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China's New Y-20 Is the Largest Military Aircraft Currently in Production

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The first Xian Y-20 military transport aircraft was delivered to the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) on June 15. Developed by Xian Aircraft Corporation, the Y-20 has an empty weight of 110 short tons, making it the largest military aircraft currently in production—larger than Russia's Ilyushin Il-76. Boeing's C-17 Globemaster III is bigger than the Y-20—the C-17's

empty weight is about 60,000 pounds more than the Y-20 and its payload capacity is 25,000 pounds more—but production stopped in 2015, making the Y-20 the biggest that is currently rolling out of factories. The Y-20—which has the official codename "Kunpeng" after a mythical Chinese bird, though it is nicknamed "Chubby Girl" for its appearance—makes China the third nation after Russia and the United States to design and develop its own heavy military transport aircraft.

The C-17 has been a major workhorse for the United States military since it was introduced in 1995, carrying troops and cargo all over the world. It allows the U.S. Air Force to quickly transport large amounts of supplies, move troops, fly large-scale air drop missions, and even transport other military vehicles such as an M1 Abrams tank, three IAV Stryker armored combat vehicles, or six M1117 Armored Security Vehicles. With the Y-20 officially in service—and the Y-20 is remarkably similar to the C-17—the PLAAF's versatility and ability to quickly mobilize large combat forces increases significantly.

With a payload capacity of 73 short tons, the Y-20 can transport China's largest tank, the ZTZ99, as well as a variety of other vehicles, supplies, or a large number of troops. The heavy transport is also ideal for large-scale airdrops and medical evacuations if necessary. The Chubby Girl has a range of 4,850 miles while carrying 40 tons of cargo, and 2,800 miles when fully laden.

Currently the Y-20 uses four Russian-made Soloviev D-30 turbofan engines, though the PLAAF plans to replace the engines with the Chinese-made Shenyang WS-20 turbofans by 2020 to give the Chubby Girl short takeoff capabilities and a greater range. In addition to functioning as a transport, the Y-20 could be outfitted as a refueling tanker for other military aircraft or used as a strategic command center to coordinate fighter jets and drones in combat.

The first two Y-20s with the serial numbers 11051 and 11052 were delivered to the 12th Regiment of the 4th Transport Division at Chengdu/Qionglai, and several more are expected to enter service in the coming months. Centrally located around China's air base in Chengdu, the Y-20 could be quickly dispatched to wherever it is needed, from Korea to the South China Sea.

With tensions rising between the U.S. and China in the Pacific, the People's Liberation Army continues to make significant military advances.