

New Chinese Aerial Refueling Aircraft Enters Service



Y-20 Aerial Refueling Aircraft

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The YY-20 aircraft represents China's new generation of aerial refueling equipment

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OE Watch Commentary

Chinese officials recently confirmed that an aerial tanker variant of the Y-20, the **YY-20**, strategic transport aircraft has entered service [1]. The Y-20 is China's largest indigenously produced military transport aircraft. As China's interests overseas continue to expand, the ability to deploy forces rapidly using the base transport variant of the Y-20 will continue to be more important. China's armed forces previously relied on the HY-6, a modified variant of China's H-6 bomber, a design that dates to the 1960s. While few details are forthcoming, Chinese media coverage has described the new tanker as having three times the capacity of the **HY-6**. The YY-20 now likely provides China's PLA Air Force and PLA Naval Aviation with greater flexibility, endurance, and range, not only for strike aircraft but also for critical enablers such as airborne early warning and control (AEW&C) aircraft [2]. The new tanker could also be used to support China's nascent aerial component of its nuclear triad, which includes an H-6 variant equipped with an aerial refueling probe.

Source: “我军新一代空中加油机运油-20投入练兵备战 (The Chinese Military's New Generation Aerial Refueling Aircraft Has Entered Service),” *PLA Daily* (Official PRC Military Newspaper), 5 August 2022. http://www.mod.gov.cn/power/2022-08/05/content_4917374.htm

At the Air Force Aviation Open Event and Changchun Air Show press conference on 31 July, PLA Air Force spokesman Shen Jinke announced that recently, Air Force Yunyou-20 and J-16 aircraft have carried out aerial refueling training at sea, improving the level of realistic combat training.

Under the guidance of Xi Jinping's thought on strengthening the military, the Air Force has developed high-tech weapons and equipment systematically in accordance with the strategic goal of “integrated air and space capability; simultaneous preparation for offensive and defensive operations”

The YY-20 aircraft represents China's new generation of aerial refueling equipment, which can effectively enhance the long-range maneuverability of the aviation force while also undertaking the same aerial delivery tasks as the Y-20 aircraft.

Notes:

[1] In Chinese military nomenclature both Transport [运 yun; transport] and Tanker [油 you; lit, gas/oil] start with Y, hence the YY designation.

[2] For a breakdown of likely capabilities and comparison to U.S. tankers, see: Peter Wood, “China to Modify Y-20 Transport Aircraft for Aerial Refueling,” *OE Watch*, January 2019.