

Stealth in Beijing

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What's the best method for determining Beijing's foreign policy ambitions? Should we try to dissect the manoeuvrings inside the Communist Party in the all-important Congress that began last week, examining the speeches and statements?

That's one method. But here's an alternative approach: we can determine Beijing's plans for the Asian region by examining an aircraft's undercarriage. Let me explain.

A couple of weeks ago, China's Shenyang Aircraft Corporation performed the first flight of China's newest stealth fighter aircraft, unofficially dubbed the J-31. Images of the flight quickly found their way online. For military analysts, there was much to dissect. But ever since the first clear photos of the aircraft emerged in September, one particular detail has intrigued those who analyse China's military-industrial complex, because it has potential implications far beyond the world of aircraft design.

The front landing gear on the J-31 has a twin nosewheel rather than the more typical single nosewheel, which suggests the J-31 might be designed with aircraft carrier operations in mind. Compared to landings on a long runway, landings at sea are heavier, so carrier-based aircraft need more robust landing gear to cope.

It's not definitive proof. A number of modern fighters which operate from land only, including China's own J-10, have a twin nosewheel. Whatever the J-31's ultimate role, the fact that China now has two stealth fighter designs in development (the larger J-20 was unveiled in 2010) is truly impressive. It comes on top of other evidence that China has ambitions to become the premier military power among its regional peers, and a serious threat to US maritime primacy in the Asia Pacific.

In fact, the current wave of Chinese military modernisation, which began when the US military's performance in the 1991 Gulf War shook the PLA out of its Stalinist mindset, has already changed the balance of power in the Asia Pacific. For instance, China's modern submarine fleet, its emerging surface ship force, its huge ballistic missile arsenal and hundreds of modern combat aircraft now make it very difficult to imagine that the US would intervene in a military crisis over Taiwan. It's not that China could defeat US forces in such a conflict; the balance has not yet tilted quite that far. It's just that the costs of victory for the US would now be far higher than in the days before China's modernisation. China could inflict a great deal of pain in such a conflict, probably more than the US would be willing to sustain to defend Taiwan.

But the Taiwan example also points to the limits of China's military modernisation. China still has very little ability to project military force more than a few hundred kilometres beyond its shores. There are of course exceptions to this judgement: China has a handful of nuclear-armed ballistic missiles with global reach, and it is developing cyber warfare capabilities that know no geographical limits.

And then there's the aircraft carrier. In September the PLA Navy accepted into service a Russian vessel purchased half-finished in 1998 and then methodically refitted in Chinese shipyards for naval service. The Pentagon's latest report on China's military says parts for a home-built follow-on carrier may already have been ordered.

If ever there was a symbol of military power projection, the aircraft carrier is it. Nuclear weapons aside, there is no more powerful weapons system for deployment far from a nation's shores than a carrier. America has 11 super-carriers. No other nation even comes close to that kind of capability, and no one is suggesting China aims to surpass the US. Where the US is concerned, China's strategy seems to be to develop a kind of spoiling force with the ability to make it very difficult for the US to dominate the region, but which cannot itself dominate Asia's seas. Carriers have very little role in that strategy.

But when it comes to China's regional neighbours, Beijing seems to have higher ambitions. Were it to deploy more than one carrier with high-performance stealth fighters like the J-31, China would become the pre-eminent regional maritime power, with the ability to coerce neighbours in disputes in which the US prefers not to get involved.

That scenario is still several years away, perhaps a decade or more. China is still learning how to land a fixed-wing aircraft on its first carrier. But a recent article by China military expert Andrew Erickson says China's military shipbuilding has advanced to the point where it can produce modern vessels at a rate matching any country except the US. Military planners as far away as Australia and India are troubled by such developments.

China's military-industrial complex still has major weaknesses. The PLA has its share of white elephant projects, much of China's indigenous military technology remains of poorer quality and performance than that of Russia or the West, and China's appropriation of foreign intellectual property has been nothing short of brazen.

But we cannot say that China's military-technological development has lacked purpose or determination. Purchases of foreign technology have on the whole been limited and strategically considered, designed to plug gaps while China develops domestic capabilities. And weaknesses are being identified and addressed. Recently, Reuters reported that Beijing is considering a \$16 billion plan to consolidate China's struggling jet engine industry.

Analyses of aircraft carriers and jet fighter designs give us hints of China's ambitions and its sense of itself as a great power. But ultimately, military power is exercised by China's leaders, and rests on economic foundations. Answers to the big questions about China's future must come from the new generation of decision-makers in Beijing. Can they build an economy to sustain China's ambitions abroad, and will they pursue those ambitions peacefully?

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