

China's Newest Warships

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The news last month that China will soon take delivery of the first of two Russia-built Sovremenny-class destroyers will inevitably result in heated talk about the ships' Sunburn cruise missiles. But before getting bogged down in the capability of the ships, we should examine what their transfer means in the larger context of China's arms procurement and defence strategy. Three important points stand out.

First, the procurement of these ships further broadens an already impressive, nearly decade-long Chinese military-technical relationship with the Soviet Union/Russia. Russian arms transfers to China include a wide range of major conventional weapons platforms: aircraft, including Su-27 fighters and Mi-17 helicopters; anti-air and ship-to-ship missiles; and naval vessels, including Kilo-class submarines and now the Sovremennys. Other reported transfers include aircraft engines and main battle tanks.

But interestingly, China's thirst for foreign weapon systems tells us more about the utter failure of its home-grown defence industry to provide the People's Liberation Army with what it needs. In a significant shift away from a largely "self-reliant" posture for its hardware modernization needs, China has over the past five years increasingly turned from its own crumbling defence-production sector towards a "go abroad" arms-procurement strategy. In other words, its boosted foreign weapons purchases highlight areas of indigenous military technical weakness, while also signalling new areas of military improvement.

Second, weapons imports such as the Sovremennys represent an increasingly rational effort on the part of military planners to link new security perceptions to arms-procurement plans. As China's security strategy has evolved from a concern with land-based borders and a "People's War" to focus on projecting power over water and into the air to China's east and southeast, so too have its procurement plans shifted from seemingly endless production runs of clunky armour, infantry weapons and other 1960s-era weaponry to more sophisticated naval and air assets.

The single most powerful motivating force here is the PLA's need to respond with effective force to a Taiwan contingency. At the moment, and into the medium term, China's military toolbox vis-à-vis Taiwan holds little more than bluster and ballistic-missile threats—not a particularly flexible or effective menu of choices for Beijing's leaders. When Chinese military planners look across the Taiwan Strait, what they must decide they lack is a combination of hardware and supporting logistics—to achieve a range of options along the escalation ladder, from harassment and blockades to anti-submarine and anti-surface warfare, to sea denial, to gaining air superiority.

Hence, the spate of foreign purchases over the past decade to help fill in these gaps. In addition, Beijing is devoting considerable resources to developing and deploying increasing numbers of more precise stand-off weapons, such as ballistic and cruise missiles—its niche in an otherwise troubled defence-production sector. We should expect these procurement patterns to continue.

Indeed, the capabilities of the Sovremennys fit neatly into these broader requirements. The ship wasn't designed by the Soviets to operate independently on the high seas. Rather, it is best suited to stay within land-based defences—the ship's outdated steam-powered propulsion system and poor defences make it a sitting duck on its own. However, it is able through its complement of eight SS-N-22 Sunburn anti-ship missiles to pack a powerful punch 120 kilometres or more from the ship, keeping would-be intruders at bay.

Finally, it is important to recognize that one (or even two) 8,000-tonne ship doesn't a navy make. Recall too that this is a service arm that still goes by the name "People's Liberation Army Navy," or "Plan," reflecting not only its second-place status, but the still-unfamiliar nature of naval operations for the Chinese military. Just sailing the ship from St. Petersburg to its new home port will be one of the longest undertakings in the navy's 50-year history. Moreover, getting the new hardware is one thing. Getting it right—in terms of doctrine, technologies, training, maintenance, logistics and joint operations—is another matter. Thus, the good and bad news for China is that the Sovremennys will easily be the largest, most modern and most sophisticated warships its navy has ever operated.

Still, these developments bear careful observation by China's neighbours. China today enjoys unprecedented access to dual-use technologies, and is working (again) to streamline its defence-production sector. That, combined with a more focused procurement strategy—including foreign weapons and technologies—aimed at Taiwan, means that China is steadily making progress in becoming a more capable military force within the narrowly defined confines of a Taiwan contingency. Still, China's ultimate aim of possessing superior force to compel unification with Taiwan remains a distant hope. But at a minimum, its current procurement strategy will increasingly complicate the political-military calculus in both Taipei and Washington—precisely its intention.