

Chinese satellites turn 'dumb' bombs into 'smart' bombs

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Fears surrounding the commercial debut of the China's Beidou satellite navigation system last week have centered on the development by the Chinese military in recent years of a bomb kit that can transform "dumb" bombs into "smart" ones.

Chief among them is the Lei Shi-6 (LS-6) "Thunder Stone" precision-guided glide bomb first unveiled by the Luoyang Optoelectro Technology Development Center in late 2006. The guidance "fit," which is attached to conventional bombs and has deployable wings, can support a number of bomb weights, from 50kg to 500kg, Jane's Defence Weekly reported last year.

Once installed, a "dumb" bomb becomes a "standoff" maneuverable precision-guided bomb similar to the US-developed Joint Attack Direct Munition (JDAM), which relies on US satellites for guidance. Unlike laser-guided weapons, projectiles using satellites for guidance can be used in any weather conditions.

According to Chinese media, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force conducted a series of tests of the LS-6 on the Shenyang J-8B starting in 2006.

Relying on the navigation capabilities provided by the Beidou satellites, aircraft pilots could limit their exposure to an enemy's aircraft and air defense system by releasing their smart bomb from a distance. The LS-6 has a range of 40km when dropped at an altitude of 8,000m and 60km at 10,000m, bringing its ordnance at a speed of Mach 1 to within 15m of a target.

Military experts have said that while Taiwan spends more than US\$300 million per Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) fire unit and missiles, the production of guided bombs like as the LS-6 is substantially cheaper. The cost difference means that a far greater number of smart bombs can be built than Taiwan's Patriot missile units can intercept, although this view does not take the other, less expensive, layers of Taiwan's air defense architecture into account.

LS-6 bombs could also be mounted on carrier-based aircraft, which China has been developing, giving the People's Liberation Army Navy a much wider angle from which to direct bombs and missiles against Taiwan. This would severely undermine the PAC-3's ability to intercept them, given the limitations posed by the Patriot radar's 90o sector coverage.

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The Taiwan Affairs Office last week denied the Beidou system would be used by the Chinese military and played down reports in Taiwan that the satellites posed a threat to the region.

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