



## PLA Media's First Reporting on Rapid Dragon

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On 2 November 2021 the media of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) published its first report concerning Rapid Dragon, the U.S. Air Force's program to develop palletized munitions that can be airdropped from transport aircraft. The report likely indicates that the PLA negatively assesses the threat posed by program.

The report was written by Cui Xiaoqiao and Li Mengyuan and was published in *Chinese National Defense News*.<sup>1</sup> Cui Xiaoqiao could not be identified, but it is likely that Li Mengyuan works at the War Research Institute of the PLA's Academy of Military Science.<sup>2</sup> The War Research Institute is the PLA's specialized institution for "researching warfare, developing operational concepts and doctrine, and designing operations."<sup>3</sup>

*Chinese National Defense News* is a sister publication of *Liberation Army News*, the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Military Commission, which is roughly equivalent to the U.S. Department of Defense. Unlike *Liberation Army News*, whose intended audience is the PLA and the Chinese People's Armed Police, *Chinese National Defense News*' intended audience is officials working in China's defense establishment as well as the Chinese public. Because "educating" the public is one of its purposes, it covers more international military news than *Liberation Army News*. Cui and Li's report was published in the Science and Technology section of *China National Defense News*, which is usually not a venue for heavy editorializing. (The newspaper's International section is usually where the newspaper editorializes about international military news.)

Such calm treatment of Rapid Dragon is likely due to the PLA's tentatively negative assessment of the threat posed by the program. Cui and Li positively assessed Rapid Dragon's potential benefits, such as its "adaptability," particularly its ability to deploy unmanned aerial vehicles, as well as its relatively low cost and its ease of employment.<sup>4</sup> However, they mentioned that unspecified "opponents" of the program fear that it will use too much of already scarce transport resources.<sup>5</sup> They also wrote that the missile that is currently being used in Rapid Dragon's tests, the AGM-158B extended-range Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile, is expensive and that its "cost-effectiveness" in a "large-scale war of attrition" would be low.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Cui and Li remarked that the range of the AGM-158B, which they stated was more than 900 kilometers,

is still within a heavy fighter’s interception range.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, they concluded that the AGM-158B will not achieve its purpose of standoff strike.<sup>8</sup> Even so, Cui and Li did not proclaim the failure of Rapid Dragon; instead, they ended their article by writing, “the outlook for the ‘Rapid Dragon’ palletized munitions system remains to be seen,” likely indicating that the PLA itself is reserving judgment of the program.<sup>9</sup>

Key Chinese Terms for Further Research		
extended-range	增程型	zēngchéngxíng
JASSM	贾斯姆	jiǎsīmǔ
Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile	联合空对地防区外导弹	liánhé kōng duì dì fángqūwài dǎodàn
palletized munition	托盘化武器	tuōpánhuà wǔqì
Rapid Dragon	速龙	sù lóng
weapons truck	武库机	wǔ kù jī

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> 崔小乔 [Cui Xiaoqiao] and 李孟远 [Li Mengyuan], “美空军欲打造托盘化武器系统” [U.S. air force wants to make palletized munitions system], 中国国防报 [Chinese National Defense News], November 2, 2021, accessed November 2, 2021, [http://www.81.cn/gfbmap/content/2021-11/02/content\\_302182.htm](http://www.81.cn/gfbmap/content/2021-11/02/content_302182.htm).

<sup>2</sup> 李孟远 [Li Mengyuan] and 郑大壮 [Zheng Dazhuang], “美推动“全域战”应对“大国竞争”” [USA promotes ‘all-domain operations’ to respond to ‘great-power competition’], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], May 7, 2020, accessed May 6, 2020, [http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2020-05/07/content\\_260638.htm](http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2020-05/07/content_260638.htm).

<sup>3</sup> Derek Solen, “The PLA’s Critical Assessment of the Agile Combat Employment Concept,” *China Brief* 21, no. 14 (July 16, 2021), accessed November 3, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-plas-critical-assessment-of-the-agile-combat-employment-concept/>.

<sup>4</sup> 崔小乔 [Cui Xiaoqiao] and 李孟远 [Li Mengyuan].

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.