East Asia is in many respects the strategic anchor of the entire region in that the vital interests of the world's three most economically powerful states, the U.S., China, and Japan intersect. . . . [I]t is in East Asia that continued American supremacy, the rise of China and corresponding Japanese anxiety—all fuelled by a range of national pathologies, painful historical memories, unresolved territorial and maritime disputes—have the potential to collide.[1]

—Dr. Michael Evans
Australian Defence College

American, Australian, Canadian, French, and Japanese vessels transit Pacific Ocean during exercise Rim of the Pacific 2010

U.S. Navy (James Mitchell)

Harmonious Ocean?

Chinese Aircraft Carriers and the Australia-U.S. Alliance

By **JOHN FREWEN**

Brigadier General John Frewen, Australian Army, wrote this essay while a student at the U.S. Army War College. It won the 2010 Secretary of Defense National Security Essay Competition.

In March 2009, China's Defense Minister, Liang Guanglie, announced that China planned to equip the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) with two conventional aircraft carriers by 2015.[2] China has not previously pursued this capability formally. Unconfirmed media reports suggest that China will possibly also seek two additional nuclear-powered carriers by 2020. China justifies the procurement of carriers as logical for a nation of its size and economic influence, and necessary to defend its interests.[3] For the Chinese people, carriers will be the jewels in the crown of a powerful navy, one befitting China's rising great nation status.

Having shaken off subjugation by foreign powers during the 18th and 19th centuries, China is moving rapidly toward the center of the international stage. After 30 years of remarkable economic growth and a reshaping of the world's economic landscape in its favor, China is poised to step into a new, possibly global, era.[4] Proud of its culture, traditions, and rising international status, China views the next 15 to 20 years as a "strategic window of opportunity"—a time for "national revitalization through continued economic, social and military development."[5]

China's emerging role in global affairs is, as yet, uncertain. The nation has unresolved historical and domestic issues that color its strategic judgments and make its intentions difficult to predict. It is also possible that China is growing and changing in ways the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) cannot control or predict. Accompanying rapid economic growth are burgeoning maritime trade and energy requirements, a growing middle class, and an increase in nationalism.[6] In addition to these challenges, the CCP faces domestic poverty, rising unemployment, criticism of its own performance, a leadership transition in 2012, and a range of separatist movements.

Of all of these, the CCP's uneasy social contract with its increasingly affluent middle class is most notable.[7] If the CCP is to retain its one-party rule, it must continue to deliver increasing prosperity and individual convenience, in part by ensuring China's access to trade and resources, particularly oil. Chinese strategists are acutely aware that they could do little in response if the United States chose tomorrow to constrict China's maritime access to oil, minerals, and markets.[8] China's concern for its strategic sea lanes, and a sense that great nations have great navies, has drawn it to a carrier force of its own.[9]

The appearance of the first Chinese aircraft carrier in the Pacific will resonate throughout the region and change the current dynamic. In Australia's case, the carriers present a particular conundrum. Australia's defense and security policy has been underpinned by its traditional friendship and alliance with the United States since World War II. However, since 2007, China has become Australia's primary trading partner.[10] Any future tensions or conflict between the United States and China in the Pacific could place Australia in a potentially invidious position—torn between security and trade.

This article discusses what Chinese carriers might mean to the Asia-Pacific region and the implications for Australia's longstanding alliance with the United States, particularly in the event of escalating U.S.-China maritime tensions. Short of open conflict, the greatest risk presented by Chinese carriers is a self-fulfilling prophecy of a U.S.-China cold war. If conflict rather than accommodation is to mark China's rise, Australia must weigh the relative benefits of its U.S. alliance against other alternatives—such as neutrality or defense self-sufficiency—before being caught in a conflict contrary to its long-term national interests.

Background

Uncontested U.S. primacy in the Asia-Pacific has been a source of great stability for over half a century. For instance, between July 1995 and March 1996, the deployment of two U.S. carrier battlegroups to the South China Sea defused escalating tensions between China and Taiwan. At the time, the role of the carrier groups in the standoff infuriated the Chinese. This response, and U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry's boast that "while the Chinese are a great military power, the premier—the strongest—military power in the Western Pacific is the United States,"[11] contributed to a long-term Chinese determination to counter overwhelming U.S. maritime might.

