

# A Constructivist Approach to China's Aircraft Carrier Ambitions

Written by Frederick Melling

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### CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

Long recognised as the symbol for modern military power, the aircraft carrier has enjoyed an extensive period of dominance over naval considerations at sea. However, increasing vulnerability, exorbitant pricing, and diminishing military effectiveness are key factors driving many analysts to question their relevance in future naval operations (Gerson, 2009, Hendrix, 2013, Isenberg, 1990). When questioned by Senators about how long the US' aircraft carrier fleet would survive in the event of war with the Soviet Union, four-star Admiral Hyman Rickover abruptly retorted: "About two days" (cited in Kinkead, 1987). Outmatched by the development of sophisticated missile technology and ultra-stealthy submarines, aircraft carriers are left incredibly exposed against coherent opponents. The US Navy's new Ford class carriers, for example, priced at a staggering \$13.4bn, are over 90 percent more expensive than their predecessors but offer only 33 percent more capability in launching power (Hendrix, 2013:6).

Despite these overlapping disincentives, states continue to develop aircraft carrier programmes with great fervour. China's carrier programme, commenced with the launching of the *Liaoning* in 2012, is a particularly interesting case when consideration of the country's often applauded peaceful rise. Yet, the PRC's push towards militarisation since the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis has led many to fear for future implications to Asian, and eventually global, security dynamics. As China's rise is seemingly destined to dominate discussion in international relations, appreciating the multifaceted determinants of its behaviour is essential to avoid misinterpretation and conflict escalation; a reliance on the rationalist expectations which that infer intentions from capabilities is as misleading as it is detrimental. As Henry Kissinger contests, "cultural, historical, and strategic gaps in perception... will pose formidable challenges for even the best intentioned and most farsighted" leaders and in the negotiation of diplomatic relations with China (2011:530). Topical discussions that attempt to rationalise the use of naval force in diplomacy are dominated by neorealist and neoliberal assumptions about pre-existing conditions of anarchy in the international arena and the state-centric nature of foreign policy decision making.

However, even a brief overview of the varying interests and identities competing for relevance in Chinese society reveals the multidimensional influences that contribute to the increasingly fragmented nature of modern international relations (Hao and Su, 2005, Putnam, 1988). Whilst China adjusts into its position as a major player among nations, its assertive behaviour through aircraft carrier proliferation is not necessarily indicative of a preordained resolution to clash with other hegemony, but rather a reflection of the public's interests. Exposure to the role of domestic forces in the formulation of foreign policy in China thus leads to new levels of understanding of the People's Republic of China's intentions in modern international relations.

With a focus on the PRC since the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1996, this dissertation aims to demonstrate that the Chinese national psyche and determination to achieve global power prestige have fuelled its aircraft carrier ambitions in the twenty-first century. Utilizing key tenets of constructivist international relations theory, with particular attention to its theoretical explanations of identity, agency and structure, and change, this paper will assess the contribution of ideational and domestic factors in the acceleration of the PRC's aircraft carrier programme. While China will be held in the spotlight of this paper, the arguments made are readily transferable to other states that have recently invested

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in an aircraft carrier capability, from emerging powers like India to more established players like the United Kingdom. In all cases, social factors remain central to the decision making processes which follow norms and modes of perception within international systems. Constructivism holds great potential to open channels of discussion previously ignored by mainstream international relations approaches, and its inclusion into the interpretation of Chinese naval ambitions is invaluable.

## *Summary of Chapters*

**Chapter II** discusses the main arguments made in the current discourse on the political uses of navies in international politics. After giving the reader an understanding of the rationale behind the inclusion of aircraft carriers in military budgets, this literature will highlight the practical and theoretical gaps existing in the debate. **Chapter III** introduces constructivism as a theoretical foundation to address the often overlooked role of social and domestic factors in the proliferation of aircraft carriers. The established theoretical framework based on constructivist explanations of identity, agency and structure, and change will then be applied to the People's Republic of China in the following two sections. **Chapter IV** explores how the Chinese national psyche contextualises the PRC's motivation to pursue an aircraft carrier capability following the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1996, with particular attention to the "Century of Humiliation" and previous Taiwan Strait crises. **Chapter V** investigates the relation between the PRC's desire to achieve world power prestige and the modernisation of its navy around the *Liaoning* aircraft carrier, while considering the implications on China's regional and global standing. The concluding commentary in **Chapter VI** outlines the main arguments made in the preceding chapters before re-examining underlying motivations behind the investment in aircraft carrier programmes in the modern era.

## CHAPTER II – REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter aims to equip the reader with an appropriate knowledge of the major arguments made by scholars concerning the significance of naval force in international affairs, which helps explain the continued insistence on developing aircraft carriers despite their mounting disadvantages. While the literature discussed in this literature review may not always refer specifically to aircraft carriers, because of the carrier's status in the modern era many of the same principles concerning capital ships can be applied. The majority academia on the role of navies in foreign policy takes on the mainstream international relations theoretical assumption that anarchy is inherent in the international system and the reliance on navies is part of the self-help security dilemma. This literature review will outline the main arguments made in discourse on significance of naval power in international relations. After which, it will identify the lack of attention to social factors before introducing the constructivist approach as integral to broadening understanding about why states pursue an aircraft carrier programmes.

### *Gunboat Diplomacy*

James Cable's notion of "Gunboat Diplomacy," is often considered a starting point for discussion of the use of force at sea and has been a major point of reference for the topic since the re-emergence of strategic naval thought. Defined as "the demonstration, threat, or use of limited naval force for political objectives," Gunboat Diplomacy explores the political and psychological messages conveyed by the flexing of military might against opponents (Cable, 1971:37). Based on numerous examples of 19<sup>th</sup> century powers utilizing "definitive," "purposeful," "catalytic," and "expressive" shows of force through the positioning of superior naval power, the practice was aimed at intimidating weaker states into accepting exploitive trade agreements (Ibid.). However, despite Gunboat Diplomacy taking its roots in the Age of Imperialism, the implication of naval force to bolster foreign policy objectives is still relevant in the modern era. Robert Mandel argues that states continue to use navies to communicate with adversaries through a process of "bargaining," "signalling," and "flexing" which he refers collectively to as "military signalling" (1986:61-62). During the Cold War, with the ever present threat of nuclear escalation, this type of messaging was especially significant because of the flexibility it afforded the state which forced the other's hand

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towards escalation, a line one dare not cross. Mandel examined several hypothetical approaches in a list of post WWII incidents to assess the effectiveness of gunboat diplomacy, and found that 53 percent had successful outcomes (Ibid.:73-74). When dialogue fails, physical shows of force can be a viable option for achieving foreign policy objectives. This is particularly true if the assailant involved has a history of using violence against a certain host; credible, but non-violent shows of force, as if to remind the victim of past trauma, are extremely effective. Accordingly, there is still a great deal of diplomatic capital in the flexing warships and maintaining of a coherent presence in regions a naval power wishes to hold influence over.

## *Naval Diplomacy*

Gunboat Diplomacy takes advantage of the rift between strong naval powers and weaker coastal states, but in the presence of greater respect for the territorial demarcations of the ocean and international norms condemning aggressiveness, its crude bullying nature makes its use ever more illegitimate. Convincing naval powers of the value of international laws and ocean regulation is a considerable hurdle to the complete phasing out of shows of force at sea, as the comparative strategic, political, and economic gains are so high (DiBiagio, 2013, Moineville and Compton-Hall, 1983). In an anarchic international system, states will further their interests by whatever means, whether they be military, economic, diplomatic, or legal. While Gunboat Diplomacy phases out, Naval Diplomacy, which focuses on influencing rather than coercing, has gained eminence as a method of foreign policy. Gunboat Diplomacy is an incredibly pejorative term; questions over its legitimacy as well as its links to old-world imperialism lead diplomats and policy makers to shy away from the term. However, the threat of force is still very present in modern diplomacy, albeit more concealed. Naval diplomacy, however, intends to prevent outright conflict, and values the more subtle approach through coercive demonstrations of power to influence rather than command opponent behaviour (Widen, 2011:719). This type of diplomacy is considerably different from that discussed by Cable and his followers as it focuses on the value of messaging rather than bombarding.

