Along the Taiwan Strait Coast*

America, Europe, and Russia Division, Regional Studies Department **AITA Moriki**

1. Introduction

Recently, discussions regarding Taiwan contingency have intensified both domestically and internationally[1]. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has repeatedly conducted large-scale military exercises in the vicinity of the Taiwan Strait and is also advancing the development of military infrastructure in coastal areas. In particular, the renovation and expansion of military airfields are often discussed in relation to the enhancement of future air operations capabilities[2].

Under these circumstances, when observing the airfields along the Taiwan Strait via satellite imagery, a striking anomaly becomes apparent. In one corner of the airfield, where the latest multirole fighters are lined up, obsolete fighter jets designed in the 1960s are mixed in among them. It is generally unthinkable for frontline aircraft and older-generation fighters to be lined up on the same apron at an operational airfield. This is particularly true at forward airfields, where it is common practice to standardize aircraft types for the sake of efficiency in maintenance, resupply, and training.

So why are these obsolete fighter jets stationed at forward airfields along the Taiwan Strait? Taking this question as a starting point, this paper examines aspects of China's air operations strategy by using open-source satellite imagery to trace the deployment and origin of the aircraft in question. Specifically, first, I will examine the mix of new and obsolete fighter jets at coastal airfields; second, it identifies inland hubs where the same aircraft concentrated to assess potential supply implications; and third, it considers the operational implication in the context of unmanned use of decommissioned aircraft.

In other words, the purpose of this paper is not to evaluate the performance of individual weapons. Rather, it is to interpret the design philosophy behind air operations based on the fact of "deployment" as revealed by satellite imagery.

In recent years, it has become possible to identify PLA airfields in China by using publicly available satellite imagery services such as Google Earth. The coordinates are provided to facilitate independent verification.

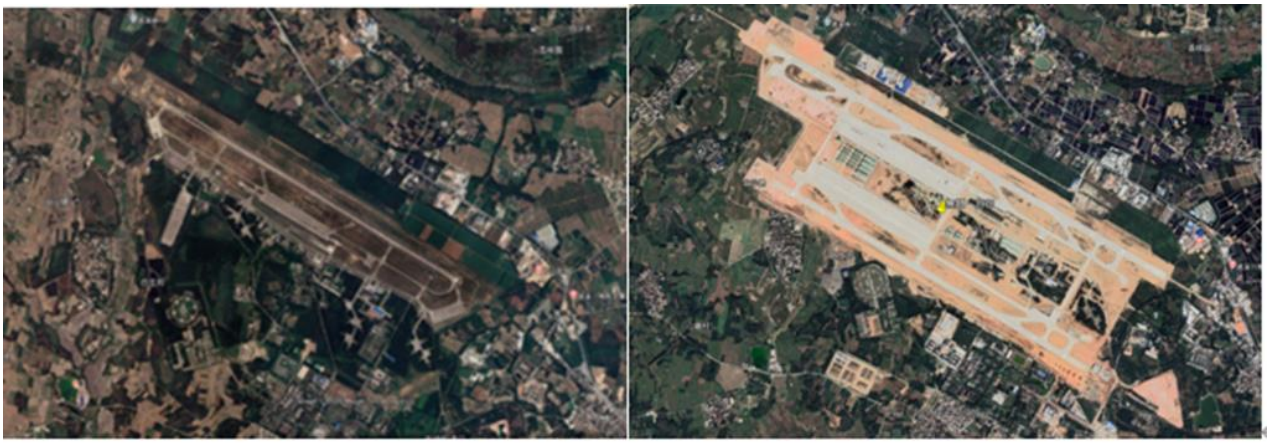
2. What's Happening at the Airfields? — *The Unusual Deployment of Both New and Old Fighter Jets*

Discussions surrounding a potential Taiwan contingency have intensified, and the first point to draw attention has been China's efforts to enhance the capabilities of its coastal airfields. Along China's coastline facing the Taiwan Strait, large-scale construction projects have been underway in recent years at airfields associated with the PLA. In light of this airfield expansion, some experts are raising concerns about the possibility of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan[3].

