

Welcome to This Week's Asia on the Horizon

(16 JUNE 2025)

This week's edition of Asia on the Horizon captures a region bracing for change—militarily, diplomatically, and economically. At the forefront is China's unprecedented deployment of both its Liaoning and Shandong aircraft carriers into the western Pacific. Not merely a show of force, the operation marks a doctrinal shift in China's naval strategy: from near-seas defense to blue-water projection. With over 960 carrier-based takeoffs and landings, including provocative interceptions near Japanese aircraft, the dual-carrier exercise has rattled capitals from Tokyo to Taipei, reinforcing anxieties about China's expanding reach beyond the First Island Chain. In our Map of the Week, we break down the maneuver's geography and scale, while the Photo of the Week offers a striking visual of the carriers in formation. Our in-depth Analysis examines whether this is a rehearsal for high-intensity operations—or the beginning of a strategic normalization at sea.

At the same time, Beijing is pursuing influence on a very different front. As highlighted in this week's Regional Analysis, China hosted over 50 African ministers in Changsha for the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) follow-up and the China-Africa Economic and Trade Expo. There, Foreign Minister Wang Yi announced the complete elimination of tariffs on imports from all 53 African diplomatic partners—extending preferential access even to middle-income economies like Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya. More than just a trade move, the tariff waiver is part of a wider South–South diplomacy agenda. With the U.S. having imposed steep tariffs on African goods earlier this year, Beijing's initiative reinforces its self-presentation as the champion of equitable globalization. Our Infographic of the Week captures the strategic messaging exchanged between President Xi Jinping and South Korean President Lee Jae-myung, offering another snapshot of Beijing's parallel diplomatic push in Northeast Asia.

Amid these overlapping developments, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi embarked on a diplomatic tour of Cyprus, Canada (for the G7 summit), and Croatia—pushing India's message of counterterrorism, economic multilateralism, and strategic engagement with Europe. The duality running through this week's newsletter is clear: as China combines military signaling with global economic outreach, other regional actors are adjusting their posture—some seeking reassurance, others realignment. The Indo-Pacific remains, as ever, a laboratory of global change.

We hope this issue offers the clarity, context, and connections needed to navigate it.



1. KEY DEVELOPMENTS

China deploys both aircraft carriers in Pacific—marking a first and raising regional alarms

On June 7–8, Tokyo reported that China’s two operational aircraft carriers, Liaoning and Shandong, were simultaneously operating in the western Pacific—an unprecedented move. The Liaoning sailed near Minamitorishima within Japan’s exclusive economic zone, while the Shandong was observed around the Bonin Islands, east of Okinotorishima. China described these maneuvers as “routine training” under international law. But Japan deemed the activity a significant escalation—an expansion of China’s naval reach beyond the first island chain and well into areas sensitive to U.S. and Japanese strategic interests.

The naval activity was accompanied by dangerous aerial behavior: on June 7 and 8, a Shandong-launched J-15 fighter shadowed a P-3C Japanese patrol aircraft for extended periods—up to 80 minutes—and came within as little as 45 meters. Tokyo formally lodged protests via its embassy in Beijing, warning of potential collision risks and urging steps to prevent recurrence. Taiwan, too, condemned the dual-carrier deployment as evidence of expansionist intent and signaled continued investments in air and maritime defenses.

Chinese carriers’ Pacific sortie underscores ‘expansionist’ ambitions, says Taiwan

On June 10–11, Taiwan’s Defence Minister Wellington Koo condemned the joint deployment of China’s two aircraft carriers—the Liaoning and Shandong—in a coordinated Pacific manoeuvre, protesting that such operations illustrate clear “expansionist” ambitions beyond China’s first island chain. Both carriers conducted exercises near Japan’s southern islands, with one entering Japan’s exclusive economic zone, prompting dismay in Tokyo. Beijing defended the activity as “routine training”, but regional capitals view it as a strategic declaration of intent—testing the limits of its naval presence into deeper Pacific waters and signaling a new challenge to U.S., Japanese, and Taiwanese surveillance and defense postures.

In response, Taiwan has escalated its military readiness. The island accelerated its F-16V fighter jet deliveries—receiving more than ten of its 66-jet order this year, with the remainder due in 2026. Japanese defence authorities have likewise deployed additional air defence assets and vowed close monitoring of China’s next island chain activities. Analysts highlight that China’s coordinated carrier sortie marks a significant step in its long-game naval strategy—asserting far-reaching maritime power and testing international response mechanisms in strategically sensitive Pacific zones.