While analysing the Indo-Pakistan Crisis of 1971, James McConnell and Anne Kelly contend that within in the anarchic international system, rules of behaviour are determined by whoever is able to exert force in the region, which is not necessarily the occupying states (1973). During the Cold War, the USSR and the US were responsible for setting the pace of most conflict situations. By sending a task force which included the *USS Enterprise* carrier to the Bay of Bengal during the height of the Indo-Pakistan War, the US used visible "expressive force" in order to tilt, in the Clausewitzian fashion, the respective balance of power in favour of Pakistan, their allies at the time (Ibid.:291). The US was thus able to legitimise this show of force by claiming a supporting policy thereby denouncing accusations of aggression. This highlights incredible implications for concerns over foreign navies crossing territorial sea boundaries; under the guise of a supporting a friend, states are able to install themselves in normally hostile waters and thus establish a presence in regions they wish to operate. Although humanitarian missions to disaster struck areas have the best intentions, there is often an underlying implication that they also have a political purpose. In addition to legitimising its Pacific presence, the US' response to Typhoon Haiyan through Operation Damayan in the Philippines, has sent a clear message to neighbouring countries about its intention of being a committed regional power (Talmadge, 2013). Moreover, China's meagre relief effort was dwarfed by the dramatic air-lifting of supplies from the *USS George Washington* to thousands of displaced Filipinos, highlighting its capability to respond to crisis situation, and even implying its ability to wage war while promoting the American image of a trusted benevolent power. Thus the Aircraft Carrier has begun to cement itself as essential to rapid humanitarian responses and the generation of soft power.

## *Visibility vs Viability*

Edward Luttwak's discussion of the "visibility versus viability" dilemma implies that it is more effective for forces to be visible in presence rather than practical in utility because their ideal purpose is to influence state behaviour rather than engage in combat (1974). Under Mussolini, the Italian Navy initially deceived its neighbours into perceiving it was much more powerful than it was by splurging its budget on flashy new ships rather than non-visible components like training, maintenance and communication equipment. It was not until 1940 that its viability was tested, and in retrospect, the British Navy easily could have out-muscled the Italians in the Mediterranean in the build up to WWII. However, despite the superfluous nature of its visible capabilities, "the political leverage that the Italian Navy secured

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for its master was all too real" (Ibid.:41). The Italian case highlights the importance of "political sex appeal" in the distribution of military funding. Although an over focus on the perception of naval strength is ultimately ineffective, an entirely mechanistic and utility based fleet minimises the diplomatic potential of visible power (Ibid.:47).

The willingness of the public to support its government in the application of force and to bear the financial burden of producing the relevant machinery are huge factors in achieving diplomatic goals through suasion. China still holds onto the prospect of reunification with Taiwan as a central Chinese Communist Party (CCP) objective, but fears over conflict escalation with the United States and disruption of the economic arrangements which have enabled its rise and continued prosperity prevent them from forcing the issue. Luttwak recognised the underlying influence held by domestic settings, arguing that "the ability of these powers to exercise naval suasion will be determined by others' perceptions of relevant domestic opinion and its parliamentary representation" (Ibid.:54). Because the Taiwanese understand the economic dynamics which allow the CCP to maintain legitimacy in government they assume that the Chinese public would not tolerate a government that risks its economic prosperity. Warships have symbolic, supportive, coercive, and defensive value as "political entities and floating ambassadors," and are thus extremely valuable to governments in the pursuit of certain foreign policy agendas (Widen, 2011:730). It is often the case that for diplomatic suasion's sake, whether it friendly or aggressive, or in times of peace or hostility, visibility of naval forces trumps their actual use in combat. Aircraft carriers in particular are highly effective in sending messages to rogue states in an easily understandable forceful format. It is no surprise that the routine exercises between South Korea and the United States heavily feature carrier capabilities. Aboard just one of the US' Pacific Fleet carriers is enough sophisticated military machinery and technology to trump any of Pyongyang's conventional armaments. Moreover, this is all observable through binoculars from the North Korean shore, which sending a powerful message of intent during times of heightened tension.

## *Maritime Sovereignty*

Hedley Bull argues that naval supremacy is too heavily associated with repression of the third world to hold diplomatic currency (1976). This is particularly true in light of states increasing their claims to their oceanic boundaries. The United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS) III's extension of sea territory for coastal states through Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) to two hundred nautical miles has ramifications for navies accustomed to *mare liberum* or *freedom of the seas* (Young, 1974:262-63). The progressive notion of EEZs and national rights to the ocean will likely increase resistance to foreign naval presence and disputes over the management of the global commons particularly in areas believed to be rich in natural resources. This has led to what Kenneth Booth refers to as "psycho legal boundaries," whereby coastal states perceive that they have great bargaining power over the invasive nature of foreign naval passage, thereby reducing the legitimacy of maintaining heavily armed vessels at sea (1983:378-80). Despite the improbability of an established international sea-regulating regime, modern navies could still play an important constabulary role as "agents of the international community" in enforcing norms and agreed conventions (Young, 1974:263). This vision is not entirely unfounded; the UN mandated security operation through Resolution 1816, in response to piracy off the Horn of Africa, has resulted in unprecedented collective maritime security cooperation. Naval force, in combination with UN initiatives, political commitments, and regional legal authority, has played a primary role in establishing lasting supply chain stability between Asia and Africa while institutionalising joint military operations to enforce normative behaviour (Wilson, 2009). There still remains the argument that these delineations heighten the effectiveness of this type of force-backed diplomacy as the messages borne hold greater significance; since navies knowingly risk more they communicate with increased urgency. What Booth describes as "selective and salient" action, where states use their navies more sparingly, places a heavier premium on naval deployment as a currency in foreign policy (1983). The ethical implications, however, of force may only go so far in the pursuit of national security and valuable natural resources at sea. Thus, before considering the legitimacy of naval force one should consider the legitimacy of the political objectives that mandate them (Bull, 1976:9). Ultimately, with an anarchic perspective on the international system that is absent a global body governing the sea, navies will strengthen in order to further protect the interests of their states. History has shown that political leaders are often talented at manipulating established rules and exploit ambiguities in conventions like UNCLOS to their advantage. Indeed, the flexible nature of naval suasion implies that what policy makers believe they are capable of gaining through such action is often most telling as perception in others abilities dictates behaviour within the anarchic system. Through this system of processes, naval diplomacy

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gathers significance as a facilitator of diplomatic action.

## *Constructivist Potential*

The literature discussed in this chapter successfully integrates realist and deterrence based theories into the explanation of naval and aircraft carrier pre-eminence. Yet, it ignores the relevance of the underlying and socially entrenched interests and identities dictated by the process of naval exchange. If the purpose of diplomacy is to communicate messages, then surely it is necessary to examine how these messages might be conceived and what conditions permit them. Although power politics and defensive strategy are major aspects which contribute towards the preference of carrier-based naval operations, there is a considerable lack of attention to the relevance of domestic and social factors in the current literature. By opening the boundaries of thought to cultural factors, such as those that are key determinants of domestic policy, one begins to understand the underlying factors that influence China's behaviour abroad (Wong, 1997). In the following chapter, this paper will introduce the constructivist perspective on international relations, which has yet to be considered in explaining the use of naval force in foreign policy. While outlining the elements of identity, agency and structure, and change, it will set up a theoretical framework to address the current gaps in the discourse.