Satellite images of airfields scattered across Fujian Province, which faces the Taiwan Strait, show that renovations have been underway in recent years, including the expansion of runways, taxiways, and aprons, as well as the construction of bunkers. Suixi Airfield (coordinates N21°23′30.9″ E110°11′46.9″), located near Zhanjiang City in Guangdong Province, is a prime example of this.

As shown in Figure 1, as of October 2018, the facility consisted of a single runway, limited taxiways, and a small apron on the south side. In contrast, satellite imagery from December 2022 shows that a new runway has been constructed parallel to the existing runway on its western side, and that a connecting taxiway and a high-speed exit taxiway linking the two runways have been built. Furthermore, a large-scale apron has been newly constructed in the central area, confirming an expansion of aircraft parking and maintenance capacity.

Figure 1: Expansion of Suixi Airfield (Left: October 2018; Right: December 2022)



Source: Google Earth (© Maxar Technologies; left: October 2018; right: December 2022)

The heightened tensions in the surrounding region are consistent with this development, and this indicates that as part of China's efforts to enhance its forward deployment capabilities. Of particular note

is Longtian Airfield (coordinates N25°34′21.1″ E119°27′40.6″), located in Longhai District, Zhangzhou City, Fujian Province (see Figure 2-1).

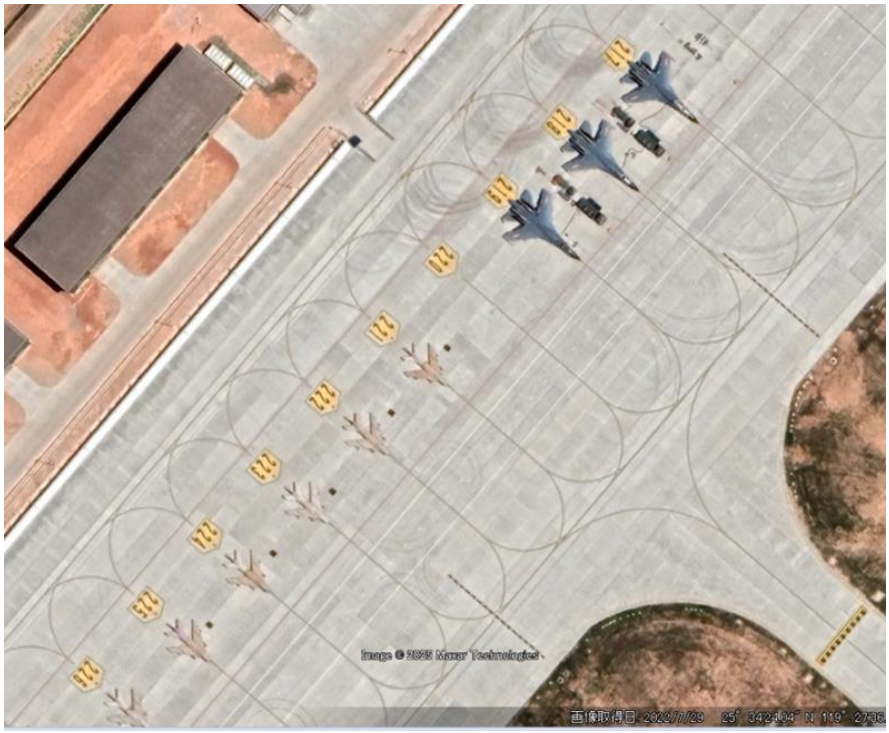
Figure 2-1: Longtian Airfield

Since February 2020, renovation and construction work has been underway at Longtian Airfield, with the addition of hardened aircraft shelters (HAS), ammunition depots, and surveillance facilities, among other improvements, as well as a significant expansion of the apron area.