Wang Yi strengthens China–Africa ties with high-level meetings in Changsha

On June 11, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi hosted a series of meetings in Changsha with African counterparts—including ministers from the DRC, Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, South Africa, Somalia, Djibouti, and Nigeria—during a FOCAC follow-up event and the Fourth China–Africa Economic & Trade Exp. He repeatedly emphasized Beijing’s readiness to turn African resource wealth into development gains, expand zero-tariff market access, and support infrastructure projects such as the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway. African ministers responded positively, highlighting China as a key partner in trade, investment, and multilateral cooperation—including in areas like energy, training, and health.

The diplomatic outreach comes alongside China’s announcement of a sweeping zero-tariff regime for all 53 African states it formally recognizes—extending duty-free access previously confined to least-developed nations to middle-income economies like South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, Kenya, and Morocco. The timing is strategic: Chinese and African officials collectively rebuked U.S. trade tariffs on African exports and urged Washington to return to "consultation on an equal, respectful and reciprocal basis". With nearly US\$11 billion in new expo deals and China pledging credit lines, training, and marketing support, the zero-tariff move deepens economic integration and strengthens Beijing’s role in shaping an alternative Global South agenda—and presses against Western protectionism in Africa.

China waives tariffs on imports from all 53 African diplomatic partners

On June 12, China announced plans to eliminate tariffs on imports from all 53 African countries it maintains diplomatic relations with—including both least developed and middle-income nations—marking historic expansion of its duty-free access regime. The decision, unveiled in Changsha during a China–Africa diplomatic meeting, goes beyond previous exemptions limited to least-developed countries: Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, and Morocco now qualify for tariff-free entry to the Chinese market. Additional support measures—training, marketing assistance, and credit lines—were pledged to help less industrialised economies avoid dominance by their more developed counterparts.

The move aligns with China’s broader push to deepen South–South cooperation in the face of rising global tensions. Beijing and African diplomats jointly urged the United States to revert to “consultation on an equal, respectful and reciprocal basis” after Washington imposed steep tariffs—up to 50%—on African exports earlier this year. China’s tariff-free pact, coupled with US\$50 billion in credit lines pledged at last year’s Beijing summit, is expected to narrow the \$62 billion Sino–African trade imbalance by increasing African export volumes. Analysts say manufacturers in middle-income countries are the immediate beneficiaries, potentially altering China–Africa trade dynamics and reinforcing Beijing’s growing diplomatic influence across the continent.

North Korea rescues and relocates capsized destroyer to Rajin for repairs

Satellite imagery from the CSIS think tank indicates that by June 8, North Korea had righted and moved its 5,000-ton destroyer—known as the Kang Kon—to the Rajin Ship Repair Factory near the Russian border. The ship had partially capsized during a May 21 launch mishap at the Chongjin shipyard, described by Kim Jong Un as a "criminal act". State media reports the hull will undergo a 7–10-day inspection before moving to a fitting-out dock to receive weapons and systems, signaling Pyongyang's commitment to pressing ahead despite the embarrassment.

On June 12, Kim publicly attended a relaunch ceremony for the Kang Kon, lauding it as proof of the regime's Western resilience and pledging two more destroyers next year. Yet analysts remain doubtful: external observers warn that critical systems—likely damaged by seawater during the capsizing—may remain impaired, casting uncertainty over the warship's operational readiness. The incident underscores North Korea's push to expand its naval reach, potentially aided by Russian technical support, and reflects the regime's urgency to showcase maritime modernization at home and abroad.

Lee Jae-myung and Xi Jinping pledge deeper Sino-Korean cooperation in first call since Lee's inauguration

On June 10, South Korea's newly inaugurated President Lee Jae-myung held his first phone call with Chinese President Xi Jinping, marking a pivotal moment in bilateral relations. The leaders committed to enhancing cooperation across economic, security, and cultural domains, signaling a strategic shift following Lee's snap election victory on June 4. Lee explicitly called on China to adopt a constructive role in the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the preservation of peace and stability—requests that Xi welcomed, framing them as aligned with mutual regional interests.

