

Navy's Blue Water Obsession

(The Aircraft Carrier Syndrome)

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Welcoming the Prime Minister on the deck of INS Viraat, India's second aircraft carrier, when it joined the fleet on 22 Aug last year, the then Chief of the Naval Staff declared that, this marked the beginning of a true blue - water capability of the Navy, keeping with its new doctrine of sea control as opposed to the existing concept of sea denial. He went on to state that, plans were afloat to acquire yet a third carrier through indigenous sources. The massive naval expansion was justified on the grounds that, it will compliment, the growth that the army and air force have already undergone. This gives an impression that, for effective defence security, all the three Services must be 'balanced' in respect of numbers and cost. The question is, how to make every rupee of this increase count towards the strategic effectiveness of our overall defence effort.

The Ministry of Finance had recently hinted that, owing to the resources crunch, the Defence Ministry was unlikely to get any substantial increase in its budget for 1989-90. The Services reaction to this was that, this will hit, not only their modernisation plan, but even routine maintenance of existing equipment. In view of this, it therefore seems strange that, the Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Western Naval Command, addressing a press conference on Jan 30, (called to announce details of the biannual review of the Indian Navy by the President on Feb 15) stated that, a contract has been signed with a French firm for a fourth aircraft carrier, as a replacement for the ageing Vikrant, which was a necessity for a 'blue water' navy of India's dimensions.

Although in the past there have been articles in Service journals, including the latest one by Adml Tahiliani (Retd) in the IDR, advocating a multi-carrier Indian Navy, this is the first time that, a senior naval retired officer, Vice Adml S Mookerjee, has dared to oppose the official naval doctrine in his paper 'Indian Naval Development - Need for a Review', published in the USI Journal Apr-Jun 89 issue. As a non-naval army 'Pongo', I wish to strengthen Adml Mookerjee's views, from a layman's Commonsense point of view, on this obsession of the Navy with the aircraft carrier. Strange as it may seem, all these champions of the carrier were naval aviators, who were at the helm of affairs to influence decisions on flexing their naval wings.

Unfortunately, there is no system with us today, which can help the Defence Minister to get an analytical and unbiased appreciation of resources allotment to be made to each of the three Services, so as to ensure optimum use being made of our meager sources towards achieving the overall defence objectives, even if this means spending all the available money only on the service(s) that is(are) effective at the expense of the others being left out of the race completely. In this respect, the clout of a particular Service seems to count more than its value as an effective defence machine, and as such our resources seem to be allotted in direct proportion to the colour of the uniform. The present blue-water concept of the Navy based on the aircraft carrier, is a typical example of this. The aim of this paper is not just to analyse whether the Indian navy needs three or more carriers, but whether it needs any at all.

In the prevailing super-charged geopolitical scenario of the South Asian land mass and the islands of the Indian Ocean (including Sri Lanka), there is no denying that the Indian navy has a very significant role to play - in conjunction with the Indian army and air force. This role, however, should be clearly within the parameters of our national objectives. Armaments and weapon systems sought to be inducted can no longer be seen from the restricted viewpoint that "only the navy knows what is best at sea."

Judging by the numerous articles that have appeared in foreign military journals against the carrier concept, the purchase of this world's most expensive weapon system - that too, of doubtful military value - will prove the most uneconomical method ever of giving the navy the teeth it requires. Even as recently as September 88, US naval expert Ashley T Tellis, reported in *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, on the utter futility of the purchase by India of a second, leave alone a third, aircraft carrier. The *Viraat* has since joined the fleet, and its acquisition is now a fait accompli; soon, a third carrier is likely to beef up the navy's might, not counting a fourth to replace the ageing *Vikrant*. Perhaps on the lines of the USA's Pacific, Atlantic and Mediterranean fleets, India, too, wants to have its Western, Eastern and Southern fleets, corresponding to the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. But can we afford this grand naval concept of three blue-water fleets built round the carrier base? The cost apart, what role can the carrier be expected to play in the Indian defence context?

