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China's first aircraft carrier enters service

Refurbished Soviet ship not expected to carry full complement of planes or be ready for combat for some time.

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The Liaoning, formerly known as the Varyag, was constructed in the 1980s for the Soviet navy[AFP]

China has taken delivery of its first aircraft carrier into service, according to the country's defence ministry.

The 300-metre-long *Liaoning*, named after the province where it was refitted, is a refurbished Soviet ship purchased from Ukraine.

Tuesday's unveiling is an attempt by China to be a leading Asian naval power, although the ship is not expected to carry a full complement of planes or be ready for combat for some time.

The announcement had been long expected and was not directly [linked to current tensions with Japan](#) over a disputed group of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea.

In a brief notice on its website, the ministry said the carrier's commissioning significantly boosted the navy's combat capabilities and its ability to cooperate in responding to natural disasters and other non-traditional threats.

"It has important significance in effectively safeguarding national sovereignty, security, and development benefits, and advancing world peace and common development," the statement said.

The vessel will "increase [China's] capacity to defend, develop its capacity to co-operate on the high seas in dealing with non-traditional security threats and will be effective in defending the interests of state sovereignty, security and development", it said.

Testing missions

China had partly justified the launching of a carrier by pointing out that it alone among the five permanent UN Security Council members had no such craft.

The *Liaoning*, formerly known as the *Varyag*, was constructed in the 1980s for the Soviet navy but was never completed.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the *Varyag* sat in Ukraine's dockyards.

A Chinese company with links to China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) bought the ship just as Soviet warships were being cut for scrap.

So far the trial runs of the aircraft carrier have been to test the ship's propulsion, communications and navigation systems.

But launching and recovering fixed-wing aircraft at sea is a much trickier proposition.

China has not said what role it intends the carrier to fill other than helping safeguard China's coastline and sea links.

The *Liaoning* has also been portrayed as a kind of test platform for the future development of up to five domestically built Chinese carriers.