

P.R.C. tries to shift to offshore defense

by Our Special Correspondent

Due to its financial crisis, the People's Republic of China has considered giving up building any aircraft carriers, and has instead decided to construct a new air force base on one of the Paracel Islands. These small islands lie off the coast of Vietnam and Hainan Island (China) in the South China Sea north of the Straits of Malacca, probably the single busiest sea route in the world. This would be the first time that the People's Republic will have made the great change of adjusting its coastal defense strategy to an offshore defense.

Early in March 1989, Chang Chun Sam, Vice Commander of the P.R.C. Navy, pointed out that during the development of the P.R.C. naval force over the past four decades, because its economic strength was not up to what was required, it could only develop a coastal defense strategy. In fact, following the trends of worldwide development, the ocean becomes more and more important in our national economic construction day by day, Chang said. We must carry out our strategic change as soon as possible, as it can benefit us by protecting our ocean territory, marine resources, shipping, and other activities in ocean development. In addition, we might recover our jurisdiction over the outlying islands, he concluded.

Conflict with Vietnam

Actually, what has forced the P.R.C. to urgently change its coastal defense strategy is the naval expansion of Japan, India, and Vietnam. India, which has already bought two aircraft carriers from Great Britain and is building another four itself, intends to have the Indian Ocean under its control and turn it into an "Indian lake." Although Vietnam is not powerful enough to push into the high seas, it will without hesitation attempt to penetrate the eastern territory of the South China Sea and the southern Paracel Islands. The latter especially would be a gun pointing at the back of China, and challenge its jurisdiction. This forced the P.R.C. to develop its "offshore defense project" and led it to consider a fleet of carriers necessary.

In addition, fighting broke out between China and Vietnam in early 1988 over the strategically located Spratly Islands, to the southeast of the Paracel group. The Spratlys are also claimed by Taiwan, the Philippines, and Malaysia.

China sent in warships and troops, provoking Vietnamese protests. Taiwan maintains a battalion-strength garrison on Itu Aba, the largest of the islands. China has been carrying out troop exercises, including marine and paratroop units, on many of the Spratlys.

The aircraft carrier project

In 1985, for further research into the structure, equipment, and facilities of carriers before they attempted to build one with their present technologies, the P.R.C. purchased a retired carrier from Australia. A "flying commander class" was set up at the Naval Academy in Canton, in order to train the first generation of P.R.C. carrier commanders. In March 1988, conflict with the Vietnamese on South Paracel Island promoted the acceleration of the project, but facing economic crisis and China's technological backwardness, the project was abandoned.

A heavyweight carrier must have the capability of attacking power on the high seas. The P.R.C. at present lacks those technologies and faces great difficulties in getting such technologies transferred from the developed countries. The billions of dollars in annual maintenance costs would be a heavy burden to the government, and right now the P.R.C. cannot afford to take this risk. Third, the carrier itself has some weak points in its development, because it will become the main target of a sea battle and needs a fleet of warships for security escort. Based on these considerations, the P.R.C. must give up its dream of building carriers at this time. They are turning their hopes to setting up new bases on the offshore islands instead, so that their coastal defense line can be expanded.

From the strategic point of view, an air force base on the Paracel Islands is being considered for the following reasons: 1) The P.R.C. might easily increase its influential power in the South China Sea, and thus gain complete control of the coastal territory of Vietnam and the Philippines. 2) To protect its political interests on the ocean boundary, Navy fighters and mid-range bombers will be suitable to protect South Paracel Island as well. 3) A consideration of economic interest, is that all marine resources, such as the rich undersea oil fields, can be well protected by the powerful air force which is stationed in this area. 4) It could cut into the military power bases of the United States and U.S.S.R. in the South China Sea, where the U.S. has Clark Field airbase in the Philippines, and the Soviets have an airforce base in Vietnam.

Even though the P.R.C. intended to construct a new air force base in the Paracel Islands, there are many new problems they have to face. The islands are little more than coral reefs, drowned at high tide. Construction will be difficult, and even when finished it will be difficult for MiG fighters to take off and land. In addition to any preliminary requirements such as fuel reserve tanks, ammunition storage and bunkers, a long-range supply line will be necessary from Haikow on Hainan Island.