The foremost question which needs a clear-cut answer is, who is the perceived enemy against whom the navy would seek to build up and deploy a carrier task force? Is it visualised that our navy should seek to dominate the two choke points, the Gulf of Hormuz and the Malacca Straits, and the key triangulation point, viz, the US nuclear force and Rapid Deployment

Force base at Diego Garcia? Surely, it is not visualised that we will also stretch upto Antarctica to defend our station there ? On the other hand, if our carriers are sought to be deployed against a perceived nearby enemy for protection of our long coastline, vital shipping lanes, and the islands of Andaman and Nicobar, and perhaps Sri Lanka, then the carrier fleets are not only cost-benefit distortions, but have serious built-in flaws.

In order to view the whole thing in its proper perspective, it is necessary to examine the main role of an aircraft carrier. To put it in a non-naval layman's language, the aim of a carrier is to present a floating airstrip away from the mainland in situations where it is not possible to provide air cover from the land. Thus, the aircraft carrier has an attacking role in waters far away from the mainland. But India has always been wedded to the policy of a defensive role, and has no intention of fighting an enemy in its (the enemy's) own territory or entering the territorial limits of its waters - unless, of course, forced to do so in a defensive role, as in Sri Lanka or the Maldives. Even in that case, the locations of our airfields are such that, we are today in a position to give more than adequate air cover with land-based aircraft to our troops and ships operating anywhere around our borders - and even across these if the need should arise. To this, if we add our land and sea-based missiles capacity, then there is no area left on land or sea from where we cannot be effective with our land-based aircraft and land and sea-based missiles.

The other uses for our aircraft carriers which have been mentioned by the navy, are in the context of protecting our long coast-line and our islands in the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean. However, so far, neither the navy nor anyone else, including The Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis has ever explained clearly how aircraft carriers will fulfil these missions more effectively, or more economically, than shore-based aircraft, missile boats and submarines.

The aircraft carrier is by far the single most expensive weapon system in the world. The latest model that the US navy has acquired costs as much as Rs 3,500 crore. If, to this, is added the cost of the crew and other essential ancillaries, the cost per carrier works out to over Rs 5,000 crore. As an aircraft carrier is a sitting duck and presents a very vulnerable target, it has to be closely guarded by a number of escort vessels. Going by the Falklands experience, at least two cruisers, four destroyers, four frigates and two submarines - more than one-third of the entire Indian naval fleet - are needed for this purpose. The cost involved works out to an incredible Rs 18,000 crore per carrier group. The operating cost of approximately Rs 50 lakh a day of

the carrier alone, excluding support ships, is a relatively 'minor' added expenditure. It is no wonder, therefore, that most countries are giving up or reducing their dependence on this type of weapon system.

Apart from its enormous cost and doubtful utility in the Indian strategic concept, a very important factor tilting the balance against the aircraft carrier is the tying-up of other capital ships and the carrier's own aircraft in simply protecting this floating platform. According to US estimates, 14 ancillary ships and almost two-thirds of the aircraft on board are required to guard a carrier, thus leaving only about one-third of the total aircraft for the attack role. Perhaps this aspect was more than proved during the 1987 air strike on Libya by fighters from two of America's biggest aircraft carriers. No more than 20 aircraft could be mustered for the actual raid. This was, among others, the main reasons why British air bases had also to be used for the mission. It is estimated that as much as eight-tenths of the Rs 18,000 crore worth of assets that constitute an aircraft carrier task group, serve no other function than to protect the carrier.

Even after taking all the necessary measures for protecting an aircraft carrier, there is still no guarantee for its 100-percent safety. In the era of ready availability of cheap, efficient and accurate long-range guided missiles--like the Exocet deployed by the Argentines in the Falklands battle which nearly hit the British carrier HMS Hermes (now, INS Viraat) -- an aircraft carrier can be destroyed at will by any small nation at minimal cost. The late Admiral Rickover, the 'father' of nuclear navy, testifying before a US congressional committee shortly before he died, stated that "a modern aircraft carrier should not be expected to last for more than two days in a major war, after which it is expendable".

