China's Leisurely Aircraft-Carrier Ambitions

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JAMES HOLMES, MAR 10 2011

The strange life of the Soviet aircraft carrier *Varyag* has occasioned no end of buzz since 1998, when China purchased it from Ukraine for scrap. Sold at auction, the flattop fetched the bargain-basement price of $20 million. It seemed to have no future. It never joined the Soviet fleet before the Soviet Union imploded, and in fact it was reportedly turned over to Beijing without major engineering systems such as main engines to propel the ship through the water.

Bringing a ship back to life involves myriad tasks, major and minor, from reconditioning old machinery to installing new. I spent a back-breaking year of my life in shipyards helping reactivate a aged man-of-war that *was* outfitted with all of its major hardware. Hence I can only marvel at the effort the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has invested in resurrecting the *Varyag*. Backfitting a completed hull with its drive train is akin to tearing apart an already-completed skyscraper to install elevator shafts.

After years of speculation—the ship was destined to become a museum, or perhaps a floating casino complete with dancing girls—it has become plain that the PLAN intends to use the ship in some operational capacity. Photos now making the rounds on the Internet show exhaust plumes rising from the stack. Auxiliary machinery is evidently running within the bowels of the engineering plant, while reports project that the *Varyag* will put to sea by 2012. But to what end?

At least three things are worth noting about Chinese carrier development. First, the *Varyag* itself will never be a frontline warship. In its heyday—had it ever cruised with the Soviet Navy—it would have been no match for an American supercarrier. Its modest air wing was a fraction the size of its antagonists'. But the *Varyag* can perform yeoman's service as a training platform for airmen unused to taking off and landing at sea. It can prepare the Chinese Navy for more ambitious endeavors.

My hometown is Pensacola, Florida, which prides itself on being the "Cradle of Naval Aviation." US naval aviators have undergone flight training in Pensacola for precisely a century—quite a head start on PLAN aviation. Indeed, Naval Air Station Pensacola was once home to the World War II-vintage flattop USS *Lexington*. Few foreign navies feared encountering the *Lexington* in battle, but countless student pilots made practice landings on the ship's flight deck before transferring to combat duty.

The "Lady Lex" thus rendered invaluable service in its training mission, helping the US Navy build up the human capital needed to execute an ambitious naval strategy. Aircraft carriers and ships are no better than the crews who operate them. The Reagan-era US Maritime Strategy called on carrier battle groups to steam into the Soviet Union's oceanic backyard to sink the Soviet fleet. Such a strategy would have been farcical without aviators who had honed their skills on board the elderly *Lexington*.

Carrier operations demand far more than perfecting hardware like arresting wires, catapults, or warplanes with tailhooks and rugged undercarriages. US Chief of Naval Operations Gary Roughead, America's top naval officer, recalls that the US Navy lost hundreds of pilots and aircraft while learning to launch and recover jets at sea. And that was after decades of experience with naval aviation, and after the US Navy had fought ocean-spanning carrier battles against Japan during World War II.

Second, PLAN carriers are unlikely to rival their US counterparts on a one-to-one basis any time soon. Japanese newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* has covered PLAN carrier development as closely as anyone. *Asahi* forecasts a five-ship PLAN carrier fleet by the 2020s. Two conventionally powered flattops comparable to the *Varyag* will start construction in 2014-2015. These midsized, 50,000-ton ships will be followed by two 60,000-ton nuclear-propelled carriers (CVNs) after 2020.

Suppose for the sake of discussion that this forecast is accurate. If so, the smaller vessels will be comparable in scale to US Navy amphibious helicopter carriers (LHAs and LHDs), vessels that displace about 45,000 tons. American CVNs tip the scale at around 100,000 tons, dwarfing these lesser brethren. Furthermore, the two Chinese CVNs would be smaller than early US supercarriers such as USS *Saratoga*, a 1950s-era ship exceeding 80,000 tons' displacement.

Tonnage is only a rough proxy for combat capacity, but it's clear that PLAN carriers will not measure up for over a decade, if then.

