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## The Real Reason the World Needs to Pay Attention to China's Growing Aircraft Carrier Fleet

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5/1/2017



It can't match Washington—yet.

China's first home-built aircraft carrier will soon be completed in the shipyards at Dalian. This vessel, which has yet to receive a name, will spend two years being fit with equipment before it is ready to join its sister carrier the *Liaoning* in operational service. Both vessels are derived

from the Soviet-era Kutznetsov-class carriers—the *Liaoning* is actually rebuilt from one—and as such, commentators are already tearing into them for their obvious shortcomings compared to America’s nuclear-powered supercarriers.

The new three-hundred-meter-long Type 001A is slightly larger than the *Liaoning* and is estimated to carry a few more J-15 Flying Shark jet fighters, perhaps up to around thirty. By contrast, U.S. carrier air wings today typically count sixty-four aircraft. Unlike the Soviet original, neither Chinese carrier is meant to double as a heavy cruiser, and as such lack the heavy missile armament of the Russian Navy’s *Admiral Kuznetsov*. Both the Russian and Chinese vessels lack catapult-assisted takeoff and barrier-assisted recovery (CATOBAR) for the embarked jet fighters, and instead rely on a “ski jump”-style curved ramp at the end of the deck. This drastically limits the maximum takeoff weight of the aircraft on board, a problem worsened by the insufficient thrust produced by the J-15’s engines, limiting it to carrying four thousand pounds of weapons while carrying a maximum fuel load. Neither do the carriers carry tanker aircraft that can easily extend the J-15’s range.

Unusually, some of the harshest criticism of the carriers and their onboard aircraft comes from Chinese media [3]. While living in China, I recall seeing daily television news coverage of the *Liaoning* that pointedly compared its capabilities to U.S. carriers. China suffered particularly badly from naval invasions [4] during its “century of humiliation,” and many Chinese citizens now see becoming a naval power with a capable carrier force of its own as befitting the nation’s status as a rising superpower.

However, directly comparing the *Liaoning*’s capabilities with American ships is missing the point: the Type 001 carriers are meant as stepping stones to building and operating more capable vessels. Just consider the U.S. Navy’s first carrier, the USS *Langley*.

The *Langley* was also converted from an older vessel, the steam-powered USS *Jupiter*, which launched in 1912 as a collier—a vessel that supplied coal for ships at sea. Between 1920 and 1922 it was refitted as an experimental aircraft carrier, receiving the designation CV-1 and a new name after aviation pioneer Samuel Langley. It was also the first turbo-electrically powered ship to serve in the U.S. Navy. The *Langley* featured a launch catapult and an elevator to ferry aircraft between the below-deck hangar and flight deck. On October 22, 1922, a Vought VE-7 Bluebird biplane became the first aircraft ever to launch from a U.S. Navy carrier. The first carrier landing followed four days later. These early flights were decidedly rocky affairs.

The 165-meter-long *Langley* was a far cry from the enormous flattops that succeeded it. The narrow flight deck lacked the elevated “island” that would serve as a control tower on later carriers. It still had a birdhouse for carrier pigeons in the stern. Intended for launch from seaplanes, the pigeons and their coop were retired after they mutinied en masse to take roost at the naval station in Norfolk.

The *Langley* could carry thirty-six aircraft; its immediate successor, the USS *Lexington* (CV-2) more than doubled that capacity to seventy-eight. Nor were the *Langley*’s fighters and bombers especially capable. Many of them had limited or no antiship capability, and most of the aircraft had an operational radius under two hundred miles. Some were retired in just a few years, or in

the case of the Vought FU, months, due to flaws discovered after they began carrier-based operations. The bane of battleships they weren't.

If this criticism sounds a bit unfair . . . well, it is. The *Langley* was a revolutionary design that taught the U.S. Navy how to manage the myriad challenges of operating aircraft at sea: landing them, taking them off, storing them on the flight deck and below in the hangar, and so on. And of course, while naval combat planes in the 1920s were not mature weapon systems, they rapidly evolved into designs that were. By investing early in both carriers and carrier-based aircraft, the U.S. Navy ensured it had begun developing the techniques and the institutional culture that budded into the far more capable force that fought in World War II. That next generation of carriers won the Pacific War for the United States—even including the second-generation *Lexington*, which was sunk early on in the Battle of the Coral Sea, but contributed to repelling a Japanese invasion fleet.

Fortunately for China, it doesn't need to pioneer the science of carrier operations from scratch, as various countries did in the early twentieth century. But developing homemade technology and institutional experience is still a formidable challenge. Even into the 1960s, U.S. Navy carriers still frequently suffered devastating accidents that killed dozens of sailors. Russia launched its first combat operations from carriers in 2016, targeting rebels in Syria, and promptly lost two fighters due to faulty arresting hooks. So while Beijing's new carriers may not be a match for the U.S. Navy's, if China ever wants to compete, its sailors and shipbuilders need to start gaining experience as soon as possible.

So what became of the *Langley*? As it grew increasingly outdated, it was converted to a seaplane tender of the same name in 1937. Anchored at the Philippines during the Japanese invasion in World War II, it was assigned to a multinational naval squadron, and was ferrying P-40 fighters to aid beleaguered Dutch forces in Java when it was attacked on February 27, 1942, by nine G4M Betty bombers. After dodging two bombing runs, the thirty-one-year-old vessel was finally struck with six five-hundred-pound bombs. With the deck on fire and engine room flooded, the *Langley*'s crew was forced to abandon ship. America's first aircraft carrier was then scuttled by its escorts.

Of course, in its defense, the *Langley* was no longer serving as a genuine aircraft carrier, and could not scramble fighters. However, the Type 001 carriers also would not want to square off in a naval battle against a capable opponent. However, besides vitally serving as operational test beds, they can also may also have a useful secondary purpose. After all, the United States' own carriers haven't spent the seventy years since World War II fighting massive naval battles—instead, they've provided striking power for expeditionary missions, and served as intimidating symbols of political intent.

China is slowly developing a blue-water expeditionary capability of its own. It has deployed naval vessels in the antipiracy mission off of Somalia, and is currently constructing a naval base in Djibouti in East Africa. Therefore, in the short term, the Chinese carriers may be far more useful as means of asserting China's status as a budding global power, rather than as a counter to the U.S. Navy's flattops. The Chinese military can more cost-effectively threaten those [4] asymmetrically, with long-range missiles.

Beijing still intends to build a more formidable carrier force—up to five more carriers are planned, according to state media—a process that will likely take decades, not years. China began construction in February 2016 of its first Type 002 aircraft carrier [5], a genuinely new “U.S.-style” design that officials stated in March will have a steam-catapult system, giving its embarked fighters far greater range and payload. Chinese media claims the succeeding Type 003s planned for the 2020s are intended to be a genuine nuclear-powered supercarrier, using the same electromagnetic-catapult technology the U.S. Navy is introducing in its latest Gerald Ford-class carriers.

China’s current carrier force is a fledgling one. For now, the U.S. Navy’s supercarriers, even taken individually, have no close rivals anywhere in the world. However, Beijing is tentatively making a long-term investment in altering that reality.