



## CHINA December 2019

### **The first aircraft carrier quasi Made-in-China**

China commissioned its first home-built aircraft carrier, called Shandong, at the Sanya naval base in Hainan, with President Xi Jinping presiding. It is theoretically China's second aircraft carrier and, according to military analysts is a copy of the first one, the Liaoning, that is a refurbished ship bought from Ukraine (a former Soviet Kuznetsov or Varyag class ship, a mid-1980s design). China's Navy has traditionally remained weak, but in the last few years has strengthened its ability to project some sea power.

The new aircraft carrier displaces around 50.000 metric tons and can reportedly carry up to a maximum of 44 aircraft including Shenyang J-15 multirole fighter jets (a variant of the fourth-generation Russian Sukhoi Su-33 twin-engine air superiority fighter), as well as a mix of rotary wing aircraft, including the multirole Changhe Z-18, the airborne early warning (AEW) Russian Kamov Ka-31 and the Harbin Z-9C helicopters (a licensed navalised variant of the French Eurocopter AS365 Dauphin).

However, unlike the US aircraft carriers that can carry up to 90 aircraft or the French carrier (40 aircraft), both using catapults, Shandong is able to carry today practically only 32 aircraft and has a ski-jumping configuration that take-off and landing operations. China apparently plans to address this problem in the next two aircraft carriers that it will build in the coming years and have advanced catapults.

The US Defense Intelligence Agency in a January 2019 report on China's military power had noted other limitations of the ski-jump configuration including its scarce ability to "operate large, specialized support aircraft, such as an AEW aircraft". There are other weaknesses that compromise China's sea-power but there is no doubt that the progress of its navy has been impressive and is likely to further accelerate in the years to come.

That said it, is important to understand at strategic level two things. Today China has practically one aircraft carrier (the Shandong), because the previous one is in essence a training vessel and as such it is also classified by the PLAN. It means that it has 1/3 of a carrier at a given year's period by an established naval rule of thumb.

Secondly, the best learning curve in history concerning these ships is the one of the US Navy (just 19 years from the first vessel to a serious carrier force in 1941). If one just looks at France, it has taken much more to produce a valuable carrier class on its own i.e. 47 years; the Royal Navy took 23 years. China needed 8 years to produce an updated copy of a foreign design (surely with valuable electronics), but we are still far from a fully autonomous project.

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