
China SignPost “Greatest Hits” #2: Military & Security Developments

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In the three years since we established *China SignPost*, Beijing’s military developments—both in technical and operational terms—have been nothing short of astounding. We’ve covered the most important milestones closely, offering insights into dynamics of disproportionate impact while debunking misconceptions that threaten to mislead observers seeking to understand the larger implications.

In late 2010, Admiral Robert Willard, Commander, U.S. Pacific Command, stated that the PLA’s DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM)—the first of its kind anywhere in the world—had reached the rough equivalent of what the U.S. military terms “initial operational capability” (IOC). *China SignPost™* drew extensively upon Chinese language sources and provided the first comprehensive published analysis of this key strategic development. It was the first publicly available assessment explaining that open source trend lines strongly supported the DF-21D’s having reached ~IOC and initial deployment in small numbers.

Andrew Erickson and Gabe Collins, “[China Deploys World’s First Long-Range, Land-Based ‘Carrier Killer’: DF-21D Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile \(ASBM\) Reaches ‘Initial Operational Capability’ \(IOC\)](#),” *China SignPost™* (洞察中国) 14 (26 December 2010).

This was the first comprehensive unclassified analyses of the ASBM from a U.S. Navy perspective based on trends in Chinese-language sources. It successfully challenged outdated views on such issues as whether China would develop and deploy an ASBM. We persisted despite widespread [public skepticism](#) because we were confident that extensive, meticulous analysis of authoritative Chinese-language doctrinal/technical publications yielded meaningful patterns and instructive indications.

This and related publications on China’s ASBM development have been read by U.S. Navy leadership, have been posted on the Fleet Forces Command website, have been discussed widely in U.S. Navy circles and beyond, have received considerable citations (including from then-Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michèle Flournoy), and have won multiple awards.

In addition to the ASBM analysis, *China SignPost™* has also consistently been among the first to provide rapid, accurate analysis of China’s first significant overseas naval and air

deployments. Of particular note, we comprehensively assessed both the March 2011 deployment of the missile frigate *Xuzhou* to the seas off Libya and the PLA Air Force's mission in which four IL-76 long-range transport aircraft flew from northwest China to Sabha, (east-central) Libya to evacuate hundreds of Chinese citizens stranded there. The 2011 Libya crisis represented a coming of age for China's military, as it was the first long-range, multi-service deployment in direct defense of Chinese citizens trapped in a dangerous environment.

Gabe Collins and Andrew Erickson, "[The PLA Air Force's First Overseas Operational Deployment: Analysis of China's Decision to Deploy IL-76 Transport Aircraft to Libya](#)," *China SignPost™* (洞察中国) 27 (1 March 2011).

China's now five-year-old anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden and the landmark deployments the PLA air and naval forces undertook during the 2011 Libyan Civil War highlight the country's small but rapidly emerging expeditionary military capabilities and mindset. China's aircraft carrier *Liaoning*—which entered service in September 2012—is an important if complicated symbol of the country's rising sea power.

China SignPost's analysts have been at the forefront of explaining *Liaoning's* strategic impacts. *China SignPost's* coverage offers particular value because we delve directly into the strengths and weaknesses of the subcomponents of China's new naval power push—such as the J-15 fighter aircraft that is operating off *Liaoning*.

Our analysis is unique because it draws on Chinese language sources as well as insights from former naval aviators to provide a measured, technically informed assessment of what the carrier and its jets can and cannot do. Most importantly, as with much of our research, this product was anticipatory. We published it well over a year before the J-15 began any actual flight operations from *Liaoning*.

Gabe Collins and Andrew Erickson, "[Flying Shark' Gaining Altitude: How Might New J-15 Strike Fighter Improve China's Maritime Air Warfare Ability?](#)" *China SignPost™* (洞察中国) 38 (7 June 2011).

In addition to providing rapid, on-point analysis of breaking events, *China SignPost* has also published research illustrating the dynamics that are motivating and shaping China's military modernization, as well as detailed examination of strategic implications for other major powers. When we believe it provides value to our readers, we do not hesitate to take on controversial issues and analyze them rigorously. This we did in our

“Strategic Horizons” series, which examined key drivers behind China’s rapid naval modernization and what it means for key regional forces, including those of the U.S. and Japan.

Andrew Erickson and Gabe Collins, “[Near Seas ‘Anti-Navy’ Capabilities, Not Nascent Blue Water Fleet, Constitute China’s Core Challenge to U.S. and Regional Militaries](#),” *China SignPost™* (洞察中国) 55 (6 March 2012).

Andrew Erickson and Gabe Collins, “[China’s Rising Seaborne Food and Fuel Imports: Propelling Naval Expansion?](#)” *China SignPost™* (洞察中国) 59 (12 May 2012).

As we enter 2014, *China SignPost* will continue to follow developments of disproportionate significance and draw upon a wide range of data and ideas that span multiple disciplines to offer original insights into China and its impact on the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. When it comes to breaking and far-reaching developments, we want to make sure that you read solid analysis of them here before it’s available anywhere else.

About Us**China Signpost™ 洞察中国—“Clear, high-impact China analysis.”©**

China SignPost™ aims to provide high-quality China analysis and policy recommendations in a concise, accessible form for people whose lives are being affected profoundly by China’s political, economic, and security development. We believe that by presenting practical, apolitical China insights we can help citizens around the world form holistic views that are based on facts, rather than political rhetoric driven by vested interests. We aim to foster better understanding of key Chinese developments, with particular focus on natural resource, technology, industry, and trade issues.

China SignPost™ 洞察中国 founders Dr. Andrew Erickson and Mr. Gabe Collins have more than a decade of combined government, academic, and private sector experience in Mandarin Chinese language-based research and analysis of China. Dr. Erickson is an Associate Professor at the U.S. Naval War College’s China Maritime Studies Institute (CMSI) and an Associate in Research at Harvard’s John King Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies. Mr. Collins is a J.D. candidate at the University of Michigan Law School. His research focuses on commodity, security, and rule of law issues in China, Russia, and Latin America.

The positions expressed here are the authors’ personal views. They do not represent the policies or estimates of the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Government, or any other organization. The authors have published widely on maritime, energy, and security issues relevant to China. An archive of their work is available at www.chinasignpost.com.