

Aircraft Carriers – Glug Glug Glug..... Really? Significance of Carrier Borne Airpower for India

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Date: 23 July 2018

In his recent article published by the Lowy Institute, titled “Glug, Glug, Glug: India’s interest in unsinkable Aircraft Carriers”, David Brewster¹, probes India’s medium term plan to develop into a three carrier fleet. Brewster cites huge costs (acquisition, maintenance and operational) and vulnerability issues attached with the Carrier Task Force (CTFs) in support of his assertion and, as an alternative, advocates the use of ‘unsinkable’ island bases as cheaper and more effective options. Dismissing flat-tops as vulnerable status symbols for India, the author recommends the deferment of INS Vishal and instead, use the freed-up capital in shoring up India’s military capabilities in the Andaman and Nicobar (A&N) and Lakshadweep island chains.

India currently operates only one carrier, INS Vikramaditya (erstwhile Admiral Gorshkov of the Soviet/ Russian Navy). Whilst India’s first indigenous aircraft carrier, INS Vikrant (IAC-I) is being built by Cochin Shipyard (CSL) and is likely to be commissioned in end 2020², India has already embarked on its follow-on induction³, likely to be named as INS Vishal (IAC-II), and expected to be much larger and more potent. A three-carrier force would allow the Indian Navy to operate one CTF on each of its seaboard at all times, with the third carrier involved in refit or maintenance.

Bang for Buck – Misplaced Example of Great Britain

The Royal Navy currently operates⁴ only one Aircraft Carrier, *HMS Queen Elizabeth* (commissioned in December 2017). Its second flat-top, of the same class, *HMS Prince of Wales*, is likely to be inducted in 2020. The author argues that the Great

Britain scaled down on its Carrier program as Carriers delivered only a modest punch for their heavy price tag, and that greater bang for the buck could be provided by island air bases instead.

The Royal Navy, till date, has operated 39 Aircraft Carriers of 13 different classes⁵, commencing 1917. Of these, 11 aircraft carriers took active part in the Second World War, and another 10 were added towards the fag end of the War. Britain lost five aircraft carriers in the War to offensive action by the Axis powers. Carriers again prove their worth for the Royal Navy during the Falkland conflict⁶ with the Argentines in 1982.

Even as the British power waned considerably, it continued to operate four carriers in 1980s, three post 1990s, and currently plans to operate two carriers of the Elizabeth class. Sure, the number of aircraft carriers operated by the Royal Navy has witnessed a steady decline, but attributing this decline to operational efficacy of aircraft carriers is clearly misplaced. A careful examination would reveal a near perfect correlation of the British economy and the number of aircraft carriers that it operated. Therefore, rather than the 'Bang for Buck', the guiding principle for the Royal Navy would be the 'availability of buck' in first place, and hence, may not be an appropriate example to quote.

Aircraft Carrier Program of the US Navy

John Lehman, who was one of the fiercest critique of aircraft carriers from outside the US administration, changed tack⁷ when appointed as the Navy Secretary under President Ronald Reagan. He eventually authored the '13 Carrier Navy'⁸ policy of the US, which remains the guiding policy document for the force structure of the US Navy (USN). It was marginally revised when President Obama advocated 11 Carriers in his Asia-Pacific Pivot policy⁹.

There is one statement of President Bill Clinton¹⁰ that sums up the rationale behind maintaining a CTF based Navy for all countries whose economy would allow that: -

“When word of crisis breaks out in Washington, it’s no accident that the first question that comes to everyone’s lips is: ‘Where’s the nearest carrier’”

– President Bill Clinton, 12 March 1993 on board USS Theodore Roosevelt

Aircraft Carrier Program of the PLA Navy (PLAN)

China, in a White Paper of 2015¹¹, has declared its intention for focusing on ‘far sea maritime capability’, thereby ramping up requisite capability to allow pre-positioning its warships, in a manner similar to the USN. CBGs would naturally form an integral part of such a strategy, and in consonance, it commissioned its first aircraft carrier, Liaoning, in 2012.

The construction of the second Chinese aircraft carrier appears to be well on track and it would be a matter of time when China churns out a number of follow-ons. Possibility of the PLAN CBGs, operating out of Gwadar and Djibouti, in the Indian Ocean, therefore, is almost certain in the coming decades. Some sources reveal that the PLA (Navy) plans to operate four carriers by 2025 and 10 carriers by 2050.

