

China aims to end US Navy's long Pacific dominance

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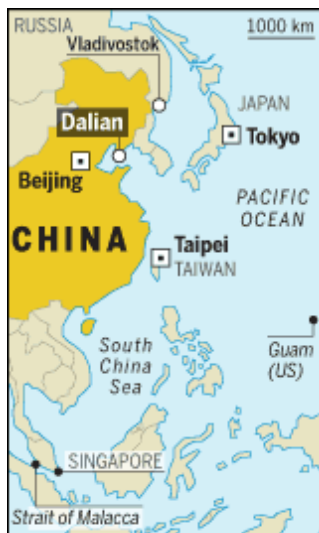
The guard at the Dalian port gate was brusquely adamant: visitors could not enter for a closer look at the Varyag, a former Soviet aircraft carrier berthed at the north-eastern Chinese city.

In fact, the guard insisted, the half-finished carrier towed as an engineless hull to China from Ukraine in 2001 was no longer even in Dalian. "It was moved away a few years ago," he said.

He was being economical with the truth. Despite its new navy grey paint job and a thick haze that lay across the city, the bulky Varyag with its distinctive "ski-jump" flight deck could be clearly seen from the roof of a nearby building. But the guard's clumsy attempt to hide the presence of the carrier was a reminder of the secrecy that shrouds all aspects of China's naval development.

Such secrecy makes it extremely difficult to judge both the current capabilities of China's fleet and also the strategic goals to which Beijing is likely to put it. But there is no doubting that the navy, long the neglected arm of the People's Liberation Army, is now at the heart of China's drive to build a military to match its growing economic and diplomatic clout.

A force that less than two decades ago was little more than a sleepy coastguard has developed or acquired dozens of vessels including conventional and nuclear-powered attack submarines, Russian Sovremenny destroyers armed with supersonic anti-ship missiles and modern home-grown air defence destroyers and frigates. US officials have also suggested that Beijing is close to deploying its first effective nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines.



Such deployments add up to change of historic significance. For centuries, Chinese leaders have generally set little store by maritime strength. The last time China tried to match the naval forces of western powers and neighbouring Japan was a failed effort by the declining Qing dynasty in the late 19th century. No Chinese navy has been able to project military power beyond neighbouring seas since the 15th century, when the eunuch Ming dynasty admiral Zheng He led extraordinary fleets of huge "treasure ships" on cruises as far as Africa.

"Historically and by nature, China's leaders and strategists have a better feel for land wars," says Michael Yahuda, professor of international relations at the London School of Economics and George Washington University. "Most of China's trouble came from powers that were strong at sea. For its decision-makers, there is a feeling that if China is to return to true greatness, it has got to have a naval capacity."

China also has a more immediate motive for emphasising

the development of the PLA Navy: its desire to back its claim to sovereignty over the rival island of Taiwan with a credible threat of force.

Beijing has stressed its desire to win Taiwan back peacefully and conflict with the democratic island appears unlikely in the short term. However, Chinese military planners' primary goal is to be able to deal with a "range of scenarios" in the Taiwan Strait and to deter any US intervention in support of Taipei, says Andrew Yang, secretary-general of Taiwan's Chinese Council of Advanced Policy Studies.

Mr Yang estimates that China's rapid development of weapons platforms will enable it to deny the US Navy access to Taiwanese waters by 2015. "In the last five to seven years, China has produced two new types of conventional submarine and two new types of nuclear-powered submarine. That's quite impressive."

Moreover, China's naval ambitions almost certainly reach beyond Taiwanese waters. In its annual report to Congress on China's military power, the US defence department said last month that the PLA appeared to be "engaged in a sustained effort to develop the capability to interdict, at long ranges, aircraft carrier and expeditionary strike groups that might deploy to the western Pacific".

This would involve "targeting surface ships at long ranges" as far away as the island chains south and east of Japan and beyond Guam. Beyond that, the Pentagon said, analysis suggested that Beijing was "also generating capabilities for other regional contingencies, such as conflict over resources or territory".

China has sharply condemned the report. At a conference at the weekend in Singapore, Lieutenant General Zhang Qinsheng, deputy chief of China's general staff, dismissed it as an unreliable product of a cold-war mind-set and insisted that China's military strategy was based around self-defence and peaceful development.

Such protestations are undermined by Beijing's reluctance to discuss how it plans to protect its increasingly international interests. Local analysts have stressed the need to secure access to oil from the Middle East and gas from South-East Asia, not to mention a host of other commodities essential to keep China's booming economy afloat.

Beijing is a big beneficiary of the "Pax Americana" enforced by the US Navy that keeps its sea lanes open. But the US Seventh Fleet's role in policing strategic waters such as the Malacca Straits, through which 80 per cent of China's imported oil flows, would also give Washington a strategic stranglehold in case of conflict over Taiwan.