The last real battle at sea in which aircraft carriers were involved was during the closing months (Mar-Jun 45) of World War II, in the vicinity of Okinawa. In this engagement the US navy had deployed a score of aircraft carriers, of which as many as four were lost to Japanese Kamikaze attacks. What the fate would be of aircraft carriers in an era dominated by a proluxity of cheap, discrete, efficient and devastatingly accurate long range, precision guided missiles and bombs, is not difficult to foresee.

In the post- War period, aircraft carriers have been involved in US wars waged far away from the American main land, such as, Korea, Vietnam, Lebanon, Grenada and lately Libya. What does the ubiquitous use of aircraft carriers to wage wars and terrify Third World countries prove? Nothing as far as war at sea is concerned. 'Aircraft carrier diplomacy' however does

prove that they are effective in a totally unequal and benign environment. They may have some use in America's pursuit of 'containment' particularly in the face of the growing problems in using air bases of allies and others to project airpower. The question is, whether such a context is relevant to India?

It is therefore, necessary to seriously consider, not whether the Indian navy requires three or more aircraft carriers, but whether it needs any at all. Clearly the aircraft carrier is a weapon system for the very rich, and those still under the sway of imperial ambition, who wish to wage a war far away from their main land. This is supported by the fact that, each year the total number of aircraft carriers afloat is diminishing rather than increasing; India is the rare exception. For instance, whereas in Aug 45 there were in the world 180 aircraft carriers afloat, by 1962 they were down to 68, and today it is less than even half that number, as can be seen from the following table, taken from Janes Fighting Ships 1986 as published in IDR 1986.

<i>Countries</i>	<i>Existing</i>	<i>Under Constr.</i>	<i>GNP (US billion \$)</i>	<i>Per Capita Income (US \$)</i>
USA	14	3	3050	13160
UK	3	-	530	9580
Italy	2	-	380	6750
Spain	1	-	200	5370
France	2	-	620	11520
Brazil	1	-	275	2140
USSR	5	1	560	5790
India	2	1	180	260

It is not entirely a coincidence that, many countries with long coast lines, and much greater wealth than India, such as Japan, Australia, China, Canada, Netherlands and Germany, have no aircraft carriers at all, but have a substantial array of other warships, specially submarines which, by all accounts is a more effective weapon system of the future than is the aircraft carrier. The fact that India has only one-tenth of per capita income of the next poor aircraft carrier owning country, Brazil, is quite a different matter.

INS Viraat (formerly the 26 years old HMS Hermes scrapped by the Royal Navy) has now joined our fleet. In fairness to the carrier's dedicated complement of officers and men, now that we are saddled with it, the ship's operational role needs to be fully re-evaluated and re-defined in relation to the current South Asian geopolitical situation. However, all grand delusions

of having three blue- water fleets should be emphatically discarded. So far, due to "Security" reasons (in our country, everything and anything concerning defence is "top secret") neither the navy nor the government has been able to state in clear terms the doctrines and postures of the Indian navy's role with respect to the aircraft carrier. Nor has there been any public debate on this matter either in the media or in the Parliament. By frittering away scarce resources which could be more usefully spent on really effective defence acquisitions, we are, in fact, jeopardizing our national security.

To emphasise the obvious, as brought out by Adml Mookerjee (USI Apr-Jun 89), our navy certainly needs more teeth and advanced weapon systems in the form of guided-missile vessels, long-range ocean-surveillance aircraft and helicopters, and above all, attack and hunter-killer submarines. These must be within the parameters of fully integrated inter-service perspective. The aircraft carrier, however, does not fit into this. As it stands, the only role one can see for the INS Viraat, is to have the pride of place in leading the Indian naval fleet every two years for the Presidential review, formerly done by INS Vikrant.

In this article an army 'pongo' has thrown the gauntlet on the redundancy of the aircraft carrier in the Indian context. Will some blue water naval 'salt' like to pick it up and challenge the arguments stated herein. The USI, I am sure, would welcome such a discussion, as that is what this Institution stands for.

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