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The First and Only ISO 9001:2015 Certified Defence and Security Magazine in India

The Only Magazine Available On The Intranet Of Indian Air Force

DECEMBER 2022

VOLUME 14 | ISSUE 03

## INDIAN NAVAL AVIATION CAPABILITIES & CRISIS



Admiral R. Hari Kumar  
Chief of Naval Staff (CNS)  
PVSM, AVSM, VSM, ADC

Pankaj Kumar Singh, IPS  
Director General, BSF

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An ISO 9001:2015 Certified Magazine

Volume 14 | Issue 03 | December 2022

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E-mail: (first name)@dsalert.org
info: info@dsalert.org
articles: articles@dsalert.org
subscription: subscription@dsalert.org
online edition: online@dsalert.org
advertisement: advt@dsalert.org

Editorial and Corporate Office
Prabhat Prakashan Tower
4/19, Asaf Ali Road
New Delhi-110002 (India)
+91-011-23243999, 23287999, 9958382999
info@dsalert.org | www.dsalert.org

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Defence and Security Alert is printed,
published and owned by Pawan Agrawal
and printed at SRG Traders Pvt. Ltd.,
B-41, Sector-67, Noida (U.P) and published
at 4/19, Asaf Ali Road, New Delhi (India).
Editor: Manvendra Singh



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A TESTIMONY TO PROFICIENCY
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# EFFECTIVENESS OF THE FLEET AIRCRAFT CARRIER

The reluctance for collaboration makes the potential for friction high and the only consideration that could deter it is the ability to attain a strategic posture that serves to stabilize. The ready availability of the Fleet Aircraft Carrier and its complimentary group is central to any power equation and in consequence, provides the foundation for stability.

**T**he Fleet Aircraft Carrier possesses a number of attributes that make it the Operational Commander's platform of choice to deal with

maritime crises. These virtues may be summed up in the platform's intrinsic ability to operate in international waters independent of territorial and political constraints; the carrier's Mobility allows it to deploy its full array of combat



**V ADM (RETD.) VIJAY SHANKAR PVSMA, AVSM**

The writer holds an MSc in Defence Studies and is a graduate of the Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island, USA; the Naval Higher Command Course, Karanja and the Defence Services Staff College. He is the former Commander-in-Chief of the Andaman & Nicobar Command, Commander-in-Chief of the Strategic Forces Command and Flag Officer Commanding Western Fleet. His command and operational experience are comprehensive and include Command of INS Viraat, the aircraft carrier; he saw active service during the 1971 War against Pakistan, Op Pawan, the IPKF operations in Sri Lanka and Op Vijay operations to vacate the Kargil intrusion. He is the recipient of two Presidential awards: The Param Vishisht Seva Medal and the Ati Vishisht Seva Medal.



A MiG-29K fighter takes off from the Indian Navy's Vikramaditya aircraft carrier.

power over distances in excess of 600 nautical miles in a day; the Role-Flexibility provided by the vessel's integral air and power projection competence permits it to respond across the spectrum of maritime conflict scenarios.

