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China's Second Aircraft Carrier Undertakes 9th Sea Trial

China's first domestically built aircraft carrier designated 'Type 001A' sailed through the Taiwan Strait on 17 November 2019 and headed into the South China Sea for its ninth sea trial sortie. The spokesman for the PLA Navy reported that the sailing is part of "equipment tests and routine training".



According to reports, Taiwan scrambled ships and jets to monitor the Type 001A carrier. In addition, the Chinese carrier was followed by two other warships as it sailed through the Taiwan Strait. One was the US Navy's guided-missile destroyer *USS Wayne E. Meyer*, and the other was the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force's guided-missile destroyer *Shimakaze*.

The Type 001A is a first-generation Chinese aircraft carrier. It was launched on 26 April 2017 for the People's Liberation Army Navy. It is China's second aircraft carrier, after the *Liaoning*, but the first built domestically. The Type 001A's design is largely based on the *Liaoning*. The *Liaoning* was itself built from the partially complete hull of the Soviet Kuznetsov-class aircraft carrier *Varyag*. The Type 001A measures about 315 metres long, has a displacement of about 55,000 tonnes (70,000 loaded), and is expected to be commissioned shortly. China will have three operational aircraft carriers by 2030. Even as it acquires these carriers, China is also concentrating on building up offensive capabilities including ballistic missiles, anti-satellite weapons, drones, and hypersonic weapons to threaten and neutralise US carriers and satellites that support informationalised warfare.



Hong Kong Protests Become Violent

Hong Kong has been smouldering since the June 2019 introduction of a bill that sought to empower the authorities to extradite residents accused of crime in Mainland China to Mainland China. Although the bill has been withdrawn, mass protests have continued and intensified in recent days. Protestors have not only become more violent but, in an unexpected turn of events, have turned university campuses into battlegrounds. In particular, the Hong Kong Polytechnic

University has become a kind of battle zone. A related significant development is troops from the PLA's Hong Kong garrison "voluntarily" coming out, in civilian clothes, to help residents clean up the debris. China appears to be in a dilemma regarding the use of force to quell the protests. Crushing the protests on the lines of the action taken in Tiananmen Square in 1989 would be costly in terms of international opprobrium and potential economic sanctions at a time when China is grappling with a slowdown and trade and economic friction with the United States. In this regard, the US House of Representatives has already initiated a move that could have serious consequences for China by near unanimously passing the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act. China has condemned this move. If President Trump decides to sign the Act into law, the US government would have to annually confirm that China continues to maintain basic freedoms in Hong Kong. A failure to confirm this would result in the US withdrawing Hong Kong's special trading status, which would constitute a massive blow to the Hong Kong, and ultimately the Chinese, economy. As it is, the turmoil in Hong Kong has resulted in a lowering of confidence in that territory's standing as one of the world's largest financial centres. This has also affected Chinese blue chip companies that are listed in Hong Kong and use the Hong Kong financial market for raising capital.

Japan's National Security Council Gets an Economic Team

Japan's National Security Council has added an economic team with ten experts to monitor suspected intellectual property abuses and technology theft by China in addition to cyberattacks emanating from North Korea. The economic team will work at the National Security Secretariat alongside other teams including the coordination team, strategic planning team, intelligence team and another three teams dealing with regional affairs. This development unfolded as Japan barred Huawei Technologies and ZTE Corp. from getting involved in public procurement contracts as apprehensions regarding alleged espionage intensifies. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has invested substantial diplomatic capital since 2017 to improve relations with China against the backdrop of the 45th anniversary of normalisation of relations and the 40th anniversary of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship, and is gearing up to host President Xi Jinping for a state visit in the spring of 2020. Nevertheless, in Japan's security discourse, China remains a "serious security concern" as reiterated in the 2019 Defense White Paper. Japan is keen to reduce its deep economic dependence on China and to diversify its economic options with other major Asian economies including India.