US presidents famously ask, "where are the carriers?" in times of trouble. The answer: many are laid up, while others are only partly ready for action. Under the US Navy tactical training cycle, one-third of the fleet is deployed at any particular moment, another third is in shipyards for extended overhaul and is entirely unavailable, and the final third is undergoing training and inspections. At most two-thirds of the fleet is combat-ready.

Assuming PLAN operational rhythms are comparable, Chinese statesmen will have two modest PLAN carriers at their disposal—three at the outside—when they demand to know where the carriers are. This is not an overbearing force.

But third, the enduring mismatch between the US and Chinese fleets is no guarantee of an equally lasting US naval supremacy in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean—the two theaters the 2007 US Maritime Strategy designates as critical to security and prosperity. Beijing is pursuing imaginative antiship missile technology. If PLA rocketeers stationed ashore can keep the US Navy out of important waters, the PLAN can accomplish its goals—even with an inferior fleet.

Why slug it out with a superior enemy fleet if army forces can strike at the opponent from land?

Specifically, Chinese engineers reportedly verge on fielding the world's first "antiship ballistic missile" (ASBM), a truck-fired weapon able to strike at moving ships at sea hundreds of miles distant. Adm. Robert Willard, the commander of the US Pacific Command, recently told a reporter from *Asahi Shimbun* that the ASBM has reached "initial operational capability." If so, it's being fielded with the Second Artillery Corps—the Chinese missile force—while continuing to undergo testing and refinement.

The annual Pentagon reports on Chinese military power contain a map depicting the combat reach of the ASBM. The map shows a firing arc that runs parallel to China's borders 2,000 kilometers offshore, commensurate with the bird's range. If the ASBM lives up to its hype, Chinese land forces will be able to strike at warships at sea well beyond the Yellow and East China seas, throughout the South China Sea, in the Strait of Malacca, throughout the Bay of Bengal, and into the northern Arabian Sea.

This makes for a sobering visual. Think about it. If US Navy carrier groups must remain beyond the ASBM firing arc, then the American CVN will cease being the yardstick for Chinese carriers. The modest carriers operated by Asian navies will become the standard to which Chinese shipwrights must build. A 50,000- or 60,000-ton PLAN carrier would vastly outclass the light carriers found in the South Korean, Japanese, and Thai inventories—and ASBM gunners can target these Asian fleets as well.

China, then, appears poised to fulfill the promise of a "fortress fleet," a navy that roams the seas under protective cover from land-based antiship weaponry. Historian Alfred Thayer Mahan railed against the fortress-fleet tactics practiced by the Russian Navy during its 1904-1905 war with Japan. For him, keeping the fleet within range of shore

artillery—guns whose range was measured in a few miles—unduly hindered its movement while encouraging Russian captains to cower within reach of friendly fire.

Small wonder wreckage from two Russian fleets littered the bottom of the Yellow Sea and Tsushima Strait by the time St. Petersburg capitulated.

But if land-based fire support extends hundreds of miles offshore, PLAN skippers will enjoy enormous liberty to take offensive action throughout the China seas and the northern Indian Ocean, all without venturing out of ASBM range. This perhaps explains Beijing's industrious yet decidedly methodical approach to naval development. If technology is revolutionizing naval weaponry in favor of shore defenses, why lie awake nights worrying about a superior US Navy?

The interactive nature of maritime affairs could swing the pendulum back toward the fleet, as it did during the 1980s with the advent of the Aegis combat system and the Tomahawk cruise missile. If technology now favors the defender, it can also restore the advantage to offensive sea power. Indeed, American engineers are already testing exotic technologies like shipboard lasers and electromagnetic railguns that promise to fortify fleet defense while augmenting offensive striking power.

But for now, China can afford a leisurely approach to aircraft-carrier construction and operations—shoring up its maritime defenses while constructing a world-class navy.

James Holmes *is an associate professor of strategy at the US Naval War College and co-author of* Red Star over the Pacific *(2010), an* Atlantic Monthly *Best Foreign Affairs Book of 2010. The views expressed here are his own.*