The satellite image in Figure 2-2 shows an enlarged view of the apron area, where state-of-the-art twin-engine jet fighters and older-generation single-engine jet fighters can be seen parked side by side on the same apron. What is particularly noteworthy here is not so much the presence of older fighters at a forward operating base, but rather the fact that they are deployed in the same operational space as the newer fighters.

First, regarding the new aircraft, it is believed to be the J-16 multi-role fighter based on the following observations: (1) the IRST sensor is difficult to identify in front of the cockpit; (2) there are several underwing pylons for anti-ship and ground attack missions; and (3) the upper surface of the fuselage between the twin vertical stabilizers is wide[4]. In recent years, it appears that the J-16 is being deployed at forward coastal airfields in place of the conventional air superiority fighter, the J-11, suggesting that China is shifting toward a multi-role operational approach that includes ground-attack, anti-ship, and air defense suppression missions.

Figure 2-2: Expanded View of the Apron Area at Longtian Airfield



Source: Google Earth (© Maxar Technologies, July 2022)

On the other hand, the small swept-wing aircraft parked on the same apron is presumed to be a J-6 fighter (equipped with auxiliary fuel tanks) based on its airframe configuration. The J-6 is an older-generation fighter that was mass-produced in the 1960s based on the Soviet MiG-19. Developed under Mao Zedong's leadership against the backdrop of the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis, the aircraft has since been withdrawn from frontline service[5].

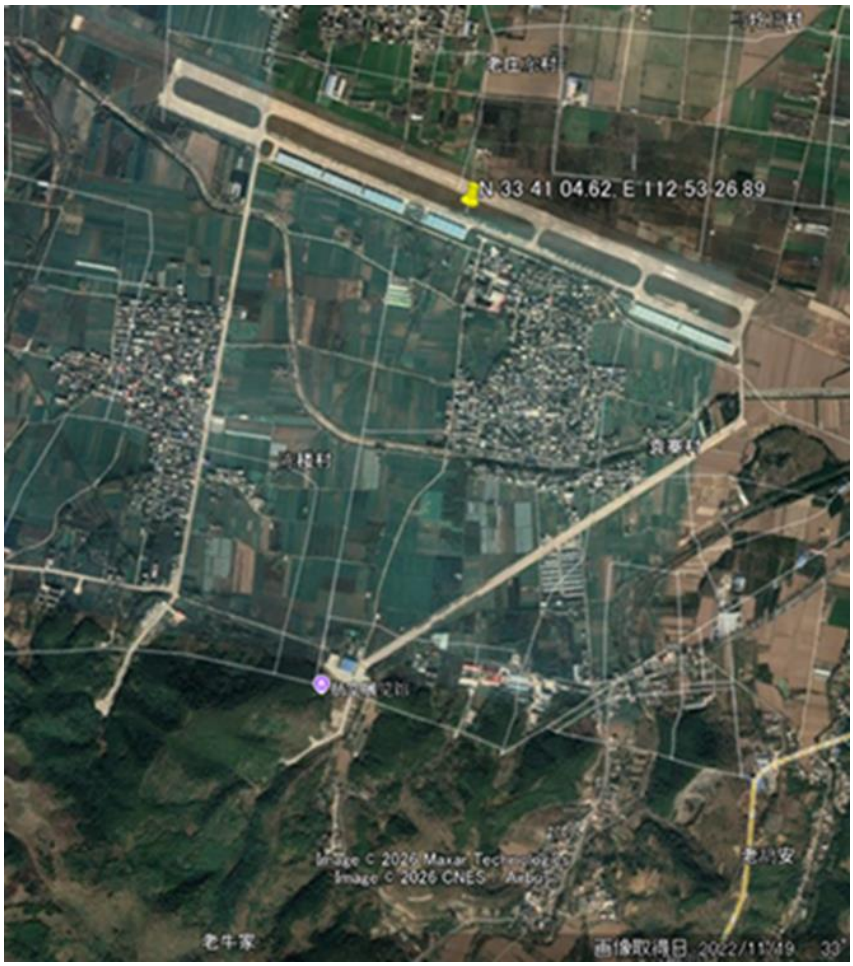
In the modern era, there is no immediately apparent rational explanation for the presence of J-6s at forward airfields. In other words, the coexistence of state-of-the-art multi-role fighters and obsolete fighters cannot be explained simply by a fleet modernization program. Rather, it suggests that they may be assigned different missions.