The People's Republic of China began a military modernization program in the 1990s to develop the ability to fight "local wars under modern, high-tech conditions."[12] This process accelerated following the intervention of U.S. carriers regarding Taiwan. A study of U.S. tactics in the first Gulf War, and the role of U.S. carriers in the Taiwan dispute, overturned the PLAN's longstanding preference for submarine forces that, until then, had been more prominent in China's naval development.[13] China has since undertaken a range of activities to develop a carrier capability.

In 1992, the CCP authorized a program to study the development of a carrier. The PLAN subsequently acquired four retired aircraft carriers for research purposes (including the former Australian HMAS *Melbourne*). Another of these four, a former Soviet *Kuznetsov*-class carrier, the *Varyag*, has been refitted in China's Dalian shipyards to "operational" status as a training carrier. It is likely that the PLAN's next step will be to produce a medium-sized carrier (40,000–60,000 displaced tons) capable of handling conventional takeoff and landing or vertical/short takeoff and landing aircraft.[14]

short of open conflict, the greatest risk presented by Chinese carriers is a self-fulfilling prophecy of a U.S.-China cold war

Although China's shipbuilding industry faces significant challenges in producing carriers, it could deliver a moderately effective indigenous aircraft carrier within a decade.[15] However, it will take China longer than that to acquire a sophisticated and mature carrier capability comparable to U.S. equivalents. This will require advanced technologies, command and control systems, aviation abilities, and ship defenses that will take years to perfect—and training personnel will take time.[16] It is unlikely that China could surpass U.S. technological and naval dominance in any broad sense for decades.[17] Therefore, the region has the opportunity, albeit a fleeting one, to prepare for the impact of Chinese carriers.

The Geopolitical Reality

China shares borders with 14 countries and has ongoing maritime disputes with a number of them. China's dispute with the United States over Taiwan is ongoing, as are standoffs with Japan, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines over the Spratly Islands archipelago (which straddles international shipping lanes through the South China Sea) and other contested territories.[18]

China also faces internal secessionist movements in Tibet and from the Uighurs (the

East Turkestan Islamic Movement) in Xinjiang. Each of these attracts international criticism of Beijing's human rights record. China is highly sensitive to foreign criticism and interference, and is disgruntled with neighbors who have sought to resolve territorial disputes through international bodies such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) or the United Nations (UN).

China's massive economy and domestic affluence depend on foreign trade and a sure supply of energy. Accordingly, energy security and trade are China's paramount maritime concerns. Maintaining a huge merchant marine fleet, and ensuring its freedom of access and security, will be an ongoing challenge. Satisfying exponentially rising energy demands in parallel with other burgeoning economies such as India and Brazil will be another.

Chinese President Hu Jintao has bemoaned China's "Malacca dilemma," which consists of up to 40 percent of its imported oil passing through these straits without a concomitant ability to ensure free passage.[19] In response, the government has adopted a "string of pearls" strategy for the Indian Ocean to reduce reliance on the Malacca Straits. This consists of ports, bases, and facilities in friendly countries designed to transport oil and other energy resources via roads and pipelines from the Indian Ocean into China.[20] Carriers will be a reassuring capability for the Chinese in this context but one of concern for other nations.

The sheer size of China's population, markets, and economy makes it a source of immense potential prosperity for many regional nations. These nations have a large stake in China's peaceful rise, just as China has a vested interest in maintaining the conditions that have supported its rise—including the stable international order created by U.S. security efforts over recent decades. Economic interdependence can be a positive and stabilizing influence if China continues to need the world as much as the world needs it. However, Beijing's suspicions of U.S. motivations and resistance to formal security arrangements create an unnerving perception of Chinese monolithic unilateralism.

The Asia-Pacific has no binding identity comparable to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Each Asia-Pacific nation has unique circumstances and interests, and it is not possible to define a regional perspective.[21] Five U.S. defense allies (Australia, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines) and close partner Singapore remain committed to Washington as the guarantor of regional security. What has changed is that China has supplanted the United States economically as the major trading partner of each of these nations.

These countries now face what Michael Evans describes as an "economic-strategic dissonance" whereby their economic prosperity is linked to continuing Chinese growth but is underwritten by the United States balancing China's rise.[22] None of these nations wants Beijing to become too strong or too weak. An assertive China is a cause for concern, yet so is a floundering China that inadvertently exports its instability. In essence, China's rise is making the United States more relevant, not less, and there is little risk of U.S. influence waning in the region. But Chinese carriers could change perceptions of American regional preeminence.

