On 13 March 2012, the deputy commander of China’s navy, Adm. Xu Hongmeng, announced his country’s first operational aircraft carrier would be commissioned by year’s end. The carrier had just finished its fourth set of sea trials, and it initiated its fifth a month later. Referred to at the time as the ex-Varyag (Varangian, after a prominent medieval Russ-Viking tribe), many commentators believed the carrier would ultimately be named after the Manchu admiral who conquered Taiwan in 1683: Shi Lang, but it was commissioned in September 2012 as the Liaoning, after that Chinese province.

Essentially a modification of Russia’s Varyag carrier, the Liaoning displaces approximately 70,000 tons fully loaded and can carry an air wing of up to 35 Russian-built Su-30s along with 18 helicopters. Western commentators believe much of the ship’s internal systems are already obsolescent and its capabilities are inferior to those of America’s nuclear aircraft carriers. Nonetheless, the carrier will elevate the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) into the status of a global naval power. More importantly, the carrier’s potential to project power eclipses that of all other navies in the Far East with the exception of that of the US. That fact brings with it strategic implications that go beyond the ship’s exact capabilities. Given China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea, and its assertion those waters constitute part of its national territory, few Southeast Asian nations will take lightly the Liaoning’s entry into service.

Construction

China’s carrier has been a long time coming, and its creation and deployment haven’t been without opposition inside the regime. Though Mao Tse-tung recognized the value of aircraft carriers, while in power he emphasized massive ground forces. Post-Mao PLAN leaders, however, saw carriers as essential components to their aspirations for a blue-water navy. The problem was finding the money to finance such a multi-ship force, and then developing the industrial and technical base to create and support it. China lacked both those things before Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms began to take hold. With a view to the future, the Communist Party approved the study of carriers and their operations in the early 1980s. They acquired the decommissioned Australian carrier HMAS Melbourne in 1985 and studied it intensely. They also purchased the former-Soviet Vertical Take Off & Landing (VTOL) carriers Kiev and Minsk (though both those ships eventually became amusement park attractions rather than operational naval units). China’s offer to buy the decommissioned French carrier Clemenceau in 1997 came to naught.

Throughout it all, the debate over aircraft carriers’ costs and military utility dominated China’s Communist Party and military media. One school of thought within the navy argued submarines would be the capital ships of the 21st century, while some party leaders pointed out the USSR had collapsed due...
delayed its delivery for nearly three years. The ex-Varyag arrived at China’s Dalian shipyard in 2003 minus its propulsion and combat systems. Beijing purchased the ship’s blueprints from the Ukraine that year for a mere USD 2 million. The ship’s modification and refurbishment began in secret two years later. It’s retained its bow “ski ramps,” and China bought four Russian-made arresting wire landing systems for the ship in 2009. At the time, they didn’t purchase any SS-N-19 anti-ship cruise missiles that would normally equip that class of carrier. Aircraft deployed on such ships are generally fighters for air defense, with missiles providing offensive punch. Helicopters are also normally carried for anti-submarine missions. Selected PLAN Air Force (PLANAF) pilots had been undergoing shipboard training for possible future carrier deployment since 1987. By 2009 the PLAN had a cadre of over 200 graduates from that program, which included experience aboard surface combatants and training with computer simulations for carrier operations.

Work on the ex-Varyag progressed slowly, due to uncertainty about what modifications and equipment would best come to suit PLAN requirements rather than to budgetary or security concerns. The wraps finally came off on 7 June 2011, when Gen. Chen Bingde, the PLA’s chief of the general staff, officially announced China was “building” an aircraft carrier. That announcement was followed, on 13 July, by a Hong Kong television report showing the PLAN training ship AXT-88 tying up at the Dalian Shipyard for the purpose of training the carrier’s commissioning crew. The carrier conducted several sea trials in 2012, all reported as successful.

Exercises & Training

Typically, a crew’s pre-commissioning training and preparation process is 12 to 14 months for a new carrier, followed by another six to eight months of operational “work up” training. Given the PLAN’s inexperience with carrier operations and its lack of carrier-capable aircraft, those time frames will be longer. Nonetheless, the publicity about the carrier is indicative of the ship’s present political importance as a symbol of national pride.

Operationally the Liaoning’s early activities have focused on honing the crew’s skills, especially that of the air wing. As the crew and fleet improve their skills, and the leadership becomes more confident, the carrier’s area of operations will expand. The carrier will also work with the 2nd Artillery Division, which controls China’s strategic and ballistic missile forces, including anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM) units. Also, given the ship’s importance as a national