3. Satellite Images Reveal Supply Base — *Where Did the Outdated J-6 Fighter Jets Come From?*

Given the source of these obsolete aircraft at the forward coastal airfields, it can be assumed that there is a hub in the rear area where aircraft of the same type are concentrated. Searching satellite imagery reveals a distinctive airfield located approximately 370 km east-southeast of Xi'an, in inland China. This

airfield is known as Baofeng Airfield (coordinates N33°41′04.6″ E112°53′26.9″), located in Lushan County, Pingdingshan City, Henan Province (see Figure 3-1).

Figure 3-1: Baofeng Airfield



Source: Google Earth (© 2025 Maxar Technologies, © 2025 CNES /Airbus, November 2022)

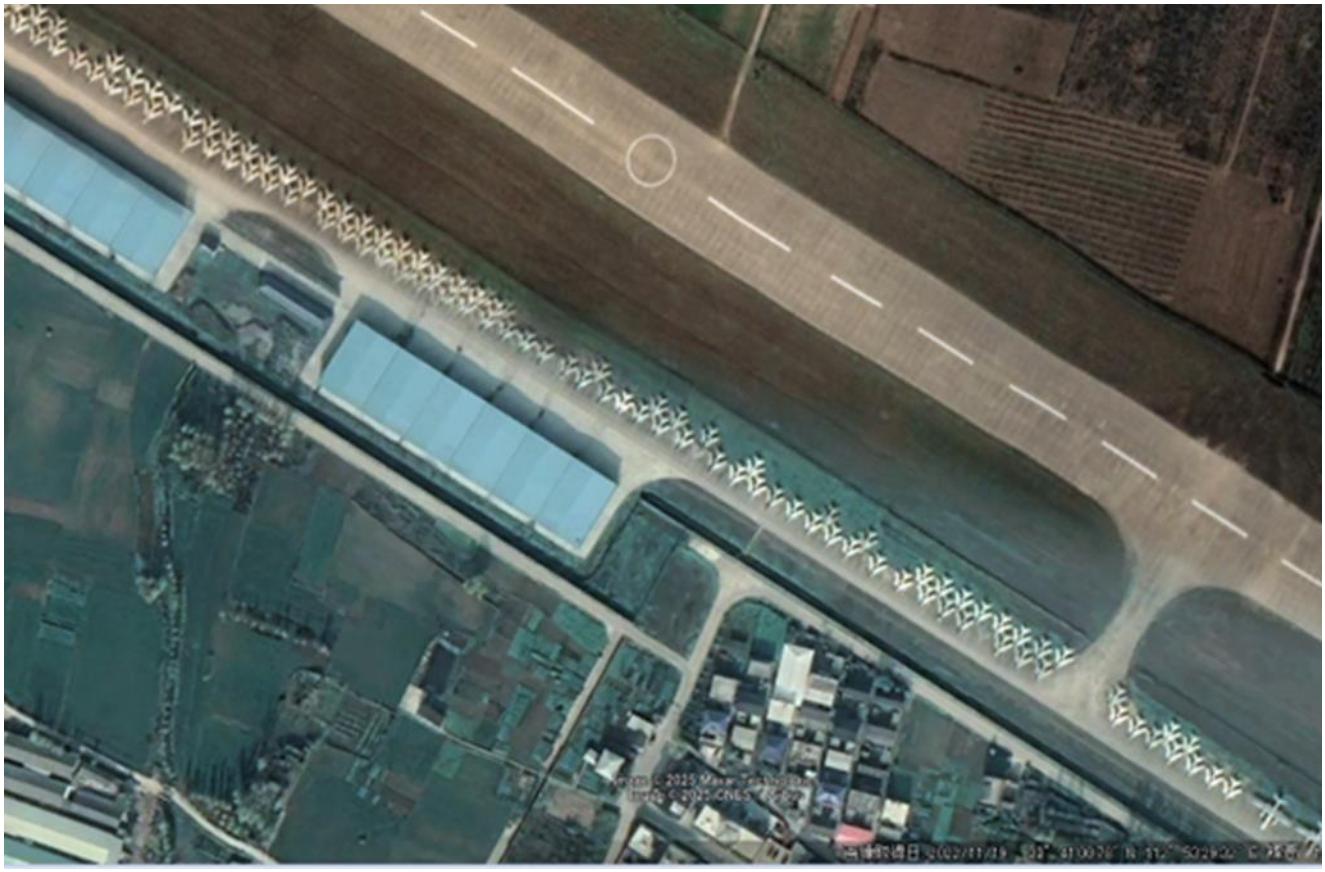
This airfield features a runway 2,180 meters long and 45 meters wide, oriented approximately 100°/280° (magnetic), with taxiways extending approximately 1,600 meters southward from each end.

