



Chinese Aircraft Carrier Program

Blue water navy on the way

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On 17 November 2008, the latest round of discussions were held on China's aircraft carrier. Major General Qian Lihua, Director of the Foreign Affairs Office in the Chinese Ministry of Defense told *Financial Times* that, "The world should not be surprised if China builds an aircraft carrier." One month later, on 24 December 2008, the Ministry of Defense announced that China is "seriously considering" building an aircraft carrier to protect its national interests.

According to a CRS Report to Congress issued on 18 November 2005: "If China is to shift to a broader "sea control" strategy, the primary indicators would be the development of an aircraft carrier, and robust anti-submarine warfare capabilities..." If China builds its own aircraft carrier, its geopolitical and military implications would bring about a major change in the Asian strategic balance, causing a host of new anxieties.

I BLUE WATER NAVY THE CHINESE SEARCH

Much has been written by Western academics on whether and when China would build an aircraft carrier. Chinese academics tend to play down this development, while the Navy and military are eager to play it up. China is keenly interested in building an aircraft carrier, but is reluctant to admit this since it could affect the regional and global geo-strategic balance.

According to an article published in a Russian newspaper - *the Independence*, Chinese leaders decided to start building an aircraft carrier in 1992 and complete it by 2000. These plans, however, had to be postponed due to the lack of technology. The Chinese aircraft carrier

program was given the number 9935, and was divided into two phases. The first stage was to acquire technology. The second stage was to build its own aircraft carrier of 40,000 to 60,000 tons. In the first phase, China acquired several aircraft carriers for studying them.

In 1985, China purchased Australian carrier HMAS Melbourne, from which it learned several engineering principles. China purchased the Minsk and Varyag in 1998 and Kiev in 2000 from the former Soviet Union. In 1995, the Spanish shipbuilder Empresa Nacional Bazan had offered to build a conventional-takeoff-and landing (CTOL) carrier for China. France is also reported to have offered to give a carrier to China, but could not due to the EU's arms embargo on China.

According to a representative of Bazan, the Chinese side seemed more interested in obtaining the blueprints of the carrier than in buying the vessel. Among these aircraft carriers, the most important was Varyag, the Admiral Kuznetsov-class carrier of 67,500 tonnage. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, its ownership was transferred to Ukraine and it remained unfinished until 1998. When the Chinese Chong Lot Travel Agency bought it for USD 20million, it was only 70 percent completed. The purchase of the Varyag has been seen as proof of China's interest in building its own Kuznetsov-class carrier. Beijing first denied speculation about its purchase and that the representative of the Chong Lot Travel Agency was supported by Beijing. Unlike previous purchases, Cheng Zhenshu, chairman of the Chong Lot Travel Agency said that this aircraft carrier would be called Ocean Entertainment Center with a 600 room hotel, casino and other facilities. It is now stationed in Dalian, where the Chinese Navy Academy is located, and is known as the 'training carrier' for cadets.

China is negotiating with Russia for the Su-33, which

can operate from an aircraft carrier and is capable of aerial refueling. Its first batch of 50 pilot cadets is being trained in the Dalian Naval Academy. The arrest of a Russian couple offering secret documents about the Admiral Kuznetsov class carriers for USD 300,000 and news about Ukraine helping China with training naval pilots are viewed as evidence of China's decision to build an aircraft carrier. Nine Chinese naval pilots who graduated in the 1980s from the Guangzhou Warship Institute are believed to have become commanders of destroyers; some of them are believed to be groomed to command the future carrier.

According to the Japanese *Asahi* newspaper, China will begin construction of the country's first domestically produced aircraft carrier next year. It said that two 50,000 to 60,000 ton carriers, similar size as *Varyag*, will rely on conventional propulsion systems, and will be tasked with patrolling the South China Sea. On 14 February 2009, an *Asahi* report stated that Beijing planned to build two nuclear-powered aircraft carriers of about 60,000 tons in displacement, besides two conventional aircraft carriers, which was decided in a meeting held in Beijing on 30 December 2008 between military officials. These aircraft carriers would permit Beijing to extend its first defensive line linking Okinawa, Taiwan and the Philippines, ultimately creating China's blue water navy.

II

FROM 'BORDER SECURITY' TO 'SECURITY TERRITORY'? SAFE GUARDING NATIONAL INTEREST

Chinese necessity to have an enlarged maritime boundary stems from its desire to protect its visible assets and to seek great power status. China's previous 'border security' has transformed into a 'security boundary' which means that its security concerns have gone beyond safeguarding its territorial boundaries to include territories beyond its borders. As its economy and global influence grows, China gives more importance to the maritime domain. The recent sending of Chinese

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warships to the Somalia coast suggests Chinese willingness and readiness to protect its interests far beyond the mother land.

Visible National Interest

China has become the world's second largest oil consumer since 2003, and is the third largest importer of oil since 2004. Chinese leaders find it imperative to protect its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC). Eight Chinese owned or operated vessels were attacked in 2008 by pirates off the Somalia coast. According to its Ministry of Defense, between January and December of 2008, about 20 percent of 1,265 Chinese ships used this vital shipping route. The necessity of a strong navy to protect its interest has gained attention in China.

A survey conducted between 19 and 20 November 2008 by *Global Times*, run by the Chinese Communist party's mouthpiece *People's Daily*, revealed that out of 2200 respondents, 86 per cent favored sending warships to the Somalia coast. On 29 December 2008, in a *People's Daily* article, 'Strong China Forum', Professor Li Daguang at the Chinese Military Academy, laid stress on having a strong navy, its mission being to protect national interests by protecting maritime routes and contributing to world peace. According to him, the reason why no US vessels were attacked was the fear, among pirates, of US naval intervention.

