

ISSUE BRIEF

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China's New Aircraft Carrier Joins the Fleet

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With the official acceptance of the *Liaoning* into the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), China now has its own aircraft carrier. From Beijing's perspective, this is a landmark event, as China had long been the only member of the U.N. Security Council's permanent five nations (the veto-wielders) not to have an aircraft carrier of its own.

It is important, however, to keep this development in perspective. China's new aircraft carrier is not yet operational insofar as it is not yet operating an air wing off of its flight deck. The Chinese are seeking to purchase a carrier-capable aircraft from the Russians (the Su-33) and to develop their own version, currently referred to as the J-15. For at least the next year, however, it is unlikely that China will actually field a carrier-capable aircraft in any numbers.

Therefore, the *Liaoning's* greatest contribution to China is likely to be its political (rather than military) impact. The future deployment of a Chinese carrier will be an opportunity to influence and even intimidate other states over territorial and other issues.

Not a Military Threat—Yet.

The PLA Naval Air Force has not yet conducted a carrier takeoff or landing of fixed-wing aircraft, although it has developed several land-based training centers at Huludao and Xi'an.¹ Without a carrier-capable aircraft, the PLAN is limited as to how far it can develop its own carrier operations.

Furthermore, an air wing requires more than just fighter and strike aircraft. Typically, it also requires an airborne early warning platform, either fixed-wing (e.g., the American E-2C Hawkeye) or rotary wing (e.g., the U.K.'s ASaC7 or Russia's Ka-31 early warning helicopters). To maximize mission time and range, it would be ideal to also have an in-flight refueling capability. The success of modern aerial missions also requires electronic warfare capabilities, which in Western air forces has often meant specialized aircraft such as the EA-6B and E/A-18. Thus far, there is little indication

that the PLAN has obtained these vital combat support capabilities.

Similarly, an aircraft carrier requires the presence of a variety of escorts to provide additional anti-submarine and anti-air protection. China's surface fleet is slowly growing, with a substantial number of Type 052D (*Luyang III*) destroyers and Type 053H3 (*Jiangwei-II*) and Type 054 (*Jiangkai-II*) frigates in service or under construction. Nonetheless, it will take some time for the Chinese to become proficient in carrier group operations.

Chinese Throwing Their Weight Around. The introduction of the *Liaoning* does, however, point the way for future Chinese naval development. China now has the only East Asian navy to field a full-deck carrier capable of supporting high-performance aircraft—the first such capability among regional navies since World War II.² Like Beijing's space program, this lends the Chinese substantial prestige, placing them ahead of their Japanese competitors.

Moreover, in the near future, China will have one aircraft carrier available to support its political ends. This will allow the Chinese to project air power over key localities that are distant from land bases, such as

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the Spratlys or off the Philippines coast at Scarborough Shoal. Even if the Chinese are not able to mount sustained, extended flight operations along the lines of U.S. carrier air wings, they will nonetheless be able to outmatch any potential air opposition from Vietnamese or Philippine forces.

The experience of World War II allied convoys on the Murmansk run is that even a handful of aircraft can make an enormous difference, both on attack and on defense. The *Liaoning*, then, may well have a significant impact even if it only conducts limited air operations.

Implications for the United States. For the U.S., the incorporation of the *Liaoning* into the PLAN means that the Chinese will be a growing factor in waters that have long been an American preserve. From the East Asian littoral, the PLAN will be able to show its flag from a flat-top across the Pacific and into the Indian Ocean.

While not necessarily a military threat, this growing capability will be a political challenge to the U.S., as it underscores that China is increasingly a maritime power with the ability to project influence both regionally and, ultimately, worldwide.

Given the ongoing tensions in the Senkakus and the South China Sea, it is quite likely that the Chinese will deploy this mobile airfield to provide over-the-horizon support for its claims against Japan and Southeast Asia, respectively, although civilian

agencies are likely to remain the more visible factor in these disputes.

