



CHINA'S TRYST WITH AIRCRAFT CARRIER

- Lt Sibapada Rath

Introduction

1. Presently, despite her ability to deploy a strong military force in South China sea, China has very little in the way of credible power projection capabilities. The 1970s, have witnessed a combination of several factors, which in turn brought about a critical shift in the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) doctrine of coastal defence, to one of modern warfare on the high seas. PLAN began to enunciate a doctrine, which emphasised on "Active Green Water Defence", which represent a capability, somewhere between coastal defence and blue water functions¹. The new role necessitated improved firepower in offshore

conflicts, maintenance of effective control over Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) and the conduct of warfare in waters adjacent to the Chinese territory. This policy redefines the concept of 'offshore waters', to include vast areas of the Pacific Ocean covering Japan, the Linquin islands and the Philippines. The planned acquisition of an aircraft carrier draws relevance to this definition. This also is in tune with the declared chinese policy to protect the countries sovereignty, to guard its increasingly important sea lanes of communication, keep Japan and India off, and to give PLAN a decisive edge in future naval warfare in general and likely

engagement with USA in particular, in the Taiwan straits².

Pursuit

2. Media reports reveal that in 1985 China bought 'HMAS Melbourne', as scrap from Australia, after being stripped off its communication and gunnery equipment. The same year, a Chinese military delegation visited France and an agreement was concluded with the French to train the Chinese Naval Forces in carrier-borne operations³. Commencement of training for aircraft carrier operations at Dalian and Guangzhou Naval Academies was also reported around the same time.

3. In 1992, China wanted to go ahead with the purchase of a second hand carrier from another country. She tried to buy the yet to be finished 65,000 ton Kuznetsov-class vessel 'Varyag', which can carry about 18 Su-27s or 25 MIG-29s, but Ukraine never showed any interest. The same year media reported that the Chinese officials had expressed interest in purchasing one of the Russian Navy's 40,000 ton 'Kiev' class carrier, during president Boris Yeltsin's visit to Beijing. Later, Chinese companies were able to purchase two vessels of this class from Russia - the 'Kiev' and 'Minsk'. However both found their destination as tourist attractions in Macao and Tianjin.

4. During the Taiwan strait crisis of 1995, China went ahead with the R & D to create a prototype of an aircraft carrier, with due seriousness. China sought the help of Spanish shipbuilders 'Emprera Nacional Bazan' to draw up plans for a light weight, conventional take off and landing carrier, but the deal could not materialise because the Chinese were actually interested in getting hold of the blueprint than the actual construction of the carrier⁴. Newspapers also reported that China was interested in importing an aircraft carrier from France, having some conditionality attached, but

in the ultimate analysis nothing came out of that either.

5. 1997, Hong Kong media reported, that China was interested in acquiring a smaller helicopter carrier rather than a fixed wing carrier. In 1999, the media further published that Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and State Council, the highest decision making body of China, had earmarked Y 250 million for two carriers, which were planned to be completed by 2009. The carriers would have a displacement of 48,000 tons and would carry 24 Su-27Ks. The arrival of a partially completed ex-Soviet carrier, the 'Varyag' at a Dalian shipyard provided basis for some speculation. But the Chinese announced that this too would toe the line of 'Minsk' and 'Kiev'.

6. In 1996, the official newspaper of Chinese military, it was argued, that aircraft carriers are indispensable in future naval warfare and to raise overall combat effectiveness and improve flexibility and adaptability, an aircraft carrier led team of battle ships will be employed in small-scale regional conflicts. It was also opined that aircraft carriers will remain the maritime overlords in settling sea conflicts, establishing sea control and particularly, in fighting ordinary naval battles⁵. Corresponding to this, in 1996 it was reported that china initiated plans to build an aircraft carrier with the design scheme provided by Russia's 'Nevskoye Design Bureau. This was followed by CMC's internal research paper, asking the R&D establishment to further its efforts to build an aircraft carrier⁶. According to this paper the building programme of the carrier, which was initially under the armed forces Tenth Five Year Plan for 2001-05, was advanced to the Ninth Five year Plan 1996-2000. But the intelligence reports indicated that nothing worthwhile had moved since then, in this direction.

7. A Russian report indicated that China plans to build an aircraft carrier with a displacement of between 40,000 to 60,000 tons and the feasibility



study and draft design of Chinese aircraft carrier started in 1992. According to an another Russian source China began work on its own carrier in 1999 at Shanghai shipyard. This carrier, code named "9985 plan" or "Project 9935," would have 48,000 ton displacement and would be capable of carrying 30-40 fighter jets, most of which would be multi-functional SU-30MMK jets, bought from Russia. The first carrier of purely Chinese design, the ship would have a built-in vertical anti-air and anti-ship missile launching system. China had also reportedly started work on naval bases and harbours in Shanghai, Zanjing and Dalian, to improve the docking facilities for this carrier. The plan for China's first light and conventional powered aircraft carrier was estimated to cost around 4.8 billion yuan, with authorities reportedly having already allocated one billion yuan for the first phase of the project. The aircraft carrier was expected to be launched in 2003 and be in service around 2005. From then on, it was estimated that China will be able to build a new aircraft carrier at an interval of every three years.

8. If the project had indeed started in 1999, this carrier would have been completed by 2006. As of mid-2004 there were no credible reports of the start of construction of such a ship. While these kind of reports continue to persist, they appear to be based on speculation, which despite repeated efforts, have gone unverified. For instance, the aircraft carriers that China is reported to be building, are all said to be under construction at the same time at a shipyard in Shanghai, which is also enclosed, to prevent observation. Surely this would have been identified given the advancements made in satellite reconnaissance.

