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China Shows Off an Aircraft Carrier but Experts Are Skeptical

By JANE PERLEZ

BEIJING — In a ceremony attended by the country's top leaders, [China](#) put its first aircraft carrier into service on Tuesday, a move intended to signal its growing military might as tensions escalate between Beijing and its neighbors over islands in nearby seas.

Officials said the carrier, a discarded vessel bought from Ukraine in 1998 and refurbished by China, would protect national sovereignty, an issue that has become a touchstone of the government's dispute with [Japan](#) over ownership of islands in the East China Sea.

But despite the triumphant tone of the launch, which was watched by President [Hu Jintao](#) and Prime Minister [Wen Jiabao](#), and despite rousing assessments by Chinese military experts about the importance of the carrier, the vessel will be used only for training and testing for the foreseeable future.

The mark "16" emblazoned on the carrier's side indicates that it is limited to training, Chinese and other military experts said. China does not have planes capable of landing on the carrier and so far training for such landings has been carried out on land, they said.

Even so, the public appearance of the carrier at the northeastern port of Dalian was used as an occasion to stir patriotic feelings, which have run at fever pitch in the last 10 days over the dispute between China and Japan over the East China Sea islands, called Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China.

The carrier will "raise the overall operational strength of the Chinese Navy" and help China "to effectively protect national sovereignty, security and development interests," the Ministry of Defense said.

The Communist Party congress that will begin the country's once-in-a-decade leadership transition is expected to be held next month, and the public unveiling of the carrier appeared to be part of an effort to forge national unity ahead of the event.

For international purposes, the public unveiling of the carrier seemed intended to signal to smaller nations in the South China Sea, including the Philippines, an American ally, that China has an increasing number of impressive assets to deploy.

American military planners have played down the significance of the commissioning of the carrier. Some Navy officials have even said they would encourage China to move ahead with building its own aircraft carrier and the ships to accompany it, because it would be a waste of money.

Other military experts outside China have agreed with that assessment.

“The fact is the aircraft carrier is useless for the Chinese Navy,” You Ji, a visiting senior research fellow at the National University of Singapore, said in an interview. “If it is used against America, it has no survivability. If it is used against China’s neighbors, it’s a sign of bullying.”

Vietnam, a neighbor with whom China has fought wars, operates land-based Russian Su-30 aircraft that could pose a threat to the aircraft carrier, Mr. You said. “In the South China Sea, if the carrier is damaged by the Vietnamese, it’s a huge loss of face,” he said. “It’s not worth it.”

Up to now, Chinese pilots have been limited to practicing simulated carrier landings on concrete strips on land in Chinese J-8 aircraft based on Soviet-made MiG-23s produced about 25 years ago, Mr. You said. The pilots could not undertake the difficult maneuver of landing on a moving carrier because China does not yet have suitable aircraft, Mr. You said.

The question of whether China will move ahead and build its own carrier depends in large part, he said, on whether China can develop aircraft to land on one. “It’s a long, long process for constructing such aircraft,” he said.

In contrast to some of the skepticism expressed by military experts outside China, Li Jie, a researcher at the Chinese Naval Research Institute, said in an interview in the state-run People’s Daily that the carrier would change the Chinese Navy’s traditional mind-set and bring qualitative changes to its operational style and structure, he said.

Although the Chinese military does not publish a breakdown of its military spending, foreign military experts say the navy is less well financed than the army and air force.

Bree Feng contributed research.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: September 25, 2012

An earlier version of this article misstated the name of the aircraft that Vietnam operates that could pose a threat to the Chinese aircraft carrier. It is the Su-30, not the Su-230.