

“FAR VISION” FOR THE DRAGON



China's Indigenous AWACS Projects

In modern air warfare, the monitoring of real time enemy air activity is vital. The AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) provides the air force commander an ability to monitor enemy air activity from low to high levels, deep inside hostile territory. This is essentially having an ADDC (Air Defence Direction Centre) in the air with a clear view of what is happening at long distances, thus meeting the age old requirement of commanders to know what is happening on “other side of the hill”. Such early warning from an AWACS gives definite advantage to the commander in air battle management and guiding of friendly fighters to intercept enemy aircraft well in time before the weapon release line. The AWACS has changed the way war is conducted. As a force multiplier, AWACS aircraft have become so critical in modern war that the side which does not have

them will suffer from huge asymmetry right from the preparatory stage to start of a shooting war.

The Chinese realised the importance of such platforms and started work on their own AWACS in 1969, and after long years of effort, developed their own indigenous fleet of AWACS/AEW aircraft consisting of four Kong Jing-2000 (KJ-2000), four KJ-200 and two KJ-500 with the PLAAF (People's Liberation Army Air Force). The PLA Navy (PLAN) has its own fleet of 14 AEW&C aircraft on the Y-8/y-9 platform. In addition, China has inducted a new indigenous heavy transport aircraft, Y-20, and while it has not yet been announced, it can be speculated that this will become the platform for future AWACS to replace the KJ-2000. This article traces the history and development of China's AWACS/AEW projects and briefly discusses AWACS limitations for PLAAF against the IAF.

First attempts

China's first attempt to develop an indigenous AWACS goes back to 1969. This project, called the Kong Jing-1 (KJ-1), was undertaken on a 1950s-designed Soviet Tu-4 piston-engined bomber (B-29 copy). The project was not successful since China did not have the technology, at that time, to overcome ground clutter problems. In airborne radar, the signal return from ground echoes is stronger than the target signal and the radar system must be designed to identify targets through such clutter. The Chinese were unable to do this and consequently the project was abandoned.

Since then, China had been, trying to purchase—or develop—an airborne warning and control capability. In the 1970s, relations between China and USA improved with the express intention of jointly opposing the then Soviet Union as their common enemy. Taking advantage of