



China's Aircraft Carrier: Chinese Naval Nationalism and Its Implications for the United States

BOTTOM LINES

- **A Boon for Naval Nationalism.** China's aircraft carrier program is not a response to the country's growing dependency on imported energy resources. Less than 10 percent of Chinese energy supplies arrive by ship. Rather, the carrier program reflects an increase in Chinese naval nationalism.
- **A Nonthreat to U.S. Seapower.** China's aircraft carrier program does not challenge U.S. maritime security. Its navy lacks the aircraft and force protection technologies for the carrier. In fact, China's carrier program diverts resources from Chinese capabilities that do challenge U.S. maritime security.
- **The Right U.S. Response.** The most significant development in China's maritime capability is its conventional ballistic and cruise missile programs. An effective U.S. response to Chinese military modernization must avoid a nationalist response to the Chinese carrier and instead focus on a transition to smaller and faster platforms that are less vulnerable to twenty-first-century missile technologies.

By Robert S. Ross

This policy brief is based on "China's Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects, and the U.S. Response," which appeared in the Fall 2009 issue of International Security.

OVERVIEW

In August 2011, after years of planning and development, China launched its first aircraft carrier—the refurbished Soviet carrier *Varyag*—which China purchased from Ukraine in 1998. This development represents a major benchmark in China's naval modernization program. In addition, there are reports that China is building two aircraft carriers, which means that within five years the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) could possess a total of three such vessels.

Observers of China's naval modernization program frequently argue that the acquisition of the *Varyag*

reflects China's growing dependency on imported oil and the Chinese leadership's determination to develop naval power to protect sea-lanes and overseas energy resources, a combination that will inevitably lead to conflict between the United States and China. They also argue that the carrier program reflects a great power's naval ambition to challenge U.S. maritime supremacy. Both perspectives are incorrect, because they fail to grasp the underlying drivers of China's carrier program and the limits of the PLAN's ability to challenge the U.S. Navy. These misperceptions could result in misguided policy recommendations and divert attention from more significant Chinese military challenges to U.S. maritime security.

KEY FINDINGS

Despite a growing demand, China is not dependent on oil imports, which represent less than 9 percent of China's total energy supply. As a result, the Chinese

economy could endure a loss of maritime supplies in a major international conflict.

Seventy percent of Chinese energy comes from domestic coal. An additional 20 percent comes from hydropower, domestic oil and natural gas, nuclear power, wind power, and biomass. Approximately 15 percent of China's imported energy resources are shipped via pipelines and rail from Central Asia and Russia. The remainder is shipped through international sea-lanes. China's growing demand for oil imports is being driven by a huge surge in the number of automobiles in China and a commensurate increase in gas consumption. To minimize the effect of a loss of international oil on the Chinese economy, China's authoritarian government could ration its supply.

China's energy planning calls for long-term reliance on the country's abundant coal reserves and other domestic energy resources. Its energy security policy seeks to avoid dependency on U.S.-controlled sea-lanes and energy competition with the United States.

China's carrier program reflects the Chinese Communist Party leadership's surrender to the forces of nationalism. Popular demand for a carrier has grown over the past decade and has spread from the PLAN to all sectors of urban society. The Chinese people have demanded a carrier as a legitimate symbol of their country's rise and a necessary step toward securing its status as a great power. As Chinese domestic instability has grown, the increasingly insecure Communist Party leadership has used the carrier program to bolster its nationalist legitimacy—just as it used the 2008 Olympics, the 2009 Shanghai Expo, high-speed rail, the “world largest airport,” and other high-profile projects for this purpose. China's carrier program reflects a rise in naval nationalism, not a well-considered national security policy.

Most important, China's aircraft carrier program does not challenge U.S. maritime security. The *Varyag* is a 50,000-ton carrier. Its size places intrinsic limitations on both the number of aircraft that it can carry and their payload. In addition, the *Varyag* has significant

power projection limitations. Equally important, given its lack of domestically produced aircraft, China may have to purchase SU-33s from Russia. Force protection will also be a problem for the PLAN. Not only does it lack aircraft to defend the carrier, but it has yet to develop advanced maritime surveillance capabilities.

Ultimately, China's development of aircraft carriers will enhance U.S. security. These carriers will not be able to threaten U.S. ships, and at the same time, the PLAN's carrier program takes resources away from other PLA programs that could challenge the maritime security of the United States, including its submarine force. Moreover, maintaining force protection for the carrier will require Chinese submarines to join the carrier task force, thus diverting them from tracking U.S. aircraft carriers in the western Pacific.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

The challenge for U.S. policymakers is twofold: to avoid exacerbating the threat posed by China's aircraft carrier program and to sustain U.S.-China cooperation and U.S.-maritime security.

