

Chinese military

China launches new aircraft carrier in bid to catch up with US capability

Fujian is the PLA's most advanced vessel and the first to be entirely designed and built domestically



The launch of the Fujian from Shanghai's Jiangnan shipyard was delayed due to the two-month lockdown in the city because of Covid © Li Gang/Xinhua/AP

Kathrin Hille and **Tom Mitchell** in Singapore 3 HOURS AGO

China launched its third and most advanced aircraft carrier on Friday, as Beijing races to catch up with US military capabilities and make good on its threats to retake Taiwan by force if necessary.

The vessel, named Fujian after the coastal province opposite Taiwan, had been under construction at Shanghai's Jiangnan shipyard since 2018. It will reduce the gap of China's carrier fleet compared with its more established US counterparts and is expected to enter service late next year or in 2024.

The Fujian was set to launch on June 3, according to analysts and media reports. But the date slipped because of Shanghai's Covid-19 outbreak and two-month lockdown.

"Resumption of work after pandemic control measures was slower than expected, and there was a lack of workers," said a Chinese military scholar, who asked not to be named because he was not authorised to speak to the media about the topic. "The equipment for further outfitting after the launch was not fully in place either."

The Fujian is the first Chinese carrier to be completely designed and manufactured domestically. The Liaoning, the first carrier, is a refurbished hull bought from Ukraine and the Shandong was built in China but based on its blueprint.

The [People's Liberation Army](#) Navy aims to have six carriers by 2035, compared with

the US Navy's fleet of 11 vessels, according to writings by PLA scholars and mentions in official Chinese media.

The Shandong underwent almost a year of construction work after it was launched in April 2017 and another 17 months of sea trials before being put into operation.

Outfitting and sea trials of the Fujian might take even longer, analysts said, but pointed out it was more advanced. The first two carriers have ski jumps, an outdated design that cannot launch heavier aircraft and limits the amount of weapons that fighters taking off from it can carry. The new ship is equipped with an electromagnetic catapult, matching the US Navy's newest innovations.

"The [PLA Navy] will face challenges transitioning from [jumps] to more demanding [catapult] carrier operations, and this might delay achieving an operational capability with the new ship," according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies think-tank. "It may also face similar teething troubles to those encountered by the US in introducing electromagnetic catapults."

[China](#) has been building its ships more rapidly than western observers expected but its progress in deploying them has not been as fast.

"It sends a big signal when the third carrier is launched, but the problem is you have to equip and operate it," said Meia Nouwens, a PLA expert at IISS. "The Liaoning is still exercising putting together a carrier strike group almost 10 years after it was handed over to the PLA Navy."

Analysts say the PLA Navy's toughest challenge is a lack of qualified sailors and a shortfall of the right aircraft. "Their biggest problem is that they don't have enough people," said Hsu Yen-chi, a researcher at the Council on Strategic and Wargaming Studies think-tank in Taipei, and were struggling to find enough people needed to staff one naval aviation regiment per carrier, which could require up to 3,000 individuals.

"The goal is to achieve a strategic balance with the US in the western Pacific, plus consolidate control of the South China Sea," Hsu added. "The normal set-up would be 40 fighter aircraft per carrier but if you look at their latest exercise, they have only 20. So they are very far from where they want to be."

China continues to produce more of the J-15 fighters that are used on the Liaoning and Shandong and is working on a new, high-speed version of the plane which is believed to be designed for use on the third carrier.

“The key differences will be catapult compatibility, advanced datalinks and radar systems, and of course a bigger payload including beyond-visual range missiles,” said a western military official who tracks the PLA.

The PLA is also exploring how to leapfrog more advanced peers and address some of the weaknesses of a traditional carrier force. In a video released by China’s South Sea Fleet this year, seven drones were visible on the deck of the Shandong.

“That they are trying this shows you there are concerns in the leadership over the vulnerability of carriers to threats of the kind China itself is using for anti-access and area denial against the US,” the western military official said.

But analysts cautioned against assuming China’s capabilities were mature in these areas. Nouwens said similar images were shown by Chinese state-owned arms producers at the Zhuhai Airshow in 2018. “While that clearly points to them thinking about this and possibly experimenting with it, we should not make the mistake to assume a decision to use this or even an operational capability,” she said.

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