



CDiSS COMMENTARY

National Defence University Malaysia (NDUM)
Centre for Defence and International Security Studies (CDiSS)

cdisscommentary.upnm.edu.my

No. 17 – 3 March 2020

CDiSS NDUM Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. CDiSS commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from CDiSS and due recognition to the author(s) and CDiSS. To contribute article and provide comment or feedback, please email the Editor at bahamzah8@hotmail.com

CHINA'S SECOND AIRCRAFT CARRIER: A SIGN OF PLA NAVAL MUSCLE?

By

Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan

On December 17, China commissioned into service its first home-built aircraft carrier, Shandong, at the Sanya naval base in Hainan, with President Xi Jinping presiding over the commissioning ceremony.

The commissioning of the aircraft carrier is significant. This is China's second aircraft carrier, and an important addition to China's power projection capabilities. It is also noteworthy because it displays China's capability to develop aircraft carriers indigenously.

Military analysts argue that the layout of the warships "limits her military potential" as also its power projection capabilities since it is simply a copy of its first carrier, Liaoning, which itself is a refurbished ship bought from Ukraine. The J-15s that it operates also imposes limitations on the kind of operations it can undertake. Nevertheless, PLA Navy is clearly on the way to becoming a more credible blue water navy and it warrants close attention from key Indo-Pacific nations including, India, the United States, Japan and Australia.

China's Navy has traditionally remained weak on account of the excessive focus on China's ground force. As such, it did not have an aircraft carrier and even lacked amphibious operations capabilities. But all this is changing. China has strengthened its ability to project sea power significantly in the last few years. The building of the naval base, Sanya, in Hainan was one such indicator. Sanya has the capacity to maintain a large fleet of surface warships, and as an underground base for submarines. The Sanya base gives China significant advantages because of its proximity to the South China Sea as well as the Malacca Straits.

China has given great importance to building its aircraft carriers. It sees the utility of a carrier both for achieving sea control and for sea denial goals. The PLA Navy acknowledges the importance of maintaining air superiority in future naval conflicts, for which large aircraft carrier are important. The best pilots are being selected for the air wing, and they are also expected to eventually command these ships.

The construction of the Shandong, displacing around 50,000 tons, and with a conventional propulsion system, appears to have begun in 2013. The carrier can reportedly “carry up to 24 Shenyang J-15 multirole fighter jets and a variant of the fourth-generation Sukhoi Su-33 twin-engines air superiority fighter, as well as around ten rotary wing aircraft including Changshe Z-18, Ka-31, or Harbin Z-9 helicopters.” Unlike the U.S. aircraft carriers that can carry up to 100 fighter jets, Shandong will be able to carry a total of only 32 aircrafts, as per senior PLAN officers.

China had procured its first aircraft carrier, Liaoning (originally the Varyag, and built for the Soviet navy) from Ukraine as scrap for \$20 million, but it was eventually restored and entered service in 2012. A senior colonel and spokesman for the Ministry of National Defense, Geng Yansheng, said the carrier was to be “used for scientific research and training.” But the colonel also clearly outlined the necessity of an aircraft to protect China’s varied interests, giving some clue to future Chinese plans.

In November, on its ninth sea trial (since May 2018) to undertake equipment tests and personnel training, it sailed through the Taiwan Straits. Both of China’s aircraft carriers have a ramp to launch J-15 fighter aircraft, which is seen as the primary combat jet for the Chinese carrier battle group.

The exact composition of a Chinese carrier battle group is unknown, but some have suggested that a future Chinese Carrier Strike Group (CSG) could include Jiangkai-II-class (Type 054A) frigates, Luyang-III-class (Type 052D) destroyers, Renhai-class Type 055 destroyers, and a couple of Yuan-class (Type 039A) or Song-class (Type 039) submarines along with additional support vessels. There are also reports that both of China’s carriers could operate together, along with others (two Type 055 guided-missile destroyers; four Type 054 frigates; six guided-missile frigates, as well as one supply ship and three Type 093B nuclear submarines), to prevent u.s. or Japanese military assistance to Taiwan in case of a war.

The PLAN’s operational tempo is also increasing. A PLA naval formation led by its first carrier, Liaoning entered the Miyako Strait for the second time in June this year; the first such passage was in December

2016. Japan had then sent its surveillance vessels although an article by Xiakedao, the official WeChat account operated by the overseas edition of People's Daily, called the Japanese action an overreaction and unnecessary, adding that "China's aircraft carriers will routinely pass the Miyako Strait." In addition to a possible Taiwan Straits scenario, experts foresee the use of the aircraft carriers "to stop US long-range bombers from taking off from a naval base in Guam."

While the induction of China's second aircraft carrier is a significant development, there are still issues that China will need to resolve in terms of training and operational experience in operating an aircraft carrier. There will also be issues of jointness to be sorted out with other combat units such as the amphibious troops, rocket forces and other service legs.

A more significant issue would be its ability to take on other traditional naval powers such as the United States and Japan. China's two carrier battle group together would have only 30 J-15 fighter jets to take on U.S. forces in the area. And unlike the American aircraft carriers that use catapults, Shandong's ski-jump configuration adds additional burdens, including how fast aircraft could be launched. China plans to address this issue in the next two aircraft carriers that it will build in the coming years. The U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency in a January 2019 report on China's military power had noted other limitations of the ski-jump configuration including its ability to "operate large, specialized support aircraft, such as an AEW [airborne early warning] aircraft."

There are other weaknesses as well that China needs to address before it can take on more capable navies in the Indo-Pacific. But the fact remains that China's progress so far has been impressive, and that point ought not to be lost even as we remain cognizant of Beijing's limitations.

Dr. Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan is Distinguished Fellow and Head of the Nuclear and Space Policy Initiative at the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), one of India's leading think tanks.

This article was published in *The Diplomat* dated 26 December 2019. **Republished with permission.**

CENTRE FOR DEFENCE AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY STUDIES (CDiSS)

National Defence University of Malaysia

Sungai Besi Camp, 57000 Kuala Lumpur

Phone: (+603) 9051 3400 ext. 4618

Fax: (+603) 9051 3031

E-mail: cdiss@upnm.edu.my