## **CHAPTER III – CONSTRUCTIVISM**

The investment in aircraft carriers as a means of opposing threats is a direct result of the rational view that material distribution of power – in the form of military machinery – is calculable (Jackson and McDonald, 2009). When national interests are at stake, you get what you pay for. This assumption offers a tidy explanation to the interest in aircraft carrier based fleets; states offset the hefty price tags with a flexible range of strike and defence capabilities that enable them to assert presence far from home shores. However, in the development institutionalised foreign policy agendas, there are a multitude of ideational factors which influence its direction and evolution within specific contexts. Chinese manoeuvres are not necessarily indicative of warmongering, as seen by mainstream international relations theory, but rather a manifestation of interests expressed by domestic forces. The PRC's desire to establish itself within the international system is far stronger than any ambition to create actual conflict, despite a seeming willingness to flirt with it.

As an emerging school of international relations thought, constructivism offers a theoretical framework that captures a more holistic combination of these social factors that are notably absent in the naval diplomacy discourse. Emmanuel Adler (1997) argues that many academics fail to grasp the importance socio-cognitive factors concerned with interpretation in international relations. The approaches discussed in the previous chapter ignore the relevance of the underlying interests and identities at play in the process of naval exchange. Leading to a major "opening of analytical space," constructivism is not necessarily concerned with power politics, rather it attempts to address the numerous social aspects left out of mainstream discussion of international phenomena (Adler, 1997, Price and Reus-Smit, 1998:266). With a broad approach that considers a variety of previously ignored domestic factors, constructivism poses a significant challenge to the often overly simplistic power politics-based theories. While examining constructivism's explanations of identity, agency and structure, and change in international affairs, this chapter aims to establish a theoretical base through the constructivist lens in order to reveal the influence of domestic factors in the PRC's push since the 1990s to modernise its navy around the aircraft carrier.

## *Origins*

Constructivism is rooted in the school of Critical Theory which played a primary role in its development from the sociological perspective, but progressed towards other aspects of global politics such the development of relationships within international systems (Price and Reus-Smit, 1998:255-56). With the abrupt end to the Cold War, mainstream international relations theory began to lack credibility in the eyes of many academics for its inability to

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predict the fall of the Soviet Union and explain the intricacies of the emergent international system. The major role of domestic politics in determining the fate of international events, for example, had been considerably overlooked in mainstream international relations academia. In a world once bound tightly by a bipolar balance between East and West, "international change provided a catalyst for theoretical change" (Jackson and McDonald, 2009:19-20). Movements of Soviet dissent and even the public reaction to the Chernobyl disaster highlighted a growing dissatisfaction with the Moscow based system and desire for change. A series of processes led to the rise in nationalism in response to the discretisation of the Soviet system and clear factors in the progressive decay of the USSR and end of the Cold War. As documented in the closing stages of the Cold War, when certain norms – such as those imposed by the USSR on its satellites – are gradually delegitimised, new ones are enabled to emerge. Thus, "both the norms and their carriers may help bring about a transformation of political actors identities, interests, and practices"(Adler, 1997:344).

## *Core Assumptions of Constructivism*

Constructivism has enormous potential to explain the processes that enable the carrier's eminence in foreign policy, and uncover the motivations behind the state behaviour that encourages carrier proliferation. In the flagship constructivist paper, "Anarchy is What States Make of it," Alexander Wendt contends that anarchic behaviour is a self-fulfilling phenomenon which moulds identities and interests of states and socially constructs through the practice of power politics and self-help (1992). Constructivism thus argues that the world has come to be as it is through an intricate process of interaction between actors within the systems they operate in. Rather than only focusing on power-politics like most mainstream international relations theoretical approaches, the constructivist perspective offers explanations through the interpretation of a wide range of social factors in state behaviour. The neorealist assumption that states act in self-interest is significant to the discussion on state identity because it implies that each state acts accordingly to its whole self. A state's governing body never has a 100 percent approval rating, as competition for control domestic politics occurs between a variety of interest groups and political parties. The singular view of state identity is ignorant of the many historical, cultural, and social aspects explored by Constructivists which help contextualise the interests of actors (Hopf, 1998). Robert Putnam even suggests that even the term "state" should be considered a plural noun because of the collective groups, individuals, and interests that it represents (1988:432). The constructivist perspective on the social frameworks that make up international politics requires three primary assumptions about the natural state of affairs.

## *Assumption I: Mutual Understandings*

First is the assumption that these structures are predicated by mutual understandings, expectations, and knowledge of actors involved. In contrast to the mainstream postulation that anarchy inherently forms the basis of individual and society interaction, constructivism asserts that the state of nature leans towards neither chaos nor order, but is rather developed over time according to the social frameworks and norms constructed by actors involved. Anarchy exists, as argued by Wendt, only to the extent actors allow it to (1992). For example, security dilemmas are relationships between states based on assumptions made about the opponent which set up chains of interactions rooted in the expectation of worst case scenarios. Security communities, on the other hand, are founded on the presumption of trust between actors within systems (Wendt, 1995:72-73). Certain scenarios may yield different types of relationships; domestic politics are incredibly important in terms of shaping national ideology and threat perception (Checkel, 1998:329). This assumption is a crucial aspect in the construction of social structures and incredibly revealing in the explanation of international affairs.

## *Assumption II: Material Resources*

The second tenet of constructivism assumes that the structures established within international systems are negotiated with material resources. Accordingly, materials at play within structures are only as valuable as the shared knowledge between actors permits (Wendt, 1995:73). Consider an the following economic analogy: currency is often represented by paper or simply as numbers in an account, but the shared belief between individuals that it is particularly valuable and has an agreed spending power makes it so. In the realm of naval diplomacy, the same is applicable to materials like warships, where shared knowledge of capability and intentions are crucial components of

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interaction. Aircraft carriers, in particular, are often considered symbols of military might and indicative of great power status and sovereignty at sea, regardless of their contested futility against sophisticated military powers. Moreover, the owner of such machinery also contributes to the perceived meaning of material resources. The sailing of the UK's two new aircraft carriers is unlikely to cause a major stir in the Atlantic's balance of power because of long standing military cooperation through institutions like NATO. Yet, the introduction of China's *Liaoning*, its single aircraft carrier that is still years from being fully operational and even decades behind its American counterparts technologically, is already generating major concerns as it represents a tremendous push to upset the status quo with a US hegemony in the Pacific. Aircraft carriers display the intention to export force abroad, which sends a strong message to other actors operating within the same theatre. Appreciating the meanings behind material resources present is therefore central to understanding international relations.

### *Assumption III: Structural Reinforcement Through Interaction*

The third basic assumption of constructivism stipulates that structures and norms of society are established and reinforced through processes of interaction. Structures come into existence through "not just talk," but out of the practices and process of actors who share the intersubjective meanings and materials discussed earlier (Wendt, 1995:74-75). Actors agree on "social facts," or particular norms like the concept of statehood which enable interaction, and the more they are used and agreed upon, the more legitimate they become (Jackson and McDonald, 2009:20). Patterns of behaviour become more naturalised over time, and actors play an active role in attempting to establish their interests. Ole Wæver describes the aptitude of constructivism in delineating the language of foreign policy, by assessing how the factors which affect decision making are conceived (1990). Language occurs in many forms throughout diplomatic exchanges and has a distinctive role in determining how agents interact with each other. As discussed in the previous chapter, signalling is a vital component of naval diplomacy, so the messages communicated between actors are crucial to mitigating these processes. Practices, like those of political violence, do not necessarily speak for themselves; they have to be "narrated and interpreted in meaningful ways within a particular social, cultural and historical context" (Jackson and McDonald, 2009:18). Chinese aircraft carrier ambitions should be viewed within this context. In many ways, practice is a form of power because it reinforces the intersubjective means that drive the construction of social structures (Hopf, 1998:177). From the United States' perspective, it would be more valuable for them to understand how China wants to be perceived rather than simply acting upon the face value of the PLA Navy's actions at sea.

