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India's Aircraft Carriers: Potency and Numbers

By Sarabjeet S. Parmar

SYNOPSIS

Recently, India's Chief of the Naval Staff Admiral R. Hari Kumar announced the repeat order for an Indigenous Aircraft Carrier, which would be the third aircraft carrier acquired for the Indian Navy. There is a need to address the requirements of IACs in the Indian Navy, such as numbers and employability, as well as any potential gaps in the carriers' operational availability and construction that could result in a major maritime capability void.

COMMENTARY

Speaking on the sidelines of the launch of the advanced stealth frigate *Mahendragiri* on 1 September 2023, the Indian Chief of Naval Staff Admiral R. Hari Kumar [announced](#) that the navy was looking at a repeat order for an Indigenous Aircraft Carrier (IAC). This would be a follow-on to the *INS Vikrant*, which was built by Cochin Shipyard Limited and commissioned into the Indian Navy on 2 September 2022.

This statement could reignite the debate regarding aircraft carriers for the Indian Navy, especially on aspects related to costs, operational efficacy, and survivability. In the [second chapter](#) of his book *Blueprint to Bluewater*, Rear Admiral Satyendra Singh evaluates the plan papers drafted from 1947 to 1948 which debated India's force levels. Though the plans underwent frequent changes, the requirement for the navy to carry aircraft carriers can be first traced back to the 15-year plan to refurbish the then post-independent Royal Indian Navy by 1963.

The aim of the 15-year plan was to build up a balanced, modern naval force that was more powerful than the navies of the nations situated in or close to the Indian peninsula, with aircraft carriers engaging in both offensive and defensive roles. With this goal in mind, the force levels of the 15-year plan necessitated the acquisition of

aircraft carriers for the Indian Navy. The number of aircraft carriers in this plan included four fleet carriers and two light fleet carriers which were to be given up when two out of the four fleet carriers were acquired.

However, the financial limitations and the inadequacy of training facilities, both for officers and sailors, resulted in the expansion plan being broken up into several phases. A revised six-year plan was introduced to acquire carriers by 1954, including one light fleet carrier. Given the immediate needs of an expanding navy and the existing, rising threat perceptions, the plan was once again revised to a ten-year plan that included two light fleet carriers to be acquired by 1954 and 1956, respectively. India finally got her first aircraft carrier, the *INS Vikrant*, in 1961.

Over time, the threat perceptions would increase and become more complex. Therefore, the contemporary security environment and the realignment of strategic partnerships today underscores the current need for a potent and flexible, balanced force for India, of which aircraft carriers are an integral part.

Balanced Force, Numbers, Employability, and Construction

The acquisition of a third aircraft carrier has met with [opposition](#), mainly by the first Chief of Defence Staff, the late General Bipin Rawat. However, the need for three aircraft carrier bears the [support of the Standing Committee of Defence](#), which, in its December 2022 report to the Indian Parliament, stated that a third carrier would enhance India's maritime capabilities. Carriers have long maintenance schedules and as two aircraft carriers are the minimum required for meeting threat perceptions and ensuring preparedness and striking capabilities for conflict, a third would be needed to ensure the operational availability of two carriers at any given point of time.

The committee made a distinction on the use of carriers in offensive operations vis-à-vis airfields on islands, which could also enhance the joint planning and operations aspects of theatre commands, emphasising the need to replace the "this or that" part of acquisitions with the "this and that" concept. In order to balance the arguments of cost in acquiring carriers for the navy and jets for the air force, the committee stated that the budgetary outlay for carriers would be staggered over the long period of the carriers' construction and operationalisation as compared to the relatively shorter acquisition and payment period for jets. This approach by the parliamentary committee highlights the importance of having balanced forces within a single armed force and across the three armed forces of India.

While the debate about having three carriers continues, the suitable number of aircraft carriers in the navy will be constantly reassessed given the changing nature of the security environment and the growing stature of India in the comity of nations, especially as a maritime nation.

The [Indian Navy's 2015 unclassified strategy document](#), *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS 2015)*, addresses the quantity of aircraft carriers in the navy in the fifth constituent strategy, "Strategy for Maritime Force and Capability Development". The strategy looked at the development of two Carrier Task Forces (CTFs) comprising one or more Carrier Battle Groups (CBGs), with each CBG centred on one aircraft carrier with multi-mission escort and support ships providing

the survivability and logistics support. Though the numbers are open to interpretation, conservative estimates for the combined CTF-CBG can range from three to six aircraft carriers, which can be taken as a benchmark for the number of carriers the Indian Navy may aim to commission into service.

In terms of the Indian Navy's employability, sea control is the central concept around which the Indian Navy is employed. While the second constituent strategy of the IMSS 2015, [Strategy for Conflict](#), places sea denial as an effective offensive measure to reduce the adversary's freedom of action and to degrade his operations – for which the Indian Navy primarily employs submarines – it also places equal emphasis on sea control as a key component and a prerequisite for most naval operations. As it has historically been proven that a CTF is best suited for establishing sea control in conflict and power projection in areas of maritime interest, it would be doctrinally and hence operationally erroneous to neglect the requirement for aircraft carriers in the navy for sea control in preference for sea denial.

The importance of both concepts in the Indian context, drawn from IMSS 2015, is mentioned in the recently released [Defence of Japan 2023 white paper](#), which reiterates the doctrinal strength of both concepts. To execute a successful strategy of conflict, the Indian Navy should thus have the potential to establish both sea control and sea denial simultaneously in more than one sea area, and not as a limited either/or option.

Apart from the offensive and defensive roles in conflict and high tension, aircraft carriers also provide the space and endurance to carry out tasks in a navy's benign role, like Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief, including Pandemics, and Non-combatant Evacuation Operations.

The indigenous construction of the *INS Vikrant* has resulted in the birth of new capacities and capabilities in India's warship building programme. Construction of aircraft carriers is a complex process and requires a high degree of expertise in planning and execution. To keep this expertise alive, there is a need to keep the production line running. This should be a manageable task given the conservative estimate of commissioning three to six carriers and the shipyard's involvement in their maintenance schedules. Any large gap in the production line and associated loss of expertise could result in a large maritime capability gap, as [experienced by the United Kingdom](#). In any case, given the lead time in constructing an aircraft carrier, the third carrier would probably replace the *INS Vikramaditya*, thereby retaining the strength of two carriers while keeping the debate for a third (or more) carrier alive.

Conclusion

Aircraft carriers are expensive but essential commodities for a maritime nation with an expanding maritime horizon, which, for India, is presently the Indo-Pacific. To protect India's national interests, the Indian Navy needs to maintain a balanced force structure that will address diverse threats and challenges and address common non-traditional threats by enhancing interoperability with other navies who may or may not have aircraft carriers. As aircraft carriers build synergy and support organic capabilities across the Indian Navy, Army, and Air Force, as well as various national and

international agencies, to meet traditional and non-traditional threats, they remain important assets to the maritime nation.

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