Still, even with China's official defence budget expanding 18 per cent to \$45bn (£23bn, €34bn) this year – and US intelligence suggesting it may really be closer to \$125bn – building the capacity to project power at long range remains a huge challenge. For some Chinese admirals and analysts, the long-term key to such capacity is the creation of one or more aircraft carriers. The purchase of the Varyag has long been widely seen as proof of China's interest in building its own equivalent of the Russian Kuznetsov-class carrier.

The vessel was bought from Ukraine in 1998 by a Chinese company that said it wanted to convert it to a floating "fun palace", but high-level intervention by Beijing was needed to win permission from Turkey for it to pass through the Bosphorus. The tug-pulled Varyag had spent more than a year turning circles in the Black Sea.

Suspensions that amusement was not the real aim were fuelled by the repainting of the vessel in naval grey in 2005. Some observers expect it to be refitted as a practice vessel and others think China could use it as a model for a future home-built carrier.

Deploying a true aircraft carrier means much more than merely copying a suitable hull, however. To be effective, a carrier force must be matched with sophisticated air and undersea defences, be equipped with a range of different types of aircraft designed for operation under the most challenging conditions and have a highly trained crew working to

carefully honed procedures.

Wang Xiangsui, a military expert at the Beijing University of Aeronautics & Astronautics, says China should not even make the attempt. Even some naval experts in the US think carriers' expense and vulnerability spell an end to the role of these as arbiters of naval supremacy, he points out, and China should look for better ways to meet its strategic needs.

"I personally feel an aircraft carrier is a luxury," he says. "It's a diamond; a very good-looking but very expensive toy."

Even if Beijing pushes ahead with carrier development, just how worried should the US and other neighbours be? Sceptics note that the PLA continues to rely on Moscow for many of its most advanced weapons platforms, such as quiet diesel Kilo-class submarines and Sukhoi fighters. Even ships and aircraft built by Chinese contractors often rely on Russian suppliers for key systems.

Some analysts say the imported vessels are poorly integrated with the rest of the Chinese fleet and can be operated only with the continued presence of Russian advisers.

The training and operational experience of PLA recruits also lag far behind that of US counterparts. The Federation of American Scientists says data from the US Navy show that China's entire submarine force conducted only two patrols in 2006, while the navy's single deployed Xia-class ballistic missile submarine made no deterrent patrol at all – a level of activity suggesting an "almost dormant submarine fleet".

Even the Pentagon says China "does not yet possess the military capability to accomplish with confidence its political objectives" on Taiwan.

China does not have to look far for a historical lesson on the difference between a navy strong on paper and one that can fight effectively. The Qing dynasty built an impressive-looking "Northern Fleet" of two battleships and 10 cruisers, only to see it brushed aside by Japan's better-trained navy in seas near where the Varyag now lies at its Dalian berth.

But Sam Bateman, research fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University, says Chinese weaknesses are easily exaggerated. "It strikes a chord with what the British used to say about the Japanese in the 1940s," he says, arguing that mainland forces appear well placed to prevail in any conflict with Taiwan.

Mr Bateman argues that the US and Japan should accept that China's emergence as a naval power is an inevitable result of its economic success and, instead of seeking to counter that rise, should focus on preventing it from triggering a regional arms race.

Certainly, Beijing itself appears keen to ease regional security concerns. Since the mid-1990s, it has worked hard to reduce tensions surrounding its sweeping territorial claims in the South China Sea through active multilateral diplomacy and joint resource exploration and exploitation.

There are also a few signs of greater PLA openness. While Lt Gen Zhang offered little new information at the Singapore security conference last weekend, his presence was something of a breakthrough, since China has previously largely ignored such events.

Mr Wang of the University of Aeronautics says Chinese defence planners have themselves yet to achieve consensus either on what their naval strategic goals should be or how they should go about achieving them. Indeed, he hopes Beijing will end up agreeing with him that the navy's aim should not be to oppose the US but to fit into a stable international security system.

"China has a need to guarantee access to maritime key points – but does not need to do this

by confronting the US Navy," he says, suggesting instead that the main aim should be to work alongside Washington.

Nonetheless, US defence planners are likely to continue to find it hard to take China's good intentions on trust while the country remains an authoritarian and avowedly communist one-party state. Beijing meanwhile still shows little willingness to embrace the level of transparency that might allay their suspicions.

China's defence ministry routinely declines to respond to the most innocuous queries about its policies, while most PLA officers are barred from contact with foreigners. Contacted this week about the plans for the Varyag – and whether the carrier might one day become the promised amusement park – an official at the Dalian shipyard where it is berthed was tight-lipped. "This matter is secret," he said. "It cannot be spoken of to outsiders."

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