### *Core Elements of Constructivism: Identity, Agency and Structure, and Change*

This paper contends that since the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, there have been significant developments in the PRC's naval positioning which can be rooted to China's national psyche and developing world power aspirations. The constructivist approach to explaining identity, agency and structure, and change, are particularly applicable in this discussion, and will serve as the basic framework in demonstrating the role of domestic forces in China's foreign policy.

#### *Identity*

Constructivists argue that the identities of individuals, domestic groups, or the states themselves are socially constructed through a series of process that affirm the mutual understandings of material resources. As Wendt asserts, "actors acquire identities – relatively stable, role specific understandings and expectations about self – by participating in collective meanings" (1992:392). Because they drive the interests, interpretations, and actions of actors, identities play a tremendous role in explaining international affairs. The Neorealist assumption that states act in self-interests implies that states know themselves as a whole or single identity. This view, however, is too homogeneous as it denies the varieties of interests at work within a state which contribute to the formation of social structures. Constructivism argues that the identity of states depends of historical, cultural, political, and social contexts (Hopf, 1998:175-76). China's diverse population and long history exists on a seemingly unrivalled scale; consequently, its national identity is composed of a vast multitude of competition identities that influence the direction of its governmental behaviour and foreign policy. Ancient Confucian values, Communist principles, nuclear weapons possession, UN Security Council membership, and even aircraft carrier capabilities are all identity related factors

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which help explain the interests and actions of the PRC. In a constant process of establishing collective meanings and competing for representation, identities provide a previously overlooked contextualisation of international affairs.

## *Agency and Structure*

The extent to which agency or structure influences state behaviour is heavily contested by international relations theorists. Often leaning to one end of the agency-structure spectrum, mainstream theorists contend that international affairs are determined by either "structure", the environmental factors which shape the behaviour of individuals within the structure, or "agency", the individuals or groups capable of making decisions and deliberate patterns of behaviour (Hurd, 2008:303-04). Due to the early influences of Alexander Wendt, whose holistic approach heavily emphasised the explanatory value of socially constructed structures, constructivist predecessors tended to leave research on agency to other schools of thought (1992, Checkel, 1998:338-40). Nevertheless, constructivism contends that agency and structure are mutually determined, and the social constructs existing within international relations "are simultaneously the products of state actions and influence upon state action" (Hurd, 2008:304). This co-composition is particularly applicable to China and its naval behaviour since 1996. As the ruling CCP has attempted to manage the Taiwan situation, it has been heavily influenced by numerous domestic groups in order to legitimise its monopoly over the governments, while concurrently using its position to influence its constituent's priorities. Moreover, the PRC's foreign policy can often be characterised as fitting its behaviour within international norms, while attempting to enact certain changes that legitimise its interests, such as the reacquisition of Taiwan. Chinese naval developments discussed in this paper are thus the result of interactions both within China, and between the PRC and other states within the international system.

## *Change*

Constructivism addresses moments of major political change and dissolution of previously established structures by claiming that the agents within the frameworks in question are in a "continual contest for control over the power necessary to produce meaning in a social group" (Hopf, 1998:180). This contrasts directly with the neorealist assumption that the interests of individuals are predetermined towards self-help tendencies within anarchic world, yet it is considerably more applicable to international events since the end of the Cold War. Although major structural changes occur over long periods of time and may be difficult to achieve, the potential exists so long as there is a struggle for control for interests within the groups that make up the structures. The end of the Cold War revealed that numerous social factors, believed "systematically unimportant" in mainstream neorealist and neoliberal theory, can actually play large role in altering the results of international events. As Emmanuel Adler argues, "the social construction of reality that assigns changes in collective meaning and purpose to physical objects is itself an important component of the process of change" (1997:342). China's shift from a coastal based defensive strategy before the Taiwan Strait Crisis to more assertive naval positioning with an aircraft carrier capability represents a significant change in the PRC's military posturing within the South China Sea. The constructivist lens offers a clear explanation of how this change came into fruition through the influence of numerous domestic forces.

## *Constructivism Applied to China's Aircraft Carrier Ambitions*

This paper seeks to add another dimension to the discussion of naval diplomacy and the use of aircraft carriers in international relations. Constructivism can play a crucial role in a more holistic interpretation of current affairs, and thus enabling decision makers to understand the multidimensional aspects of state behaviour. Misunderstandings on the international level, particularly between regional powers, have a long history of catastrophe. The best alternative, from the diplomatic perspective, is through the establishment of mutual understanding and clear communication. Without considering the identities and interests of neighbouring states, this is impossible. Lacking the constructivist assumptions concerning identity and interests in the anarchic system, realist and deterrence based approaches to the roles of aircraft carriers in foreign policy fall short of understanding the multifariousness of international relations (Wendt, 1992:396-97). Because the constructivist lens seeks to identify the role that social mechanisms play in influencing behaviour within the anarchic international system, it is integral to employ in the discussion on China's naval policies since the Taiwan Strait Crisis. When examined with constructivism, the elements of identity, agency and structure, and change, offer significant insight on the Chinese national psyche and world power identity's



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influence over the PRC's aircraft carrier programme.

## CHAPTER IV – Third Taiwan Strait Crisis and China's National Psyche

The national psyche is made up of a combination of factors which includes national perspectives, intentions, characteristics and other elements which underline a country's domestic and international behaviour. For the PRC, it is heavily influenced by a rich traditional history stretching back several millennia and a period of foreign domination known as the "Century of Humiliation." Historically, China's size granted it comfortable relations with its regional neighbours, allowing a paternal instinct to flourish with a focus on unifying its respective territories under a centralised Chinese authority. However, interactions between the international superpowers of Great Britain and Imperial Japan during the "Century of Humiliation," starting with the First Opium War in 1839, have structured the national psyche in a manner reflective in its international behaviour. According to Allison Kaufman, "the tale of loss and redemption, in which modern China was forged out of a crucible of suffering and shame at the hands of foreign powers has become part of the PRC's founding narrative," and serves as a strong historical lesson regarding vulnerability at the hands of international powers (2011:2). Since the CCP's Civil War victory in 1950, the PRC has struggled to overcome its past, but a focus on rapid economic development and a series of diplomatic victories signalled its repair. However, just as the China was beginning to assert its presence more as a regional power fitting of its economic status, it was dealt a significant blow by the reality of the United States' military hegemony in the Pacific.

Before the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis, China's naval ambitions were limited to active coastal defence, focusing on "green-water" capabilities through shore-based artillery, guided missiles, and aircraft (Sakhuja, 2000). However since the incident, there has been a considerable push for naval modernisation, most visibly with the introduction of the *Liaoning* aircraft carrier, following from the Chinese domestic audience for a more assertive presence internationally. Western preconceptions about China's national psyche are often described in an ahistorical manner which makes misleading and decontextualized assumptions about the intentions of Chinese behaviour. This chapter will discuss the importance of identity, agency and structure, and change in relation to recent developments concerning China's national psyche. Using a constructivist lens, the Third Taiwan Strait crisis will be broken down to access the damages inflicted upon the Chinese national psyche with an awareness of how such developments have contributed to generating support for the PLA Navy's aircraft carrier programme.

