

China's carrier is no cause for regional alarm

Shashank Joshi and Ashley Townshend

The Australian

6 September 2011

P. 8

The launch of China's first aircraft carrier is bound to stoke strategic anxieties throughout Asia. It should not. Far from posing a threat to maritime stability, China's new naval behemoth will remain vulnerable and easy to contain.

Although its Soviet-era hull has been extensively outfitted, China's refurbished Varyag is an entry-level carrier by 21st-century standards. In tonnage terms, it's little more than half the size of a US supercarrier -- of which Washington boasts 11 and three on the way.

A fully loaded Nimitz-class supercarrier can carry 90 aircraft and remain at sea for more than 20 years before having to replenish its nuclear-powered engines. The Varyag, by contrast, will max out at 60 aircraft and just 45 sea days. While the US navy has been operating carriers since the mid-1930s, China is yet to incorporate the Varyag's new and largely untested weapons and sensors into operating procedures and crew expertise.

China's carrier will be hard-pressed to generate much airpower. Unlike US ships, the Varyag employs a less sophisticated ski-jump style launch system, meaning fighter jets take off from a ramp on the deck. As this imposes limits on an aircraft's weight, China's J-15s -- its only carrier-based fighter -- will have to skimp on weapons and fuel to launch from the ship, reducing their combat radius.

Nor can the Varyag accommodate heavy refuelling assets or fixed-wing surveillance planes -- further undermining the J-15s' range and leaving both ship and aircraft vulnerable to aerial attack from afar.

Technical limitations aside, carrier warfare is one of the most complex operations any military can undertake. As highly visible and vulnerable platforms, carriers must deploy as part of an integrated battle group. Yet even the world's most competent navies have taken many years to perfect this task. Given the PLA navy's nascent command, control and logistics procedures, it will be decades before Chinese carriers are ready for combat.

The PLA navy has not mastered anti-submarine warfare, meaning US attack submarines remain free to roam China's territorial waters with impunity. Across the straits, Taiwan is threatening China's big ships by fielding its own anti-ship ballistic missiles that can strike moving carriers. Further afield, China's carrier lacks the logistical network to patrol, let alone fight, great distances from home -- rendering Beijing's blue-water ambitions a faraway dream.

What combat purpose, if any, could China's Varyag fulfil?

One theory is that a carrier may be useful in a conflict over Taiwan because it would permit China to project air and sea power in multiple directions, rather than just across the straits. But China already has more than 1300 missiles pointed at the island, so it is hard to see what value the Varyag would add. As a Taiwan Straits war would almost certainly attract US involvement, China's entry-level carrier would be quickly outmatched.

Another scenario is that Beijing might use the carrier to intimidate rival claimants in the South China Sea. It's one thing to use maritime administration vessels to scare off commercial ships, but it would be a huge escalation to send a carrier instead. As such moves would drive ASEAN even closer towards Washington, it's unlikely Beijing would use the Varyag in such a heavy-handed way.

Even if China's carrier ended up in the South China Sea, it would be vulnerable to land- and sea-based threats. In recent years, Vietnam has bought six Kilo-class submarines and 12 Sukhoi fighter jets; Malaysia has ordered two Scorpene-class submarines; Indonesia is set to buy two subs this year; and The Philippines seeks one. Alongside their anti-ship missiles, and leaving aside the strengthening navies of India and Japan, these carrier-killing platforms would be a nightmare for Beijing.

What, then, is the point of China's shiny new ship?

For one thing, the Varyag will be a useful training carrier to prod the PLA navy up a steep learning curve. China is rumoured to have an indigenous carrier program that will benefit greatly from lessons learned today.

The Varyag's real meaning probably lies in Beijing's pursuit of prestige. China's domestic debate on sea power has emphasised that great powers require great navies and great navies need carriers. China is the only permanent member of the UN Security Council yet to operate a fully functioning carrier -- a humiliating fact for millions of Chinese. If this seems an implausible motive, consider that large numbers of citizens have volunteered personal funds to support carrier construction.

China's neighbours will not be so sanguine. After the Varyag set sail, Taiwan paraded its newest anti-ship missile against a billboard depicting a carrier being devastated by rockets. Four days later, supercarrier USS George Washington on a port-call in Vietnam hosted senior military and political leaders.

Overreactions will only strengthen Communist Party and PLA hardliners, emboldening strands of Chinese nationalism. While co-operating to blunt the PLA navy's offensive capabilities, the US and its allies should recognise Beijing's legitimate maritime interests.

This narrative should focus on freedom of the seas, but it must emphasise that regional stability is the sine qua non of China's own growth and development.

As the Varyag gains its sea legs, Asia's biggest challenge is to ensure that China's nervous neighbours navigate a cool-headed path between complacency and alarm.

Shashank Joshi is an associate fellow at the Royal United Services Institute, London. Ashley Townshend is a research associate at the Lowy Institute for International Policy, Sydney