

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Published on *The National Interest* (<http://nationalinterest.org>)

Source URL (retrieved on Aug 11, 2011): <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/explaining-aircraft-carriers-5753>

Explaining Aircraft Carriers

| [More](#)^[1]

|
August 11, 2011

[Justin Logan](#)^[2]

Yesterday, State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland made [the following comment](#)^[3] regarding China's [maiden voyage](#)^[4] in the old [Varyag](#)^[5] carcass it has been tinkering with for over a decade:

We would welcome any kind of explanation that China would like to give for needing this kind of equipment.

This echoes Donald Rumsfeld's remarks at the 2005 Shangri-La Dialogue in which he puzzled [in quintessentially Rumsfeldian fashion](#)^[6]:

Since no nation threatens China, one must wonder:

- * Why this growing investment?
- * Why these continuing large and expanding arms purchases?
- * Why these continuing robust deployments?

Maybe, like me, the Chinese are reading [Aaron Friedberg's new book on U.S.-China security competition](#)^[7] (Friedberg worked on Asia for Vice President Cheney). Perhaps high-ranking military officials there shudder a bit when they read, on page 184, that someone very close to the levers of power in Washington admits mildly that

Stripped of diplomatic niceties, the ultimate aim of the American strategy is to hasten a revolution, albeit a peaceful one, that will sweep away China's one-party authoritarian state and leave a liberal democracy in its place.

Given this, as Friedberg sensibly notes later (p. 231),

It is difficult to believe that the present Beijing regime will accept indefinitely a situation in which its fate could depend on American forbearance, and hard to see how it can escape that condition without building a much bigger and more capable

navy.

I actually agree with David Axe's characterization of the *Shi Lang* as “a piece of junk ^[8],” and given the geography of the region, I wouldn't—as the Chinese aren't—pour many resources into aircraft carriers to remedy this predicament. But if the roles were reversed, and China spent four times as much as we did on our military—and if China had naval bases ringing my coastline and fancied itself the “hub” of a “hub-and-spokes” set of alliances between itself and a variety of Latin American countries and Canada—I'd probably think that these facts, when assembled, constituted a pretty strong argument for spending more money on anything I could use to defend myself. Especially if China had recently gone on an ideological rampage trying to “hasten revolutions” and leaving smoldering wreckages in its wake.

At any rate, what's good for the goose ought to be good for the gander, so I anxiously await the Pentagon's detailed explanation for why we need each of our 11 aircraft carriers, every one of which is enormously more powerful than the PRC's puny flattop.

More by

Source URL (retrieved on Aug 11, 2011): <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/explaining-aircraft-carriers-5753>

Links:

[1] <http://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=250&username=nationalinterest>

[2] <http://nationalinterest.org/profile/justin-logan>

[3] <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2011/08/170349.htm>

[4] <http://www.theatlanticwire.com/global/2011/08/chinese-media-says-its-first-aircraft-carrier-ready/40607/>

[5] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet_aircraft_carrier_Varyag

[6] <http://www.iiss.org/conferences/the-shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-archive/shangri-la-dialogue-2005/2005-speeches/first-plenary-session-the-hon-donald-rumsfeld>

[7] <http://www.amazon.com/Contest-Supremacy-America-Struggle-Mastery/dp/0393068285>

[8] <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2011/06/relax-chinas-first-aircraft-carrier-is-a-piece-of-junk/all/1>