Xi underscored the necessity of respecting each nation's core concerns and charting relations on a "right track," portraying the new strategic partnership as a stabilizing force in an unpredictable geopolitical environment. For Lee, the rapprochement presents a careful diplomatic dance: reaffirming South Korea's alliance with the United States while engaging more warmly with China—and potentially, North Korea. The call reflects a deliberate recalibration of Seoul's foreign policy posture after years of tension over U.S. missile defenses, heralding a more multilateral and regionally nuanced approach.

Tentative trade framework announced after London meetings revives Geneva truce—with rare earths in focus

On June 9–10, senior US and Chinese negotiators convened in London to reinforce the truce agreed in Geneva earlier in May. They reached a preliminary “framework agreement” aimed at easing China’s export restrictions on rare earth minerals and reaffirmed commitments under the Geneva consensus, pending endorsement by Presidents Trump and Xi. The framework reportedly includes the lifting of rare earth export curbs and the potential easing of US semiconductor export restrictions toward China. Despite President Trump describing the deal as “done,” both China and analyst commentaries emphasize that it remains an initial framework—lacking detailed terms, with durability yet to be tested.

Market response was muted: S&P futures edged slightly lower, while currency and equity movement suggested the outcome was largely anticipated. Analysts broadly welcomed the de-escalation of tariff tensions but cautioned that deep-rooted structural issues—tech competition, supply chain security, and national security export controls—remain unresolved. The deal’s heavy reliance on rare earths also highlights China’s leverage, prompting observers to warn that a broader, comprehensive agreement is still distant.

Seoul halts loudspeaker propaganda aimed at North Korea—a sign of de-escalation

On June 11, South Korea’s military suspended its loudspeaker broadcasts directed at North Korea, an operation that had resumed in July 2024 in retaliation against Pyongyang’s trash-laden balloons. President Lee Jae-myung, fresh from his June 4 inauguration, had pledged to cease the broadcasts as an early gesture of peace-building, framing the move as part of a broader effort to ease bilateral tensions, restore trust, and reestablish dormant military communication channels. Local communities near the demilitarized zone—who had endured persistent K-pop and propaganda noises—welcomed the cessation, hoping for quieter and less militarised days ahead.

Reports from June 12 suggest that North Korea also stopped its counter-broadcasts—typically a cacophony of sirens, gongs, and animal noises—immediately following Seoul’s suspension. While the mutual pause offers a rare diplomatic opening, analysts remain cautious: Pyongyang has historically used such psychological tactics as pressure levers and may quickly resume them if Seoul backslides in balloon or leaflet campaigns. Still, with the loudspeakers silenced, both sides have created a fragile space for renewed military-to-military dialogue and confidence-building—an early test for President Lee’s stated priority of diplomatic engagement.

Australia reassures U.S. amid Pentagon-led review of AUKUS submarine pact

On June 11, Australia's Defence Minister Richard Marles emphasized that Canberra is working "very closely" with Washington as the Pentagon undertakes a formal review of the 2021 AUKUS trilateral submarine agreement with the U.S. and U.K.. Marles expressed confidence that the pact—destined to supply Australia with Virginia-class nuclear-powered submarines by the early 2030s and domestically built SSN-AUKUS vessels in the 2040s—remains on track despite the Trump-era administration's "America First" examination. With Canberra already committed around A\$368 billion (US \$239 billion) to the deal, Marles described the review as "natural" and said it reflects the scale and strategic significance of the undertaking.

The review has stirred domestic and international discussion. Critics warn that Australia's defense spending—at about 2.3 % of GDP—is below the 3–3.5 % levels U.S. planners seek, raising doubts about Canberra's ability to fully support the sub-fleet. Observers note that U.S. naval production capacity, already strained, may struggle to deliver submarines on schedule. Meanwhile, strategic analysts suggest the review could reshape AUKUS timelines or technical details but is unlikely to derail the core agreement. Nonetheless, the episode highlights the delicate balance between Australia's defense ambitions, fiscal prudence, and industrial-readiness within a shifting Indo-Pacific order.