Notwithstanding the financial and technological challenges ahead, acquisition of a substantive carrier capability appears inevitable. China aims to avoid the mistakes of earlier rising powers such as Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, which staked claims to global leadership and directly challenged the dominant powers of the time. Instead, China is seeking to shape the global rules, norms, and institutions that may affect its economic future. Accordingly, one of its foreign policy objectives is to reassure other countries that its rise does not threaten their economic or security interests.[23] This will be difficult to achieve within the current CCP context of introversion, sensitivity, and intrigue.[24]

China's rise is making the United States more relevant, not less, and there is little risk of U.S. influence waning in the region

What Do Chinese Carriers Signify?

Despite President Hu's assurance that for "now and in the future, China would never seek hegemony, nor would it turn to military expansion or arms races with other nations,"[25] the carriers will be an unsettling symbol of China's growing military might for nations in the Asia-Pacific. Carriers represent military power projection in the purest sense, and seem incongruous with China's professed policy of noninterference in the affairs of other states.

The carriers will compound existing regional concerns about China's lack of transparency in governmental processes, including uncertainty about the role of its military in policymaking and the increasing use of "soft power" diplomacy to expand global influence. Australia's 2009 Defence White Paper called on China to "do more" to explain why its military modernization appears beyond the scope required for a conflict over Taiwan.[26] At best, uncertainty "dominates the circumstances of China's economic rise."[27]

Chinese leaders argue that their country "is totally transparent in strategic intentions"[28] and that the United States maintains a Cold War mentality with respect to China. The United States insists on the right of military aircraft to operate 12 nautical miles from China's coastline in defiance of China's stated 200-nautical-mile exclusion zone (the same distance the United States and Russia maintained off each other's coasts during the Cold War). This has created overt animosity between the U.S. Navy and PLAN for over a decade. Future incidents are likely to be exacerbated by the intervention of a Chinese carrier group.

In a practical sense, 2 or even 4 Chinese carriers would not alter the overwhelming military advantage maintained by the U.S. Navy's 11 sophisticated carrier battlegroups. The U.S. experience is that it takes three carriers to maintain one ready for sea. In this light, it will be many years before the PLAN could hope to generate a consistent carrier presence. Others argue that the U.S. Armed Forces will maintain their qualitative military and technological edge, particularly in space, and Chinese carriers will merely become additional targets for U.S. aircraft and cruise missiles.

China is, therefore, also pursuing complementary technological and asymmetric capabilities that could counter or neutralize overwhelming U.S. military advantages. These capabilities, often generically referred to as the "Assassin's Mace" [29] reportedly include antiship cruise missiles, antisatellite missiles, and stealth, nano-, and cyber-warfare technologies. The successful Chinese test of an antisatellite missile in January 2007

and the potential for mysterious Chinese capabilities fuel concerns about Beijing's strategic intentions.

Some believe these technologies are beyond China's immediate reach or that they can be defeated by emerging U.S. capabilities. Others portend a "technological Pearl Harbor" (consistent with a Chinese strategic culture that values surprise and deception) in which U.S. command systems are paralyzed or a major platform is destroyed by potent secret weapons.[30] On balance, it is reasonable to assume that China is seeking capability advantages, as do all military powers, but as yet it has not exhibited any aggressive intent.

U.S. Navy (Mark R. Alvarez)

USS *Essex* and USS *Denver* operate with Philippine navy ship BRP *Dagupan City* in South China Sea during exercise Balikatan 2010

What Will Chinese Carriers Do?

In 2004, President Hu expanded the PLAN role to include "safeguarding China's expanding national interests and ensuring world peace."[31] This extended the PLAN focus beyond Taiwan and maritime sovereignty toward protection of China's increasingly important international sea lines of communication. China's role in recent years in international institutions, including supporting UN Security Council resolutions (a shift from the previously strict belief in noninterference in the internal affairs of states) and participation in coalition counterpiracy operations off the coast of Somalia, supports this intent.

Major General Qian Lihua, director of the Defense Ministry's foreign affairs office, stated, "The question is not whether you have an aircraft carrier, but what you do with your aircraft carrier."[32] He added, "Unlike another country, we will not use [a carrier] to pursue global deployment or global reach." Instead, he described a carrier's purpose as offshore defense.[33] However, there is little utility for carriers in sea denial of China's coastal areas or in a direct role in an operation to seize Taiwan, as airpower can be projected from the mainland.