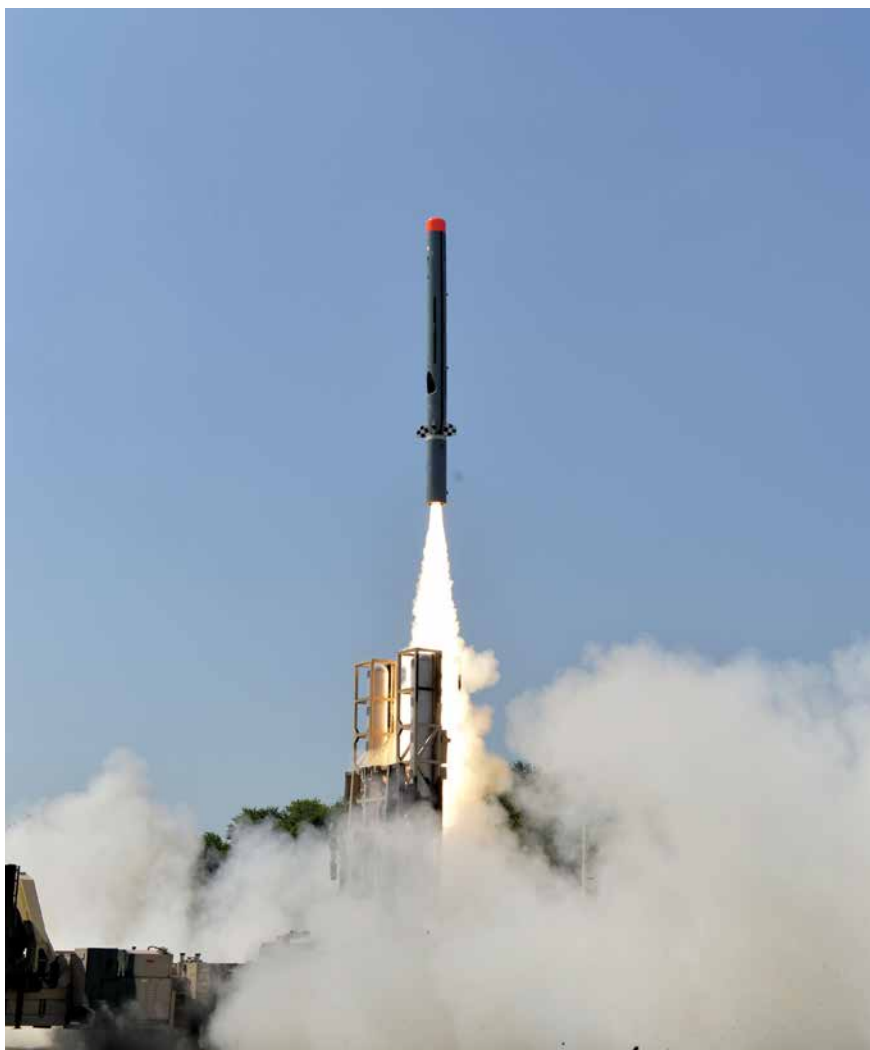
### The Sceptics View

Detractors of the Fleet Carrier harp on three issues that to them lie at

the heart of the debate of whether the navy's demand for the Fleet Aircraft Carrier is justified or not. The assertions made in support of their premise are as follows:

- The Aircraft Carrier is old in concept and vulnerable in contemporary Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) threat scenarios.
- The platform is expensive and the nation's maritime security interests are better served by sea-denial forces such as submarines, small missile units and land-based air-power.
- The prospect of action damage makes the Commander of a deployed Aircraft Carrier much too tentative to venture into "harm's way".

In the **current combat** environment characterized by **fluidity**, the capabilities **needed in one situation** may **not** be the same in **another**



A view of the 'NIRBHAY' sub-sonic cruise missile of DRDO.

### Analysing The Three Assertions

The first Assertion suggests the obsolescence of the concept of the Aircraft Carrier; this is not rational since obsolescence is a condition when the Carrier ceases to have operational use. Concepts are essentially tempered by time and technology. The issue of vulnerability to contemporary A2/AD threats requires more serious deliberation. Depending on the situation, threat perceptions and how operations have been conceived; the Carrier Group, in addition to its integral air power, will comprise of elements that provide the necessary capabilities to neutralize or suppress forces that are likely to confront it. Where the threat is perceived to emanate from long-range Anti-Ship Ballistic or Cruise Missiles, then the adversaries extended surveillance and control chain will be targeted either by co-operating units or by integral forces.

The second Assertion relates to the cost-benefit or the valuation of the Carrier in terms of its ability to provide security. This while sounding 'scholarly' is, in fact, a distortion of the theory of maritime warfare; of Control of oceanic spaces and of Denial of the same. That the Aircraft Carrier is a 'big ticket' platform cannot be seen in isolation. The economics of the platform must be weighed against the part it plays in defining and securing the maritime interests of the nation. The relationship between the Carrier and denial forces when integrated provides the instrument for sea control to influence the outcome of operations; but when separated, denial forces restrict themselves to chance skirmishes and nuisance value.

