



The J-20 fighter jet during its ground test
Credits: Flickr/roberthuffstutter (Creative Commons)

Is Chinese military superiority to be feared in the future?

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The scene was meticulously set. The message was clear. The day after the US defence secretary, Robert Gates, arrived in China, the country's military authorities conducted their first flight test of the J-20, which many observers of strategic affairs already call the first stealth fighter of the fifth generation exclusively built by the People's Republic of China (PRC). A few days earlier, shots of the aircraft conducting ground trials had invaded chancelleries and staff headquarters all around the globe. The specialised blogosphere had also been very reactive to what obviously looked like a major technological advance from China in the military field. Yet, and despite the –often hasty– conclusions drawn by some commentators, the show of force that has just been displayed by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) require several considerations which will most likely make it possible to temper the debate.

Beforehand, we have to admit that the various ground and flight tests of the J-20 seem to attest that the PRC masters some advanced technologies in the field of combat avionics. It is however advisable to remain extremely cautious on the real abilities of the aircraft, which is still at the stage of prototype. China has, as in many other domains, taken a long time to integrate the technological

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innovations of the past couple of decades. But we already knew for long that the PRC was anxious to modernise its military fleet of aircraft, mainly made up of planes that were developed in the 1950s and 1960s with foreign help (the USSR).

Judging by recent events (the “blinding” of an American spy satellite by a ground-based laser, anti-satellite/anti-missile tests, the development of the anti-ship ballistic missile DF-21D, the growth of the Chinese space sector, and so on), several indications confirm a resolute increase in power of the country in the military field. And the sum of all those factors could imply that China is entering an arms race with its main “co-opetitor”², the United States. Several considerations must nevertheless be taken into account.

First of all, in spite of China’s endeavours to modernise its armed forces, the United States remain, with a defence expenditure level assessed at more than \$ 661 billion in 2008 (i.e. 43% of the world military spending), the globe’s main military power³. The same year, Chinese military expenditure only reached a bit more than \$ 100 billion. Those figures should however be related to the differences of wage costs between those states. We should also point out that China prefers to bank on a “denied fight” strategy rather than to follow a logic of brutal confrontation, which is very specific to the Western strategic culture. And if some day the J-20 was to attack the United States, it would probably happen above all at the level of the export market of combat aircraft, currently dominated by... the United States.

As for the J-20 programme, it should probably be stressed that this new fighter jet does not only support the Chinese strategic goals. It also serves domestic policy purposes consisting in rallying the people behind a major technological symbol. And this, in a dimension of the strategic action where the United States possess a nearly absolute mastery. As regards military technology, the weapon *aesthetic* furthermore represents a fundamental means of communication and influence, psychologically speaking. The fact that the J-20 shows numerous similarities of external conformation with the F-22 Raptor and, to a lesser extend, with the latest model of the Russian combat air force, the T-50, is not in the least due to the sole respect of technical constraints linked to its stealthiness (which still has to be confirmed in practice). This aesthetic is aimed at leaving its mark on Western specialists and non-specialists who –like the author of this paper– surely automatically compared the pictures of the aforementioned craft on the Internet.

² Neologism composed of the words “co-operation” and “competition” to describe the mixed relationships between powers.

³ Source: SIPRI Yearbook 2010.

Operationally speaking, it should be noted that the fact of possessing a fleet of advanced combat airborne platforms is not sufficient to extend the range of a country's strategic options. The implementation of such systems, even at the leading edge of technology, requires to resort to advanced bases and to the support of allies. But it just so happens that, even if the PRC is endeavouring to develop its relations throughout the world, its immediate environment is made up of potential competitors and opponents (India, Japan and the United States).



Figure 1: The X-37 technology demonstrator developed in the framework of the US Air Force (credits: Christian Science Monitor)

Finally, it is an odd thing to think that the United States could, as some observers and commentators claimed, admit to be surprised by the progresses made by the PRC, especially when one knows how much attention the American Department of Defense (DoD) devotes to the evolution of the Chinese armed forces (among others through the publication of annual reports on the issue). Indeed, the opacity of the military budget more frequently prompts exaggerations rather than

underestimates. If one assumes the existence of military-technological competition between both states, it is useful to remind that each measure taken by an actor prompts its opponent to adopt a countermeasure. And it is precisely this balancing process which is currently at work. As such, it is no coincidence that, even if it did not catch the media attention, the United States lately operated a technology demonstrator, called X-37, that many experts suspect to be the prototype of an advanced recognition system of the last generation. Similarly, it would be mistaken to see in the DoD's latest budgetary adjustments the result of an unfortunate timing. As a reminder, the budget review of the American Department of Defense relies on the prospect of saved funds being pumped into the development of a new strategic bomber (able to carry nuclear missions)... possibly without any pilot, beyond the fifth generation. The US Navy is also offered the possibility to develop a new autonomous recognition/combat sensor for its aircraft carriers. Those developments show that a subtle process of military rebalancing is continuously under way.

Will we have to fear Chinese superiority? The present state of the balance of powers shows that a complete reversal of balance is not yet on the agenda. It is however clear, in the light of those indications, that the West, and more particularly the United States, will no more be the only ones to define the grammar of the 21st-century international and strategic relations.