Islamic State Attack on Tajik Border Post

On 6 November, a group of 20 militants attacked the Tajik border guard outpost at Ishkobod in Rudaki district near the border with Uzbekistan. The attack led to the death of 15 militants and two Tajik security forces personnel. Tajik official sources stated that the militants entered Tajikistan from the Kala-i-Zal district of Afghanistan's Kunduz province, and that the attack was organised by the Islamic State. Tajikistan shares borders with China, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan, exposing it to insurgent spill over from these neighbours. The Islamic State continues to pursue its longstanding aim of expanding its presence into Central Asia from its enclave in Afghanistan's Kunduz and Nangarhar provinces. Earlier, in May 2019, the group had claimed responsibility for 20 deaths during a jail riot east of Dushanbe. In July 2018, a carload of militants who had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State ran down and killed four Western cyclists. The Islamic State's affiliates in the region continue to remain dangerously active even as the parent group in Iraq and Syria is struggling to survive.

Allahr Dal Banned in Bangladesh

Bangladesh banned a radical Islamist group Allahr Dal on 8 November 2019. The country has been ravaged by Islamist extremism since the late 1990s after jihadists who fought in the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan returned home. The Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League government started a clampdown on extremist organisations following the killing of 18 foreigners at an upscale Dhaka restaurant in 2016 by a group linked to the Islamic State. Allahr Dal, or the Party of Allah, was banned after police suspected that the group was planning terrorist attacks. The group's leader Matin Mehedi was arrested in 2006 after he had connived with the largest Islamist group of Bangladesh, Jamayetul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), in carrying out more than 400 small blasts across the nation in 2005. It is believed that Allahr Dal, established in 1995, is an offshoot of JMB. The group's objective is to establish Sharia law in Bangladesh. It was planning to buy arms and weapons to carry out raids to free its imprisoned leader.

Israel Strikes Terrorist Targets in Gaza and Damascus

On 12 November, Israel launched missile strikes targeting the senior leadership of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) in Gaza and Damascus. While the Israel Defence Force (IDF) acknowledged the Gaza strike, which killed the 42-year old PIJ commander Baha Abu al-ata, it did not acknowledge the strike against the PIJ leader Akram al-Ajouri in Damascus. The IDF blamed the PIJ for a series of rocket attacks against Israeli civilian targets in the preceding months, including on a music concert in August 2019. The PIJ is reportedly backed by Iran.

On 19 November, the IDF intercepted missiles fired into northern Israel from Syrian territory, apparently fired in retaliation to the targeting of the PIJ leadership. Charging the Iranian Qods Force of being behind the hostile action, the IDF responded by striking targets inside Syria, including Syrian air defence batteries. Defence Minister Naftali Bennett vowed to carry out more strikes, even threatening to directly target Iranian officials and leadership engaged in such activities.

These Israeli strikes in Syria are in line with its policy of neutralising targets inside enemy territory. Israel can be expected to continue to carry out such punitive, pre-emptive strikes across the Syrian and the Lebanese air spaces since these countries have weak air defences. Such strikes could, however, lead to uncontrolled outcomes if Iranian forces or Iranian-backed militia inside Syria or Iraq were to suffer significant damage. Iran demonstrated its capability to carry out cross-border strikes as recently as September 2019 when it reportedly masterminded the attack against the Abqaiq oil facility in Saudi Arabia.

Nigeria the Next Victim of China's Predatory Economics?

China has emerged as Nigeria's biggest creditor. Since 2002, China has committed US\$ 6.5 billion in investments, aid and loans to Nigeria. During these years, Nigeria has obtained some 17 loans from China to fund myriad projects. According to Nigeria's Debt Management Office, the country's total external debt stood at \$27.1 billion in June 2019. Of this, it owed more than \$2.6 billion – nearly 10 per cent of the total – to China alone. In contrast, the debt Nigeria owes to other major creditors is much smaller: \$362 million to France, \$74.63 million to Japan, \$171 million to Germany, and \$26.46 million to India. A former Deputy Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, Dr. Obadiah Mailafia, has acknowledged that it is politically risky for Nigeria to become indebted thus to a world power such as China. There are also unconfirmed reports that Nigeria may have pledged some of its oil fields in the Niger Delta as collateral to China. Although the Nigerian government has dismissed claims about being caught in a Chinese debt trap, the International Monetary Fund had warned Nigeria earlier this year to be wary of the terms under which Chinese loans were being granted. Such caution is warranted given the larger trend of Chinese loans and investments in Africa. Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti, Zambia and Madagascar are finding it difficult to service the loans they have received from China. During the past year alone, two Chinese funded infrastructure projects, an airport in Sierra Leone and a port in Tanzania, have been rolled back amid debt and sovereignty concerns. Africa, it appears, has begun to realise the ill effects of China's predatory economics and debt-trap diplomacy.

