

Global Ambitions: As China's trade expands, so do its military horizons
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ARTICLES

The flag follows trade, said Otto von Bismarck. The “Iron Chancellor” knew a thing or two about strategy — even if he was a late convert to colonialism, and the efforts in Africa and the Pacific were a footnote to German imperialism. And, as the mastermind behind the rising industrial power of the last century, he might have a lesson to impart to today’s rising power, the People’s Republic of China. Likewise, the Kaiser’s decision to build a “risk fleet” — not designed to go toe to toe with the Royal Navy, but to give some maritime power-projection capabilities to a continental power — seems to have a 21st-century parallel. As China’s trade — the engine of its growth and the source of legitimacy for the regime in Beijing — expands, so do its strategic and military horizons.

In the March and April issues of AFJ, I discussed China’s growing submarine fleet and increasing numbers of new capable surface naval combatants, but these do not define the limits of China’s power-projection plans nor its military buildup. There is every possibility that, within a decade — or, if you’re an expert, by the end of China’s 12th Five-Year Plan — the People’s Liberation Army could be working up its second aircraft carrier battle group and equipping its airborne army with C-17- or even C-5-class strategic transport aircraft. It is becoming evident that China’s ambitions extend beyond the canonical Taiwan Straits scenario.

NEW ALARMS

Within the American China-watching community, it is a relatively new idea that China could soon develop real military capabilities that could challenge the U.S. in the greater Asian region or beyond. But clearly, the possibility has begun to take root broadly.

For the first time, in the 2005 issue of its annual review of Chinese military modernization, the U.S. Defense Department, while noting the PLA’s first priority is to prepare for a conflict over Taiwan, went on to note that “some of China’s military planners are surveying the strategic landscape beyond Taiwan.” In its 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review, the Pentagon announced, “China has the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States and field disruptive military technologies that could over time offset traditional U.S. military advantages.”

In Congress, Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John Warner said China seeks to “project influence, and perhaps even force, elsewhere in the region.” And the intelligence agencies are reaching similar conclusions. Deputy Intelligence Director Michael Hayden said, “There’s almost a momentum in Chinese thinking that ... great powers need certain things, and they aren’t necessarily tied to a specific military event, either proposed or expected, but simply become the trappings of their global legitimacy.”

Nor is it just Americans who are projecting a larger result from China's rise. It's becoming conventional wisdom in East Asia. Regional promoters of "Greater China" nationalism, like the Singapore Straits Times newspaper, see the PLA's greater military reach as a natural and acceptable development. In a March 23 editorial, it advised: "As China's economic networks multiply across the globe, it would be compelled to ensure its trade and oil-supply routes are never impeded. Force projection, even if only implicit, is the method of choice."

Indeed, China's growing energy dependence is increasingly regarded as Beijing's greatest strategic concern — and its greatest weakness. A reliance on foreign petroleum has driven China's current rush to secure sources in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Central Asia, Africa and even Central and South America. China and Russia are pushing their Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which could soon count Iran, Pakistan, Mongolia and India as members, to acquire a distinct military-cooperative character. In the minds of the Straits Times — again, to be regarded as reflecting Chinese government thinking — this is simply normal strategic behavior. The paper advises Americans to stop "hectoring" China about its military buildup, and "make space" for China's new power.

CHINA'S CARRIER QUEST

Since the early 1980s, there has been a raging debate within the circle of foreign PLA-watchers over whether China would acquire aircraft carriers. On the plus side, there was the clear advocacy of the PLA Navy (PLAN), especially its former leader Liu Huaqing, who once opined that he would "die with his eyes open" if he did not see a Chinese carrier before his demise. In addition, through the 1980s and 1990s there was a clear and intense program to acquire carrier knowledge from any source, even to the extent of purchasing used carriers. In 1985, Beijing bought the Melbourne from Australia; in 1989, the small-deck carrier Minsk and, in 1990, its sister Kiev from Russia; and, in 2002, the larger but unfinished Russian-Ukrainian Varyag.