The real utility of carriers is providing air cover for forces conducting sea control and sea denial away from China's shores and outside the range of its land-based air defense. In this context, "PLAN officers speak of developing three oceangoing fleets, one to patrol the areas around Korea and Japan, another to push out to the Western Pacific and a third to protect the Indian Ocean and the Straits of Malacca."[34] Chinese carriers could detect and interdict forces in the Pacific Ocean, ensure sea passage through the Malacca Straits, or protect string-of-pearls bases across the length of China's strategic sea supply routes into the Indian Ocean.

The high risk of losing a carrier to U.S. weapons or provoking an escalating American or regional response (including a nuclear one) makes an aggressive carrier posture unlikely. However, it is possible that a Chinese carrier group could deter or delay an intervention by U.S. carrier groups, or apply pressure during a standoff or negotiation, while avoiding direct confrontation. It is also conceivable, in a conventional sense, that China could achieve some form of limited local sea dominance against U.S. or coalition naval forces, or win a localized, short, high-intensity naval engagement for strategic advantage. In these circumstances, Chinese carriers would challenge the perception of U.S. maritime dominance in the Pacific.

Carriers also offer the CCP the means to posture in ways not available to them at present. Carriers could be used with economic and cultural tools to persuade and coerce, such as protecting blockading ships from air, surface, and subsurface threats. Furthermore, a carrier might play "smart power" roles, such as evacuation operations in support of China's immense international diasporas or humanitarian interventions.

In one sense, a carrier group may present China with a "Great Red Fleet" to extend influence and authority in a manner reminiscent of President Theodore Roosevelt's Great White Fleet of 1907–1909. At a minimum, the carriers herald an increasing presence in the Pacific that will require accommodation by the United States and other regional nations. Short of the unlikely event of open conflict, Chinese carriers will be as much about perceptions as tactical effect, and will complicate the strategic calculations of others.

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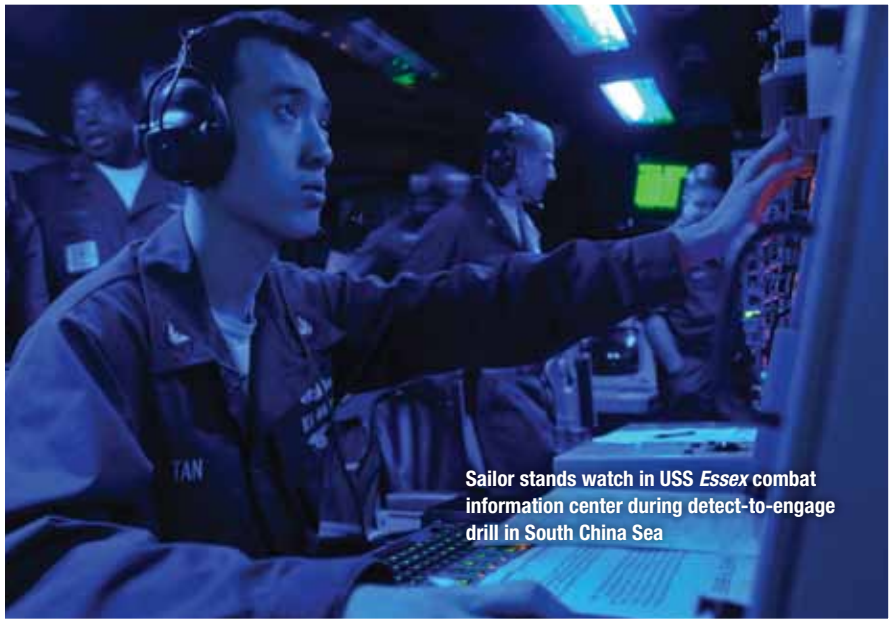
The Risks of Chinese Carriers

In 2008, a Chinese admiral offered the commander of U.S. Pacific Command a division of the Pacific Ocean between their two countries once China had carriers.[35] In 2009, China hardened its position on the Spratly Islands, pushing for bilateral rather than international resolution of the territorial disputes. Both stances indicate China's growing diplomatic confidence and a determination to avoid checking of its strategic intentions.

