

China Debuts Potential New Fighter Jet, Fueling Speculation About Advanced Airpower

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Sailors stand near fighter jets on the deck of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy aircraft carrier Liaoning as it participates in a naval parade to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the founding of China's PLA Navy in the sea near Qingdao, in eastern China's Shandong Province, on April 23, 2019. Mark Schiefelbein/AFP via Getty Images



By Stephen Xia and Sean Tseng

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Commentary

China's aviation industry recently made waves by revealing on Dec. 26 what resembled new, high-performance stealth fighter jets—different from the fifth-generation J-20—[flying](#) in plain sight.

Within a day, [photos](#) of two distinct tailless aircraft circulated on social media, indicating they were undergoing flight tests. Their designs align with several concepts associated with China's push for sixth-generation airpower. However, experts are cautious about labeling them as such due to the lack of data and the secretive nature of military advancements.

The Pentagon's 2024 defense [report](#) notes that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been working on supersonic medium- and long-range stealth bombers while developing the subsonic H-20 strategic bomber. This new design could align with that plan—resembling Cold War-era jets like the U.S. F-111 or Soviet Su-24—but upgraded with modern stealth tech.

By unveiling these new jets, Beijing's intention could be to fuel discussions in the United States regarding the PLA's sixth-generation fighter programs, casting doubt on U.S. military superiority and prompting Washington to reassess its military strategies.

The tradeoff between manned and unmanned aircraft may be central to the debate, which could influence the United States' combat effectiveness, long-term military planning, and technological investment. The choice affects budget allocations: manned aircraft require significant personnel and maintenance costs, while unmanned systems demand high initial tech investments but offer operational savings and reduced human risk.

The first fighter jet seen on Dec. 26 attracted significant attention. Seen [flying](#) alongside a J-20, it appeared slightly larger, with a broad delta wing and no conventional tail. Its wide canopy indicated it was a manned aircraft, and the fuselage featured intake ducts on both sides,

along with an additional intake behind the cockpit. This led some analysts to [speculate](#) that it might be powered by three jet engines, while others believe the extra intake is just for cooling and reducing infrared signals.

This plane seems built for better stealth, long-range performance, higher speed, and bigger payloads than the J-20. However, it's too early to label it as a sixth-generation fighter. It might be a stealth "fighter bomber" meant to replace older aircraft like the JH-7, as China's aviation industry hasn't produced a new fighter bomber since that model.

According to the Pentagon report, these stealth bombers equipped with long-range cruise missiles could expand the Chinese regime's strategic reach. This would allow the PLA to project power beyond its immediate region—potentially into the Second Island Chain or farther—while ramping up tensions in areas like the Taiwan Strait, South China Sea, and East China Sea.

The second aircraft spotted on the same day was smaller and harder to identify because of poor photo quality. It may come from the Shenyang Aircraft Corporation, which also makes the J-16, J-15, and the recently revealed J-35. Meanwhile, the larger tailless aircraft, likely a Chengdu Aircraft Corporation project, bore "36" near its intake, prompting foreign media to call it the "J-36."

In late 2022, Gen. Mark Kelly, then head of the U.S. Air Combat Command, [said](#) China is pursuing capabilities similar to those of the U.S. Next Generation Air Dominance program, which aims to develop a manned fighter with low radar signatures, advanced sensors, flight computers assisted by artificial intelligence (AI), and open-architecture systems.

It's unclear if the first plane spotted in December is a full-fledged sixth-generation prototype or merely a testbed for new technologies. China has been running various manned fighter experiments for years, which could include both small-scale and full-size mockups to try out new equipment and systems.

Many core features of a true sixth-generation jet—like AI-driven systems, cost-effective stealth materials, and next-gen engines designed for sustained supersonic speeds and powering future weapons—are still under wraps.

The timing of the “leaked” photos, particularly around the holidays, seems intentional. In contrast, the U.S. Air Force’s next-generation program has kept its test flights largely out of public view, partly because modern digital design methods reduce the need for physical prototypes.

China still **struggles** to **produce** reliable high-performance turbofan engines, though it is working hard to **replace** Russian imports with homegrown models. If this new plane is indeed a supersonic stealth bomber, it could pose a serious challenge to U.S. bases in the Western Pacific, especially those in Japan’s Okinawa and the U.S. territory of Guam, and to any American forces supporting Taiwan. With supersonic speed, such an aircraft could more easily slip away from radar or escape once detected—an advantage that slower bombers don’t have.

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Stephen Xia

Author



Sean Tseng

Author

Stephen Xia, a former PLA engineer, specialized in aviation equipment and engineering technology management. After retiring from military service, he has been following the world's development of military equipment.

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