

# China's Emergence as a Naval Power

Written by Robert W. Murray

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, SEP 25 2012

The world is a busy place these days, and there is no shortage of issues to discuss in a blog entry.

My first inclination was to finally engage in the foreign policy issues being raised in the upcoming US Presidential election, but hearing today that Republican nominee Mitt Romney was surprised at the fact that airplane windows do not go down to let air in really speaks for itself.

Instead, I want to highlight a situation that went almost unaddressed by our scholarly community after its announcement last week. I am not placing blame anywhere, especially with the ongoing problems in Syria, Iran, and the UN General Assembly gathering all earning their fair share of commentary. That said I believe the most important discussion needs to focus on China and its announcement that it has finally entered the great power realm of naval power.

In military and strategic studies, one of the most important variables to consider when calculating the power capabilities of a state is its ability to extend its sphere of influence elsewhere in the world. Lesser and middle powers usually do this through their alliances with major or great powers because they are limited in their capacity to wage war on a large or independent scale. The hallmark of great power status, in my mind, is not the number of troops a state can amass or the number of planes they can build; instead, it is the capability of moving the tools of war from one state to another, and in the case of the modern international system, from one continent to another. This is best achieved by the development of aircraft carrier technology, as these sailing cities allow states to move their army, air force and naval power at will.

Now I know what the first rebuttal to this statement will be – “France and the UK are no longer great powers but they have aircraft carriers.” This is very true, however, France and the UK still rank as major powers, but contemporary cases prove they have let their own capabilities decline and have both bound themselves strongly to alliances that can make up for their own lack of great power capabilities.

It has been no secret that China has been working diligently on sailing its own aircraft carriers, and rumours of stolen schematics, technology and even the recovery of a scuttled US carrier have all been reported over the last 5 years. China's dedication to securing its own naval power has now entered a totally new realm, and those of us who measure capabilities must now reevaluate China's place in the international system.

Almost immediately after China's announcement came the apocalyptic predictions that China was out to take over the world and that western civilization was under threat. Why is it that anytime a non-western state takes steps to establish its place as a power in the world that those in the west automatically perceive a threat? Perhaps it has more to do with what western states, like the US, UK and France have historically done with their own naval power that makes us so nervous. Or, maybe it is just a primitive reversion to the overblown “Clash of Civilizations” thesis that still clouds the field today.

I often ask the same questions about Iran's nuclear capabilities or even North Korea's. The world has not seen a nuclear bomb used since 1945, but each time a non-western state announces its intention to join the elite club of nuclear states, western thinkers and policy-makers begin coaching children in the west to hide under their school

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desks again, as if we were in the midst of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

It is nothing less than rational for a state wishing to increase its power position in the international system to develop greater capabilities and to rely less on alliances to project their power. A Chinese aircraft carrier does not mean that Los Angeles or Vancouver will be invaded next week; nor does an Iranian bomb equate to an immediate threat. States and their leaders are still bound by the rationality principle, and decisions are made according to careful analyses of costs and benefits.

States are driven by their desire to survive and to exert their influence where the opportunity permits. Civilization may have some bearing, but I do not believe a Chinese or Iranian leader is any less rational than an American President. Now, if the Chinese or Iranians figure out how to fly planes with the windows down, then the world should worry...

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*Read more from Robert W. Murray's e-IR blog: Power, Security and Self-Help: A Blog of International Reality.*

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## About the author:

**Robert W. Murray** is Vice-President of Research at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy and an Adjunct Professor of Political Science at the University of Alberta. He holds a Senior Research Fellowship at the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies and Research Fellowships at the University of Calgary's Centre for Military and Strategic Studies and University of Alberta's European Union Centre for Excellence. He is the co-editor of *Libya, the Responsibility to Protect, and the Future of Humanitarian Intervention* with Aidan Hehir (Palgrave, 2013), *Into the Eleventh Hour: R2P, Syria and Humanitarianism in Crisis* with Alasdair MacKay (E-International Relations, 2014), and *International Relations and the Arctic: Understanding Policy and Governance* with Anita Dey Nuttall (Cambria, 2014). He is the Editor of the IR Theory and Practice blog on E-IR.