

China Moves to Project Air Power With Soviet Carrier Overhaul  
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By Bloomberg News

Oct. 20 (Bloomberg) -- Welding torches flare at dusk in the coastal Chinese city of Dalian as workers mill about on the flight deck of an unfinished aircraft carrier once intended for the Soviet navy.

More than 400 miles (643 kilometers) from the ocean, a full-size mock-up sits next to a lake in Wuhan. While the twin can be used to train deck crews, it will never sail. Its "hull" is a 1,000 foot-long (300 meter) building.

China's leaders have talked for five decades about acquiring what they call "aircraft mother ships." Spurred by dependence on safe sea lanes for exports and inbound shipments of oil, gas and iron ore, the world's fastest-growing major economy is preparing to send a carrier to sea within a few years, military analysts say. Such a move in the Pacific, where the U.S. has dominated since World War II, would give China added power in territorial disputes with Japan, South Korea, Vietnam and the Philippines.

"A Chinese aircraft carrier is probably a matter of when, not if," says David Finkelstein, director of China studies at CNA, an Alexandria, Virginia-based consulting group with national-security expertise. "There is already a strategic rationale for the need for an aircraft carrier or some sort of vessel that can project air power within the region."

The first will be the former Varyag being completed in Dalian, according to a July report by the U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence. It predicts the warship will become operational as a training platform between 2010 and 2012, with domestically built carriers "sometime after 2015."

#### Destroyers, Submarines

They would join a fleet of about 190 principal ships, including destroyers, submarines and amphibious vessels, according to a 2009 U.S. Defense Department report. That compares with about 285 U.S. ships, including 11 aircraft carriers displacing about one-third more than the 65,000-ton ex-Varyag.

China must buy jets, train aviators, build support vessels and learn the skills required to conduct air operations at sea. One such battle group costs about \$10 billion, U.S. Naval War College researchers estimate.

While China's commission of an aircraft carrier may cause consternation in Washington, it won't change the military balance between the two nations because of the U.S. lead in numbers of carrier battle groups and platforms such as ultra-silent cruise-missile-carrying nuclear submarines, says Robert Ross, a professor at Boston College in Massachusetts who specializes in U.S.-China relations.

#### Military Installations

That reality may be lost amid alarm in the U.S. Congress and among allies including the Philippines, which came to the brink of conflict with China in 1995 over alleged Chinese military installations on a South China Sea reef and will look for reassurance from the U.S. that defense ties remain strong.

"The carrier is a symbol of power projection, which will simply resonate in other countries as it resonates in China," Ross says.

China concentrated on protecting its home waters with missiles, submarines and minelayers until this decade; carriers weren't seen as necessary or cost-effective, Ross says. It bought a World War II-era vessel from Australia in 1985 that it later scrapped, according to the Australian Navy. Two Russian carriers became tourist attractions.

China's fleet has begun to range beyond its coast. Two destroyers and a supply ship deployed for anti-piracy patrols off Somalia in December 2008. With a \$3.9 trillion economy and the world's largest foreign-exchange reserves, at \$2.3 trillion, China's leadership is showing signs it is serious about joining the U.S., Russia, France and Brazil in possessing vessels capable of launching conventional fixed-wing airplanes.

#### Offensive Operations

China "won't forever be without an aircraft carrier," Defense Minister Liang Guanglie told his Japanese counterpart in March, Xinhua News reported. China's 2006 Defense White Paper said the navy would extend its mandate beyond coastal defense to include "offshore defensive operations."

The Varyag was originally intended to be the second 65,000-ton carrier of the former Soviet Union when construction began in the 1980s; it wasn't completed after the country broke up in 1991, according to the U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence July report. Its sister, the Admiral Kuznetsov, is the flagship of Russia's navy.

Ukraine inherited the Varyag, selling it to China in 1998. It arrived in 2002 in Dalian, site of China's largest shipyard, the report said. It was in plain view during a visit last month, in drydock about 600 meters from an Ikea furniture store.

#### Crew Training

During renovation, its future crew could train in Wuhan's southern suburbs. Construction on the mock-up began last year, heralded by drummers and the provincial Communist Party leader, according to a press release from state-owned China Shipbuilding Industry Corp. in Beijing. Two cranes towered above the structure as of last week, visible to farmers across Huangjia Lake fertilizing vegetable plots.

Finkelstein and Ross say they believe China is trying to avoid surprising the world when it inaugurates its carrier program and has allowed the military to make public statements about its plans, even though two people at China Shipbuilding's 701 Institute hung up when called about the project, and the Defense Ministry didn't return fax and e-mail requests for comment.

"This shouldn't be a shock when it happens," Finkelstein says. "The real question is, what are they going to do with these things?"

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