### *The Third Taiwan Strait Crisis (1995-1996)*

It is no surprise that maintaining a centralised government over a country with the expansive territorial size and 1.3 billion population of the PRC is an overwhelming challenge. A brief overview of its history indicates that China has been bound by a long series of attempts to join its proclaimed territories under a consolidated rule. The Dynasty Wars marked centuries of bloody campaigns aimed at achieving this seemingly fabled vision of a unified China. Even today, the Taiwan issue is just one of several separatist movements which plague the mainland. Western provinces far from Beijing, such as Tibet, South Mongol, and Uyghurstan continue to pressure the capital over independence; as tensions rise, some have turned increasingly violent (Kaufman, 2010). The recent 2014 Kunming Rail Station Massacre, that left 30 civilians dead and many more injured, has been directly linked to the Xinjiang conflict which has been ongoing since the late 1960s (BBC, 2014). Taiwan, though often holding centre stage due to its entanglement with the United States, is one of many continuous disputes over sovereignty in China.

Often referred as "the task of the century," reunification with Taiwan is of particular symbolic and strategic significance to mainland China, serving as an ideological point of leadership for the CCP and a pivot for power projection into the South China Sea (Hao and Su, 2005, Ross, 2002). Taiwan's ruling political party, the Kuomintang (KMT), is an ever present reminder of unfinished business from the Chinese Civil War, and with most Chinese genuinely believing that Taiwan is indeed part of China, interference by the United is perceived as an invasion of the

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PRC's sovereign rights. Extreme political sensitivity has earmarked China's dealings with Taiwan, as the risk of military escalation with the US and other regional powers threatens economic growth. Thus, the CCP has to strike a careful balance between underlying ideological party guidelines which demand a visible effort to reunite, and the international relationships which enable economic prosperity and CCP legitimacy (Chu, 2005:245-46). Managing Taiwan is an incredibly important point of contention for the PRC's government, but maintaining economic prosperity is undeniably the priority.

In contrast to the First (1954-1955) and Second (1958) Taiwan Strait crises, which were focused on expelling the Chinese Nationalists from the mainland, the Third broke out as a result of PRC efforts to influence Taiwan's government and public over upcoming general election. The standing president and KMT's candidate, Lee Teng-hui, was a staunch independence advocate and the antithesis of what the PRC wanted in a leadership position (Ross, 2002). The US' decision to allow Lee to speak as an alumnus at Cornell University through the granting of a special visa in 1995, despite officially recognising the "One China" policy, compromised years of carefully fostered US-Sino relations. In addition to providing a legitimising platform to the Taiwanese president, the United States had yet to invite its Chinese counterparts for an official visit since the Tiananmen incident in 1989. In response, and after recalling its ambassadors in the US, the PRC began a series of missile tests over the Taiwan Strait "that were equal parts military deterrent and political theatre" (Kissinger, 2011:473). The advanced missiles, capable of carrying both conventional and nuclear warheads, were launched for several days and targeted into the ocean well within view of Taiwan's coast. Although largely symbolic, they served as a warning to Taiwanese officials and voters through the demonstration of Chinese capabilities; although Taiwan's unruly period may be temporarily tolerated by the mainland, outright movements for independence would not.

Under the pretence of avoiding bad weather, the United States sent two Aircraft Carriers towards the Taiwan Strait in its most significant show of force directed at China since the Cold War (Ibid.:476). The *USS Nimitz* and the *USS Independence*, each with a combined crew of 10,000 men and a fleet of up to 180 fighter jets, threw a considerable amount of weight behind Taiwan, and sent a strong message to the PRC regarding US commitment to Asian security (Ross, 2002:55-56). With dialogue prevented in the absence of ambassadors, signalling through military muscle flexing became to most effective communication tool in the diplomatic exchange. According to the principle of brinkmanship in naval diplomacy, as discussed in Chapter II, diplomatic advantage lies with the navy not forced into striking first. The provocateur risks losing legitimacy in the international community by being labelled an aggressor, and gives their opponent justification to use more lethal force – potentially nuclear – in defence. Because it is easier interpret an airborne missile as intended strike than a platform of fighter jets, the United States aircraft carrier capability was able to diplomatically trump China in the standoff without having to enter the Taiwan Strait.

Although briefly flirted with, escalation between the United States and China over the Taiwan issue was as undesired as it was potentially devastating – this remains true today. However, the most significant development from the Crisis was not seemingly renewed tensions in the Pacific, in fact relations between the US and China normalised relatively quickly with both sides backing down with the aim of focusing on a more cooperative relationship. Rather, the incident served as a wakeup call to the PRC's subservience to foreign forces and a crushing blow to the Chinese national self-esteem despite its economic progress. Just as British gunships inflicted a series of humiliating defeats in the mid-1800s at the dawn of the Century of Humiliation, the US aircraft carrier presence was a cruel reminder of foreign domination in China. Turning to the constructivist perspective, this chapter will access the social factors that have been involved in the developments concerning the Chinese national psyche and their influence on the PLA Navy's modernisation.

### *Identity*

Constructivism explains that identity is the product of interactions between actors with social systems; gathering characteristics through process, interest emerge and patterns of behaviour become compounded (Hurd, 2008). This explanation of identity is important to the discussion on the Chinese national psyche during the Taiwan Strait crisis because it helps unpack the PRC's perception of the event and provides context for its ensuing behaviour. China's interactions with foreign powers from the beginning of the First Opium War have been underlined by hostility and exploitation, however since taking power, the CCP has focused on uniting its populace under a common identity that

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prioritises the unification of the Chinese state against foreign oppression (Kaufman, 2010). Despite altering its ideological focus away from its communist roots towards nationalism after the Cold War, the embracement of the Century of Humiliation continues to be integral in the construction of China's national identity. Providing lessons for future generations about the dangers of vulnerability, and legitimisation of the CCP for turning the tables of national misfortunes, the insecurities developed during the period can often be seen as key motivators in Chinese foreign policy. The shame experienced is thus

“reframed from an irrational emotion that needs to be cured, through social psychology, to a social practice that needs to be understood in terms of political and historical narratives” (Callahan, 2004:201).

Following the emergence of the PRC, its first major test abroad came with the Korean War (1950-1953), where its military involvement played a significant part in driving back US-led United Nations forces. Accordingly, its leadership in the face of adversity has become “a key legitimiser for CCP rule, because the CCP is portrayed as the only modern Chinese political party that was able to successfully stand up to foreign aggression” (Kaufman, 2011:3).

When the US challenged the PRC over Taiwan in 1996, the incident carried significant symbolic repercussions because it challenged a Chinese identity built on resistance to foreign powers. The US' sale of F-16 fighter jets to Taiwan in 1992, for example, drew a far less heated response than Lee's Cornell visit because the US' recognition of a dissentient leader was indicative of a fundamental disrespect for the PRC's unification interests (Scobell, 1999:230-31). A nationalistic identity, carved out of the Century of Humiliation and typified by resistance to foreign powers, demanded a strong show of force to communicate to the United States that China was serious about unification. The PRC's ensuing missile strikes, however, lacked the diplomatic leverage and flexibility held by the US' carrier fleets and failed to prevent an American intrusion into what it considered a domestic affair. Just as Mao Zedong's decision to take the country towards nuclear status after the First Taiwan Strait crisis in 1955, the PRC's development of an aircraft carrier fleet through the *Liaoning*, is indicative of the desire to acquire the necessary machinery to prevent foreign domination. The Chinese identity reveals an interesting dynamic between nationalism and foreign policy, where past periods of shame are sources of motivation for the militaristic element to its behaviour in the South China Sea. A Chinese aircraft carrier capability is thus a crucial element of the PRC's road to recovery from the Century of Humiliation.

