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## China's carrier forces US Navy rethink

By Sukjoon Yoon

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The acquisition of an aircraft carrier is the foundation and ultimate symbol of a navy's blue-water strategy. There is no more important reality for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) as it starts operating its first carrier. The full ramifications of the PLAN's ambitious acquisition of naval air power are as yet uncertain. The ultimate outcome depends upon maintaining a balance between a variety of contradictory postures and strategies.

### China's plays the Great Power Game

Two forces have driven the acquisition of China's first aircraft carrier: (i) the ambition of the late Admiral Liu Hwaqing (known as China's equivalent of the US naval strategist Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan). As the first PLAN officer to visit a US aircraft carrier, Liu played a crucial role in promoting the PLAN's interests; and (ii) the concern of the Chinese leadership that their country's status as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council could be undermined by the lack of an aircraft carrier. According to this view, possession of an aircraft carrier and its associated air wing are the pre-eminent manifestation of great power status.

Until 2012, China's naval air capabilities were limited to regional naval power functionality - notwithstanding its global interests - after the strategic prioritization of asymmetric tools in a naval modernization drive that had strictly adhered to an "antiaccess, area denial" (A2/AD) strategy. Now, by joining the expensive blue-water navy club they are showing that they regard the US an "inactive superpower".

The *Liaoning*, China's first aircraft carrier, and the most substantial and transformational naval

platform built to date by the Chinese navy, signals the start of a new phase for China: an official declaration that "China is now effectively a great power, and no longer a stricken nation".

### **Towards a more offensive stance**

The conceptual basis of China's military strategy has been considered defensive in nature due to the lack of high-level military technologies and resources. The PLAN has adopted an A2/AD strategy with asymmetric assets such as anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCM), anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBM), and stealthy diesel and nuclear-powered submarines.

The PLAN's acquisition of an outdated aircraft carrier has changed the nature of its naval strategy. With an aircraft carrier and, before long, indigenous aircraft carriers capable of carrying air wings, the PLAN has progressed one step closer toward deploying an operational area-access and ocean-going task fleet comprising a variety of assets, including sophisticated surface screening, underwater, early warning and replenishing, and support-at-sea vessels.

With its fleet air wing capability, China will be able to achieve significantly greater offensive naval power projection capabilities, which will extend the combat-effectiveness of its land-based naval power beyond the regional air defense functions of its current fleet. The acquisition of aircraft carriers may lead the PLAN to expand upon its exclusive island barrier defenses, known as the inner and outer island chains (though there are three chains from a US perspective), moving beyond a defensive stance to a proactive war-fighting attitude. The PLAN has handed over its patrol mission, of securing its maritime jurisdictional rights and safeguarding sovereignty, to quasi-naval forces, such as the China Marine Surveillance, the Maritime Safety Administration, the Maritime Border Police (equivalent to the US Coast Guard), and the Fishing Regulation Administration.

Alarm bells have been ringing recently, with the South China Sea Fleet conducting a variety of naval exercises beyond the inner island chain. In future naval exercises, a yet-to-be-commissioned indigenous aircraft carrier seems to be the intended flag ship, with a naval operation concept of composite warfare, including naval air wing functions of fleet air defense and the projection of air-strike power inland.

The PLAN aircraft carrier apparently means to test the application of the concept of offensive multi-mission naval warfare, as manifest in a blue-water navy capacity reaching to the outer island chain.

### **Value for money?**

There are significant financial issues. Although they will be vastly more capable than any of the PLAN's current surface combatants, indigenous aircraft carriers will carry a correspondingly hefty price-tag. Although the PLAN has benefited from very significant increases in China's defense budget, the operation of aircraft carriers entails additional surface combatants, more missiles, and fighter planes for carrier-based air wings. These demands will face strong competition from the PLA's ongoing modernization, and its consequent acquisition of the latest weapons systems.

Conducting successful operations with the *Liaoning* is likely to prove very expensive in relation to existing submarines and other surface combatants. Although the *Liaoning* is being hyped as a breakthrough in naval warfare, its primary role appears to be as a naval air wing training platform.