China-backed militia secures rare earth mining foothold in Myanmar's Shan State

On June 12, Reuters reported that the China-aligned United Wa State Army (UWSA) has assumed control over newly established rare earth extraction sites in eastern Myanmar's Shan State. Satellite imagery and on-the-ground accounts confirm multiple leaching pools and continuous day–night mining operations managed by Chinese-speaking supervisors. Extracted heavy rare earths—key inputs like dysprosium and terbium critical for EV motors, wind turbines, and military hardware—are being trucked approximately 200 km to the Chinese border, ensuring Beijing's unhindered access amid rising U.S.–China trade frictions.

With traditional mining hubs in northern Myanmar disrupted by conflict, China appears to be relocating raw material sourcing to more stable UWSA-controlled areas. Analysts highlight that Myanmar supplied nearly half of China's rare earth imports in early 2025—and that utilizing Shan State sites, where regulations are relaxed and labor costs are low, yields substantial profit margins. Beyond economics, this move reinforces China's geopolitical position: by deepening control over strategic mineral flows, Beijing strengthens its bargaining power in trade negotiations and secures a critical component of global high-tech and defense supply chains.

Modi embarks on three-nation diplomatic tour amid G7 pivot

On June 15, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi departed on a high-profile five-day tour, marking visits to Cyprus (June 15–16), Canada—where he’ll attend the G7 summit in Kananaskis (June 16–17)—and Croatia (June 18), before returning home June 19. In a tweet, Modi stated the trip aims to “thank partner countries for their steadfast support in our fight against cross-border terrorism” and to “galvanize global understanding on tackling terrorism in all its forms”.

The Cyprus leg is historic—Modi’s first visit by an Indian prime minister in over two decades—highlighting deepening ties with the EU’s Mediterranean partners and signaling a new focus on technology, trade, and security cooperation. At the G7 summit in Canada, Modi is expected to engage with global leaders on key issues like energy security, AI, and the AI-energy nexus, while also aiming to mend strained India–Canada relations. The tour culminates with Croatia—the first-ever visit by an Indian PM—reinforcing cultural and economic bonds with Central Europe.

Bangkok and Phnom Penh advance crisis talks amid May border skirmish

On June 14, Thai and Cambodian officials convened in Phnom Penh under the Joint Boundary Commission to de-escalate tensions following a deadly skirmish on May 28 that claimed the life of a Cambodian soldier—part of long-standing disputes along undemarcated border temples along their 820 km frontier. The dialogue was described by Thai officials as “productive,” with both sides agreeing in principle to revert to the 2024 agreed troop positions and work together to reduce military presence and nationalist rhetoric. Thai government spokesperson Nikorndej Balankura emphasised that Bangkok sincerely hopes the meeting will “pave the way for a sustainable solution,” while Cambodia affirmed its intention to press unresolved areas before the International Court of Justice—a move Thailand opposes.

Despite assurances of goodwill, analysts warn that this round of talks is unlikely to yield a definitive settlement. Bangkok has threatened economic countermeasures—such as border closures and utility cuts—while Phnom Penh has retaliated with its own trade and media restrictions. Domestic political undercurrents also complicate matters: Thailand’s ruling Pheu Thai Party contends with public backlash over broader economic issues and simmering nationalist sentiment, intensifying scrutiny of its handling of the border crisis. With Cambodia firm on a judicial route via the ICJ and Thailand pushing for bilateral negotiation, the path to lasting resolution remains uncertain—leaving border villages and regional stability hanging in the balance.

Taipei blacklists Huawei and SMIC under export regime—tightening control over chip flows

On June 15, Taiwan’s Ministry of Economic Affairs added China’s tech giants Huawei and SMIC to its “strategic high-tech commodities” export control entity list—joining other entities like the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The update, made public late Saturday, mandates that Taiwanese firms must now secure government approval before exporting any technology or components to these companies. Taipei’s move follows revelations that a TSMC-manufactured chip was discovered in Huawei’s 910B AI processor, prompting similar actions from U.S. regulators. Taiwan, home to powerhouse TSMC, is aiming to safeguard its semiconductor leadership and prevent the transfer of cutting-edge know-how to China amid intensifying geopolitical competition.

