

Is China's PLA Navy threatening the South

China Sea

Last Wednesday, January 17, China sailed its post-Soviet aircraft carrier (the Liaoning) through the Taiwan Strait — and not for the first time. It did the same six months ago, and six months before that. In fact, China's lone aircraft carrier seems to do little else besides sail back and forth through the politically-sensitive strait. It leaves its home port of Qingdao on the Yellow Sea, then sails through the East China Sea and Taiwan Strait to Hong Kong on the South China Sea. After a week in Hong Kong, it sails the reverse route back home to Qingdao.

China's neighbors and the Western press react hysterically to these repeated "provocations" as the Liaoning sails first past Japan's Senkaku Islands (disputed by China, which calls them the Diaoyu Islands), then past Taiwan (which China considers a renegade province), and finally to the South China Sea (site of China's notorious Nine Dash Line maritime claims). China owns the only fully-functional aircraft carrier in the region, and it can seem like China is using the Liaoning to threaten its neighbors with its "big stick."

A quick look at the map makes it clear why the Liaoning repeatedly sails such a sensitive route. It's simply sailing up and down China's eastern coast in one endless training loop. Lacking a global infrastructure of naval bases and support facilities, China doesn't dare send its precious 30-year old, Soviet-surplus carrier far out into the ocean. In fact, if you were to imagine the least provocative place China could sail its carrier and go anywhere at all, it would be Qingdao to Hong Kong and back. There's nowhere else to go.

China will soon be launching a second, home-grown aircraft carrier (though still based on the Liaoning design) and may have started work on a third, more advanced ship. By the time that third ship launches in the early

2020s, the Liaoning, essentially just a training ship, will be ready for retirement. So a decade from now the PLA Navy will have a two-carrier fleet, putting it on a par with India and Japan (Japan's four small carriers currently only carry helicopters but can accommodate aircraft in an emergency).

Local area dominance

The PLA Navy won't be challenging the mighty U.S. Navy for control of the world's oceans anytime soon. But combined with its aggressive program of illegal island-building (and military airstrip construction) in the South China Sea, China's military buildup can be seen as threatening its smaller neighbors. Vietnam and the Philippines are directly challenged by China's expansive maritime claims, and Taiwan's diplomatic situation is always precarious. The growing PLA Navy dwarfs the naval forces of all ten ASEAN countries.

Given its apparent willingness to flout international law by pouring billions of dollars (and untold tons of concrete) into the shallow waters of the South China Sea, it seems inevitable that China will slowly but surely extend its maritime footprint in the region. That is an insult to its neighbors, whose claims to these waters are often stronger than China's. But Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte may be politically astute to give China a pass on the issue. Short of an unwinnable war, there is no practical way to stop China from taking what it wants.

But what it wants is mainly useless water and remote coral reefs. The much-vaunted hydrocarbon reserves of the South China Sea are actually quite small and, in any case, not in the disputed areas claimed by China. As the world (including China) moves rapidly toward a post-carbon future, what reserves there are will slowly decline in importance anyway. There is every chance that they will never actually be exploited.

The South China Sea is certainly important for the trade that passes through it, including the oil and gas that are the lifeline of Northeast Asia, but here again perceptions grossly distort reality. It is often said that 40 percent of the world's trade passes through the South China Sea. It is less often pointed out that most of that trade is to and from China itself. If China were to use its military resources to close the South China Sea, the first economy to be destroyed would be its own.

Again, a quick look at the map provides a lot of clarity. The major ports of Vietnam and the Philippines are on the South China Sea, and these countries could be vulnerable to Chinese pressure in the event of a blockade. But in case of trouble, trade to Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan would just take the slightly more circuitous route around Borneo and the Philippines to avoid the area. Meanwhile any conflict in the South China Sea would devastate China's export-dependent economy.

It is impossible to believe that either Vietnam or the Philippines would challenge China for control of the South China Sea, so conflict scenarios involving those two countries can safely be put aside. Vietnam and the Philippines will simply have to manage their relationships with China to make sure that push never actually comes to shove. Meanwhile the stronger powers of Northeast Asia have little to fear from a closure of the South China Sea. And the biggest power of all, the United States, isn't even a party to the dispute.

Keeping the sea lanes open

Western China-watchers worry that China is developing the capacity to exclude Western (read: American) naval forces from operating in the South China Sea in the event of a conflict. They call this potential strategy anti-access / area-denial or A2/AD. In this scenario, China would use a combination of land-based missiles, artificial island air bases, and its new aircraft carriers to deter U.S. and allied forces from entering the South China Sea. China could, in effect, close the sea.

What these pundits fail to see is the view from the other side. The United States itself could easily close the South China Sea to all navigation through an A2/AD campaign of its own. And that would harm China much more than it harms the United States and its allies.

Rather than assuming that China's expensive forward bases in the South China Sea are offensive platforms for a future invasion (of where?), it makes more sense to imagine them as tools that China can use to keep its own sea lanes open, even in the face of American hostility. In peacetime, the United States has always been committed to keeping the seas open for commerce, but in a conflict situation the U.S. Navy could be a powerful force for closure. Chinese strategists must recognize this — and dread it.

China's bullying tactics in the South China Sea have alienated neighbors and sparked fears of China's growing power. But there's no sense in inflating those fears to irrational heights. China's PLA Navy will certainly grow to parity with other regional navies. That's no cause for alarm. And China will certainly develop the capacity to sink ships in the South China Sea, just as Iran has the capacity to sink ships in the Persian Gulf and Russia has the capacity to sink ships in the Baltic. None of them will do so, because to close their neighboring seas would be to kill their own economies.

The most likely motivation behind China's maritime military buildup is the desire to ensure China's own security, a desire sparked by fear and nurtured by two centuries of naval inferiority. It is unfair of China to pursue its own security at the expense of the security of its smaller neighbors, but it is perhaps inevitable that any country in China's position would do so. That won't reassure nervous China-watchers in Vietnam and the Philippines. But it should reassure the world at large that China is not about to start World War Three in the South China Sea.

Salvatore Babones

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