



China's Aircraft Carrier Program

OE Watch Commentary: The *South China Morning Post* recently published a series of articles that piece together the progress and expectations of China's aircraft carrier program. The accompanying excerpts highlight some of the noteworthy points.

Currently, China has two aircraft carriers that are fully operational. The first one, Liaoning, a refitted Soviet Kuznetsov-class vessel, was commissioned into the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy in September 2012. The second aircraft carrier, the Shandong, was commissioned in December 2019.

With each aircraft carrier, we should expect China's level of capability to rise. For example, the Liaoning reportedly carries 24 J-15 fighter jets, while the Shandong, with its higher capacity, is expected to hold up to 40 aircraft (36 J-15 fighter jets, and some Z-9 helicopters and KJ-600 early warning planes).

While the Liaoning is homeported in Qingdao, within China's Northern Theater, the newer Shandong is

expected to be homeported in Sanya, a large naval port on the southern tip of Hainan Dao (Island), within the Southern Theater. However, both carriers are expected to fall under the command of the PLA Navy headquarters, rather than their respective theater commands. In the event of wartime joint operations, the Shandong would likely be placed under the command of Southern Theater Command. Then, in the event of a war surrounding Taiwan, the Liaoning and Shandong would likely join forces to form a dual-carrier battle group to cut off foreign military access (such as from the United States or Japan) to Taiwan.

According to the second report, the formation of a dual-carrier battle group would be a defensive measure and would likely include two Type 055 guided-missile destroyers (the region's most advanced destroyers), four Type 054 frigates, six guided-missile frigates, one supply ship, and three Type 093B nuclear submarines. Hong Kong-based military commentator Song Zhongping argues that for maximum impact within the sea and air domains, the PLA would need to coordinate joint operations between combat units, such as the rocket force, amphibious troops, and other service groups; in addition to forming a dual-carrier battle group.

At least two more aircraft carriers are expected to come about in the foreseeable future. According to the third article, a third aircraft carrier is expected to be more modern than the first two. Construction of that one could reportedly begin as early as 2021. The third and fourth carriers, unlike the first two, will be equipped with electromagnetic catapults to launch jets. While these first four aircraft carriers are conventional carriers, China has also been exploring the possibilities of building more technologically advanced, nuclear powered vessels. **End OE Watch Commentary (Hurst)**



Aircraft Carrier Liaoning in Hong Kong Waters in 2016.

Source: Baycrest via Wikimedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_aircraft_carrier_Liaoning#/media/File:Aircraft_Carrier_Liaoning_CV-16.jpg
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“Together the [Liaoning and Shandong] aircraft carriers would be able to launch nearly 30 carrier-based J-15 fighter jets to target any warplanes from American carrier strike groups, which would effectively reduce the numerical strength [of the American forces].”



Continued: China's Aircraft Carrier Program

Source: Minnie Chan, "First Made-in-China Aircraft Carrier, the Shandong, Officially Enters Service," *South China Morning Post*, 17 December 2019. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3042469/chinas-second-aircraft-shandong-carrier-officially-enters>

First Made-in-China Aircraft Carrier, the Shandong, Officially Enters Service

The ship (Shandong) is a modified version of the Kuznetsov-class design that features upgraded radar and bridge systems and a ski-jump deck for take-offs...The ship will be able to carry 36 J-15 fighter jets compared with the Liaoning's capacity of 24...Beijing-based naval expert Li Jie said that in total the vessel would be able to carry 40 aircraft, including Z-9 helicopters and KJ-600 early warning planes.

Sanya provides easy access to the South China Sea and is the largest naval complex of its kind in Asia...Hong Kong-based military expert Song Zhongping said the Shandong was expected to be stationed in Sanya.

...the two carriers [Liaoning and Shandong] would be under the command of the PLA Navy headquarters, rather than the Northern and Southern Theatre Commands... But...the Shandong "might be placed under the Southern Theatre Command for joint operations in the event of war in the South China Sea."

Source: Minnie Chan, "China's Aircraft Carriers Tipped to Team up to Target Foreign Forces Aiding Taiwan," *South China Morning Post*, 19 December 2019. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3042688/chinas-aircraft-carriers-tipped-team-target-foreign-forces>

China's Aircraft Carriers Tipped to Team up to Target Foreign Forces Aiding Taiwan

China's new aircraft carrier is likely to team up with its sister ship to form a dual-carrier battle group to cut off foreign military access to Taiwan during a war, according to a military magazine and defence specialists.

"[Another major] task of the [battle group's aircraft] is to stop US long-range bombers from taking off from a naval base in Guam. This would be to prevent American aircraft targeting the PLA's landing transport formations and Chinese submarines," ...

In addition to the Liaoning and Shandong, the dual-carrier group will include two Type 055 guided-missile destroyers, the region's most advanced destroyer; four Type 054 frigates; six guided-missile frigates, as well as one supply ship and three Type 093B nuclear submarines, according to the report.

Hong Kong-based military commentator Song Zhongping said a dual-carrier group would help the People's Liberation Army extend its combat range from the coast of mainland China to the air-sea domains around Taiwan.

"However, in order to take supreme advantage in sea and air domains, the PLA needs to coordinate not only the dual-carrier battle group, but also joint operations between different combat units, such as the rocket force, amphibious troops and other service groups."

"Together the two aircraft carriers would be able to launch nearly 30 carrier-based J-15 fighter jets to target any warplanes from American carrier strike groups, which would effectively reduce the numerical strength [of the American forces]," Zhou said.

Source: Minnie Chan, "Chinese Navy Set to Build Fourth Aircraft Carrier, but Plans for a More Advanced Ship are Put on Hold," *South China Morning Post*, 28 November 2019. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3039653/chinese-navy-set-build-fourth-aircraft-carrier-plans-more>

Chinese Navy Set to Build Fourth Aircraft Carrier, but Plans for a More Advanced Ship are Put on Hold

The Chinese navy is moving ahead with plans to build another aircraft carrier, but plans for a fifth have been put on hold for now, according to military insiders...

"China doesn't possess the nuclear technology required, although it has developed many nuclear-powered submarines," said the source, who added that developing a reactor for use on a large warship is more challenging than making one for a submarine.