

Deception *by the* BY BRAHMA CHELLANEY Boatload

The shocking rise of the Chinese navy.

China's announcement that its first aircraft carrier is ready to set sail as early as the end of this month has refocused attention on the country's naval ambitions. So, too, has the Pakistani defense minister's disclosure that his country recently asked China to start building a naval base at its strategically positioned port of Gwadar, on the Arabian Sea.

Both revelations underscore China's preference for strategic subterfuge.

After it bought the 67,500-ton, Soviet-era *Varyag* carrier—still little more than a hull when the Soviet Union collapsed—China repeatedly denied that it had any intention to refit it for naval deployment. For example, Zhang Guangqin, Deputy Director of the Chinese State Commission for Science, Technology, and Industry for National Defense, said in 2005 that the *Varyag* was not being modified for military use. However, work to refit the carrier had already begun in Dalian, China's main shipyard.

In order to deflect attention from the real plan, the state-run media reported plans to turn the *Varyag* into a "floating casino" near Macau. And, to lend credence to that claim, the two smaller Soviet-era aircraft carri-

ers that were purchased with the *Varyag* in 1998–2000 were developed into floating museums.

The first official acknowledgement that China was turning the *Varyag* into a fully refurbished, deployable aircraft carrier came this month, just when it was almost ready to set sail. And the acknowledgement came from General Chen Bingde, the chief of the People's Liberation Army, in an interview with *Global Times*, the Communist Party's hawkish mouthpiece.

Subterfuge is also apparent in China's plans at Gwadar, where a Chinese-built but still-underused commercial port opened in 2007. From the time construction of the port began, Gwadar was widely seen as representing China's first strategic foothold in the Arabian Sea, as part of its strategy to assemble a "string of pearls" along the Indian Ocean rim. It was known that Gwadar, which overlooks Gulf shipping lanes and is near the Iran border, would eventually double as a naval base. Yet all along, China continued to insist that Gwadar's only role was commercial.

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Not surprisingly, then, Pakistani Defense Minister Ahmed Mukhtar's public comments about a naval base at Gwadar deeply embarrassed China's government. At the end of a recent visit to Beijing with Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani, Mukhtar reported that the Chinese government was more than happy to oblige whatever requests for assistance the Pakistani side made, including reaching an agreement to take over operation of the Gwadar port after the existing contract with a Singaporean government company expires. China also made a gift to Pakistan of fifty JF-17 fighter jets.

More importantly, Mukhtar disclosed that Pakistan had asked China to begin building the naval base. "We would be...grateful to the Chinese government if a naval base is...constructed at the site of Gwadar for Pakistan," he announced in a statement. He later told a British newspaper in an interview: "We have asked our Chinese brothers to please build a naval base at Gwadar."

After Pakistan revealed the plans for a naval base, China responded with equivocation, saying that "this issue

was not touched upon" during the visit. Given China's proclivity for strategic stealth, even its work on the Gwadar port was launched quietly. Moreover, China does not wish to deepen the concerns that it aroused in Asia last year by openly discarding Deng Xiaoping's dictum, *tao guang yang hui* ("conceal ambitions and hide claws"). On a host of issues, including its territorial claims in the South China Sea and against Japan and India, China spent 2010 staking out a more muscular position.

On these issues, too, the gap between Chinese officials' words and actions is revealing. For example, China persisted with its unannounced rare-earth embargo against Japan for seven weeks while continuing to claim in public that no export restrictions had been imposed. Like its denials last year about deploying Chinese troops in Pakistani-held Kashmir to build strategic projects, China has demonstrated a troubling propensity to obscure the truth.

The *Global Times*, however, has not been shy about advertising China's interest in establishing naval bases overseas. In a recent editorial, "China Needs Overseas Bases for Global Role," the newspaper urged the outside world to "understand China's need to set up overseas military bases."

The insurrection against Pakistani rule in the mineral-rich southern province of Baluchistan may impede China's plan to turn Gwadar into an energy transshipment hub to transport Gulf and African oil to western China by pipeline. But the insurgency is no barrier to China's use of Gwadar to project power in the Middle East and East Africa, and against peninsular India. Indeed, to get into the Great Power maritime game, China needs Gwadar to redress its main weakness—the absence of a naval anchor in the Indian Ocean region, where it plans to have an important military presence.

What was touted as a floating casino is now being launched as the floating centerpiece of China's growing naval prowess. In fact, with a second and larger aircraft carrier currently under construction, it may not be long before China displays its naval capabilities by dispatching a carrier battle group to the Indian Ocean—if not basing one at Gwadar. ♦

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