

## **Amid row on South China Sea, China holds first live-fire drills with aircraft carrier**

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**Beijing:** China's first aircraft carrier battle group has carried out its maiden live-fire exercises on a massive scale, in a show of strength amid increasing tensions with the US over the South China Sea and Taiwan.

Aircraft carrier 'Liaoning' conducted the mammoth drills with live ammunition in the Bohai Sea involving dozens of ships and aircraft as well as several air-to-air, air-to-ship and ship-to-air missiles, the PLA Navy said in a statement.

The exercise was aimed at testing a combination of various types and numbers of ships to optimise the carrier's combat ability, the navy said.

The carrier, destroyers and frigates carried out exercises covering air interception, sea-based attacks and air-defense as well as reconnaissance, early warning and anti-missile systems.

The carrier's original design allows it to carry about 30 fixed-wing aircraft.

The time and exact location of the exercises were not disclosed except that they were held in the Bohai Sea which is located between the Chinese coast off Dalian and North and South Korea.

Earlier reports said the aircraft carrier would be deployed in the disputed South China Sea when it is ready.

It was the first time that the weapons used on the carrier were displayed in public since it entered service in 2012.

Videos of the Liaoning's J-15 fighters firing missiles were broadcast on China Central Television, the first time that images of J-15 live-fire exercises have been shown to the public.

Rear Admiral Chen Yueqi, commander of the Liaoning carrier battle group, said the exercise is a "milestone" for the unit.

"It enabled us to explore how to organise a carrier battle group exercise and to test the training levels of our sailors and pilots. It can also boost the battle group's efforts to become combat ready as early as possible," he told CCTV.

The exercises were conducted as China struck a more aggressive posture over the disputed South China Sea issue and braces to have a showdown with US President-elect Donald Trump, who questioned 'One-China' policy and held an unprecedented phone talk with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, which drew strong diplomatic protests from Beijing.

China has become more assertive over the South China Sea after an international tribunal struck down its claim over all most all of the area.

The Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan also have counter claims over the disputed SCS.

China yesterday confirmed that it is building military facilities in some of the reclaimed islands, saying the deployment of necessary defensive facilities on some islands in the South China Sea is legitimate and normal.

Reacting to the reports showing satellite images of the military facilities in the islands revealed by US think tank, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang said the South China Sea islands are China's inherent territory

and China is building necessary defensive facilities on its own territory which is completely normal and has nothing to do with militarisation.

"If China's building normal facilities and deploying necessary territorial defensive facilities on its own islands is considered militarisation, then what is the sailing of fleets in the South China Sea?" he said questioning the movement of US naval fleet in the area.

Besides Liaoning, China is currently building two more aircraft carriers one of which was expected to be ready by next year.

Chinese Defence Ministry spokesman Yang Yujun said in earlier briefings that there will surely be more carriers in future.

Commander Xu Ying, chief of a J-15 squadron that participated in the event, was quoted by the State broadcaster as saying that through the exercise, pilots improved their use of tactics and weapons and enhanced confidence in their equipment.

Though the Navy did not disclose components of the carrier battle group, Zhang Junshe, a senior researcher at the PLA Naval Military Studies Research Institute, told China Daily that the battle group would have three Type 052C or Type 052D destroyers, both of which have advanced vertical-launch missile systems and cutting-edge air defence radar, three Type 054A frigates, one replenishment ship and one attack submarine.

"The recent exercise is really a landmark for the carrier battle group because it means the group's ships and aircraft have achieved a high level of integration and cooperation and that the unit is closer to gaining combat readiness," Zhang said.

"Next, the group would focus on honing its air defence and counter-submarine capabilities."

Wu Peixin, an aviation industry observer in Beijing, said the news indicates that the J-15 fighter force has obtained initial operational capability.

"The J-15 is as mighty as the United States' F/A-18E/F Super Hornet. It is capable of carrying out multiple operations such as fleet air defense and anti-ship strikes," he said.

"Given that dozens of ships were used in this drill, the aircraft carrier was likely to be accompanied by submarines, depot ships and fast combat support ships, in addition to guided missile destroyers as well as two guided missile frigates," Li Jie, a Beijing-based naval expert, told state run Global Times.

Liaoning is a refitted vessel based on an unfinished Russian-made carrier and delivered to the Chinese Navy on September 25, 2012.

Its battle group took shape in December 2013, when the carrier and several escort vessels, including two guided missile destroyers, two guided missile frigates and an attack submarine took part in a long-range formation drill in the South China Sea.

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