Invisible National Interest

On 12 May 2007, Admiral Timothy J. Keating, commander of the US Pacific Command, suggested that the US would be willing to help (an aircraft carrier program) if that is what China decides upon. Nearly a month later on 8 June 2007, *People's Daily* published an article titled, "Military observation: Why the US wants to help China in building an aircraft carrier?" suggesting the perspective China has on this issue. It said that the US's benign suggestion stems from the fact that it cannot stop China and therefore the best course of action is to help China in building an aircraft carrier. In the process, the US would get to know details of the aircraft carrier and its operational value. Second, the US can sell aircraft carrier related products to China in the garb of assistance and can influence the whole process of construction. The article revealed another interesting point. It said that the US's suggestion cannot come out of a pure heart since the US is preventing the EU from selling its arms to China. Hence the US proposal must stem from strategic

motivations, and derives from the US strategy of “technology blockade” and “technology infiltration.” While the former applies to the US opposition to EU’s efforts to lift their arms embargo on China, the latter applies to the US suggestion to help build the Chinese aircraft carrier.

By deploying an aircraft carrier China would project its national interests better within Asia. On 1 August 2007, Chinese Navy expert, Li Yaqiang, addressed the question whether a country without an aircraft carrier can prevail in a conflict with the US. He confirmed that though there are other elements to decide victory or defeat in a conflict, but a non-aircraft carrier state would be defeated by being in a weaker position. Zhang Chengmao, Director, Operational Command and Control Department, PLA Navy Arms Command College, in an interview to China Youth Online, said that the aircraft carrier is not directly linked to victory or defeat in a war, but reflects a country’s striking power. For a long time the US had no rivals to match its strength, which is closely related to the US’s possession of aircraft carriers, he added.

III

SEEKING GREAT POWER STATUS GETTING READY TO MEET GLOBAL EXPECTATIONS?

Several nations currently own aircraft carriers. There are 22 aircraft carriers in active service across the world. The US has 11 carriers; France, Brazil, Russia, Britain, India, Spain, Italy and Thailand have one or two aircraft carriers. Deploying an aircraft carrier conveys a great power nation image. Among UN Security Council Permanent members, China is the only country without an aircraft carrier. As Chinese media and experts have expressed, the possession of an aircraft carrier conveys a symbolic message.

According to *Global Times* (7 January 2009) except Japan and India, other countries welcomed Chinese participation in the Somalia mission, and appreciated that sending warships to Somalia indicated Chinese willingness to play a bigger role in the international arena. China is the fourth largest economic power (now third) and its military capability has to be improved to match that. Ma Xiaolin, Chinese international affairs expert, said that the Chinese military has already set foot on the global stage and sending warships to Somalia is a good opportunity for China, that has so far only focused on coastal waters, suggesting a new role for its navy. In an interview with Xinhua News, Yuan Ciyou, senior analyst from the Hong Kong Phoenix, said that the Chinese

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have a responsibility to the international community, but their lack of finance and the foreign policy of Taoguangyanghui (hide one’s capability and bide one’s time) made China not expose its capability to the world. However, it is time now for China to start participating in international affairs as a great power country. Chinese interlocutors often tell Westerners that “a nation cannot become a great power without having an aircraft carrier.”

In a commentary, Major-General Yang Yi, of the Institute of Strategic Studies, remarked that, “the significance goes beyond military. It sends a strong political message to the international community that China with its improved economic and military strength is willing to play a large role in maintaining world peace and security,” Li Jie of the Institute of Naval Military Academy indicated that “to build an aircraft carrier is not merely an “aircraft carrier” issue but poses an image of a nation, apart from producing a tremendous deterrent.”

The reason why China does not want to simply buy an aircraft carrier from other countries is also linked to it seeking for great power status; it wants to show the world that it is a powerful independent country. *China News* published an article in November 2008 which said that foreign countries cannot interfere [in china’s decisions] but also that there was no way they could interfere. An aircraft carrier is part of Chinese weapon systems just like nuclear submarines. China has to work for its own salvation by its own efforts. Although Russia is willing to help China through technology transfers, China would build its aircraft carrier indigenously to the extent possible. The chief designer at the Russian Nevskoye Design Bureau noted that China had not asked for assistance in designing its aircraft carrier. Chinese willingness to cooperate with Russia but its unwillingness to share design reveals that China, as best as it can, wants to develop its own aircraft carrier. Certainly, in the process, China will build it with Chinese characteristics, while avoiding the scrutiny of its potential rivals.

One more reason why China wants to build an indigenous aircraft carrier is its economic aspects.

When the British government planned to build two aircraft carriers, the HMS Queen Elizabeth, 65,000 tons and HMS Prince of Wales, 65,000 tons, it was estimated that more than 1,000 people will be employed on the construction in the shipyards.

Apart from more jobs in the ship building sector, an increase in associated jobs linked to the supply of materials and infrastructure is ensured. If China is to build aircraft carriers as *Asahi* has predicted, it would give a fillip to the Chinese shipbuilding industry and employment, and boost Chinese economy.

IV CONCLUSIONS

China deploying an aircraft carrier would increase the geopolitical imbalance in Asia. A counter response is possible from other countries. The Straits of Malacca are strategically important since around 80 per cent of China's energy needs are supplied by Indonesia and Malaysia.

On 12 December 2008 they pledged to increase their security cooperation and expand joint patrols in the Straits of Malacca, and signed an agreement to allow limited use of each other's air space without prior permission to prevent any misunderstandings during joint air patrols. This agreement is a first of its kind and was arrived at a month after Major General Qian Lihua's statement on China's aircraft carrier. It now depends on China to either maintain Asian security status quo or fuel stronger counter responses.

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