2010

In My View

Thomas S. Momiyama

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol63/iss3/23
IN MY VIEW

SUPERCARRIERS FOR SMART SUPERPOWER DIPLOMACY

Sir:

The focus of the Naval War College Review Winter 2010 issue on the maritime strategic perspective in the Pacific elicits fresh contemplation on the role of the U.S. Navy’s aircraft carriers as global American representatives and thus as effective and necessary tools of foreign policy and diplomacy in the new era of unconstrained, and literally “asymmetric,” confrontations of nations and factions. Professors Li and Weuve (“China’s Aircraft Carrier Ambitions: An Update”) present a perceptive discourse on how the fast-growing Chinese economy could substantiate Hu Jintao’s “emerging interests” in “some new level of power-projection capabilities” despite the lagging (carrier aviation) technology base of the People’s Liberation Army Navy. Methodical analysis of the “implications” of China’s carrier “acquisition” for the strategic concerns of the United States and western Pacific nations surrounding China remains understandably speculative. That may be due in part to China’s characteristically enigmatic nature, its calculated cycles of silence and cacophonous rhetoric. China, taking its time in its military power buildup, cleverly holds the rest of the world in suspense as to its strategic intentions.

Clearly, the twenty-first-century world and its expanse of oceans have become “contested commons,” in the phrase of Under Secretary of Defense (Policy) Michèle Flournoy in the U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings of July 2009. But there will probably be no more major sea battles the likes of Midway. Navigating the contested commons will call for a real-time and astutely adaptive foreign policy. So why a big carrier force of the U.S. Navy? The answer is “smart power.”

American defense and geopolitical experts have called for “smart power,” defined as the sum of the nation’s “soft power” (a concept of Harvard’s Joseph Nye, referring to nonmilitary international reach) and the classic military capability now called “kinetic power.” The “speak softly and carry a big stick” dictum may be
restated as “speak wisely, including judiciously saying nothing, but carry—and indeed be visibly ready to use—a big stick.” And that “big stick” would be the “supercarriers” of the U.S. Navy. By far the most effective symbol and instrument of the kinetic power of the nation, the aircraft carrier is the thirty-knot-plus moving air base. The U.S. Navy’s carrier fleet is “super” in a literal sense, with its nuclear power, displacements now reaching 100,000 tons, deployed air-wing complement of over seventy-five aircraft (and unmanned aerial vehicles), and catapult-assisted takeoff but arrested recovery (CATOBAR) design (classified as the “most capable but also the most expensive” by Li and Weuve). The most advanced steam catapult design is about to be replaced by a precision electromagnetic catapult in the Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78) class, now under construction.

The U.S. Navy, with ten-plus supercarriers still listed in the just-published Department of Defense QDR (Quadrennial Defense Review), stands uncontested above all major naval powers of the world, none of which nonetheless would be caught without an aircraft carrier in its fleet—one or a few. Those self-respecting naval-air powers are Australia, Brazil, Britain, France, India, and Russia, with China obviously in an effort to join the status.

The carriers effectuate the doctrines of continuous forward presence and on-demand power projection, both in peacetime and conflict. With carriers, the Navy thus provides strategic deterrence to prevent wars; global vigilance over potential third-world and insurgency surprises; expedient reprisal and quelling of hostile foreign actions; flexible and adaptive airpower, ballistic weapons, and amphibious land war support for the Air Force, Army, and Marines in war, not to mention the on-the-spot mercy and peacekeeping missions in regional internecine battles and natural disasters, as just experienced in the Haiti earthquake. This advocacy for the carrier’s “big stick” does not negate the contributions of Army and Marine land forces and strategic and tactical Air Force constituencies to the nation’s kinetic power. But these components do not replicate the carrier force’s visible peacetime forward-presence underscoring of diplomacy.

The best-won war is a war prevented from occurring. And the supercarriers of the smart superpower may be the answer for keeping the balance of peace in the future world.

THOMAS S. MOMIYAMA

U.S. Senior Executive Service (Retired), former director of the Naval Air Systems Command’s Aircraft Science & Technology Programs, graduate of the Naval War College and Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government