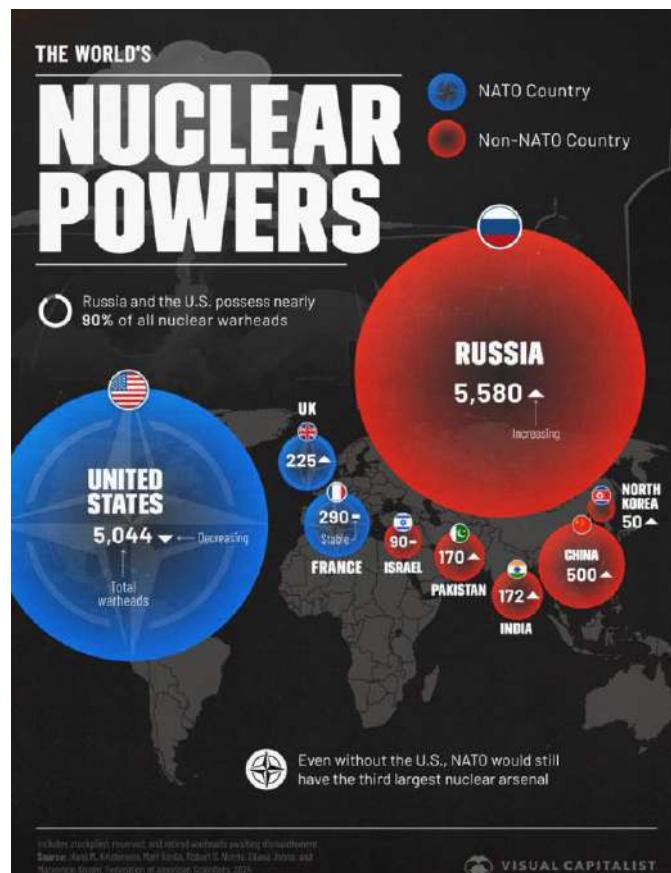
The blacklisting highlights Taipei’s resolve to deepen export controls independently—even as it aligns its policy stance with major allies like the U.S., which labeled Huawei a national security threat. It adds another layer to existing US-led restrictions aimed at curbing China’s high-end chipmaking capabilities. Analysts caution this could complicate bilateral dynamics with Beijing and stoke retaliatory scrutiny on Taiwanese tech firms. Domestically, the move likely tightens oversight for firms like TSMC and MediaTek, potentially affecting both supply chain operations and Taiwan’s ambitions to become a resilient global semiconductor hub.

2. STATISTICS OF THE WEEK

Mapping the World's Nuclear Arsenal: Rising Risks and Shifting Trends

According to the latest data from the Federation of American Scientists (2024), Russia and the United States collectively control nearly 90% of the world's nuclear warheads, with Russia leading at 5,580 (increasing) and the United States at 5,044 (decreasing). Beyond the duopoly, the global distribution reveals emerging dynamics in Asia and among NATO allies. China now possesses an estimated 500 warheads, marking the most rapid expansion among nuclear states. India (172) and Pakistan (170) maintain parity, while North Korea's arsenal is estimated at 50 warheads, though its true capability remains opaque.

NATO's collective strength remains formidable: even excluding the U.S., the alliance—through the UK (225, increasing) and France (290, stable)—would command the third-largest nuclear arsenal globally. The map also underscores the regional diffusion of deterrence strategies, with Israel (90) maintaining ambiguity and no official doctrine. As geopolitical tensions rise in Europe, the Indo-Pacific, and the Middle East, the data offers a sobering reminder: nuclear modernization is accelerating across multiple fronts—shaping doctrines, alliances, and the thresholds of global conflict.



<https://www.visualcapitalist.com/mapped-countries-with-the-most-nuclear-weapons/>

4. PHOTO OF THE WEEK

Show of Force: China's Dual Aircraft Carrier Formation in the Western Pacific

This week's image captures a historic moment in China's naval development: the first-ever simultaneous deployment of both the Liaoning and Shandong aircraft carriers conducting coordinated operations in the western Pacific on June 7–8. The image shows the two carrier strike groups sailing in parallel formation, flanked by their escort vessels and overflown by J-15 fighter jets in combat formation—symbolizing China's expanding maritime reach and growing carrier aviation capabilities.

Beijing describes the deployment as “routine training,” but Tokyo, Taipei, and Washington interpret the exercise as a strategic escalation. Japan reported that a J-15 fighter came within 45 meters of a P-3C patrol aircraft during a prolonged intercept, prompting diplomatic protests. Taiwan labeled the display “expansionist,” reaffirming its resolve to bolster coastal defenses. As the Indo-Pacific navigates rising military posturing, this photo serves as a stark visual cue: China's blue-water navy is no longer aspirational—it's operational.