But there also has been a consistent strain of skepticism. The U.S. Navy doubted that the PLA could afford carriers and their attendant weapons, support ships and support infrastructure, or that, even if it acquired the pieces, it could orchestrate complex carrier operations. And American and other strategists contended that China's strategic interests did not extend beyond the reach of its submarines and land-based airpower. Further, the Chinese have consistently downplayed ambitions to build aircraft carriers — to the point of putting out the story that the Varyag would be transformed into a casino. By 2005, however, Chinese actions cast such a categorical conclusion in doubt. From 2002 to early 2005, the Varyag remained docked in the Chinese harbor at Dalian, and there was little to indicate it was being rebuilt for military missions. Furthermore, there were reports that its steam turbine engines were not in working order and would be difficult to repair. But in May 2005, the Varyag was placed in dry dock and, in early August, it emerged painted in PLAN gray, a clear declaration of ownership. Also in 2005, Russian reports noted that the Chinese had consulted with the Russian Neveskoye Bureau, which designed the Varyag-class carrier.

Photos from early this year show the Varyag's flight deck is being repaired. And in a March 10 article in the Hong Kong newspaper Wen Wei Po, PLA Lt. General Wang Zhiyuan, a member of the Science and Technology Committee of the General Armaments Department, was quoted as saying, "The Chinese army will conduct research and build an aircraft carrier and develop our own aircraft carrier fleet. ... An aircraft carrier is a very important tool for big countries defending their interests in the sea. China is a big country with a long shoreline. An aircraft carrier is necessary to defend our interests in the sea."

Wang also noted that the first Chinese carrier would join the South Sea Fleet in about five years, and that the carrier's weapons and support ships were either built, or being built or acquired.

ANOTHER PIECE OF THE PUZZLE

There also is an emerging body of evidence to suggest that China is making serious efforts to gather a carrier air wing. Russian sources interviewed at the Moscow Airshow in August indicated the PLA was considering two carrier combat aircraft.

One option was the direct purchase of the Sukhoi Su-33, a version of the Su-27 redesigned and optimized for carrier operations and which first landed on the Russian carrier Kuznetsov in November 1989. What makes this option attractive is that the factory which has made almost all the Russian-built Sukhoi fighters for export to China also produces the Su-33. A second option pursued by China is to modify its Chengdu J-10 with an upgraded and thrust-vectoring engine. With its canard configuration, thrust-vectoring would allow the J-10 to achieve lower landing speeds and other capabilities needed by carrier aircraft.

After the Moscow show, Russian press reports indicated that during the show a Chinese audience received a special demonstration of the unique Su-33UB twin-seat naval attack fighter — a demonstration I also witnessed. The two-seater, too, had been modified with new thrust-vector nozzles to improve carrier landing and maneuver characteristics. The Su-33UB makes greater use of composite materials, conferring stealth advantages, while its larger cockpit can accommodate a larger radar for guiding long-range anti-ship missiles.

Revealing its growing understanding of carrier operations, the PLA Navy also is exploring at least two carrier-based airborne radar platforms, although information about the efforts is sketchy. In mid-2005, a Chinese magazine photo recording the visit of former Vice Premier Wu Bangguo to an aircraft design firm also included a partial picture of a small airborne warning and control system (AWACS) aircraft similar in size to the old Grumman E-1 Tracer. This airframe could also serve as the basis for anti-submarine or carrier-on-board-delivery platforms. In addition, at the Moscow show, the Kamov helicopter company confirmed previous reports of Chinese interest in its unique Ka-31 AEW helicopter.

While open sources do not allow for an exact assessment of the future PLAN carrier air wing, it's increasingly clear that the Chinese have a number of options going forward. Which path they choose is less certain than their obvious desire to develop a capability.

There's also clear evidence that the PLAN is thinking not only about carrier operations per se, but other components of maritime power. These begin with battle group tactics, including submarines and surface combatants. Wang has claimed that the support ships for one or two carriers are already available. The Chinese South Sea Fleet boasts two new Aegis-style Luyang II destroyers as well as two Russian Shtil SAM-equipped Luyang I destroyers. As it is likely nuclear submarines are to be based near Yulin Base on Hainan Island, this carrier group may also have ready subsurface escort as well.

But there's more to the buildup than naval combatants. Since 2000, the PLAN has doubled its short-range sealift to about 35 LST-sized ships and is building a variety of smaller landing ships. There is reporting of Chinese interest in either buying or co-producing the Russian ZUBR large tank-carrying assault hovercraft. But any serious operations that would seek to move the two dedicated Army amphibious divisions based near Taiwan, or the two marine brigades based south of Hong Kong, plus the 300,000 or so follow-on army forces, would rely heavily on impressed civil cargo and passenger transports.

