

# China's aircraft carrier : implications for Southeast Asia

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## **China's Aircraft Carrier: Implications for Southeast Asia**

By Koh Swee Lean Collin

### **Synopsis**

*The induction of China's first aircraft carrier by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is no cause for overreaction by Southeast Asian governments, from the strategic and operational perspectives. Still, China's aircraft carrier programme may provide greater grounds for concern by 2020.*

### **Commentary**

THE INDUCTION into service of China's first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, amidst ongoing tensions in the East and South China Seas, could not have been more coincidental. Inevitably this could provoke regional concerns in regard to whether China would use its newfound capability against competing claimants in those disputes.

This might be especially so for comparatively weaker countries in Southeast Asia which have viewed China's growing naval might over the past decade with at least some concern. However, should Southeast Asia be overly concerned about this development?

### **Carrier in confined littorals**

The accepted consensus amongst naval analysts is that building a full-fledged carrier capability takes time. More than just having the aircraft carrier, it involves providing supporting elements such as escorting warships and replenishment vessels, not to mention a fully-developed carrier-borne aviation complement, all of which constitute a typical carrier battle group (CBG).

A CBG is still not considered a fully-operational fighting force until the necessary doctrine and operational and technical knowhow of carrier operations are acquired, diffused and mustered throughout the entire CBG. The time taken for a whole CBG to train to operate together as one cohesive fighting force can be considerably lengthy.

Moreover, the Southeast Asian maritime confines, characterised by narrow and semi-enclosed waters, do not favour the operation of large-sized carriers. A typical CBG presents a large and highly visible target with its accompanying fleet train, which increases its vulnerability to detection.

In confined littorals, large warships could be particularly vulnerable to well-concealed asymmetric countermeasures, exploiting local geography, such as submarines and long-range missiles. The encounters

between US Navy carriers and PLAN submarines in 1994 and 2006 as well as the successful attack on the Israeli Navy corvette INS Hanit in 2006 by a Hezbollah shore-based anti-ship missile highlight such vulnerability.

### **No surprise for regional governments**

The Chinese carrier programme should not have come across as a surprise regionally. China's aircraft carrier dream dated from the Kuomintang period in the 1940s and this was revived by the communist government in the 1980s. High-profile purchases of decommissioned Australian and Soviet medium-sized carriers in the mid-1980s and early-1990s exemplified Beijing's intent. This meant that over these decades, regional governments have at least been partially desensitized to the Chinese carrier prospect.

Since the 1990s, even if it does not constitute the primary motivation behind Southeast Asia's naval modernisation, China's aircraft carrier intent could have spurred regional acquisition of such 'cheaper' anticipatory countermeasures as long-range missiles, aerial maritime surveillance and submarines. These could have helped in mitigating the potential materialisation of China's aircraft carrier programme. In sum, Southeast Asia is generally prepared for such a contingency.

Therefore, China's first aircraft carrier should not warrant any overreaction on the part of Southeast Asian governments. However, China's carrier programme may potentially present a real source of concern by 2020 when the two planned indigenous carriers, according to PLAN sources, are expected to enter service in 2020 and 2022 respectively. The indigenous carrier is reported to be based on but larger than the Varyag design, implying a vastly more capable vessel displacing more than 70,000 tonnes full-load.

One needs also to pay attention to Beijing's overall attempts to build up its CBG capacity. This is well exemplified by the recent induction and construction of new destroyers optimised for fleet air defence coverage, conceivably with CBG air defence in mind. This means that China is seriously bent on pursuing a long-term carrier capability which is more than just a prestige pet project.

### **Benign aspect of aircraft carrier**

Given that a full-fledged CBG capability for China will require more time to materialise, it is premature to strike the alarm bells; the actual use of a carrier is arguably more crucial than the mere possession of it. And it could have a benign impact as well.

Prior to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami for instance, Singapore's force of new Endurance-class amphibious landing ships projected a somewhat aggressive image but their humanitarian deployment off Aceh in the aftermath of the disaster aptly demonstrated that these otherwise offensive-looking platforms do have their benign aspect.

The Americans for instance deployed their carriers to good effect after the 2004 tsunami and the 2011 East Japan Sea tsunami. The Thai Navy used her 'pocket carrier' RTNS Chakri Naruebet for the southern floods disaster relief. The Chinese could take note of these instances and strive to utilise its future carrier capabilities for such benign purposes. In fact, Beijing should be aware of the peaceful utility of such large naval platforms, as its hospital ship Anwei had demonstrated in its international goodwill voyages.

### **Less glamorous power projection**

If Southeast Asians are worried that the new carrier could be used to assert Beijing's maritime claims in the region, based on recent patterns of Chinese gunboat diplomacy, this worry could be exaggerated. China has been relying increasingly on lightly-equipped civilian law-enforcement vessels for such functions instead of PLAN warships and this trend is projected to continue as China rapidly builds up such capacities.

In times when its emergence as a great power has come under intense international scrutiny, the last thing Beijing would want is to be seen as overly aggressive by exploiting its newfound naval might. The deliberate low-profile induction of this first aircraft carrier is one such gesture of China's reluctance to be portrayed as using disproportionate force in its exercise of gunboat diplomacy.

Also, rather than an aircraft carrier in the South China Sea, greater efficacy and credibility can be achieved through 'less glamorous' power projection capabilities such as Beijing's rapidly expanding amphibious assault forces, or fourth-generation land-based airpower supported by mid-air refueling aircraft. That would provide more immediate ramifications to the regional naval balance. In the shorter term, these aspects instead of the carrier programme deserve greater attention of China's Southeast Asian neighbours.

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