<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202410/1322207.shtml>

5. INFOGRAPHIC OF THE WEEK

Xi–Lee Call Sets Strategic Reset for China–South Korea Relations

This week’s infographic visualizes a key diplomatic moment: the first phone call between Chinese President Xi Jinping and newly elected South Korean President Lee Jae-myung on June 10. As seen in their featured quotes, the conversation marked a strategic reset in bilateral ties, underscoring mutual interest in deeper cooperation amid regional instability.

President Xi emphasized the need for multilateralism, free trade, and certainty in an increasingly fragmented world, calling China and South Korea “close neighbors that cannot be moved apart.” President Lee, in turn, prioritized economic and cultural continuity, while explicitly urging Beijing to play a constructive role in Korean Peninsula denuclearization and regional peace. The infographic—courtesy of EuroHub4Sino—captures the calibrated tone of the dialogue: a blend of pragmatic economic interdependence and cautious geopolitical signaling.



6. REGIONAL ALLIANCES

Bridges, Not Bases: China's Renewed Push for Influence in Africa

Against the backdrop of mounting global polarization and intensifying Sino-American rivalry, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi convened a high-level diplomatic initiative in Changsha this past week, welcoming representatives from over 50 African countries for the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) follow-up meetings and the 4th China-Africa Economic and Trade Expo. The gathering, held from June 11, marks a renewed phase in China's long-standing Africa strategy—one that prioritizes trade liberalization, infrastructure connectivity, and South–South solidarity over traditional security alignment. It reflects Beijing's growing effort to entrench itself as the principal development partner for Africa, in contrast to what it often frames as the conditional and coercive approach of the West.

Trade, Tariffs, and Tangible Commitments

The centerpiece of this year's engagement was China's announcement that it would eliminate all tariffs on exports from the 53 African countries with which it maintains diplomatic relations. This move, building on previous exemptions limited to least-developed countries, now extends duty-free access to middle-income economies like Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. It was accompanied by new credit lines, trade facilitation training programs, and logistical support designed to help African firms scale exports to the Chinese market. Chinese officials also emphasized infrastructure collaboration—highlighting projects like the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway and regional digital connectivity—as vehicles for African industrialization.

African leaders, in turn, responded warmly. Ministers from Ghana, South Africa, Senegal, and the Democratic Republic of Congo expressed strong support for Chinese engagement, citing job creation, technology transfer, and predictable financing as key benefits. Wang Yi reaffirmed China's position as “Africa's most reliable development partner,” while several African counterparts voiced frustration with Western tariffs and political preconditions. Joint statements called for the U.S. and other developed economies to return to “equal, respectful and reciprocal” trade dialogue, implicitly contrasting their approach with Beijing's no-strings-attached model.

Strategic Soft Power and Long-Term Positioning

China's Changsha summit demonstrates that its engagement with Africa is not merely transactional—it is geopolitical. The waiver of tariffs is economically significant, but it also deepens Beijing's normative influence across African institutions and multilateral forums. As tensions mount in the Indo-Pacific, and as Western sanctions regimes grow more expansive, China is positioning Africa as a stable counterweight and strategic partner in shaping a multipolar global order. Unlike its military signaling in the South China Sea or Taiwan Strait, Beijing's Africa strategy is quiet, patient, and deeply embedded in economic interdependence.

The challenge for regional actors in Asia is twofold: to understand how China leverages its global South diplomacy to buffer against strategic isolation, and to anticipate how these partnerships might inform future coalitions on issues ranging from digital governance to global trade rules. As China reaffirms its influence in Africa without overt bases or hard power, the Changsha meetings remind us that strategic depth in the 21st century may be built more on trade corridors than on carrier strike groups.

Conclusion: Diplomacy as Strategic Infrastructure

The Changsha meetings underscore how China's Africa engagement is evolving from a commercial partnership into a platform for long-term strategic alignment. By eliminating tariffs and expanding capacity-building efforts, Beijing is not just supporting African development—it is shaping the very architecture of South–South cooperation. This deepening interdependence offers China both diplomatic insulation from Western pressure and a reservoir of political goodwill across international forums.