Each of these taxiways cuts through the city and extends all the way to the foot of the mountain. Furthermore, this airfield does not exhibit typical characteristics of either a civilian airport or a military airfield.

Indeed, this airfield lacks the facilities typically found at military airfields, such as hardened aircraft shelters (HAS), ammunition depots, and surveillance facilities. Instead, it features a long, narrow maintenance hangar and a large apron. Based on this, the airfield appears to be neither a PLA operational base nor a civilian airport, and is highly likely to be a test airfield serving functions related to the evaluation and management of decommissioned aircraft.

On the other hand, a closer look at this airfield reveals numerous obsolete fighter jets parked there. Examining the enlarged satellite image confirms that many obsolete J-6 fighters and Il-28 bombers are parked on the taxiways adjacent to the runway (see Figure 3-2).

Figure 3-2: Obsolete aircraft stored at Baofeng Airfield



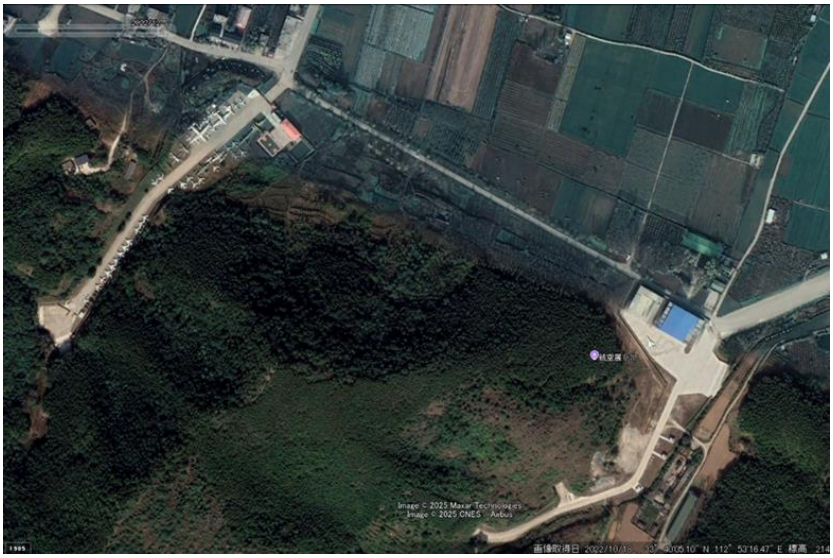
Source: Google Earth (© 2025 Maxar Technologies, © 2025 CNES /Airbus, November 2022)

The huge number of J-6s lined up in the apron area are not arranged as they would be in an exhibition facility, but are maintained in a configuration that allows them to be moved immediately if towed. In other words, it is highly likely that this represents a management system distinct from simple static displays or long-term storage.

