

past. However, to say that China has a full-fledged blue-water navy is to over-state the case. At best it has a brown-water navy with blue water tinges; despite some fairly long-range deployments.⁹ Some of the ships are new but the equipment is from the sixties and seventies. The Chinese are well aware of this fact and are eager to improve their sea-going technology. Fresh impetus has been added to Chinese naval programmes by virtue of the increased importance of maritime commerce as a consequence of rapid economic growth in coastal and riverine China. Furthermore, the maritime law of 25 February 1992 enumerates Chinese claims to virtually the whole of the South China Sea and to broad reaches of the Western Pacific adjacent to the Chinese coast. The PLA(N) is clearly intended to enable China to uphold these claims, although the Chinese see the growth of their naval capability as being non-threatening to their neighbours. Indeed, they maintain that the PLA(N) is simply an appropriate expression of the state of China's power.¹⁰

Economic growth in China and fire-sale conditions in Russia have enabled the Chinese to acquire a significant number of high performance SU-27 fighter jets from the Russians. Many of these aircraft have been deployed to Hainan Island, the closest thing the Chinese have to an aircraft carrier in the disputed region of the South China Sea. The acquisition of a carrier is probably only a matter of time. While the Chinese alleged in 1992 that it would cost too much to purchase the partially completed Soviet carrier Varyag, the real concern then (quite apart from the political complexities of dealing with the Russians and the Ukrainians) was the message that the acquisition of the vessel would have telegraphed to the rest of Asia. Two years on, a more confident leadership seems less concerned about such matters and will probably opt for two