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Chinese Aircraft Carrier's Debut: Gunboat in the South China Sea?

By Koh Swee Lean Collin

Synopsis

The maiden voyage of the Chinese aircraft carrier Liaoning to the South China Sea carries strategic and operational significance for Beijing and Southeast Asia. The ramifications, however, can be both negative and positive.

Commentary

THE PEOPLE'S Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), as reported by Xinhua, deployed its first aircraft carrier Liaoning to the South China Sea on 26 November 2013, accompanied by some of its most capable surface combatants. The move came amidst rising tensions in the East China Sea and with the backdrop of intensified PLA aerial and naval activities. These included a night-time amphibious landing drill staged in the Bohai Gulf and purported aerial demonstrations over the East China Sea.

As the deployment carries both strategic and operational significance for Beijing and Southeast Asia, there may be reasonable grounds for concern over the PLAN's expanded ability to project force amid ongoing geopolitical rivalries in the South China Sea.

Southeast Asian backdrop

The latest deployment can be seen in the context of ongoing geopolitical dynamics in Southeast Asia. Japan ramped up her diplomatic offensive in the region, including Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's pledge to assist in the Philippines and Vietnamese maritime security capacity-building efforts. India recently secured more concessions from Vietnam under a joint offshore oil venture in the South China Sea. India-Vietnam defence cooperation was also lately enhanced, including New Delhi's grant of a US\$100-million credit to support Hanoi's military modernisation.

Significantly the move came after criticisms of China's initial lacklustre response to the aftermath of Super Typhoon Haiyan, which was read by some analysts to have potentially undermined Beijing's diplomatic gains in Southeast Asia. The significant American and Japanese naval presence in support of typhoon disaster relief in the Philippines amplified the promise of Washington's Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy, in conjunction with ongoing Japanese defence policy debate over the use of "collective self-defence".

Political signal to the region

For Beijing, the *Liaoning's* deployment sends a political signal to both Southeast Asia and primarily Japan and the United States – of its resolve to defend its core interests in the South China Sea, including a longstanding opposition to foreign interference in the area. Hence, this pioneer carrier deployment can be deemed what James Cable described in his seminal publication *Gunboat Diplomacy* as a show of “expressive force” – to demonstrate Beijing’s concerns and displeasure over recent developments in Southeast Asia, including the increase in American and Japanese regional naval presence.

From the operational perspective, the *Liaoning's* deployment to the South China Sea aids in showcasing the PLAN’s commitment to become a bluewater navy capable of fulfilling China’s “active offshore defence” doctrine. The *Liaoning* had thus far made several voyages close to the Western Pacific waters and the deployment south merely highlights PLAN’s ability to project force in multiple directions. The South China Sea deployment is likely designed to test and evaluate the feasibility of carrier operations in the shallower, semi-enclosed waters in the area. The flotilla’s composition speaks volumes of this intent.

The two accompanying *Type-051C* destroyers, equipped with the sophisticated S-300FM long-range air defence missiles, are probably the primary air warfare escorts for the *Liaoning* while the pair of *Type-054A* frigates primarily serves as anti-submarine workhorses of the flotilla. Other than carrying out tests and evaluation, including carrier flight operations with the J-15 fighter jet, the carrier is likely trying out air defence and anti-submarine coordination with its surface escorts in the South China Sea environment as an integral, vital part of carrier battle group operations.

The operational tests and evaluation of the *Liaoning* in the South China Sea will certainly add valuable data to the gradually accumulating compendium of information gleaned by the PLAN in carrier operations. This is most likely not going to be a one-off deployment to the South China Sea.

With subsequent follow-on voyages to the area, the PLAN will be able to establish its own comprehensive set of doctrines on carrier operations in diverse operating environments encompassing both the deeper, open waters of the Western Pacific, as well as the shallower, semi-enclosed South China Sea. After all, the *Liaoning* is designated mainly as a test-bed for potential future development of indigenous aircraft carriers.

Future gunboat diplomacy?

Whether or not the PLAN South Sea Fleet will in future be equipped with an aircraft carrier, this deployment may enhance the PLAN’s ability to execute combined, inter-fleet missions. It has already demonstrated this ability to do so for the first time via Exercise Manoeuvre-5 – an open-sea combat drill involving all three fleets of the PLAN in the West Pacific Ocean in October-November this year.

In the event of a crisis in the South China Sea, the PLAN South Sea Fleet may expect its sister fleets to provide reinforcements, including the dispatch of a carrier battle group if necessary.

With this new development, the PLAN will expand its force projection capabilities in the South China Sea, augmenting the array of new surface and sub-surface warfare, and land-based maritime aerial strike and amphibious assault capabilities accumulated by the PLAN South Sea Fleet. Its carrier-borne aviation capabilities will bridge the limitations of land-based airpower staged from the Chinese southern coastal aerodromes including those on Hainan Island.

Future deployments of the *Liaoning* to the South China Sea will certainly add to the complexity of ongoing disputes in the area. This has the potential of upping the ante of regional gunboat diplomacy which has so far been restricted to small numbers of regular naval ships but mostly civilian maritime law enforcement vessels. A Chinese version of the American deployment of a pair of carriers in response to tensions in the Taiwan Strait back in 1996, but in the South China Sea context, is not a remote possibility.

An aircraft carrier is long recognised as a credible instrument of coercive diplomacy and Beijing, having been at the receiving end of such an exercise in 1996, is cognisant of this utility.

Nevertheless, it may be worth noting that PLAN’s carrier capabilities can have benign effects for Southeast Asia. If past experience of US Navy’s carrier deployments in response to natural calamities – including the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the latest Super Typhoon Haiyan – are any guide, the PLAN may well utilise its newfound capability to contribute significantly towards stronger regional resilience against future common security challenges.

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