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Aircraft Carriers: China's Emerging Maritime Ambitions

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The Chinese appear closer than ever to making a decision to go ahead with building an aircraft carrier, eventually acquiring as many as six vessels. While expensive to build and difficult to operate, a fleet of Chinese carriers could tilt the balance of power in the Pacific.

TWO REMARKABLE events involving China's military ambitions occurred in March. First, Beijing announced that it was increasing its defence budget by 15 percent, raising it to approximately US\$70 billion. Then in late March, while on a trip to Japan, China's defence minister Liang Guangli stated that Beijing would 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), including two Russian-made *Sovremenny*-class destroyers, according to *SinoDefence.com*. During the same period, however, the PLAN has acquired at least 31 submarines, including several new nuclear-powered boats and Russian-built *Kilos*. This has led some Western analysts to conclude that the PLAN was shifting its operational emphasis *away* from surface warfare and in favour of more undersea operations.

Why Aircraft Carriers

Submarines certainly have their advantages over surface ships. They are stealthy and usually oriented towards offensive operations. Hence, they have a variety of uses, including anti-ship and anti-submarine warfare, land-attack (using cruise missiles), minelaying, inserting special operations forces (such as the US Navy Seals), and especially nuclear attack (China is finally building a respectable fleet of nuclear-powered ballistic missile-carrying submarines – probably totaling five boats in all – each capable of launching 12 ballistic missiles). Submarine forces could be particularly effective in operations against

Taiwan, such as enforcing an embargo of the island or supporting a coastal invasion.

But submarines also have their drawbacks in that 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. One need only recall President Roosevelt's “Great White Fleet” that circumnavigated the world back in 1907-1909, signaling America's emergence as a global military power. And no surface ship makes as great an impression as an aircraft carrier.

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

A carrier is not just about political theatre, however. 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 PLAN around Carrier Battle Groups (CVBGs), with the carrier at the heart of a constellation of supporting submarines, destroyers, and frigates – an amalgamation of power projection at its foremost. Such CVBGs are among the most impressive instruments of military power, in terms of sustained, far-reaching, and expeditionary offensive force. Married with China's recent growth in submarine forces, the PLAN organised around CVBGs would be a wholly different kettle of fish.

Challenges facing Carrier Battle Groups

Admittedly, acquiring four to six CVBGs will a significant challenge for the PLA. Such an acquisition would be expensive, time-consuming and risky. 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 (US\$3.9 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 when it comes to a carrier.

Additionally, it can take several years to build an aircraft carrier, and several more years to outfit, train a crew, and sea-trial, before it can be declared operational and turned over the navy. Consequently, it could 15 to 20 years *at least* before the PLAN could have a full fleet of four to six CVBGs ready to go.

Finally, few things are more challenging than carrier operations. The potential for mishap resulting in the death of the pilot or those supporting him is very high. Landing an aircraft on a carrier deck, moving in all three axes, is one of the most stressful aspects of flight operations. 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. During cyclic operations, the aircraft carrier is launching and recovering aircraft 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 fueling aircraft, performing maintenance, and arming aircraft. Movement of these 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.

At the same time, 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, when it began an unbroken string of double-digit annual growth in defence expenditures. Consequently, China is now the second-largest defence spender in the world, overtaking the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and Japan in just the past few years.

Balance of Power

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, in addition to building up its short-range ballistic missile forces opposite Taiwan. True, the PLA may have “a long way to go” – at least 60 percent 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. Its impact would be nothing less than revolutionary in terms of expanding Chinese military power. 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 (PACOM), 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.

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