Furthermore, if you follow the taxiways extending from both ends of the runway mentioned earlier, you can see an aircraft hangar—a bunker carved into the mountainside—in the lower right corner of Figure 3-3, and a facility that appears to be a museum, along with an aircraft on display, on the left side of the image.

According to the local government's official website, this airfield, built in the 1960s and 1970s, was originally used as a military airfield and is sometimes mentioned in connection with the so-called "Lin Biao Incident" of 1971. At the time, Lin Biao served as Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission and was in charge of the People's Liberation Army under Mao Zedong[6].

Figure 3-3: The Aviation Museum, located south of Baofeng Airfield



Source: Google Earth (© 2025 Maxar Technologies, © 2025 CNES /Airbus, November 2022)

It is currently open to the public as an "Aviation Exhibition Hall［航空展览馆］," and as a storage center for retired PLA Air Force aircraft, it houses a large number of retired military aircraft that are still airworthy or have remaining utility, while also serving purposes such as combat readiness training[7].

Given this, the deployment pattern—in which a small number of obsolete J-6 fighters are scattered across forward airfields along the Taiwan Strait, while a large number of the same model are concentrated at inland airfields—is more naturally understood not merely as a matter of storage, but as a relationship between supply hubs and operational airfields. In other words, this suggests that the obsolete fighters appearing at the coastal forward airfields were systematically transferred from rear airfields[8].

4. Implications of the Operational Concept: *What Will Obsolete Fighters Be Used For?*

Based on the above observations, the phenomenon of obsolete fighters being concentrated inland while also appearing at forward coastal airfields is difficult to interpret as a deployment intended for standard air defense missions. This suggests that these obsolete fighters are not being forward-deployed to gain air superiority, but rather are being operated with a different type of mission in mind.

The development of unmanned aerial vehicles in China dates back to the 1960s. In 1984, the country successfully conducted test flights of a target drone modified from a MiG-15bis, and since then, improvements in high-speed flight and remote control technology have continued[9]. In other words, the

technological foundation for converting retired fighter jets into unmanned aircraft did not emerge suddenly, but is the result of long-term development; this point should not be underestimated.

The J-6 is no longer a fighter capable of withstanding modern air-to-air battle. However, given that it has been used as a target drone even after being retired, it is not technically implausible that it could be put back into service following a conversion to an unmanned configuration. Discussions about repurposing these aircraft for one-way suicide attacks are frequently seen in Chinese media[10], and similar observations have been made by experts overseas[11].

It is worth noting here that unmanned aircraft do not result in human casualties, making it possible to operate them on the assumption of a high attrition rate. In other words, this approach not only forces enemy air defenses to engage them but also allows for the possibility of some of the aircraft that break through the air defense systems to crash directly into ground facilities.

Assuming that an unmanned J-6 is designed for one-way suicide attack operations, it could serve as a means of directly attacking air defense radar sites, surface-to-air missile batteries, airfield facilities, or critical infrastructure. Even if the aircraft is an older model, the kinetic energy and destructive power of an aircraft crashing into a target at several hundred kilometers per hour are by no means negligible. The issue is not the generation of the aircraft, but the consequences should they breach air defense systems. This concept would impose a significant burden on air defense systems, forcing repeated engagements while enabling a portion of these platforms to penetrate even robust defenses.

This possibility has also been observed in the protracted war in Ukraine. Ukraine has been using outdated drones as cruise missiles to strike at Russia[12]. In my article "Future Air battle Envisioned by China" (published in the NIDS collective volume *War with New and Old Characteristics*), I pointed out that PLA experts are drawing lessons from the war in Ukraine and are conducting various studies and upgrading their equipment systems in preparation for future air battle. In particular, I noted that PLA experts are exploring strategies not only to penetrate air defense networks head-on but also to use large numbers of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to provoke air defense reactions and degrade their effectiveness. Given the observed sustained deployment of long-range drones and missiles in recent conflicts, it appears that air battle is shifting toward a focus on the "sustained neutralization of air defense systems[13]."