China's Naval Doctrine

9. The projection of naval power away from blue waters, is a mission the PLAN already faces, although without the necessary capabilities. The

most possible scenario would be armed conflict in the South China Sea. Any action in the Taiwan Straits would be geographically close to home waters, but the war zone could be expanded into high seas, once USA joins. Then "PLAN would require to engage US naval ships in waters away from home.

10. Being a blue water navy envisages two important concepts; sea control and sea denial. For PLAN, sea control denotes the first line of defence. It consists of China's three key offshore straits ; the Bohai sea strait (Beijing and Northern China), the Taiwan straits (accessing West Pacific) and the Qiong Shan straits. So far as sea-denial is concerned, two island chains are traditionally the USA's ocean frontiers of check against China. The first island chain starts from Japan to the Liuqu islands and to Taiwan and the Philippines archipelago. The second island chain starts from Ugasawara-Gunto islands and the Mariana islands of Japan. PLAN'S second layer of defence and its sea-denial capabilities are primarily aimed at breaking any blockade of the first island chain⁷. In PLAN'S maritime doctrine, there are two combat models; the independent deployment of naval force and PLAN'S participation in joint operations with the other services. According to the first model, PLAN is indeed a 'Blue Water Navy', having offensive motives away from home waters, launching strategic campaigns against the enemy's Naval Fleets. As per the second model, PLAN is purely a defensive entity. However, the emphasis now is on the first model and corresponding strategic and tactical employment of naval power⁸.

11. The continued relevance of aircraft carrier in China's strategic thinking lies in the fact that sea control and sea denial can only be achieved through air superiority. This was the genesis of China's aircraft carrier programme. Initially, PLAN felt the aircraft carrier necessary for possible actions in the South China Sea. Given the short reach of



PLAAF fighter planes, air control could be provided by carrier-based aircraft. In case, a conflict erupts in Taiwan Straits, operations are likely to be conducted within 300 km of the mainland. Protagonists of military affairs within PLA argue that instead of developing a costly symmetrical fleet, PLAN should adopt asymmetrical warfare strategies, to defeat a navy of the scale of USA. In case, USA becomes involved militarily in a cross-straits conflict, it would certainly deploy aircraft carrier battle groups. The same is evident from the recently concluded Afghan war and Gulf War II. To counter this threat and due to the hurdles in the path of acquiring an aircraft carrier, PLAN has taken delivery of two Russian-built Sovremenny-class destroyers and ordered two more and simultaneously strengthened its submarine fleet.

Hurdles In Acquisition

12. In the present circumstances there is no urgent strategic need. In addition, there are a number of financial, technical and geopolitical hurdles. In case of an eventuality in the Taiwan Straits the operations are likely to be conducted within 300 kms of the mainland and with the modernisation of the Air Force continuing unabated, land based air power can at least be able to establish a level of air superiority over a selective ranges of the country's major maritime areas. China can also meet this threat with her growing arsenal of short-range missiles.

13. Economically, at a time when China is passing through economic transformation, the astronomical cost of a carrier is definitely a severe constraint. In addition to this, a carrier would require new fighter aircrafts, helicopters, airborne early-warning systems and a host of escort vessels and submarines. And there is also a requirement of mandatory refit, every four to five years. Thus there would be a requirement of at least two carriers. Further, there is a necessity for strategic naval bases capable of berthing the carriers, which would in

turn pressurise the exchequer.

14. So far as the technical hurdles are concerned, aircraft carriers require special technologies with which China has little experience. There are also aspects such as handling carrier borne operations, air defence, early warning, interception and enhanced ASW capabilities. The 'Minsk' and 'Kiev' have been stripped of their engines, armaments and communication systems, which would be uneconomical for refit. To add to this, China does not possess any suitable VTOL aircraft, which could operate from the 'Kiev' class carriers. So far as 'Varyag' is concerned, refitting the vessel would be prohibitively expensive.

A Concluding (Observation)

15. All said, the geopolitical consequences have to be weighed in the context of China's present position. Aircraft carriers have always been a tool for force projection. Whatever China may plead; that it is for defensive purposes and other connotations attached with that, the countries in East Asia, especially Japan will not be able to digest it. It would reinforce the existing fears that Beijing intends to dominate the South China Sea, resolve territorial claims in its favour and pursue regional hegemony. The ASEAN nations, especially those having a claim over Spartley and Paracel islands, would no doubt strengthen their military links with USA and this will result in corresponding American presence in the waters of South China Sea. Such a scenario will change the geostrategic configuration, that will definitely have a major impact on the region.

16. The issue of whether the PLAN is building or even planning to build an aircraft carrier is important, in so far as, such ambitions imply possible strategic competition for the US Navy. US analysts, who see China as a growing military threat, site the 'Varyag' purchase as significant in terms of US policy. While one carrier alone would



not pose a threat to US interests, it would definitely indicate the direction of Chinese policy.

17. If China were to build or purchase an aircraft carrier, such an asset would enable it to provide increased air defense and support for amphibious operations. The proposed Chinese aircraft carrier would be a vessel of 40,000 - 50,000 tons of displacement, one similar to the French "De Gaulle Class" nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. Given the complexities of developing a new naval reactor, considerably larger than the type used on China's nuclear submarines and that a very long range is not

required, conventional steam boilers would be adequate for a Chinese aircraft carrier. Russian designed steam turbines could give the carrier a top speed of 30 knots. The vessels might carry 24 combat aircraft, such as the Sukhoi-30MKK launched by a ski-jump. Below decks, might be two missile launchers housing 24 missiles, either the Russian SSN-22 'Sunburn' or the more advanced 'Yakhont'. China is also reported to be working on a land-attack cruise missile to be mounted on the vessel. In all probability the aircraft carrier would be built at the Shanghai and Jiangnan Shipyards.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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