In contrast to its hard power assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, China's Africa strategy emphasizes continuity, infrastructure, and reciprocity—what might be called “diplomacy as strategic infrastructure.” This dual-track approach allows Beijing to project influence in multiple domains without overstressing militarily. For regional actors in Asia, the lesson is clear: China's power projection is no longer confined to fleets and factories—it now travels along trade routes, in tariff waivers, and through the institutional trust it builds with emerging economies. In an increasingly multipolar world, this model may prove just as decisive as any maritime deployment.

7. ANALYSIS

Strategic Waters: China's Dual Carrier Deployment Signals a New Maritime Era

On June 7–11, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) carried out its most ambitious naval maneuver to date: the simultaneous deployment of its two operational aircraft carriers, Liaoning and Shandong, into the western Pacific. It is the first time both carriers have operated together in the region, signaling not just progress in China's naval aviation capabilities, but also the maturation of Beijing's ability to conduct integrated maritime operations far from its shores. While Chinese authorities insist the exercise was part of routine training, its timing, geography, and scope point to a more assertive strategic message—directed as much at the United States and its allies as at domestic audiences.

A Symbolic and Tactical Breakthrough

The deployment represents a breakthrough for the PLA Navy on several fronts. The Liaoning sailed near Minamitorishima, deep within Japan's exclusive economic zone, while the Shandong maneuvered around the Bonin Islands, east of Okinotorishima. These locations are well beyond the First Island Chain, the conventional boundary of China's near-seas defense zone. By placing both carriers in the Philippine Sea simultaneously—accompanied by destroyers, frigates, and support vessels—the PLAN demonstrated growing logistical sophistication and air-sea coordination.

Notably, over 960 carrier-based aircraft sorties were conducted during the operation, including J-15 fighter launches and landings. According to Japanese officials, the exercise also included aggressive intercepts: one J-15 came within 45 meters of a Japanese P-3C patrol aircraft. Tokyo issued a formal diplomatic protest, citing safety concerns and rising regional tension. Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense characterized the deployment as “expansionist,” arguing that China is testing the resolve and readiness of regional actors.

Strategic Context and Political Timing

This deployment did not occur in a vacuum. It came just weeks after the release of China's 2025 National Defense White Paper, which outlined a doctrine of “holistic security” and emphasized integrated, all-domain readiness. It also follows a period of intensifying U.S.–China competition: the Biden tariffs remain in effect under President Trump's second administration, and U.S. carrier groups have increased patrols near Taiwan and the South China Sea. China's naval maneuver, therefore, carries symbolic weight—it projects confidence, deterrence, and defiance in the face of what Beijing views as strategic containment.

Beyond symbolism, the operation may also serve as a trial run for future multi-carrier strike coordination. With its third carrier, Fujian, currently undergoing sea trials and featuring electromagnetic launch systems (EMALS), China is poised to dramatically

enhance its naval air power. Dual or even triple-carrier operations may soon become a norm, not a novelty.

Implications for Regional Security Architecture

For regional powers such as Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines, the exercise underscores the need for sharper maritime situational awareness, enhanced joint training, and greater interoperability with U.S. forces. The formation of regional naval coalitions—such as the Quad's Maritime Domain Awareness Initiative—may take on renewed urgency. Meanwhile, ASEAN states, long wary of siding openly in great-power competition, may find their strategic space further constricted as Chinese carrier operations expand into Southeast Asian waters.

From the U.S. perspective, the PLAN's maneuver raises questions about long-term carrier dominance. While the U.S. Navy retains qualitative advantages, the sheer scale and frequency of Chinese deployments now demand a recalibration of U.S. force posture and logistics in the Indo-Pacific. It may also encourage greater investment in counter-carrier strategies, including submarines, long-range anti-ship missiles, and AI-driven maritime surveillance.

Conclusion: The New Normal at Sea

China's dual-carrier deployment marks a turning point in its maritime trajectory. Once a continental power focused on near-seas defense, Beijing is now signaling ambitions to become a true blue-water navy, capable of projecting power, shaping regional narratives, and deterring intervention. Whether this was a bold rehearsal or the beginning of routine dual-carrier presence in contested waters, the message is unmistakable: the balance of maritime power in the Indo-Pacific is shifting—and every actor, from Tokyo to Washington to Manila, will have to adjust course.