The United States is wary of Chinese military intentions in the Asia-Pacific and conscious of regional nations' unease. Militarily speaking, China's procurement of antiaccess and area-denial weapons is of the most concern. Strategically, there is a risk for the United States that regional nations might shift from U.S.-China fence-sitting to "bandwagoning" with China. As Australian strategist Hugh White asserts, "As the British discovered and as the Chinese discovered, once you lose economic primacy, strategic primacy follows pretty quickly."[36]

Washington's policy will remain a key variable for the region, and its responses to Chinese carriers will be closely watched. The region will act with confidence if the United States remains economically significant and a security guarantor. It could become unsettled if the United States is perceived as inadequately committed or if it engages China insensitively. At worst, an ambiguous U.S. response could trigger a militarily resurgent Japan or accelerate the current widespread regional naval modernization into a maritime arms race.

U.S. Air Force (Bradley Lail)



Sailor stands watch in USS *Essex* combat information center during detect-to-engage drill in South China Sea

In 2007, the U.S. Pacific Fleet for the first time had more ships assigned to it than the Atlantic Fleet.[37] While this is a prudent military contingency response, and reassuring to allies, it could conversely be perceived by China as an aggressive U.S. containment policy, thereby hardening Beijing's competitive resolve and potentially provoking an antagonistic strategic response—increasing the likelihood of tensions between the PLAN and the U.S. Navy. The correct balance will remain difficult to find.

While outright Chinese aggression appears unlikely in the next decade or so, Chinese carriers operating in the South China Sea and the Pacific will encounter ships from Australia, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, and the United States.[38] These nations have competing interests and maintain surveillance on each others' activities. The new carriers would increase suspicion and amplify tensions.

A series of attempts to build confidence and develop Chinese and American bilateral agreements have met with little success. None has delivered enduring or effective means of managing crises between the two countries.[39] Some are concerned that no "Incident at Sea"–type of agreement exists between the United States and China, as existed to defuse tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union from 1972. Whether future naval tensions arise from longstanding disputes, from CCP exploitation of nationalistic sentiments, or from some apparently trivial event, a Chinese carrier group could raise the stakes (and emotions) and increase the possibility of an incident escalating unintentionally.

The unintended consequences of Chinese carriers pose the greatest threat to regional harmony in the decades ahead. Without an agreement to moderate sea incidents, it may be impossible to realize a "harmonious ocean" between a Chinese carrier-capable navy and other regional navies in the South China Sea and Pacific.[40]

The Australian Context

Australia shifted its security reliance from Great Britain to the United States after the sinking of HMS *Repulse* and HMS *Prince of Wales* on December 10, 1941, just days after Pearl Harbor. A lack of air cover and arguably the absence of a carrier permitted this catastrophe. The loss of these two British ships effectively destroyed Singapore's naval protection, just when Australia feared a Japanese attack if Singapore fell. This shook Australia and exposed Britain's inadequate commitment to defending its former colony. Ever since, Australia has looked to the United States as its principal security ally.

Cultural ties with and a debt of gratitude to the United States run deep in Australia. The Australia, New Zealand, and U.S. Security Treaty of 1951 is a military alliance on defense matters in the Pacific region. It binds Australia and the United States to common defense in the event of an attack on either country. The treaty has dominated Australian strategic thought since World War II and has, in effect, allowed Australia to forsake a strategy of defense self-sufficiency. Canberra has faithfully supported U.S. security endeavors from Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan, and benefited by maintaining a relatively small, albeit professional, defense force.

Once a British colonial outpost, Australia has gradually drawn closer to Asia in population composition and economic focus. At present, Japan and China are Australia's major export markets, and it actively seeks a closer relationship with regional organizations such as ASEAN. Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was the first Western leader fluent in Mandarin. Regardless, recent Australian-Sino relations have been mixed, largely due to Chinese resentment over Australian rules for foreign investment and the tone of Australia's 2009 Defence White Paper, which sets out strategy and military spending priorities until 2030.

The White Paper identifies China's rise as a challenge but falls short of describing it as a direct threat. However, the inference is not difficult to draw, as the paper cautions China that the "pace, scope and structure" of its military buildup appears "beyond that required for a conflict over Taiwan" and cause for regional concern in the absence of further explanation.[41] The paper also announces a surprising addition of 12 submarines, effectively doubling the presently undermanned Australian fleet.[42] No precise role is offered for these submarines other than "sea control including freedom of navigation and the protection of shipping."[43]

These submarines appear intended to deny the maritime approaches to Australia, to protect Australian trade routes and shipping, and, if required, to contribute usefully

to a U.S.-led coalition against a maritime force. The tenor of the White Paper and the submarine fleet expansion angered China while underscoring the enduring centrality of the Australia-U.S. alliance. Former Prime Minister Rudd had further reinforced Australia's ongoing security reliance on the United States by describing China as a partner and the United States as a strategic ally.