### *Agency-Structure*

The interplay between agents and social structures in the consideration of China's national psyche has a dramatic effect on the formation of Chinese foreign policy. Constructivist theory asserts that the relative influences of agencies and structures are mutually determined. The extent to which agents can act independently of structures, and conversely the degree to which structures control agent behaviour, is realised through practice rather than being predetermined either way (Checkel, 1998). Numerous agents within China – primarily the high ranking officials of the CCP, officers of the PLA, and the commerce-minded entrepreneurs and industrialists – act within various structures – such as paternally minded governance, regional security statuses, and international trade arrangements. Despite sharp contrast between the Chinese governments from the ancient imperial system to the modern day, China has a long history of hierarchical-based domestic governance (Wong, 1997). Moreover, there still exists a sense among actors that this structure holds certain parental responsibilities regarding the maintenance of social and economic security: “in both imperial and contemporary times, people have expected the state to intervene on their behalf” (Ibid.:194-95). Therefore, the PRC is so unwilling to relent on the issue of Taiwanese independence because its paternal instinct won't let it, and China's attempts to bring the island back under its protection and leadership are telling of the social structures which have emerged with the development of the national psyche. Between agency and structure, nationalism is a commonly occurring theme that is often used as a legitimising tool within the PRC to pander to the national psyche. Zhidong Hao explains the dynamics between agency and structure in China

“as a double edged sword, [where] nationalism makes it possible for individual groups to assert their interests, but it also sets boundaries between groups and nations which impede communication and hinder relationships” (Hao, 2005:143).

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By prioritising economic growth, the CCP has enabled its business focused agents to prosper in the modern era; meanwhile, these agents permit the government superstructures the position of leadership so long as economic progress is sustained.

The combined influences of the agencies and social structures in question cannot accept an outbreak of conflict with the United States because of the risks posed to the privileged position of China's economic status; however, they also cannot abide foreign intervention in their domestic affairs nor accept any proposition of Taiwanese independence. The resulting paradox presents a seemingly impossible task for the Chinese. In order to maintain the favourable status quo, the solution has been for the PRC to, while maintaining an assertive stance, not force the issue. The development of aircraft carrier machinery in reaction to the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis is reflective of the co-constitution of the agency and structure within China. A carrier capability grants the PRC the capacity to satisfy the nationalist and commercial interests of agents demanding a strong but non-disruptive – in terms of trade – Chinese presence in the South China Seas, as well providing the PRC the ability to assert itself more flexibly within the normative confines of the Asian security structure.

## *Change*

Since its conception, the PRC has experienced dramatic periods of change within its domestic society from a strict communist order reinforced by the Cultural Revolution and isolationism to an increasingly globalised society characterised by booming international trade (Deng and Wang, 2005, Swaine, 1995). Under Mao, Chinese foreign policy was heavily centralised within the political elite, but as the general population has gained greater pluralisation, more actors, particularly non- and quasi-governmental officials, have become involved in the decision making process. For example, economic interactions between non-state actors abroad in industry, commerce, trade, agriculture, and banking had led to the build-up of more vested interests abroad, and thus a greater desire for Chinese foreign policy to reflect certain behaviour (Deng and Wang, 2005). The growing influence of media and think tanks had led to increase information distribution; with more relevant, accurate, and timely information available to the public, it has become impossible for the CCP to ignore and censor the spread of news to its citizens. The CCP thus has to be considerably more sensitive to independent media outlets and its more educated public. For example, following the US bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade during Operation Nobel Anvil in 1999, riots across China marked a dramatic shift in public opinion which transgressed into China's more aggressive foreign policy stance towards the United States. The influence of more energetic youths, as opposed to their quelling during the Tiananmen protests of 1989, became more preeminent and indicative of the younger generation's desire to compete with their American counterparts (Li, 2005:51).

The Chinese audience understands that military conflict would be harmful to the more immediate economic interests of the PRC, but nationalist sentiments embedded in the national psyche have given to public cries for more aggressive foreign policy (Swaine, 1995:50). Many regular citizens thus heavily favour the acquisition of military hardware that will allow the PRC to assert itself in international affairs, while not being pressured unfairly as they were in the past. This applies directly to the tremendous public support of the PLA Navy's aircraft carrier development programme as a means of achieving Chinese interests from trade agreements to sovereignty over Taiwan and other territories. Changes within the PRC's domestic structure have granted the general populace an increased influence, albeit indirect, in the direction of Beijing's international relationships. Reflecting a national psyche that fosters memories of past suffering during the Century of Humiliation, public support has grown considerable for the acceleration of military development.

## *Concluding Comments*

Having examined the development of PRC's national psyche and the role it played in the interpretation of the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis, it is evident that domestic factors heavily influenced China's perception of foreign encroachment. Chinese desire to reverse the "humiliation of Western and Japanese imperialism [by] ending foreign interference in its domestic affairs," experienced a significant setback in its face-off with the United States (Ross, 2002:54). With both sides holding steadfast to their convictions over the future of Taipei, the dispute illustrates how modern foreign policy draws against domestic interests to transform a relationship recently typified by economic

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cooperation into one of rising tensions and stakes around the world (Kissinger, 2011:478). A constructivist approach to identity, agency and structure, and change elements in the Chinese national psyche sheds light on the impact of domestic forces in the PRC's assertive foreign posturing. The decision to initiate an aircraft carrier programme, like its previous decision to obtain a nuclear capability, was a thus natural step natural step for a government whose legitimacy is based on its ability to preserve the state's sovereign integrity. In the following chapter, the PRC's aircraft carrier programme to date, with particular attention to the launching of the *Liaoning*, will be examined in relation to China's rising economic status and its desire to be recognised as a global power.

## CHAPTER V – China's Aircraft Carrier and World Power Ambitions

The examination of China' national psyche in the previous chapter revealed that many internal characteristics and identities collected over an expansive history have contributed to the PRC's decision to develop an aircraft carrier capability. However, as the country continues its unprecedented economic growth and more active engagement in international relations, it becomes clear that its aspirations stretch far beyond simple recovery from the Century of Humiliation. Many analysts have observed that

“China's cooperative and constructive foreign policy [reflects] an increasingly positive and confident evaluation of not only the regional and international orders, but also its own role within them” (Deng and Wang, 2005:4).

As the PRC continues to grab headlines as state destined to dominate the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the PLA Navy's plans to integrate an aircraft carrier capability into its maritime forces are reflective of a public eager achieve international recognition as a global power in proportion with its economic status and on par with the United States.

The Taiwan Strait crisis demonstrated that despite its economic status and rising international influence, the PRC still lacked the machinery to back up its diplomatic efforts within regional and domestic affairs. Just as it embraced lessons from the Century of Humiliation, the Taiwan Strait crisis taught the PRC that without an aircraft carrier capability, it would not be able to reach its dream of becoming an established world power with the ability to influence regional and international affairs. Providing global reach, diplomatic persuasion, military flexibility, the US' aircraft carriers were the envy of the PLA Navy. This chapter aims to explain how the PRC's obsession with achieving world power status on par with the United States has been a key driver in the development of its aircraft carrier programme. First, it will examine the rapid progress made by the PLA Navy in the modernisation of its forces around a carrier capability since the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis and the status of its operations today. Using the same theoretical framework of Chapter 4, the constructivist approach to explaining identity, agency and structure, and change, will be applied to the Chinese ambition to become recognised as a global power.

