

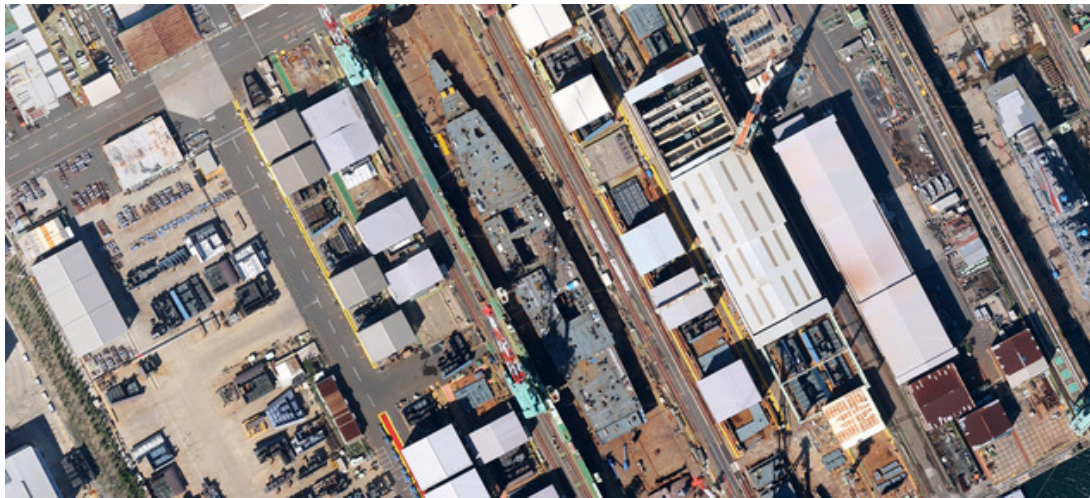


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Izumo under construction. Google capture

Is It a Duck? Is It an Aircraft Carrier? No! It's Japan's 'Helicopter Destroyer'

James Simpson takes a skeptical look at Japan's newest helicopter carrier

On Aug. 6, a hot and sticky summer's day in Japan, a floating controversy was launched into the waters of Yokohama Port.

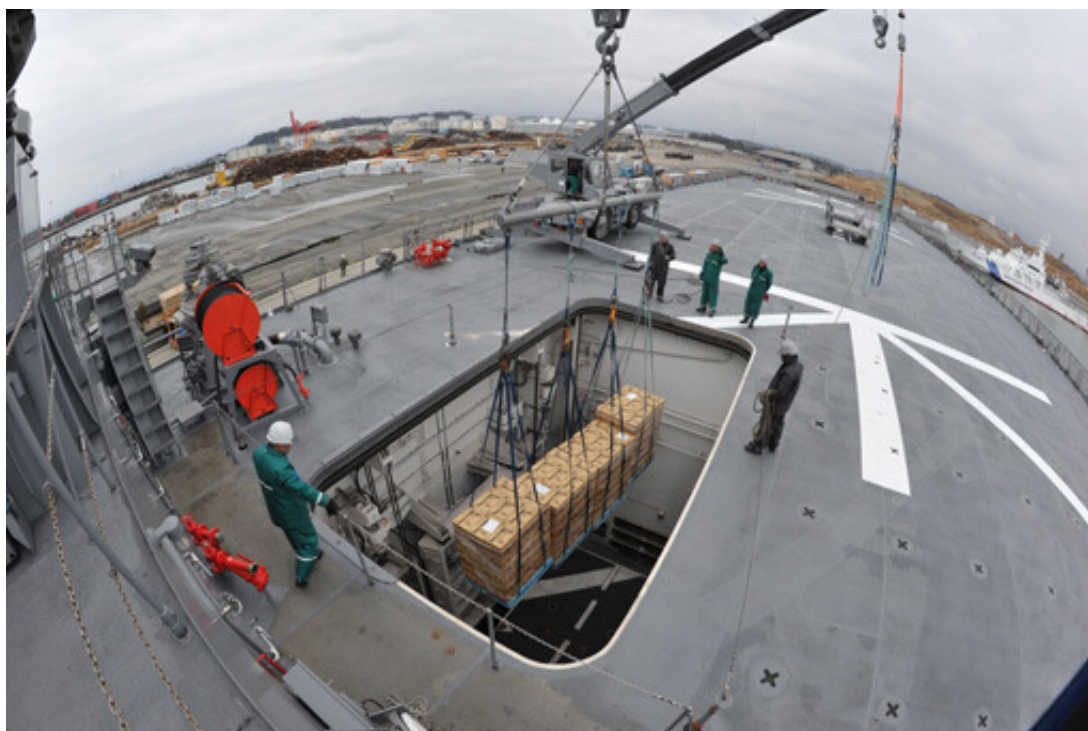
The 19,500-metric ton helicopter carrier dropped down the ramp at IHI Marine United's shipyards, its utilitarian 22DDH moniker finally replaced by the name *Izumo*.