Australia's conundrum is now two-fold: how to avoid U.S. policy drawing China (and by default Australia) into conflict, and how to accommodate Chinese interests without undermining the U.S. alliance. An additional challenge is moderating Australian coordination with the United States to avoid losing an independent voice with China.

In the event of escalating U.S.-China tensions, Australia could assume different roles. One is trusted middleman, working to achieve accommodation over conflict between the two great powers. Australia's close historical and cultural relationship with the United States and its growing independent trade and regional ties with China have it uniquely placed to mediate if U.S.-China relations should sour to the point of an incommunicative posture. Evidence of the developing strength of Australia's relationship was recently seen in Chinese Vice Premier Li Keqiang lavishing "extraordinary praise" on Australia as a partner and friend during a visit in October 2009, despite the recent frictions.[44]

Alternatively, Australia could become marginalized as tensions rise, losing the ear of both nations, particularly if it is perceived as militarily irrelevant or a military minion of the United States. Australia requires a sufficiently independent defense policy and an effective level of military deterrence to retain Chinese respect. At present, Australia does not maintain adequate deterrent capability against a nation of China's might without U.S. backing and will remain dependent on support from U.S. capabilities until at least 2030 under the financial constraints of the current White Paper. True defense self-sufficiency poses significant challenges to Australian policymakers.

At worst, Australia could be martyred in a U.S.-China conflict if it honors its alliance with the United States but finds its military capacity seriously degraded and its trade with China suspended. Australia lacks strategic depth in its major platforms and relies on a technological advantage over other regional powers to deter or defend against attack. Being drawn into a conventional force-on-force conflict at sea could be devastating to the Royal Australian Navy. A major Chinese strike (possibly even nuclear) against U.S. installations on Australian soil would be a momentous political test for any Australian government, and it would be beyond Australia's capacity to retaliate decisively. Such a predicament would be compounded if U.S. maritime dominance fell into question as Australia was trying to regenerate major capabilities.

In this regard, the recent Defence White Paper has been criticized as ambiguous by several foreign policy commentators.[45] Hugh White has accused it of deferring the "hard decisions" of how to respond to China's rise, and of failing to account for how an eclipse of U.S. primacy might reshape Australia's strategic objectives and operational capabilities. His concern is that self-reliance is not realistically considered, nor are preparations adequate for escalating tensions between the United States and China. Of course, budgetary considerations have guided Australia's present strategy.

former Prime Minister Rudd had further reinforced Australia's ongoing security reliance on the United States by describing China as a partner and the United States as a strategic ally

White asked, "Do we stay with the U.S. as it becomes drawn deeper into a competitive relationship with China? I think the answer is quite probably not."[46] His answer is heretical to many, suggesting the almost unthinkable: that Australia might remain neutral—or perhaps even side with China—if a conflict with the United States were to emerge. While this possibility seems remote in the current political context, other regional nations may choose to take that path (particularly if it is paved with Chinese largesse). In these circumstances, either neutrality or an alternative alliance offers other options for Australia.

An alliance with another regional nation such as Japan or possibly India might support a neutral stance but could still result in Australia being drawn into a broadening U.S.-China conflict. A new alliance would also struggle to replicate the trust and surety associated with the well-tested U.S. alliance, at least for many decades. Australian full neutrality could not be considered without actual defense self-reliance.

Australia's 2009 Defence White Paper notes that U.S. nuclear protection has removed the need for Australia to consider more "significant and expensive defense options."[47] Although not named, these options could include aircraft carriers and nuclear weapons. Australia relinquished its carrier capability (HMAS *Melbourne*) in 1982 and has never pursued nuclear weapons. There is currently no Australian intention or public debate to acquire either. These capability options could require prominent consideration if China becomes militarily aggressive or the United States signals a withdrawal from the Pacific.

Australia is well positioned to act as middleman during rising tensions between China and the United States despite the risk of marginalization. It should reinforce its status as a trusted interlocutor and valued independent agent (as evidenced by its regional leadership roles in East Timor and Solomon Islands) and continue to play a leading regional role in encouraging Chinese transparency. Australia can also champion an Incident at Sea–style agreement between China and other regional nations while continuing to develop military capabilities useful to both U.S.-led coalitions and regional security more broadly.