Moreover, the *Liaoning* can hardly be considered a true aircraft carrier in comparison with, say, the US CVN next-generation aircraft carrier. In any case, a light aircraft carrier does not necessarily constitute an effective offensive weapon: they carry fewer than 80 aircraft, vertical take-off planes and/or helicopters, which provide only limited combat ability and operational capability, as was demonstrated during the Falklands War of 1982 between the UK and Argentina.

Although superficially similar to American carriers, this author's observations suggest that in terms of priority the *Liaoning*, a 60,000-tonne ex-Soviet vessel, is intended to be subordinate to China's noisy nuclear-powered submarines in the western Pacific which bear most of its nuclear ICBMs. The cash-strapped PLAN can ill-afford the *Liaoning*, let alone the indigenous aircraft carriers believed to be under construction. China is facing a serious dilemma over whether to fund and build such vessels in the near-term.

### **Sea control vs sea denial**

The induction of China's first operational aircraft carrier indicates that the naval concept of sea control is gaining ground against the established, and much less expensive, concept of sea denial. The Chinese A2/AD strategy has produced very successful and satisfactory results, and continuing this approach may result in the US withdrawing back to Guam-Hawaii-San Diego and the PLAN being able to take a breath to build momentum for the expansion of its naval operational space.

The expected commissioning of an indigenous aircraft carrier by the PLAN in the near future will clearly distinguish the line between an A2/AD strategy and a sea control concept. The A2/AD strategy has demonstrated that the Chinese navy can apply the concept of sea denial as a low-cost, low-risk and highly effective strategy to prevent adversaries from using the maritime domain.

Once it possesses true aircraft carrier capability, however, the PLAN will be able to implement a new conception of maritime strategy, based on the principle of sea control rather than sea denial.

There are US countermeasures designed to marginalize the Chinese A2/AD strategy: the AirSea Battle Concept (ASBC) published in 2011, and the Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC) published by the Pentagon and the US Joint Chiefs of Staff in 2012.

The former is aimed at China's A2/AD strategy, and the latter focuses on the deterrence of China's military expansion into the western Pacific. According to US experts, the PLAN has increasingly been conducting full-scale naval drills, or coalitional naval exercises with multi-

mission naval task fleets, and these have taken place in the exclusive economic zones of other nations or in confined sea areas.

Two fundamental questions must be answered before the Chinese can congratulate themselves for building their first aircraft carrier. These issues apply both to the *Liaoning* and to other aircraft carriers that may be completed in the near future. First: can China actually afford to build and operate aircraft carriers? Second: how should the PLAN integrate its incrementally improving carrier-based naval aviation capabilities with its A2/AD strategy?

If the PLAN can't resolve these questions, then Chinese aircraft carriers may blur the lines that currently distinguish the inner and outer island chains of the region, thus compromising both economic and physical security at sea.

### **How should the US and its allies respond?**

The existence of Chinese aircraft carriers has provoked a debate among the US and its allies. The received wisdom is that China's A2/AD strategy in the East Asian seas will soon be amended, and that a Chinese declaration of "no-go-zones" is more than likely. The US and its partners have to articulate a maritime strategy beyond the passive "Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Sea Power", and it has to be more specific than the stated intention to achieve a 60/40 allocation of US naval assets between the Pacific and the Atlantic.

To counter the Chinese aircraft carrier(s), the US Navy needs a "US version" of the A2/AD strategy, such as the ASBC. To achieve this, a new generation frontline platform, such as the Zumwalt-class DDG-1000, should be assigned to the Pacific Command, rather than sending littoral combat ships to Singapore.

The South Korean navy should enhance its "operational area access" capability to better support the US Navy by strengthening its power projection ability in line with the JOAC. As in the Cold War era, the US Navy should not attempt to shoulder the burden of responding to China's maritime strategy alone, but instead should share strategic, operational, and tactical responsibilities with its allies, in particular the Korean Navy.

Ensuring that the freedom of the seas in the region is preserved is of paramount importance, and Chinese aircraft carrier(s) are only one more obstacle to be surmounted.