

China shifts the Pacific waters with its aircraft carrier trials

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The way things are today, an aircraft carrier is not so much a military instrument as a symbol of power. This makes China's decision to invest in this very expensive, demanding form of military capability particularly interesting. For many years to come, no Chinese aircraft carrier will win any battles against the US or any other major naval power, as the Chinese well understand.

But their sea trials this month of a converted Soviet-era carrier seem to confirm that the Chinese are serious about getting carriers anyway, at least in the longer term. This sends a message about how China sees its role in the Asian Century, and the message is not reassuring.

To understand what China's carrier means, we need a little Naval Strategy 101. Throughout history, the goal of any serious naval power has been what strategists call "sea control". This is the power to use the sea when and where one wishes, whether to trade or to project military force. One achieves sea control by limiting any adversary's ability to attack one's own ships.

For 100 years America has exercised sea control in the western Pacific — just as Portugal, Spain, Holland and Britain did for centuries before them. Until now, the only Asian power to challenge Western sea control in our region was Japan, in the decades before 1945. America's defeat of Japan, and its control of the western Pacific since, have been achieved by its unmatched fleet of aircraft carriers. They are the essential instrument for sea control in the age of air power.

The Chinese have long understood that America's sea control in the western Pacific has been the military foundation of its strategic primacy in Asia, and that the US Navy's carriers are the key. They have therefore focused the formidable expansion of their naval and air forces over the past 20 years on trying to deprive the US of sea control by developing their capacity to sink American carriers. In this they appear to have been strikingly successful, to the point that US military leaders now acknowledge that their sea control in the western Pacific is slipping away.

But for China, depriving America of sea control is not the same as acquiring it themselves. Its naval strategy has focused on the much more limited aim that strategists call "sea denial": the ability to attack an adversary's ships without being able to stop them attacking yours. These days, sea denial can be achieved without putting ships to sea, because land-based aircraft, long-range missiles and submarines can sink ships much more cost-effectively than other ships can. This is what China has done.

But only aircraft carriers offer the round-the-clock protection for other ships needed to achieve sea control. The catch is, you need carriers to achieve sea control, but you need sea control to deploy your carriers. The problem with carriers is that they are very large, rather slow, easy to find and easy to hit. Moreover, they are extremely valuable, so they make a very tempting target.

The central fact of modern naval warfare — which the Chinese grasp as well as anyone — is that sea denial is relatively easy to achieve, but control is extremely hard. We seem to be entering an era in which many countries can achieve sea denial where it matters to them most, but none can achieve sea control against any serious adversary.

So here is the conundrum of China's carrier program. The Chinese navy has a good chance of sinking American aircraft carriers that come too close to China, but the US Navy can certainly sink any Chinese aircraft carrier any time it likes — even in China's own front yard. And not just the US Navy: Japan, Korea, India — even Australia if we could only get our submarines to work — all have the capacity to sink a Chinese aircraft carrier without too much trouble. And others, like Vietnam, are getting such capabilities too. This means that as long as they face other major powers or even feisty middle powers in the waters around Asia, China has no chance of achieving sea control. So what use are carriers to China, and why is it spending so much money on them?

There are two possible answers. The more reassuring is that the Chinese are buying expensive capabilities that make no strategic sense for reasons of prestige. If this is so, it is good news for those who fear China's growing naval power, because the more money it spends on aircraft carriers that can easily be found and sunk, the less it will have to spend on submarines, missiles and other more effective forces. It They may be this dumb, but I wouldn't bet on it.

The less reassuring possibility is that China is looking a long way into the future, and sees an Asia in which it can exercise sea control, and use aircraft carriers to project power around Asia just as America has done. That would be an Asia in which China has not merely displaced America, but replaced it as the dominant power in Asia. That would be an Asia in which China would be sorely tempted to use its power-projection forces to bend its neighbours to its will.

The uncomfortable fact is China's carrier program only makes strategic sense if China expects and intends to be able to dominate Asia within a few decades — which is how long it will take for its carrier capability to mature anyway. And that is not a future that anyone else in Asia would want.

So what do we do? The dumb response would be to try to ensure US sea control in the western Pacific in the face of China's growing power, America's fiscal constraints and the inexorable balance of operational advantage in favour of sea denial. The smart thing to do is to ensure that America's, and our own, sea denial capabilities remain strong, and persuade China that it has no chance of achieving the grandiose ambitions that its carrier program suggests it may be harbouring.

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