In the event of an open conflict between China and the United States, Australia lacks the ability to provide air cover to a maritime force deployed away from its shores and has no independently credible deterrent to a major power, in isolation from the U.S. alliance. To mitigate these risks, Australia requires a more thorough consideration of the underpinnings of defense self-sufficiency, including a carrier capability and nuclear deterrence.

Announcements about China's carrier intentions are the latest manifestation of a growing military and maritime capability that is difficult to interpret but impossible to ignore. As ever, China remains enigmatic. What is certain is that the CCP faces a complex set of challenges to maintain China's rise, meet its growing trade and energy requirements, and retain political power. China's expanding interests, and its aircraft carriers, will unavoidably affect Australia's

strategic circumstances in the coming decades. Notwithstanding the military capabilities that carriers will afford China, miscalculations or misunderstandings from incidents at sea are the most significant threat to the peaceful inclusion of a carrier-capable Chinese navy in the Pacific.

Each of the Pacific nations will manage China's carrier ambitions differently, but the U.S. response will set the regional tone. For Australia, the choices include retaining U.S. security dependence, thereby risking a form of martyrdom, or pursuing greater defense self-sufficiency. The debate about genuine self-sufficiency has not been held in any substantial sense. Therefore, by default, the U.S. alliance will retain its primacy in Canberra's strategic thought, and Australian military capabilities will evolve in accordance with the intent of the 2009 Defence White Paper—at least until the time that Chinese carriers are likely to appear.

Despite any good intentions, it appears unlikely that Chinese aircraft carriers could enhance harmony in the Pacific Ocean. There are still at least 5 years before China's carriers appear on the horizon of its Pacific neighbors. Australia must consider not only the military implication of these carriers but also the perceptions they will create in terms of relative U.S.-China preeminence. It is best that this thinking is done before the carriers materialize in the Pacific. Developing an understanding of the regional perceptions of Chinese carriers will be important to achieving accommodation rather than conflict and to maintaining stability and confidence in the Asia-Pacific. **JFQ**

NOTES

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[23] Medeiros, 251–252.

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[27] Evans, 1.

[28] Major General Qian Lihua, director of the Defence Ministry's Foreign Affairs Office, quoted in "Army Leader to Tour U.S. Military Sites," *China Daily*, October 24, 2009.

[29] Commentaries on *Assassin's Mace* range from dismissive to fearful. Moderates portray the term as overused and comparable to that of *silver bullet* in English. See Alastair Iain Johnston, "Toward Contextualizing the Concept of a Shashoujian (Assassin's Mace)," August 2002, available at <www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~johnston/shashoujian.pdf>.

[30] See David Lei, "China's New Multi-Faceted Maritime Strategy," *Orbis* 52, no. 1 (Winter 2008), 3.

[31] Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), *The People's Liberation Navy: A Modern Navy with Chinese Characteristics* (Washington, DC: ONI, July 2009), 9.

[32] Erickson and Wilson, 28.

[33] "China Hints at Aircraft Carrier Project," *The Financial Times*, November 16, 2008.

[34] Lei, 3.

[35] In 2008, Admiral Timothy Keating, commander of U.S. Pacific Command, reported a conversation, seemingly in jest, in which a senior Chinese naval officer suggested drawing a line down the middle of the Pacific: "You guys can have the east part of the Pacific, Hawaii to the states. We'll take the west part of the Pacific, from Hawaii to China." Discussed in Friedberg and Ross.

[36] Patrick O'Connor, "Australia: Former Labor PM Keating denounces Rudd government's 'isolationist' stance on China," July 10, 2009, available at <www.wsws.org/articles/2009/jul2009/keat-j10.shtml>.

[37] Peter Brookes, "Flashpoint: The Great Wall Goes to Sea," *Armed Forces Journal Online*, available at <www.armedforcesjournal.com/2009/07/4118579>.

[38] Weitz, 394.

[39] Ibid., 382–387.

[40] See Andrew Scobell, "Is There a Civil-Military Gap in China's Peaceful Rise?" *Parameters* 39, no. 2 (Summer 2009), 19.

[41] *Defending Australia*, 34.

[42] Ibid., 70.

[43] Ibid., 60.

[44] See Rowan Callick, "China Push to Heal Rift in Ties," *The Australian*, October 31, 2009.

[45] O'Connor.

[46] Ibid.

[47] *Defending Australia*, 50.