

ISAS Insights

No. 133 – 5 September 2011

469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassecc@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



China and Its Aircraft Carrier: The Dragon's Deft Dealings with a Nervous Neptune

Iftekhhar Ahmed Chowdhury¹

Abstract

The latest sea-launch of the Aircraft Carrier by China may be a more cosmetic exercise than substantive. Of more consequence is perhaps the acquisition of a deadly maritime armoury. As the Chinese do everything for a reason and in a calibrated fashion, so such vessels have their uses. However, there will be a tendency to harmonise capabilities with perceptible and palpable needs. Nonetheless there is always the possibility of accidents vis-à-vis neighbours which could have horrendous consequences. The answer to avoid it may lie in a regional Big-Tent Naval conference like those held in the past among western maritime powers.

Introduction

That the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) of China, as that branch of their military is formally and somewhat oddly designated, should acquire an Aircraft Carrier should not come as a surprise to anyone. The surprise, if any, should be that it has taken that long for the Chinese to do so. That is because in most decisions, time is not necessarily of the essence to them. It is always tempered with pragmatism, perceptions, prestige, patience and posturing. When all these constellations of forces combine, the Chinese take the required policy step. It

¹ Dr Iftekhhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous Institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He was the (Foreign Advisor) Foreign Minister of Bangladesh from 2007-2009. He can be contacted at isasiac@nus.edu.sg. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Institute.

is always intensely measured. This is one element of Marxist thinking that is also ingrained in China's cultural behaviour pattern. (Indeed there are several, otherwise Marxism would have never found votaries in China). Sometimes, as in the case of the Carrier, the Chinese will bring the decision-making to the point of inevitability. On such occasions, other protagonists, including adversaries, would have no option but to relax and enjoy.

The Chinese had a good working relationship with the oceans from times immemorial. It was thousands of years ago that the sea-faring alchemist Xu Fu set out in search of the elixir from the 'Fusang' tree that would give humans immortality. That was the closest approximate in the East to Jason of Greek mythology seeking the Golden Fleece across the waters. But unlike Jason, Xu Fu did not succeed in his quest, and did not find the elixir.

The lesson the Chinese draw from that fable, as they always wont to do from historical or even mythical examples, is that the recipe of immortality lies only in human endeavour, and does not grow on a tree. The links to the seas developed through the 14th century voyages of Admiral Zheng He, also called Haji Mahmud Shamsuddin in Persia as he was reportedly a Muslim, a boon for Beijing's current relationship with the Islamic world. Thus it was that a relationship evolved with oceans that in present-day Chinese political jargon would be termed 'harmonious'. So as we see, the Chinese dragon always dealt deftly with the sea-god Neptune. It will therefore, doubtless and by the same token, ensures that the acquisition of the Carrier will not render him unnecessarily nervous. If Neptune need not be nervous, nor need others, including the West and also the regional neighbours.

Carrier Acquisition

The Chinese decision, or the first official expression of it, to acquire an Aircraft Carrier coincided, possibly by design, because calibration is an important element in Chinese policy-making, with a shift in naval doctrine. The time was mid to late 1980s. Till then the doctrine was largely the defence of coast-lines. A new concept then evolved, which involved three missions.

The first was to resist invasion from the sea and keep the enemy within limits. The second was to protect national sovereign territory. And the third was to safeguard national unity and maritime rights. Initially the interests to be protected were within the so-called 'first island chain'. It stretched from the Kuriles, Japan, Ryukyus and Taiwan to Philippines and Borneo. Later the goal seems to have extended to the 'second island chain', which ran from the Kuriles and Japan to Bonins, Marianas, Carolines and the Indonesian archipelago. It would now include the territorial waters claimed by China including the South China seas. Protection of Chinese vessels from Somali pirates further west in the Indian Ocean would be an additional goal. It is noteworthy that 90 per cent of China's trade by volume is transported

by sea. Two-thirds of its energy needs will be met from overseas by 2015. There is much therefore that needs to be protected.

These requirements obviously demand 'blue water capabilities' as a naval policy response. There have been talks of Chinese interest in developing dual-use port facilities in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar, though the Chinese deny accusations of a 'string of pearls' policy. Unsurprisingly, the PLAN is the fastest growing force in the Chinese military. Since 2000, China has procured around 20 major surface vessels as frigates and destroyers, and at least 31 new submarines. There is chatter in strategic circles around the world that China plans to build around six aircraft carriers. The first of these, acquired some years ago from Ukraine, was deployed for an inaugural sea-trial last month, raising regional and America's concerns. To mollify those confounded, the Chinese officials were at pains to explain that the vessel would be used only for 'research, experiment and training', and nothing else. Though procured from Ukraine, it is not lost on the rivals that on what was just a hull, all the add-on equipment will be Chinese. This is a bit like the East European saying that 'this is my grandfather's axe, my father changed the handle and I changed the blade'. Eventually the Chinese would build their own in entirety. In line with the policy of calibrations, the trial was launched to coincide with the visit of the United States (US) Vice President Joseph Biden, just as some months earlier their stealth-fighter was tested when the US Defence Secretary Robert Gates was in Beijing.