Taking its name from the sacred region that enchanted Lafcadio Hearn, the Victorian chronicler of Japanese myths, the *Izumo* is the largest

naval vessel deployed by Japan since the Second World War—the same length as the IJN *Kaga*, the refitted battleship-turned-aircraft carrier that played a major role at Pearl Harbor and Midway.

But if you have been keeping track of the international media reaction to the *Izumo*'s naming and launch ceremony, you might now believe that Japan has gained a new strike aircraft carrier—a crucial tool for Tokyo to throw its weight around East Asia.

You need to think again.



A *Hyuuga*-class vessel loads supplies following the 2011 Tohoku Earthquake. Japan Ministry of Defense photo

The *Izumo* in figures

The *Izumo* is Japan's third flat-top helicopter carrier. Two 13,950-metric ton *Hyuuga*-class vessels entered service in the past four years, the first of which saw much use during the response to the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and resulting tsunami. With beaches strewn with debris and water levels still far from navigable in many places, the helicopter proved itself an important rescue and logistical tool.

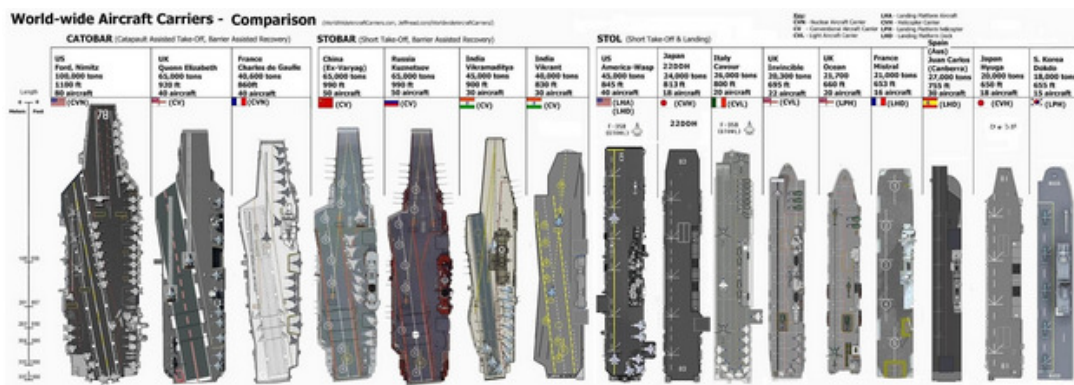
Having built the *Hyuuga*, IHI Marine United already possessed the technology and know-how to build the *Izumo*, driving down the price: at \$1.25 billion, the *Izumo* is only slightly more expensive than the \$1.1 billion *Hyuuga*, even when adjusted for the approximately one percent deflation over the six-year interim.

What does the Maritime Self-Defense Force get for its money? More helicopters, more space for supplies, more space for personnel and refugees—the *Izumo* is the ideal ship for a nation so recently rocked by a natural disaster, and one that prides itself on its support of international aid missions to places like Haiti and Sumatra.

At 248 meters long, the *Izumo* is 51 meters longer than its older sisters. That extra length allows her to simultaneously operate five helicopters from its deck out of its maximum complement of 14 helos. By contrast, the *Hyuuga* can only operate four helicopters and carry 11 total. For the time being, at least, the *Izumo*'s initial complement will only consist of seven anti-submarine patrol choppers (presumably SH-60Ks) and two search and rescue helos.

The *Izumo* also benefits from a more efficient use of its space than the *Hyuuga*. One of its two elevators is on the ship's port side, behind the ship's central "island," to prevent the movement of equipment from completely interrupting operations on deck. This also frees space down in the cargo hold, which can hold 50 3.5-ton trucks, and allows the ship to accommodate 450 passengers in addition to its 470 crew.

However, anyone who has been following its launch in the international press would be forgiven for thinking that Tokyo has just received its first offensive post-war fighter-capable aircraft carrier.



Izumo (22DDH) in comparison to other carriers around the world. 2ch capture

F-35 conundrum

Let's get this straight: yes, the *Izumo* is long enough for launching planes with short take-off and vertical landing (or STOVL) capabilities, and yes, Japan is purchasing the F-35 which has a STOVL-capable F-35B. These two facts have driven rumors of Japanese intentions to convert the *Izumo* into a conventional carrier. These rumors are ignorant and deluded.

