

by Tetsuo Kotani

China's possession of aircraft carriers is not a matter of "if," but "when." Last November, an official in China's Ministry of National Defense touched for the first time in a public venue on the possibility of his nation acquiring aircraft carriers. China has purchased three carriers built by the former Soviet Union and one built by Australia, gaining an opportunity to study their structures. One of those, the Varyag, was supposed to serve as a floating casino in Macao, but it is now moored at a shipyard in Dalian, where it has been painted the same gray as other naval vessels and an angled deck has been installed. The Varyag does not have engines and cannot be employed as China's first aircraft carrier, but it can be used for research/training purposes.

There is a rumor that China will purchase Sukhoi-33 (Su-33) aircraft from Russia. The Su-33 is a ship-based fighter carried on Russia's only aircraft carrier, the Admiral Kuznetsov. China has been training pilots for ship-based aircraft at navy aviation training centers in the Ukraine. The centers are equipped with simulators for taking off from angled decks, landing with arresting wires, and emergency response operations. In addition, since 1987, China has been training pilots as aircraft carrier ship captains at the Guangzhou Naval Academy. Nine PLA Navy pilots have completed the three-year course, and all are thought to be commanding destroyers. In a few years, they will become ideal candidates to captain an aircraft carrier.

Given the foregoing, that carrier is likely to be a 60,000-ton conventional propulsion carrier of a former Soviet Union model, which has been outfitted with an angled deck. But a carrier program consists of far more than just one ship. To have one carrier in regular operation, a minimum of two backups (for maintenance and training purposes) are necessary. It is estimated that a 50,000-ton class aircraft carrier in the British Navy costs about \$5 billion to build and deploy. Even if the Varyag is used for training, it would be necessary to construct two ships, a cost of \$10 billion.

Furthermore, aircraft carriers cannot be operated alone. In addition to ship-based aircraft, it is necessary to form a strike group consisting of combatant ships, submarines, and supply ships, etc. In short, the possession, maintenance, and operation of an aircraft carrier absorb an astronomical amount of money and time.

So why bother? First, possessing an aircraft carrier is proof that China is a major power, and a sign of prestige. Second, it could shape the balance of combat capabilities in the South China Sea, where China has territorial disputes with Southeast Asian countries. To coastal countries that do not possess powerful military forces, China's aircraft carrier would be a major threat. China has made Hainan Island a base for its strategic nuclear submarines, and an aircraft carrier would be useful with regard to making the South China Sea "off limits."

Furthermore, protection of the sea lanes from the South China Sea through the Strait of Malacca and up to the Indian Ocean, and in particular, curbing a sea blockade against China, which could be envisioned at the time of a Taiwan contingency, would be possible. And finally, an aircraft carrier could be used for rescue operations during large-scale disasters.

Should we worry? Not yet. First, development and deployment of carriers, and all their paraphernalia will take decades. Second, the substantial price tag is not the only cost of such a project. Other countries in the region are likely to become wary of Chinese intentions as it develops power projection capabilities.

And third, a Chinese carrier strike group would be no match for a U.S. carrier strike group, which is said to have striking power on par with a middle power nation and a defensive perimeter up to 700 kilometers. The United States is the only country with the capacity to operate the top-of-the-line carrier-based aircraft – and it can deploy as many as 11 such strike groups around the world.

Although the military balance in the Taiwan Strait already overwhelmingly favors China, which has deployed more than 1,000 missiles in the coastal areas, the introduction of Chinese aircraft carriers would not significantly affect the military balance. In fact, a Chinese aircraft carrier attacking eastern Taiwan from the sea would be a target for the U.S. forces. Carriers are vulnerable to precision guided missiles, submarines, and mines. In order to rule out intervention by a U.S. carrier attack group in a Taiwan contingency, China's current access denial strategy makes more sense. In fact, China would need to give up some submarines and anti-ship missile development programs to build a carrier strike group.

China has every right to possess aircraft carriers. The day when China possesses carriers may not be far off. Although the international community shouldn't overreact, it is necessary to watch developments and respond. As Japan debates revision of its National Defense Program Guidelines, there should be an assessment of the implications of Chinese aircraft carriers on regional security. In response, Japan should:

- maintain and strengthen the alliance with the United States. Steady implementation of the realignment of U.S. forces in Japan, particularly involving the transfer of the carrier airwing from Atsugi to Iwakuni and securing a permanent training facility for field carrier landing practice within 200 miles of Iwakuni, are most important. That is because the carrier strike group based at Yokosuka is the keystone of U.S. forces in the Pacific, and the carrier air wing provides its "striking power."
- develop appropriate countermeasures. China's possession of carriers does not mean Japan has to respond in kind. More appropriate countermeasures include reinforcement of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) submarine fleet and reinforcement of air bases along the Ryukyu and Bonin islands. The reinforcement of submarines, the natural enemy of an aircraft carrier, provides an effective deterrent. A feasible study of nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) might be necessary as well since the JMSDF submarine fleet would be required to undertake blue water operations. Furthermore, since a Chinese aircraft carrier will likely carry the Su-33, it is also necessary to come to a decision promptly on the next-generation main

fighter aircraft of the Japan Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF). On this point, Japan should request a prompt response from the United States on sales of the F-22.

- to counter China's access denial strategy, it is necessary to reinforce intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities.. Also, in addition to the steady introduction of next-generation patrol aircraft, Japan should strengthen cooperation with friendly countries in the region. For example, South Korea is in the process of building up its ASW capabilities, so Tokyo should consider revising the three principles of weapons exports, providing South Korea with P-3C aircraft, and assisting in improving their support facilities. Given the vastness of the sea areas to be covered, introduction of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs) should be encouraged as well.

The PLA Navy just celebrated its 60th anniversary. Today, China is standing at the crossroads between continental power and maritime power. China is building up its military capabilities as other naval powers are conducting more brown water missions with fewer ships to keep vital sea lanes open. They regard the seas as highways, while China sees them as barriers.

Japan learned lessons from the Pacific War and has behaved as a responsible maritime power ever since. The possession of aircraft carriers would provide a good opportunity for Chinese security planners to choose the right path. Failure to do so will invite tough countermeasures from other maritime powers. We should not be frightened by China's progress in this area.

Tetsuo Kotani is a research fellow at the Ocean Policy Research Foundation. The views expressed are entirely his own.

© 2009 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.