

Aircraft carriers will make waves

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TWO remarkable events involving China's military ambitions occurred last month. First, Beijing announced that it was increasing its defence budget by 15 per cent, raising it to approximately US\$70 billion (S\$106 billion). Then in late March, while on a trip to Japan, China's Defence Minister Liang Guanglie stated that Beijing will not remain the world's only major country without an aircraft carrier. According to the authoritative Jane's Information Group, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) will likely build four to six aircraft carriers, commissioning the first by 2015.

Since 2000, China has acquired some 20 major surface combatants (destroyers and frigates). During the same period, however, the Chinese navy has acquired at least 31 submarines. This led some Western analysts to conclude that the Chinese navy was shifting its operational emphasis away from surface warfare in favour of undersea operations.

Submarines certainly have their advantages over surface ships. They are stealthy and usually oriented towards offensive operations. They have a variety of uses, including anti-ship and anti-submarine warfare, land-attack (using cruise missiles), minelaying, inserting special operations forces and conducting nuclear attack. China is building a respectable fleet of nuclear-powered ballistic missile-carrying submarines - probably totalling five in all, each capable of launching 12 ballistic missiles. Submarine forces could be particularly effective in operations against Taiwan, such as in enforcing an embargo on the island.

But submarines also have their drawbacks. To begin with, they are perhaps too stealthy: They don't make for good political spectacle. When it comes to 'showing the flag', nothing makes an impact like the surface fleet. And no surface ship makes as great an impression as an aircraft carrier.

The Chinese comprehend the emblematic nature of the carrier when it comes to great power status. In early March, Admiral Hu Yanlin, PLAN's former political commissar, explicitly stated that 'building aircraft carriers is a symbol of an important nation'.

A carrier is not just about political theatre, though. One aircraft carrier may be symbolic; but four or six carriers is a new maritime strategy. In fact, it could presage the reorientation of the Chinese navy around Carrier Battle Groups (CVBGs), with each carrier at the heart of a constellation of supporting submarines, destroyers and frigates. Such CVBGs are among the most impressive instruments of military power. A Chinese navy organised around CVBGs would be a wholly different kettle of fish from the current Chinese navy.

Admittedly, acquiring four to six CVBGs will be a significant challenge for the Chinese. It would be an expensive, time-consuming and risky acquisition. Britain's new Queen Elizabeth-class carriers will cost around US\$3 billion each, while France's planned 70,000-tonne supercarrier will likely cost around ? 3 billion (S\$6 billion). And these figures do not include the cost of fighter aircraft and supporting systems - at least another US\$1 billion or more. China may be able to build a little cheaper, due to lower labour costs, but it still has to guarantee quality and capability, and neither comes cheap.

Additionally, it can take several years to build an aircraft carrier, and several more years to outfit it, train its crew and have it undergo sea-trials. Consequently, it could take at least 15 to 20 years before the Chinese navy could have a full fleet of four to six CVBGs ready to go.

Finally, few things are more challenging than carrier operations. Landing an aircraft on a carrier deck is one of the most stressful aspects of flight operations. The potential for mishap resulting in the death of pilots or those supporting him is very high. Moreover, the carrier deck is a highly dangerous work area, given its relatively small size and the number of activities all taking place at the same time.

Deckhands must guide aircraft to their launch positions, while others must guide those that have just landed to their storage positions. All the while, other deckhands are moving about the work space fuelling aircraft, performing maintenance and arming aircraft. Movement of so many pieces on the deck is a highly choreographed but deadly ballet: One misstep can result in a deckhand being struck by a moving aircraft, blown into the ocean by jet blast, or worse, sucked into the engine itself.

But these are not insurmountable challenges. Yes, carriers are expensive, but China appears committed to making the funding available. Beijing has doubled its defence budget in just the past three years, and it has more than quintupled military spending since 1997. Consequently, China is now the second-largest defence spender in the world, overtaking Britain, France, Russia and Japan in just the past few years.

China has also shown great determination in building up its armed forces. Beijing has been engaged for more than a decade in an ambitious military modernisation effort, acquiring - in addition to new ships and submarines - hundreds of modern tanks, several dozens of new fighter aircraft, and many types of precision-guided weapons. True, the PLA may have 'a long way to go' - at least 60 per cent of the Plan fleet is considered to be 'old', according to the US Defence Department - but it is not for lack of trying.

If China does acquire not just one, but a fleet of aircraft carriers, it would greatly alter the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific. The impact would be nothing less than revolutionary. It would constitute a clear challenge to US armed forces in the region in general, and to the US navy's Pacific Fleet in particular.

In 2007, Admiral Timothy Keating, the then-head of US Pacific Command, half-jokingly told the Chinese to 'knock yourselves out' when it came to building an aircraft carrier, implying that it would be a colossal waste of effort and resources. He may soon get his wish and live to regret it.