Deadly Armoury

More significant than carriers, the Chinese have focused on deadly weapons that would reduce the effectiveness of these platforms. One is the *DongFeng* (East Wind) 21 D, a precise anti-ship killer-missile that supposedly can destroy a US Super-carrier in one strike. It is believed to employ a complex guidance system, a low radar signature and an unpredictable flight path rendered so by its manoeuvrability. Also, it has the capacity to evade tracking system, with the possibility of travelling at a speed of mach-10, which would allow it to reach a maximum range of 2,000 km in 12 minutes.² The other is the stealth-fighter mentioned earlier, the J 20, which many American military strategists see as a game-changer. This is equivalent of the American F 22 A Raptors, as well as the F 35 Joint Strike Fighters. It is seen as rendering all air defence systems in the region as obsolete, with no radar arrays having the capability of picking it up.³ It can therefore remain undetected throughout its flight, with potentially devastating consequences for targets, including US and other Aircraft Carriers. Though the present Chinese defence budget at US\$ 97.7 billion is only a fraction of

² 'Report: China Develops Special 'Kill Weapons' to Destroy US Aircraft Carrier', US Naval Institute (31 March 2009), <http://www.usni.org/news-and-features/chinese-kill-weapon>. Accessed on 5 September 2011.

³ For details of its capabilities, see Robert Johnson, 'China Claims Air Superiority with Its New J-20 Stealth Fighter', *Business Insider* (10 May 2011).

that of the US, the Chinese, through perhaps more prudent strategic assessment, in line with the need to secure better goals with more meager resources, opted for most bang for the buck.

Why Carrier?

But why acquire Aircraft Carriers at all, when these are incredibly costly, and while not entirely obsolete, are certainly more vulnerable as targets that can be more easily acquired and destroyed? Also, for that very reason each Carrier needs a protective shield of battleships, an expensive proposition to say the least. Enter prestige as a factor in the calculations, a somewhat Asian value, but not necessarily devoid of military significance. This became all the more apparent when in July this year a senior Chinese researcher at the Academy of Military Sciences, General Luo Yuan, said: ‘If we consider our neighbour India will have three Aircraft Carriers by 2014, as also Japan, I think the number for China should not be less than three, so we can defend our rights and our maritime interests effectively’.⁴ But six, the reportedly planned number, is even better than three.

This also goes to show the main purpose of Chinese Aircraft Carriers is not necessarily to tilt the naval balance in their favour. China is doing this through other means, by developing other capabilities, deploying effective weapon systems and procuring more appropriate sea-vessels. The combination however, is in effect designed to dampen the combative spirit of regional competitors like Vietnam, Australia and even India, the great Asian rival. With the US and its latest Air Sea Battle Concept (ASBC), the Chinese see themselves as having a lot to deal in their hands vis-à-vis their major superpower protagonist.⁵ The Vietnamese, who have not so long ago announced a decision to purchase six submarines with an eye on China, recently celebrated a victory achieved over a Chinese fleet in the year 1288. But that was a long time ago, and even the Vietnamese do not believe this to be a history unlikely to repeat itself. Of their two policies of either ‘confronting’ or ‘enmeshing’(with cooperation) China, Vietnam now appears to have wisely opted for the latter.⁶

Australia, through a Defence ‘White Paper’ has laid out some ambitious plans that include procurement of 12 submarines, but its political leadership has been prudently asserting they want no part of the rivalry with China. Aaron L. Friedburg, a Professor of Princeton University, has written: ‘Those (Chinese) preparations do not mean that China wants war

⁴ ‘China needs at least three aircraft carriers’, *Spacewars* (30 July 2011), http://www.spacewar.com/reports/China_needs_at_least_three_aircraft_carriers_general_999.html. Accessed on 11 September 2011.

⁵ Iftekhhar Ahmed Chowdhury, ‘Power-play of Peers in the Pacific: A ‘Chimerican’ Chess Game?’, ISAS Insight No.124, 10 June 2011.

⁶ For an elaboration on the concept of ‘enmeshment’, see William Choong, ‘Coping With China’s Rapid Rise’, *The Straits Times* (2 September 2011).

with the United States. To the contrary, they seem intended mostly to overawe its neighbours while dissuading Washington from coming to their aid if there is ever a clash'.⁷

Conclusion

That leaves out India, and the complex relationship between the Indian elephant and the Chinese dragon. India has let its 'blue water' aspirations be widely known. It has presence in the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean and even in the South China seas. In six years, India hopes to have three Carriers with battle groups, deployed both near and far. The capabilities will be augmented by MIG-29 K aircraft with a range of 2,300 km, and such sophisticated missiles as the 'BrahMo' with its 300 km range and 'Dhanush', which can be fired both on and under-water with 350 km range. The danger is that Sino-Indian paths at sea may cross. Indeed recently there was the case of the Indian naval ship 'Airavat', cruising close to Vietnam, which was warned off the supposedly 'Chinese waters' by China's navy.

Fortunately this did not lead to any further incident, but such possibilities cannot be ruled out in the future. What is obviously required is a 'Big Tent' regional naval conference, as between western powers in the past, agreeing on some rules of naval conduct and 'confidence building measures'. A failure in understandings in this regard could result in accidents, with consequences far more horrendous now, than then.

.....

⁷ 'China's Challenge at Sea', *International Herald Tribune* (5 September 2011).