First, just as Chinese nationalists view the *Varyag* as a symbol of China's great power status, Americans associate the U.S. Navy and its aircraft carriers with American global preeminence. They will therefore perceive China's carrier program as a challenge to U.S. maritime dominance. Status is important not only for the Chinese but also for the Americans. An increase in naval nationalism in China may therefore produce a similar increase in the United States and elevate pressure on U.S. policymakers to “contain” China's rise. U.S. nationalist rhetoric, however, will only exacerbate Chinese nationalist hostility toward the United States and create even greater pressure on the Chinese leadership to adopt a nationalist foreign policy. The resulting heightened tension in bilateral relations would not enhance U.S. security, but it would challenge U.S.-China cooperation.

Second, U.S. preoccupation with China's carrier program will divert attention from long-term PLA

programs that could pose a more significant challenge to U.S. maritime security. China's carrier program is a nationalist effort, rather than one element in a long-term program to develop a surface fleet designed to contend with the U.S. Navy ship for ship. China's long-term strategy relies on land-based and ship-based missiles to challenge the U.S. surface fleet and its power projection capability. An effective response to this long-term challenge requires the U.S. Navy to transition to platforms that would be less vulnerable to Chinese missiles than a costly 100,000-ton nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. A twenty-first-century U.S. Navy that effectively responds to twenty-first-century military technologies will increasingly rely on small and fast surface ships carrying large numbers of drones and on submarine platforms that China's primitive antisubmarine warfare capability cannot detect.

CONCLUSION

China's naval modernization program has made significant progress over the past thirty years, and the acquisition of its first aircraft carrier is a significant achievement. Nonetheless, China's carrier does not pose a strategic challenge to the United States, because it lacks the capabilities to challenge U.S. maritime supremacy. Still, the carrier does represent

a political challenge to the United States. A U.S. strategic response to China's carrier program requires a dispassionate focus on the PLAN's capabilities, rather than on China's nationalist aspirations and its demand for status. A proportionate U.S. strategic and diplomatic response should avoid escalating threats and unnecessary U.S.-China friction.

China's aircraft carrier program does not challenge the security of the United States, but other aspects of PLA modernization may challenge U.S. maritime capabilities. An effective U.S. security policy should focus on emerging Chinese technologies that matter, rather than on the strategically irrelevant symbols of Chinese naval nationalism.

• • •

Statements and views expressed in this policy brief are solely those of the author and do not imply endorsement by Harvard University, the Harvard Kennedy School, or the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs.

RELATED RESOURCES

Cole, Bernard D. *The Great Wall at Sea: China's Navy in the Twenty-First Century*, 2d ed. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2010).

Coté Jr., Owen R. "Assessing the Undersea Balance between the U.S. and China," SSP Working Paper WP11-1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Security Studies Program, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2011).

Erickson, Andrew S., and Lyle J. Goldstein, eds., *Chinese Aerospace Power: Evolving Maritime Roles* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2011).

Glosny, Michael A., and Phillip C. Saunders, and Robert S. Ross. "Correspondence: Debating China's Naval Nationalism," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Fall 2010): 161–175.

O'Rourke, Ronald. "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress" (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2011).

Zhang Wenmu. "Sea Power and China's Strategic Choices," *China Security*, No. 3 (Summer 2006): 17–31.

ABOUT THE BELFER CENTER

The Belfer Center is the hub of the Harvard Kennedy School's research, teaching, and training in international security affairs, environmental and resource issues, and science and technology policy.

The Center has a dual mission: (1) to provide leadership in advancing policy-relevant knowledge about the most important challenges of international security and other critical issues where science, technology, environmental policy, and international affairs intersect; and (2) to prepare future generations of leaders for these arenas. Center researchers not only conduct scholarly research, but also develop prescriptions for policy reform. Faculty and fellows analyze global challenges from nuclear proliferation and terrorism to climate change and energy policy.

FOR ACADEMIC CITATION:

Ross, Robert S. "China's Aircraft Carrier: Chinese Naval Nationalism and Its Implications for the United States." Policy Brief, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, October 2011.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert S. Ross is Professor of Political Science at Boston College and Associate of the John King Fairbank Center for East Asian Research at Harvard University.

ABOUT *INTERNATIONAL SECURITY*

International Security is America's leading peer-reviewed journal of security affairs. It provides sophisticated analyses of contemporary, theoretical, and historical security issues. *International Security* is edited at Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and is published by The MIT Press.

For more information about this publication, please contact the *International Security* editorial assistant at 617-495-1914.

**Belfer Center
for Science and
International Affairs**

Harvard Kennedy School
79 JFK St.
Cambridge, MA 02138

TEL: 617-495-1400
FAX: 617-495-8963
<http://www.belfercenter.org>