### *Aircraft Carrier Development and Blue Water Assertiveness*

After the fall of the USSR, former Soviet satellites' inclination to offload expensive military projects was met by Chinese desire to modernise its forces through the acquisition of foreign technology and machinery. Originally claiming that the *Admiral Kuznetsov*-class carrier was to be reformatted into a casino, despite the intended port being too shallow and no gambling application being filed in China, the *Varyag* was purchased by supposedly private investors from the Ukrainian government in 1998. Shrouded in controversy, the vessel was not permitted to exit the Black Sea by Turkish officials due to the dangers of canal crossing until a \$360 million USD economic package – compared to its \$20 million price tag – was agreed between the Chinese and Turkish governments (Storey and Ji, 2004:82-84). Officially starting sea trials in August 2011, many observers consider the *Liaoning* as a “starter carrier” for the PLA Navy, using the vessel as a training device for integrating airborne competencies into its blue water naval plans (O'Rourke, 2010:20-23). Leveraging lessons learned from observing the US Pacific Fleet, and beginning with more advanced technology, the Chinese will hope to develop a viable capability within the next two to three years. Moreover, PLA Navy press releases have several times asserted its plans to construct a series of indigenous aircraft

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carriers, while expressing a desire for larger vessels to carry more fighters and even nuclear powered engines within the decade (Ibid.:20-23). However, the operational significance of the Chinese carrier depends on the PLA Navy's ability to effectively conduct joint military operations; it will likely be decades before the PRC is able to compete with the US Navy in terms of size and proficiency.

Sea trials of the *Liaoning* and the PRC's expressed desire to accelerate its aircraft carrier programme have occurred in the backdrop of heightened tensions in the South China Sea due to growing Chinese blue-water assertiveness. Disputes over island chains with several states in the Pacific region over natural resources and defensive perimeters have shed considerable spotlight on China's naval build up. A confrontation with the Philippines, ongoing since 2011 over fishing rights near the Spratlys islands, has typified the trend of Chinese encroachment in other states' Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), despite demarcations ratified by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and effective since 1994 (Al Jazeera, 2014). In light of its desire to establish itself as a world power, such developments draw attention to the PRC's inability to influence events abroad to suit their national interests in the same manner the United States has dictated the state of play within the Pacific since the end of WWII. For example, an unfortunate by-product of China's meteoric economic rise has been energy insecurity with an increasing reliance on sources imported from the Middle East through the Strait of Malacca between Malaysia and Singapore to fuel its industrial needs. What former Chinese President Hu Jintao identified as the "Malacca dilemma," the PRC has developed a "fundamental economic dependence on energy imported through maritime straits under the control of other navies" (Jones et al., 2014:11). Increasing political and price instability of these import zones has revealed China's lack of influence abroad, and thus spurred them to develop the type of blue-water capability that would enable them to manipulate foreign affairs far from their borders.

In November 2013, the PRC outlined a new "air-defence identification zone" within the South China Sea and demand any aircraft entering the zone comply certain rules or risk "emergency defence measures" (BBC, 2013). Encompassing several of these disputed island chains – most notably the Senakuku Islands which are claimed by Japan and Taiwan, as well as China – the new boundaries have received highly vocalised criticism. Admiral Harry Harris, Commander of the US Pacific Fleet, condemned the manoeuvre as a "witches' brew for miscalculations," arguing that the "aggressive growth of the Chinese military, the lack of transparency and a pattern of increasingly assertive behaviour," are serving only undermine regional securing (Wroe, 2014). Many states within the region, especially Japan and South Korea, are entered into defence agreements with the United States and rely on the hegemon to maintain regional security and protect the status quo. However, the PRC has been making strides to directly confront the American naval presence in an attempt to unnerve the US' role in the South China Sea.

A curious encounter between the *USS Cowpens* missile cruiser and a small vessel escorting the *Liaoning* in international waters in December 2013 marked one of the first direct confrontations between the PLA Navy and its American counterpart. After the US cruiser ignored demands to leave the area, the Chinese ship steered itself straight in front of the *Cowpens*' pathway forcing it to radically alter its course to avoid a collision. A subsequent radio conversation between respective officers ended with the US leaving the area thwarted and confused (Holmes, 2013). The incident was an immense symbolic victory for the PRC who successfully managed to bar one of the US' most sophisticated surface ships from entering an area in its presence without having to fire a shot. Likely to be the first of many standoffs, confrontation is reflective of China's craving to be taken more seriously as an authority within the South China Sea, and have its national interests respected in light of its newfound military hardware. Returning with a constructivist lens, this chapter will examine the social aspects of China's desire to assert itself as a world power and how this has encouraged the modernisation of its navy around an aircraft carrier capability.

### *Identity*

The neorealist position that pre-set identity dynamics based on the assumption of systemic anarchy make conflict an unavoidable feature of international relations, is as misleading as it is pessimistic (Gries, 2006:311). Constructivism asserts that because domestic behaviour is not solely dictated by self-help government interests, identities of actors within the state system are an integral component to determining the drivers of foreign policy decision making. Identity formation, as viewed through the constructivist lens, occurs through interaction with certain interests becoming confounded by repeated practice (Hopf, 1998). In his examination of rising tensions in Sino-American

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relations, Peter Gries argues that individuals tend to identify with their state in a positive manner; when it is challenged, as with China over the sovereignty of Taiwan, nationalist attitudes may create a theatre of competition which build up conflict with the challenger (Gries, 2006:311-12). In the case of China and its burgeoning obsession with achieving world status, exchanges with the United States in particular have fuelled an inferiority complex within the Chinese public. In addition to the Taiwan Strait Crisis, several other factors led to the re-emergence of anti-American sentiment throughout China during the 1990s. US opposition to Beijing as a host of the 2000 Olympic games, invitations of Taiwan's president to speak at universities, joined with a history of confrontation with the United States have merged into a national desire to confront the western bully (Li, 2005:51). Furthermore, despite the proclaimed miracle of its phenomenal rise, a Chinese national has yet to be awarded a Nobel Prize within the field of economics. To add further insult to injury, the first Chinese winner was the dissident writer Gao Xingjian, prompting nationalist resentment of the West's overinflated ego (Gries, 2006). An unpleasant reminder of unfair treatment during the Century of Humiliation, failure of the PRC to receive formalised reaffirmation from the outside world has led China to take measures into its own hands.

As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and one of the few holders of nuclear weapons, the aircraft carrier club remained one of the few elite groups symbolising great power status that China was not yet part of. With their extraordinary cost, most countries struggle to justify spending tax revenue on aircraft carriers. For China, however, obtaining national backing to bear the burden of funding was a less a question of asking, but rather responding to demand (Storey and Ji, 2004). In addition to the defensive purpose served to a country increasingly aware of its own self-worth, an aircraft carrier presence is exactly the type of political symbol desired to cement its rightful place in the global order. Before the *Liaoning*, even the competing emerging powers of Brazil and India had naval airborne capabilities. Thus, the Chinese people were eager to put themselves on par with foreign competitors and be more assertive against perceived injustices from around the world. Chinese identities, underlined by nationalism and growing confidence, have pushed the PRC to take measures to focus on shows of strength to increase recognition from abroad, revealing motivations to use an aircraft carrier as a symbol of its deserved place as a world power.

## *Agency and Structure*

The co-composition of the agency-structure spectrum in the PRC regarding its desire to be recognised as a leader among nations has played a significant role in prioritising its aircraft carrier programme. Mainstream international relations theories, with assumptions concerning the inherent anarchic nature of international relations, approach the agency-structure debate by leaning heavily towards the influence of either individual actors or overhanging social structures in the determination of behaviour. Constructivism, however, contends that because competing identities and interests are always in competition for recognition, the balance between the relative sway of agents and structures is mutually determined (Checkel, 1998, Hurd, 2008). The effect to which agents can act independently of structural influences, for example, is the product of the interplay between the entities; actors involved in the PRC's economic position share a reciprocal relationship with government superstructures. As Dali Yang contends, "while the Chinese state has played an important role in expanding the market, market expansion has, in turn helped prepare the ground for the rationalisation of the state" (cited in Pieke, 2004:517). Economic policies since the 1980s have undoubtedly been pivotal in facilitating the legitimacy of the CCP's rule in China, but they have also empowered its domestic audience with leverage over government behaviour. In order to appease these greater interests abroad, the CCP has had to lessen its central grip and integrate "horizontal linkage between institutions in the Chinese foreign policy community" (Hao and Su, 2005:7). The resulting practice of policy coordination and consensus building has led official international decisions to be consulted between a panel of delegated departments – including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade, and other national security and defence organisations – and demonstrates the increasing realisation within the Chinese government of the multiplicity of foreign policy considerations (Ibid.).