More importantly, the discussion should not be limited to the J-6 alone. In addition to the J-6, China possesses a vast number of retired fighter aircraft, including the J-7—a copy of the MiG-21—and the J-8, which is an improved version of the J-7[14]. If the transition to unmanned operations for retired fighter jets were to proceed systematically, the crux of the issue lies in the fact that the entire fleet of retired fighter jets could be reorganized as future unmanned strike assets.

If a scenario emerges in which cutting-edge multi-role fighters handle air superiority and precision strikes, while fleets of unmanned, older-generation fighters attempt to saturate and penetrate enemy air defenses, this indicates that future air battle is entering a new phase. The key issue here is not the generational gap

between aircraft, but rather the operational design philosophy of how to systematically repurpose the potential resource represented by retired fighter fleets.

5. Conclusion: A Shift in Operations Revealed by Satellite Images

This paper examines aspects of China's air force operational strategy from the perspective of "the deployment of China's air power as seen through satellite image analysis." Starting with the deployment of obsolete fighter jets at forward airfields along the Taiwan Strait, it traces their origins to explore elements of China's air force operational concept. The methodological significance of this paper lies in its ability to visually confirm the specific deployment relationships between coastal forward airfields and inland airfields through a detailed analysis of satellite imagery, thereby highlighting the potential for the redeployment and reorganization of obsolete aircraft.

The satellite imagery revealed more than just a simple upgrade of equipment. It indicates that retired fighter aircraft are being reorganized and reintegrated into the operational framework in the form of unmanned systems. When obsolete fighters are deployed as one-way suicide attack assets, the air defense side is forced to continue intercepting them; however, it cannot be ruled out that aircraft that evade interception could inflict direct physical damage. In such cases, the critical issue is not the performance of individual weapons, but the sustainability of air defense and its resilience to attrition[15].

More importantly, the discussion should not be limited to a single model, such as the J-6. China has a vast number of retired fighter jets, including the J-7 and J-8. If the conversion of retired fighter jets to unmanned systems is carried out systematically, the scope will not be limited to a single model, and a substantial unmanned attack force could be established in the future. The issue is not the age of the platform, but how large numbers of expendable systems can be employed to degrade and penetrate air defense networks.

While assessments of air power often tend to focus on state-of-the-art aircraft and stealth capabilities, this article suggests the need to turn our attention to the "latent capabilities lying in reserve"—namely, retired fighter fleets. Satellite imagery reflects not only the modernization of hardware but also the modernization of operational doctrine.

Furthermore, during the course of this study, while examining the layout of the airfields using satellite imagery, it was confirmed that the airfield was constructed as a military facility during the Cold War and has a historical background linked to the Lin Biao incident. Even open-source satellite imagery can serve not only as a means of identifying military deployments but also as an opportunity to reexamine the formation process and historical context of the airfield.

What is needed going forward is not merely the enhancement of our intercept capabilities. We must reevaluate our air defense posture from the perspective of how long we can sustain interception operations and whether our ammunition reserves and personnel systems can withstand long-term strain.

The changes revealed by satellite imagery are minor. However, if we overlook the structural shift represented by the reorganization of retired fighter fleets, we risk misjudging the nature of future air battle. While this article presents only one hypothesis, it is necessary to continue examining the shift in design philosophy implied by these deployment changes.

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PROFILE

AITA Moriki

Research Fellow, America, Europe, and Russia Division, Regional Studies Department

Field of expertise: PLA

Planning and Coordination Office
National Institute for Defense Studies
Telephone (direct) : 03-3260-3011
Telephone (general) : 03-3268-3111 (ext. 29177)
National Institute for Defense Studies website: www.nids.mod.go.jp