But to leave little doubt that it takes this task seriously, the PLA has rapidly modernized its army amphibious and marine units. Both use the new 105mm gun-armed T-63A amphibious tanks, which fires the 5-kilometer-range Russian-designed Bastion gun-launched anti-tank missile. This effectively outreaches the 105mm guns on Taiwan's tanks. Both have also been equipped with several new types of amphibious armored personnel carriers, plus new naval artillery, beach fording and logistic support equipment.

GOING AIRBORNE

Finally, it's clear that the PLA has learned the lessons of joint warfare and regards its expanding naval capabilities and ambitions as pieces of a larger puzzle. And, in addition to sustaining power-projection operations, Beijing wants complementary rapid-response forces.

To meet the need — perhaps to intervene in Central Asia as well as East Asia, where the weak states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization are exposed to the U.S. position in Afghanistan and to domestic unrest — China's future tool of choice could well be an expanded airborne corps. Airborne troops are part of the PLA Air Force for administrative and logistic support reasons but are believed to be directly subordinate to the PLA's leading organ, the Central Military Commission; increasingly they are regarded as a strategic asset. In recent years, PLA authors have stressed the utility of airborne forces to deliver decisive “decapitating” blows to the enemy. It is also likely that PLA airborne officers have had increased exposure to their Russian counterparts, in addition to their exercising together during the infamous Peace Mission 2005 joint exercise last August. Currently, the sole 15th Airborne Army headquartered in Wuhan counts two active divisions and a training division, roughly 35,000 men. But for some time there has been an expectation that the PLA would form a second force, the 16th Airborne Army.

Already, the government in Beijing is pouring money into the 15th Airborne, especially since the beginning of the decade. In 2005, it revealed its new ZLC-2000 airborne infantry fighting vehicle, similar to the Russian BMD airborne tank, which the Chinese tried but failed to co-produce. Chinese sources note it will come in three versions, an infantry fighting vehicle armed with a 30mm cannon, a version armed with anti-tank missiles and a command-and-control version. The PLA also has apparently imported Russian heavy-drop parachute technology. In addition, airborne troop exercises have featured new Italian Iveco-designed light trucks and new jeep-like buggies, and the weapons-and-communications kit of airborne soldiers has been improved.

And to get its airborne troops to the scene, the PLA is purchasing Russian heavy transports and may soon enlist the Ukraine to enable new indigenous heavy and outsize transports. During the 1990s, the PLA Air Force purchased about 20 Ilyushin Il-76 transports, and then in September 2005, soon after Peace Mission 2005, it signed contracts to purchase 30 to 32 more Il-76s and a number of aerial refueling tankers for support. The Il-76s can carry up to 50 tons of cargo and during Peace Mission 2005 were seen dropping three ZLC-2000 IFVs apiece.

As in so many other areas of its military modernization, the long-term ambition remains, and has long been, for China to produce its own heavy transports. Past failures have been interpreted as a sign of endemic Chinese shortcomings; in the 1980s it produced the Y-9 airlifter concept, which was similar to the Il-76. And after two decades of failed attempts to co-produce or co-develop U.S. or European-led civil airliners, China is just now reaching a point in its absorption of large aircraft design and production technologies to consider anew the development of large civil and military transports. The recently announced 11th Five-Year Plan, setting policy out until 2010, contains funding for a new 150-seat civil transport and an unspecified heavy transport, which some Chinese officials have said may be designed to carry up to 100 tons, in the class of the U.S. Air Force's C-5.

Predicting the exact course of Chinese military modernization is next to impossible. At the same time, the increasingly global nature of Beijing's strategic interests, like the global patterns of its trade, has been a consistent pattern of the late 1990s and the first part of this decade. To repeat: Chinese leaders regard their dependency on global markets as both a strength to be exploited (it is the framework for China's economic growth) and a looming strategic weakness (it exposes a variety of pressure points to the U.S. military). The vulnerability of Beijing's energy supplies, and supplies of natural resources more broadly, is a clearly stated Chinese concern.

Moreover, U.S. and other intelligence organizations have, with equal consistency, underestimated the pace and the progress of PLA transformation. The military balance across the Taiwan Strait is already more unstable than what was forecast. PLA Navy submarines are ranging farther afield, entering waters claimed by Japan.

It is enough to note the disparity between Beijing's global strategic interests and its local military grasp. But if the Chinese flag does follow Chinese trade, this gap will not long endure.

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