First, let's look at the F-35 that Tokyo is actually buying: the conventional take-off and landing F-35A, not the STOVL-capable F-35B or even catapult-compatible F-35C you'd expect to see gracing an aircraft carrier. Furthermore, these jets will be going the Air Self-Defense Force rather than the Maritime Self-Defense Force.

Even were the MSDF to buy some F-35Bs for their boat, the purchase will take several years to grow fruit. The selection process for the ASDF purchase of 42 F-35As began in July 2009 following the U.S. Senate ban on exports of the F-22; and only four U.S.-made planes will enter service by 2017 while the other 38 will be built domestically for completion by 2021 at the earliest. Any attempt to pick up the F-35B would require a few years lead time in order to adequately meet Japanese government bidding requirements.

Leaving aside the airframes, several other hurdles remain before F-35s can take off from the *Izumo*'s deck.

One of these is the lack of carrier operation skills within the MSDF itself. Japan has not operated naval fighters since 1945. Pilots will need training in combat flight and carrier operations, so will all of the support staff who safely help get the birds in the air. While the MSDF would surely be able to cross-train with the ASDF and U.S. Navy, it adds more time, effort and money into the conversion process.

There are also numerous hurdles. Japan's military will have to jet-proof the deck, as well as to arrange and fit the equipment necessary to support a jet.

Critics are viewing the *Izumo* as a de facto strike carrier—bringing to mind Japan's supposed “latent” or “virtual” nuclear capability in which Japan has the technology and know-how to build a nuclear weapon at very short notice. While they may be technologically capable in both regards, such views of Japanese capabilities ignore public resistance to having a combat-ready fighter-carrying aircraft carrier, as well as the budgetary restraints faced by the MSDF. It also ignores the immediacy and enormity of a threat that would be required to force Japan's hand, particularly while it is able to benefit from the carrier-borne protection provided courtesy of the U.S. Navy.

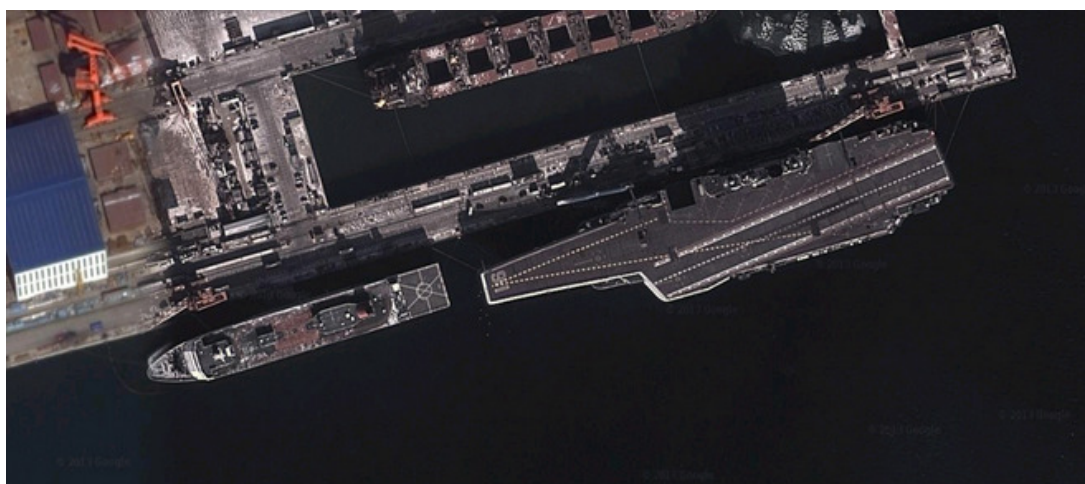
With regular territorial intrusions, ASDF scrambles and Coast Guard scuffles with China, many Western writers appear to believe that the threshold has been crossed. Meanwhile, it seems many Chinese writers are pointing at themselves and asking, “Who? Me?”

Chinese hypocrisy and Japanese (in)credibility

The loudest protests over the *Izumo* unsurprisingly come from China, whose leaders are quick to play the history card. The *Izumo* was also the name of a British-built cruiser paid for with war reparations following the First Sino-Japanese War and went on to play a major role in the Second Sino-Japanese War that preceded the Second World War.

This is an argument that is neither here nor there: the *Hyuuga* shares its name with an imperial-era battleship, as do many other MSDF ships, including the *Kongou*-class destroyer. These names come from archaic region names, names of mountains, rivers and other traditional sources of naval names. Ruling out all names of ships from the height of Japanese naval power will leave very few names of any significance to the Japanese.

