

## Vikramaditya's Induction: High-point for the Indian Navy

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After the loss of the INS Sindhurakshak a few months ago, the Indian Navy has set itself on the path of redemption. In August this year, India's premier Kilo-class submarine – just back from a costly refit in Russia - had been preparing for an operational deployment when an explosion onboard destroyed the boat and 18 of its crew-members lost their lives.

The accident was a 'body-blow' for the Indian Navy – a material and morale loss that would take years to recover from. But only three months later a new narrative has emerged with the commissioning of INS Vikramaditya – one of hope, optimism and resilience.

The new aircraft carrier, unveiled at Severodvinsk in Russia on November 16, is a historic milestone. Coming two months after another achievement - the actuation of the nuclear reactor of the Arihant, India's first indigenous nuclear powered submarine – the Vikramaditya is being seen as a 'game-changer', with the potential to transform the Indian Navy's profile in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and beyond.

Its proportions and capabilities are indeed significant. At 44,500 tonnes, the Vikramaditya is the largest ship of the Indian Navy. Among its primary aviation assets, will be Kamov-31 helicopters and MiG 29 K multi-role fighter aircraft - the mainstay of its integral combat capability. In addition, the naval version of the indigenous Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) may also be positioned onboard, making the Vikramaditya the first Indian aircraft carrier to operate two aircraft of the Short Takeoff but Assisted Recovery (STOVAR) variety.

For the Indian Navy, operating two full-fledged carrier battle groups (CBGs) - one each for the Eastern and Western seaboard – is not just a long-standing ambition, but also a key component of its operational strategy. With the INS Viraat nearing the end of its operational life, the Indian Navy has been under pressure to position a suitable replacement. The Vikramaditya brings it one step closer to actualising a desirable end-state. By the end of 2018 the navy is expected to induct the 40,000-tonne INS Vikrant being built at the Cochin Shipyard. The Vikramaditya, in the words of India's Naval Chief, Admiral D K Joshi, is intended to "bridge the gap between the INS Viraat's decommissioned, and the entry of the INS Vikrant".

Notwithstanding the euphoria surrounding its commissioning, Vikramaditya's journey has been anything but a smooth. When the deal for the ex-Admiral Gorshkov was first signed with Russia in January 2004, it was worth \$1.5 billion, with \$974 million earmarked for the refit and rest for 16 MiG-29Ks. In the years that followed, the price was renegotiated several times, to be eventually pegged at \$2.33 billion and another \$2 billion for 45 MiG-29Ks. As a result, the ship, which was first due to be delivered in August 2008, was delayed by nearly five years.

Vikramaditya's commissioning has re-ignited an old debate among maritime analysts of the relevance of aircraft carriers. Proponents of aircraft carriers argue that it must play a central role in 'blue-water' operational plans. Opponents posit that the aircraft carrier's high vulnerability and inadequate logistical sustainability render it an obsolete asset. Not only is it expensive, they point out, it is also incapable of projecting significant offensive power. The fact that it is virtually defenceless against under-water attacks makes it a near liability in war.

As compelling as the sceptics' reasoning appears, it is the proponents who proffer a more nuanced rationale for retaining the giant ships. Modern day maritime discourse, aircraft carrier supporters aver, requires such ships to be located in a new conceptual framework. Ocean-going navies today need three types of conventional assets. The first category comprises 'hard-power assets' - fighting platforms like destroyers, frigates, missile boats and attack submarines meant for the real combat operations in a naval battle. These are used in both offensive and defensive operations, and are meant to influence the tempo and outcome of a maritime conflict. The second lot is of 'soft-power' assets like hospital ships, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) platforms, survey vessels, etc. These provide a valuable regional (and global) service and are crucial for a navy's soft-power outreach. Finally, and most significantly, a navy needs assets for 'power projection' – a critical component of a nation's maritime strategy. Navies strive to accrete power and project it far away from the home country as a metric of national influence and their own regional relevance. Aircraft carriers fall in this category.

Equally interesting has been the commentary on the supposed 'contest' between 'sea control' and 'sea denial'<sup>1</sup>. Inducting an aircraft carrier, it has been suggested, signifies the triumph of the concept of 'sea control' over the more practical and "much less expensive" notion of 'sea denial'. The analysis has sought to draw a false equivalence between two fundamental concepts intrinsic to national maritime strategy. While the former is a prerequisite in dictating the terms of a naval engagement, the latter (as a subset of the former) has limited application and is meant to deny a stronger adversary the use of maritime space. Both play a vital role in a nation's larger maritime strategy, but none supplants the other.

There is one significant difference though. Since 'sea-denial' is useful in defending a nation's maritime territory against an aggressive adversary, it is primarily a war-time concept. 'Sea control', on the other hand, allows for both battle-space domination in war and the expansion of naval sphere of operations in peacetime (a critical component of

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<sup>1</sup> "The promise of Vikramaditya", the Hindu, Nov 21, 2013, at <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/the-promise-of-vikramaditya/article5372635.ece>

Grand National Strategy). Its utility as a metaphorical enabler in naval strategy is, therefore, far greater.

An aircraft carrier, however, doesn't by-itself guarantee an expanded sphere of naval influence. With a limited integral defensive capability and even lesser manoeuvrability, a carrier needs an armada of armed escort ships and aircraft to protect it from external threats. In this, the Vikramaditya has an inherent disadvantage as it lacks on-board close-in-weapon-system (CIWS) and long range surface-to-air missiles (LR-SAMS). Its near total dependence on layered in-depth defence provided by its screening ships and aircraft is a challenge that the Indian Navy will need to address in due course.

The Indian Navy will also be mindful of the China's maritime ambitions and the role that its new aircraft carrier – the Liaoning – is likely to play in its Indian Ocean expansion. The new aircraft carrier might be used both for China's power projection, as well as an instrument for its 'soft-power' diplomacy - a key component of the 'far-seas' naval strategy. That apart, the Chinese navy is also said to be considering using aircraft carrier in a 'hard-power' role for the expansion of its island barrier defences, also known as the inner and outer island chains.

Ultimately, possessing an aircraft carrier does not only indicate 'blue-water' capability, but also represents a navy's 'vision'. If a maritime force can conceive of an aircraft carrier's role as a 'versatile' and flexible asset – one that can switch easily between soft power diplomacy, power projection and combat operations – it can be a 'game-changer', for both national foreign policy and naval strategy.

The Vikamaditya could prove to be critical in shaping the Indian Ocean's strategic environment.

*Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.*