Aircraft Carriers as Status Symbols

It would be naïve that a country, however prosperous, would be spending in excess of 4 Billion USD¹² (approximate cost of construction of INS Vikrant) for a mere ‘status symbol’. Nor does it reflect prudence to operate and maintain such cost intensive ‘status symbol’ platforms!

As has been aptly brought out in “In Defence of the Aircraft Carrier”¹³, for the Indian Navy, the aircraft carrier is an ‘article of faith’, a ‘potent symbol’ of India’s pride and power, and a ‘projection of national will’.

Vulnerability Issues

The statistics¹⁴ pertaining to the World War II are quite revealing in respect of survivability of aircraft carriers vis-à-vis other naval combatants. In comparison to 11 percent carriers, the Allies in the Second World War had lost 18 percent battleships, 33 percent cruisers, 36 percent frigates, 21 percent sloops and 37 percent submarines.

There's no gainsaying that attack capabilities against the CBG has since increased manifold, through better surveillance, detection, classification, identification and even more lethal targeting. However, what naysayers miss out completely is the fact that the CBGs too have kept pace with time, and they are an equally more lethal pack, operating as a synergized and mutually-supporting conglomerate, such that the combat-capability of the group as a whole is greater than the sum of its parts¹⁵.

Unlike the aircraft carriers that operated in the Second World War, today's variants are self-sufficient in defence as stand-alone. For instance, Vikramaditya is equipped with Barak anti-missile defence (AMD) system and the future Indian carriers are likely to be equipped with extended-range Barak versions or even better AMD systems. In addition, the escort warships and integral aircraft of the CBG and its escorts are even more effectual in various combat roles such as Air Early Warning (AEW), Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW), Combat Air Patrols (CAP), and AMD. CTFs of today have, therefore, better survivability than their counterparts that operated during the Second World War.

Sea-based vs Land-based Air Power

History bears testimony that static defence has seldom worked against mobile maritime forces. On the other hand, each aircraft carrier provides for an extensively 'mobile' airbase, thereby 'virtualising'¹⁶ a number of static ones. For India, carrier-based aviation would rather be a much more cost effective option as compared to the shore-based airpower, in defence of its widely dispersed island territories and also in dealing with mobile maritime threats.

CTFs are much lesser vulnerable to enemy's pre-emptive strikes owing to its mobility. In addition, shore-based aircraft have their own share of issues pertaining to the safety of aerial refuellers, time on task, and combat efficiency at extended ranges.

Extra Territorial Air-Bases

In addition to the limitations that constrain shore-based airpower in maritime role, India does not seek to invest overtly in overseas basing. Such foreign bases are expensive and may not be even available in critical times owing to adversarial geopolitical factors.

Consequently, Carrier-based force remain the only suitable alternative for India to conduct out of area contingencies. Also, the CTF remains the fastest means of deployment of credible force as a force projection measure, in support of own land operations, or for providing security assistance to friendly countries.

Shoring up Combat capabilities at A&N and Lakshadweep Islands

India's emergence as a major power and the consequent expansion of its area of interests would place concurrent demands for substantive investments in various dimensions of national security. And shoring-up of combat capabilities at A&N and Lakshadweep islands is definitely one of these significant dimensions.

However, it would be imprudent to offset one significant capability with the other and it would remain the sole prerogative of the Government to balance competing budgetary requirements for myriad requirements in the capacity/capability matrix.

Conclusion

India today is world's sixth-largest economy by nominal GDP and the third-largest by Purchasing Power Parity (PPP). Post the 1991 economic liberalisation, India has

achieved a remarkable 6-7% average GDP growth annually. In 2018, India's economy became the world's fastest growing major economy¹⁷, surpassing that of China. As per PwC estimates in 'The World in 2050'¹⁸, India is expected to be the world's second largest economy in PPP terms in 2050, only behind China, accounting for 15 percent of the world's total GDP.

On the other hand, the Indo-Pacific is likely to remain the strategic center of gravity (COG) for all major powers of the world. Accordingly, India would need to invest substantially to possess the 'blue-water' naval capability, centered upon the Carrier Task Force, thereby keeping pace with its economic trajectory and expanding areas of interests.

The debate in India, therefore, should not be on the need of the aircraft carriers, but on the optimum numbers, size and capability of these potent platforms needed to safeguard and protect our expanding maritime interests.

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Notes and References

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