

CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



CENJOWS

U.S, CHINA & INDIA: MILITARY AIRCRAFT COMPARISON

1. Comparisons of the US and China Military aircraft have been done in the past by many think tanks with varied conclusions. On 20 Jun 2020, Jen DiMascio, Aviation Week Executive Editor published his comparison in the latest issue of the Aviation Week Journal¹. According to him, the U.S. military operates 13,319 aircraft—about three times as many manned aircraft as the Chinese military, which operates 4,519. His colleagues, data analysts Dan Urchick and Michael Tint observed that the ratio is not even, across all types of aircraft as depicted graphically below².

2. With regards to combat aircraft, the ratio is narrower: The U.S. operates 3,435 aircraft while China operates 1,943. For now, the U.S. has a qualitative edge—with 586 fifth-generation combat aircraft to China's 38. The U.S. possesses especially large advantages in rotary-wing aircraft (4.3:1); tankers and transports (4.8:1); and command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) platforms (4.1:1)³.

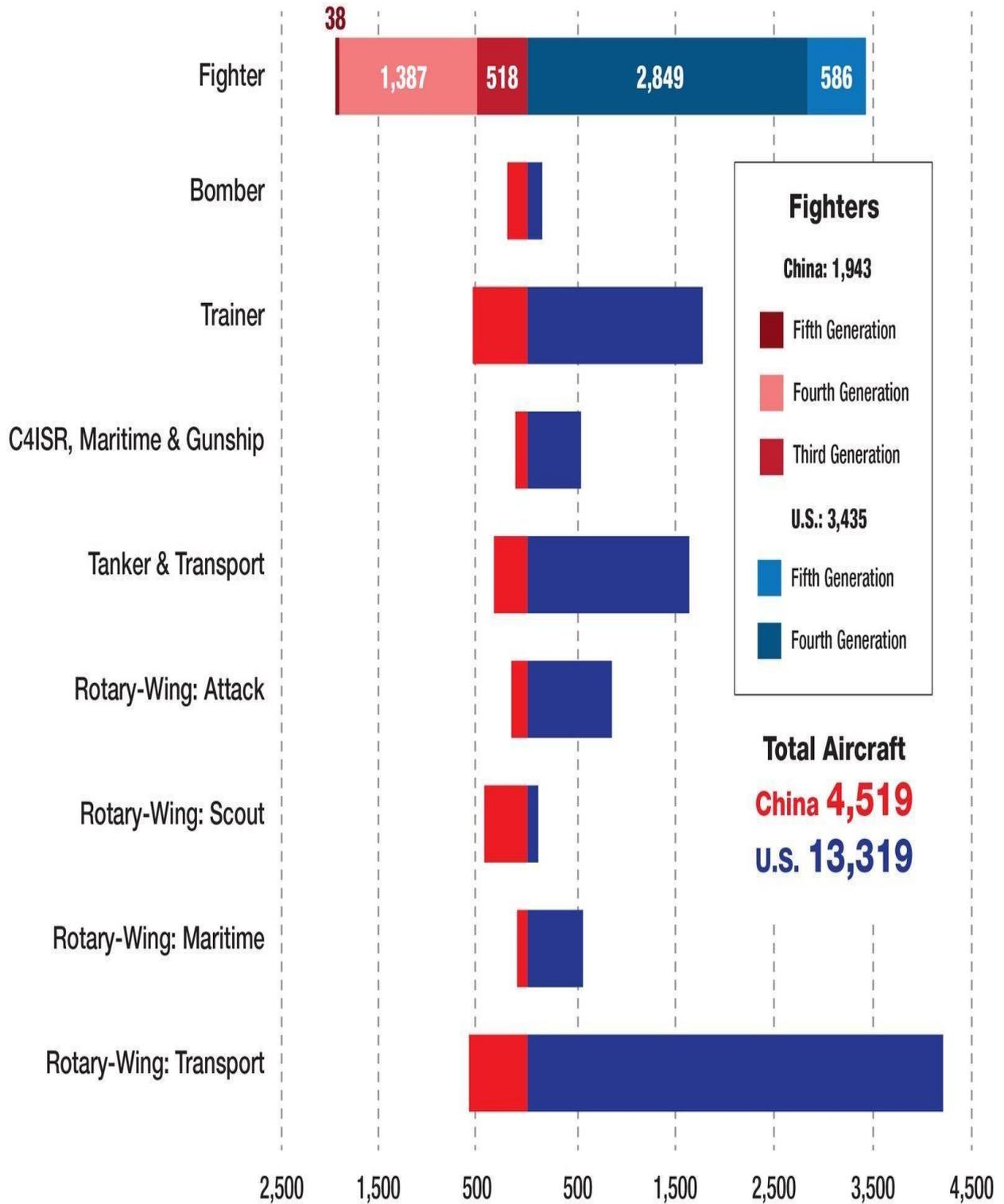
¹ <https://aviationweek.com/defense-space/aircraft-propulsion/what-ratio-us-chinese-military-aircraft>

² *ibid*

³ *ibid*

Military Aircraft Snapshot

China vs. the **U.S.**



3. On 18 Jun 2020, Brad Lendon, CNN, compared the latest Chinese and Indian Military aircraft status⁴. On the basis of a study authored by Frank O'Donnell and Alexander Bollfrass of the Belfer Center in March this year he states that India has about 270 fighters and 68 ground-attack aircraft it could bring to bear in combat with China. China, by contrast, has 157 fighters and a small fleet of ground-attack drones in the region. The high altitude of Chinese air bases in Tibet and Xinjiang, plus the generally difficult geographic and weather conditions of the region, means that Chinese aircraft are limited to carrying around half their design payload and fuel, the study claims. The Belfer study also gives the Indian Air Force (IAF), with its Mirage 2000 and Sukhoi Su-30 MKI aircraft, a qualitative edge in the region, where China fields J-10, J-11 and Su-27 aircraft. The Indian Mirage 2000 and Su-30 MKI aircraft are all-weather, multi-role aircraft - while of the Chinese aircraft, only the J-10 has those abilities⁵.

4. Meanwhile, India has built up its bases in the region with China in mind, according to an October 2019 report from the Center for a New American Security. "To weather a potential People's Liberation Army (PLA) attack, India has placed greater emphasis on infrastructure hardening; base resiliency; redundant command, control, and communications systems; and improved air defense," the report claims. The Belfer study points out that China, facing perceived threats from the United States on its eastern and southern flanks, has strengthened its bases there to the neglect of the Himalayas, leaving at least four PLAAF airbases vulnerable. "Indian destruction or temporary incapacitation of some of the four above air bases would further exacerbate these PLAAF operational inflexibilities and weaknesses," it claims. The Belfer report gives the edge to India's Air Force in one other area - experience. "Recent conflicts with Pakistan give the current IAF a level of institutional experience in actual networked combat," it says. Lacking such experience, Chinese pilots may have difficulty thinking for themselves in a dynamic aerial battlefield, according to the Belfer report. "Recent PLAAF exercises with unscripted scenarios have found that pilots are excessively reliant upon ground control for tactical direction," it says. "This suggests that PLAAF combat proficiency may be significantly weaker than often estimated⁶."

⁴ <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/17/asia/india-china-military-comparison-hnk-intl-scli/index.html>

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*