After President Jian Zemin launched the "go out" trade policy in the 1990s, China's international trade boomed by almost 600 percent between 2001 and 2007, with thousands of Chinese firms operating overseas in resource-rich developing countries (Economy, 2010:145). Increasingly aware of its global footprint, particularly after emerging relatively unscathed by the 2009 Recession in comparison to the West, the Chinese public raised its expectations

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regarding how it should be respected by other states and how its government should behave accordingly. As the result of "expanding national interests created by deeper integration into the world economy," China's naval modernisation, with particular attention to its aircraft carrier ambitions, sets out to cement its position as a global power in proportion to its economic strength (Glosny et al., 2010:161). Domestic agents in China have surmounted previous structural barriers to significantly enhance their role in determining the direction of the PRC's foreign policy, demanding an aircraft carrier capability to reinforce its bid to garner global power prestige

## *Change*

Explaining major systemic change has proved to be a major struggle for most international relations scholars. Constructivists propose that because there is a continuous contest for meanings within social groups, previously subdued interests gain relevance and momentum towards altering the status quo (Adler, 1997). Transformations in the direction of the PRC's foreign policy since 1996, especially its shift to prioritise offensive rather than defensive naval capabilities, are reflective of developments within the Chinese domestic audience. In 2010, China overtook the United States as the world largest consumer of energy, and with urbanisation steadily on the rise, the country is likely to continue to look beyond its borders for natural resources (Economy, 2010:146). With growing awareness of its interconnected relationships with the outside world, actors within China demonstrate a deep concern for how its government behaves abroad. Suggestive of the Chinese desire to command responsibility as a global power during times of crisis, China's carrier ambitions stretch beyond warfighting and to participate in an array of operations from disaster relief to peacekeeping. In 2008, the PRC deployed a taskforce of four ships to take part in counter-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia, demonstrating how "even a limited power-projection capability could pay international dividends" (Glosny, et al., 2010:167) If the PRC was solely concerned with using an aircraft carrier for non-traditional naval missions – such as humanitarian aid – in order to address certain great power responsibilities, it could have followed Japan in constructing a relatively inexpensive helicopter platform. However, nationalist pressure from China's domestic audience and military elites have steered the PRC way from a cheaper and potentially more effective option. As Ross contends, the Chinese "are seeking international prestige, rather than simply the ability to fulfil China's reputed humanitarian responsibilities" (2010:173).

Capitalising on nationalist momentum, the PRC's military elites also hope to garner support for a more entrepreneurial blue-water force. Having endured decades of domination from superior US ships, members of the PLA Navy seek the machinery that will enable them to assert what they believe is their rightful place in the international security balance. Despite the cryptic nature of the PLA Navy's press releases, many analysts predict China's naval expansion to occur in three phases: firstly securing a defensive first island chain within the South China Sea, secondly extending naval capacity outwards into the Pacific region, and finally achieving a global capability by 2050 (Economy, 2010:149, O'Rourke, 2010). With its foreign policy operating under "a new pattern characterised by increasing domestic restraints," the governing CCP has had to evolve with the demands of internal actors in order to preserve its leadership of the PRC (Hao and Su, 2005:2). Following a national yearning for global prestige, in light of recent the embarrassment of US superiority during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis, have fuelled a dramatic change from China's previous focus on coastline defensive to long ranging blue water naval capabilities fitting of a world power.

## *Concluding Comments*

The Third Taiwan Strait Crisis revealed that despite the PRC's increasingly pivotal position in the world economy, it still failed to command the respect it felt deserved of a world power. As China continues its great internal expansion, actors within the state are recognising the interconnected nature of the PRC's relationships with the outside, while growing in confidence about their position within the international system. Henry Kissinger's works, for example, has always been highly admired by the Chinese because rather than belittling their accomplishments with a wary threat perception, they recognize China as a rising and future power and emphasize the need for collaboration (Gries, 2006:320). Its reactions to imbalanced views about western superiority, typified by the "Nobel Prize complex," characterise China's discontent with its subservient position in world affairs and reveal its motivation to pursue the machinery that could garner more authority and respect. A close examination of forces contributing to developments in identity, agency and structure, and change as they relate China's aim of world power recognition exposes the



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underlying forces driving PLA Navy modernisation. Reflective of its goal to “democratise the US hegemonic order,” and vault over a history of grievances over unfair treatment, Chinese aircraft carrier ambitions have been integral to the countries plans to establish itself as a leading figure in international relations (Holmes, 2013).

## CHAPTER VI – CONCLUSION

After millennia of inward focus, China's destiny appears to be inextricably linked to the outside world, and its aircraft carrier ambitions are an interesting aspect of the PRC's struggle to define itself in the twenty-first century. As Roy Bin Wong illustrates, “the symbol of China's traditional culture is the yellow soil of the agrarian past; the symbol of China's future is the blue ocean connecting China to the vast world beyond its borders” (Wong, 1997:197). Although fears over what Chinese aircraft carrier development implies to the current international balance of power are not entirely unfounded, solely basing key foreign policy decisions on what certain capabilities imply for self-help intentions sets a counterproductive precedent to future diplomatic efforts.

It seems only a matter of time before the United States' hegemonic status is coherently challenged by emerging powers like the People's Republic of China. Therefore, understanding the country's motivations, particularly when it comes to military considerations, is incredibly important in the management of relations and negotiation of crises in the years to come. This dissertation has attempted to explain the underlying domestic factors that have contributed to the PRC's decision to invest in an aircraft carrier capability. The constructivist approach was used because of its relevant assumptions about the multifaceted nature of international relations and recognition of domestic audiences as key instigators to international affairs. By analysing the Chinese public, this paper has revealed that the *Liaoning* and its predecessors are a reflection of China's yearning for greater recognition and respect, rather than retribution, in a world that it is growing increasingly apart of. A national psyche, heavily influenced by previous traumas inflicted by foreign superpowers during the Century of Humiliation, was a key contributor to Chinese insecurities following the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis. Outmuscled by the United States of an issue considered fundamentally a concern of Chinese sovereignty, national outcry was instrumental to generating support for to bear the financial burden of aircraft carrier development. Moving forward, the PRC's growing confidence regarding its status in relation to other nations has led its domestic audience to demand a more assertive presence abroad and fitting of its economic might. The symbolic power represented by the aircraft carrier was central to China's public demand to gain an aircraft carrier capability and reflective of internal desires to achieve world power prestige.

Further areas of research could include the influence of other domestic factors, such as the significance of shipbuilding industries or historical naval traditions, and hold the potential to further unravel the fixation on aircraft carrier proliferation. Moreover, although China tends to grab more headlines, India's naval developments in recent years have been arguably the more aggressive of the two. Knowledge of the social elements driving Indian naval policy could prove invaluable to future international relations, particularly in light of its ever-present tensions with Pakistan and its proximity to crucial sea lanes connecting the Middle East and Africa to Asia. Nonetheless, considering the importance of previously overlooked social determinants of state behaviour has led to a greater understanding of the motivations underlying China's foreign policy. The Chinese dragon is not a volatile beast committed to uprooting the current international system, but rather an intricate creature composed of multiple identities and interests and eager to increase its role in international affairs.

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