These protests seem even less sincere when the People's Liberation Army Navy has this beast sitting in Dazhu Shan.



Liaoning (CV-16), China's first aircraft carrier. Google capture

The *Liaoning* is the former Soviet carrier *Varyag*. Bought from the Ukrainian government by a private buyer in Macau in 1998 for use as a floating casino—by 2007 was clear that it had fallen into the hands of the PLAN who were intent on making the vessel China's first carrier. In addition, the Chinese have now apparently begun construction on a second carrier, this time built from the ground up.

Song Xue, the PLAN's deputy chief of staff, was not coy about China's carrier ambitions: "The next aircraft carrier we need will be larger and carry more fighters." As a Soviet carrier, the *Varyag* was capable of carrying 30 fixed-wing aircraft and 24 helicopters, and speculation is

already rife that their Made-in-China carrier will be fitted with a catapult. Whatever comes out of Beijing's plans will be significantly larger and more capable than the *Izumo*.

Even so, the Chinese media has gone to great lengths to shift talk of a rising military onto Japan. China's major newspapers gave front page coverage to the *Izumo*'s launch referring to the *Izumo* as an "aircraft carrier in disguise," while Japan's *Asahi Shimbun* had a single column and photo buried on the back pages. All discussed the (presumed) likelihood of the *Izumo* as an F-35B carrier, with Chinese state television stating that it could be converted in one to two months.

It's not just China. Korea's *Joongang Daily* railed against the timing of the launch—the 68th anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing. According to the MSDF, the day was chosen for being an auspicious day on the Japanese calendar and the spring tide.

Western media were quick to point out that it is Japan's biggest warship since the Second World War. Much English-language coverage echoes Chinese skepticism of Japanese intentions, playing up the (imagined) capabilities of the *Izumo* while ignoring the long-term non-aggression of the MSDF throughout its history, but in favor of the concerns of a rising power who has become increasingly belligerent in its perceived territorial waters.

Official denials of any plans to convert the ship into a strike carrier were reported in the English-language press, but largely in passing.

Japanese media reporting on the naming and launch ceremony were low-key, with attention given to the humanitarian missions the *Izumo* is expected to face. Very few English-language outlets covered the ship's 35-bed state-of-the-art surgery, but this was included in most Japanese reports.

With a prime minister who is typically considered to be a historical

revisionist at the helm, it is unsurprising that Japan's credibility seems to hold little water abroad. Yet that is no excuse for the poorly-informed rumor-mongering surrounding the *Izumo*.

Missing the point

Yes, the *Izumo* will be a useful tool for patrolling the disputed Senkaku islands out in the East China Sea, but with no well deck for launching hovercraft and other amphibious vehicles, they are poorly suited to getting boots on the ground against a Chinese incursion—presumably armed with anti-air missiles. It is likely to be a much better patrol ship and an even better humanitarian aid vessel. Helicopters make a lot of sense in a disaster zone, particularly when operating the kinds of rescue missions seen in 2011.

Media speculation playing up the possible use of the *Izumo* as a strike carrier is dangerous and only confuses perspectives on what is occurring in East Asia—fueling public opinion towards the hypothesis that Japan and China are locked in an arms race. The MSDF has played a very minor role in the islands dispute with China. It is the Japan Coast Guard that is tasked with protecting Japanese seas on a daily basis and, unlike the MSDF, the Coast Guard has used its cannons in anger.

Japan is playing a very delicate balancing act. On the one side, the U.S. is keen to have the Japanese take up more of its defense burden, as are many of Japan's political elite and the chiefs of staff of the Self-Defense Forces. On the other side, the Japanese public is largely opposed to any notion of Japan gaining a true offensive-capable military, and bristle at hypocrisy coming from China.

In comparison to the Chinese *Liaoning*, purchased under false pretenses and evolving as an aircraft carrier with some degree of secrecy, Japan's helicopter carrier program and defense purchases are largely transparent. Any sign that Japan was to convert the *Izumo* would be

impossible to miss.

The strongly biased reporting shows that the Chinese media would do well to consider China's own provocative build-up than speculate on Japanese hypothetical capabilities. It also shows that we defense tech enthusiasts could also stand to step back and look at the big picture. Japan isn't going anywhere anytime soon.

Thanks to Kyle Mizokami for assistance with this article. War is Boring is going to Syria! Support our efforts with a small donation. Subscribe to War is Boring: medium.com/feed/war-is-boring.