

China reveals construction of aircraft carrier

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Chen Bingde, head of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) General Staff, last week officially confirmed for the first time that China is building an aircraft carrier. The refitting of an unfinished former Soviet aircraft carrier, the Varyag, purchased by China from the Ukraine, was hardly a military secret. Nor were the associated test flights of the J-15—a Chinese version of the Russian-made Su-33 carrier-launch fighter. Nevertheless, the confirmation of the refit is one more sign of growing US-China rivalry, particularly in the naval arena.

The carrier is likely to be launched this year, possibly on the National Day (October 1) as a means of promoting Chinese patriotism. It may be renamed the Shi Liang, after the Chinese general who re-took Taiwan in the 17th century.

Lieutenant General Qi Jianguo, assistant chief of the PLA General Staff, told the *Commercial Daily*: “All the great powers in the world, including those permanent members of the [UN] Security Council, have them. The carrier is seemingly the mark of a great nation.”

Qi referred to the growing strategic pressures facing China, saying: “It would have been better for us if we acted sooner in understanding the oceans and mapping out our blue-water capabilities. We are now facing heavy pressure in the oceans, whether in the South China Sea, East China Sea, Yellow Sea or the Taiwan Straits.”

China's determination to develop an aircraft carrier capacity is in response to increasingly aggressive American efforts to maintain the US presence in waters immediately off the Chinese mainland. Over the past two years, the Obama administration has stepped up joint naval exercises with allies such as Japan and South Korea and strengthened military ties with Vietnam, the Philippines and other South East Asian countries. Washington has also encouraged members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to challenge China's territorial claims in the strategic South China Sea.

China's economic rise has led to a vast expansion of its foreign trade and investment, especially with Africa and the Middle East, on which it depends for energy supplies. Beijing's plan for a blue water navy is aimed at protecting vital sea lanes, particularly across the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea and the Chinese mainland. The question of military protection looms larger because Chinese companies have suffered losses of at least \$19 billion in Libya due to NATO's intervention to topple the Gaddafi regime.

Chinese naval expansion comes into conflict with US efforts to maintain global naval predominance, including throughout Asia. Since World War II, American naval strategists have advocated a policy of controlling key “choke points” connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans, such as the Malacca Straits, and thus the ability to cut off vital oil supplies in the event of a confrontation with any Asian rival.

Last week, a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) weekly, the *Study Times*, called for the development of a military capacity corresponding to China's great power status. “The ‘go out’ strategy implemented by China is not to fight for a sphere of influence, and [it] will not use warships and cannons to clear the way, as with colonialism and imperialism,” the article stated. “But military might is the necessary backup to ensure we have the capabilities to protect our rights of freedom of action around the world and within the region.”

The aircraft carrier program is central to China's plans. The Varyag is the sister ship of the Kuznetsov, the only aircraft carrier still operated by the Russian navy. The vessel will weigh 67,000 tonnes fully loaded and have a capacity for 50 aircraft—significantly smaller than the American 100,000-tonne nuclear-powered Nimitz class carriers that carry 90 aircraft.

Unlike nuclear-powered carriers, which are high-speed and have a virtually unlimited range, the Chinese carrier will be conventionally powered and will require access to refuelling to operate for sustained periods. China is building a number

of port facilities across the Indian Ocean, including in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, that could potentially be used for this purpose.

China's carrier will be much larger than the French De Gaulle class (45,000 tonnes) or British Invincible class (25,000 tonnes) carriers. Its mere presence in Asia, which will be accompanied by destroyer escorts and nuclear-powered attack submarines, will be watched closely by the US and also Asian rivals such as Japan and India.

In Japan, the *Asahi Shimbun* noted last December that China's State Oceanic Administration had issued a report pointing to plans for more than one aircraft carrier. The report stated that the Chinese military "came out in 2009 with a vision and plan to construct aircraft carriers" as part of an effort to make China a "mid-level" maritime power by 2020.

Citing unnamed Chinese military sources, the *Asahi Shimbun* said that a CCP Politburo meeting in April 2009 had approved the program. The initial stage was to build another conventionally-powered aircraft carrier by 2014. The next stage was to build two nuclear-powered carriers, based on a former Soviet-era project (the 79,000-tonne Ulyanovsk class) that was never completed.

Most US analysts believe it will take years before China has a fully operational carrier battle group. Toshi Yoshihara of the US Naval War College explained recently: "The dribs and drabs of multiple ship types that characterise the current fleet won't really cut it for serious war-fighting purposes. They still need to settle on a satisfactory ship design, which they seem to be nearing, and proceed with serial production. Then, putting a flotilla together centred around the carrier and integrating the pieces into an organic combat unit will be the next challenge."

By contrast, the US Pacific Command already has five aircraft carriers, 180 ships and 2,000 aircraft, and bases close to China in South Korea and Japan. It can also call on another six carriers based in other parts of the world.

Moreover, the US is not passively watching China's naval expansion. It is developing its military ties in Asia and its own naval capacity. Earlier this month, US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates told a security forum in Singapore that there would be "new significant growth in the breadth and intensity of US engagement in Asia."

Gates announced that the US navy intended to build a base

in Singapore to permanently deploy its new advanced Littoral Combat Ships. These warships are specifically designed for near-sea and coastal combat and are clearly aimed at maintaining US naval control of the narrow Malacca Straits, through which ships carrying 77 percent of China's crude oil imports pass.

US analysts are particularly concerned about reports that China is developing the DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missile, which could potentially threaten US aircraft carriers in waters off the Chinese mainland. In response, the Pentagon is discussing a new strategic doctrine known as "Air/Sea Battle" to maintain US naval dominance throughout the Asian region.

According to *Aviation Week* in April, the doctrine included "Air Force counter-space operations to blind PLA space-based ocean surveillance systems and prevent targeting of anti-ship ballistic missiles." It also involved "long-range penetrating strikes would destroy PLA ground-based, long-range maritime surveillance systems (such as over-the-horizon radars) and missiles aimed at ships and bases. Concurrently, the Navy submarine-based strike support against PLA integrated air-defense systems would pave the way for Air Force strikes."

A related element appears to be the American X-47B stealth drone bomber, which carried out its test flight in February. Designed to be launched from an aircraft carrier, the X-47B is widely believed to be a major weapon that the US military could use to strike deep inside Chinese territory to destroy stealth fighters and anti-ship ballistic missiles on the ground. The X-47B, which will enter service in 2020, would allow aircraft carriers to attack China's missile launchers from a safe distance.

The "Air/Sea Battle" doctrine makes clear that the US is preparing for a full-scale war against China and heightens the danger of such a confrontation. A relatively minor naval incident would have the potential to trigger pre-emptive US strikes, including deep inside China, that could lead to a catastrophic military confrontation between the two powers.



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