In the longer term, it is possible that the Chinese will choose to dispatch it to the American exclusive economic zone (EEZ) to counter American freedom of navigation activities in what the Chinese claim as their EEZ.

What the U.S. Should Do:

■ **Strengthen Pacific Command.**

The Administration's decision to undertake the "Asian pivot" is laudable, as it signals America's staying power in the Western Pacific, but it requires the actual commitment of resources in addition to rhetoric. In the short term, this means increasing the percentage of the U.S. Navy committed to the Pacific area, as Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta has promised, and increasing the Air Force presence as well. However, the current state of the U.S. military is such that concerns about the Middle East are tying down half of the American carrier fleet.³ The Navy's generally shrinking fleet also means that ships and crews are on ever-heavier rotations wherever they are afloat.⁴

■ **Meet U.S. Navy shipbuilding requirements.** Such stopgap measures as shorter leaves and extended deployments will not actually solve the problem of meeting the growing challenges in

the Pacific and Middle East; only a Navy that meets stated requirements can do that. The U.S. Navy has indicated a need for 313 ships in order to fulfill its obligations, while the Quadrennial Defense Review Independent Panel recommended a fleet of 346 ships. In reality, however, the U.S. Navy currently fields approximately 285 vessels. That number is likely to drop further, even before sequestration cuts affect force structure.

■ **Provide more defense resources.** Meeting military requirements is likely to mean more defense spending, not less. Already enacted budget cuts, not to mention those demanded by sequestration, cannot be reconciled with meeting ongoing or future defense needs. American ability to project power and thus influence states requires a robust, well-trained force sufficiently equipped that no opponent would doubt its effectiveness. Moreover, in an era of rapid technological change, cutting research and development efforts essentially condemns future generations of American servicemen and women to operating with less capable systems; meanwhile, countries such as China are actively modernizing their forces.

■ **Do not rely just on the military.** For China, the *Liaoning* is an

1. David A. Fulghum, "New Chinese Ship-Based Fighter Progresses," *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, April 28, 2011.

2. Thailand operates the aircraft carrier *Chakri Naruebet*, but that vessel operates only Harrier aircraft and reportedly deploys only rarely. See Christopher Albon, "Thailand Uses Aircraft Carrier for Disaster Relief," U.S. Naval Institute, November 2010, <http://blog.usni.org/2010/11/23/9128> (accessed October 11, 2012).

3. Robert Haddick, "This Week at War: Does the United States Need More Aircraft Carriers?," *Foreign Policy*, May 25, 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/05/25/this_week_at_war_does_the_us_need_more_aircraft_carriers (accessed October 11, 2012).

4. Daniel Fineran, "US Sends Aircraft Carrier Back to Gulf to Face Iran, Syria," Reuters, August 23, 2012, <http://news.yahoo.com/u-sends-aircraft-carrier-back-gulf-face-iran-133020445.html> (accessed October 11, 2012).

additional card that can be played for regional influence. China has also demonstrated a willingness to use its economy as a means of influencing other states (e.g., the decision to reduce the sale of rare earth minerals). For the U.S.—still the world’s largest economy with a wealth of not only resources but skills—Chinese efforts at influencing other states can and should be countered through not only military means but also strategic communications, financial assistance, and diplomatic pressure.

In this regard, completion and ratification of the Transpacific Partnership within the next year is critical—as is the need to reach out to other potential FTA partners, such as Taiwan, Japan, and Thailand.

Back Up the “Asia Pivot.” Much of the discussion about the new Chinese aircraft carrier focuses on the current state of the ship, often explicitly downplaying Chinese capabilities. These dismissive stories fail to recognize both the political

implications of Beijing possessing a ship of this sort and the continuing growth of the overall PLA Navy. Without a sustained commitment to U.S. naval superiority, not only will the Chinese fleet pose a threat to China’s neighbors, but it will jeopardize American ability to secure and maintain its interests in the western Pacific.

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