The third Assertion deals with the tentativeness of the Commander when required to commit an aircraft carrier to battle. This is,



*Since its commissioning into the Indian Navy, Operation Jupiter was INS Viraat's first major operation in July 1989, as part of Indian Peace Keeping Operations in Sri Lanka in the wake of the breakdown of the Indo- Sri Lankan Accord of 1986.*

at best, a fallacious argument. At any rate, the hesitancy to go into “harm’s way” only occurs when the fleet force package is wanting in material and technological capabilities. The three ‘assertions’ are, therefore, rather eclectic in form and tendentious in content, particularly in light of the unique attributes of the Fleet Carrier.

### **Unique Characteristics Of The Fleet Carrier: Indian Experience**

The Aircraft Carrier’s Mobility, which enables it to act as a rapid responder, has been evident in every operation that it has participated in. Whether it was the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, Operation Jupiter the Sri Lanka peacekeeping operations in 1989, Operation Parakram the Indo-Pakistan stand-off post the Pakistan-sponsored terror attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001 or the rescue and relief operations consequent to the Tsunami of December 2004. During the recent crisis along the Line of Actual Control with China, the Indian Carrier Group was poised to execute its plans to squeeze China’s energy-jugular plying across the Indian Ocean and through the Malacca Straits.

The importance of an Aircraft Carrier as the central control and strike element of a task force charged with exercising sea control was validated over a sustained period of several months in the North Arabian Sea during Operation Parakram. The Carrier’s integral air-power and co-operating maritime patrol aircraft ensured complete sanitisation of the surveillance bubble around the force; Surface Action Groups comprising speedy and stealthy missile units prowled the surveillance and kill zones to counter hostile trespassers venturing into these tracts; while anti-submarine warfare units searched, located and suppressed the submarine threat. Friendly merchant ships and tankers were routed through safe waters while those bound for Pakistani ports were marked by forces in readiness to divert/seize them. Not only was the Pakistan Navy limited to coastal patrols, but its surveillance elements remained, in the main, restricted to the Makran littoral.

After US combat operations in the Gulf were terminated in 2003, tanker traffic was being flagged by the US out of the Gulf under escort. To verify Indian capability to do the same without being targeted, the Indian Carrier

Group was deployed in the Gulf of Oman to provide airborne escort to Indian hulls coming out of the Gulf. The tankers motored along three escort lines patrolled by missile destroyers from the Carrier Group. Significantly, this was accomplished in sea-space where no land-based aviation was available. These tasks could not have been achieved in the absence of the Indian Fleet Carrier.

And because the Carrier is such a large and capable platform, it can integrate assets from other services (even other nations) into its operations. Its Role-Flexibility was on display in Operation Jupiter during the peacekeeping operations in Sri Lanka in 1989. This is especially crucial today with the stress placed on jointness between the armed services and between allies. In the current combat environment characterized by fluidity, the capabilities needed in one situation may not be the same in another. This is where the versatility of the carrier and its consorts to be tailored for foreseeable roles comes to play. Given the adaptability, payload, mobility and power of the Carrier Group, it now becomes meaningful to understand the operational philosophy that governs its deployment.

### **Contemporary Naval Thought**

A fourfold classification of maritime forces has dominated contemporary naval thought. The grouping is largely functional and task-oriented. It comprises of aircraft carriers, denial forces (including surface, air and sub-surface units), escorts and surveillance elements. Auxiliaries including logistics and other support ships and tenders provide distant and indirect support. In addition, current thought has given strategic nuclear



China's A2/AD bubble in the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean.

The **issue of vulnerability** to contemporary **A2/AD threats** requires more **serious deliberation**

forces a restraining role to define and demarcate the limits within which conventional forces operate.

The make-up of the fleet must logically be a material and technological articulation of strategic concepts that prevail. India has for long aspired to attain a strategic maritime posture that would permit control and hold sway over oceanic spaces that serve to promote its national interests. And in times of hostility, influence the course of the conflict. Against this frame of reference, the fundamental obligation is therefore to provide the means to seize and exercise that control (it must come as no surprise that China develops forces necessary to realize its A2/AD policy). Pursuing this line of argument, it is the Aircraft Carrier Group and its intrinsic air power assisted by strike and denial forces that sea

control and security of control can be achieved. It is here that the true impact of the Aircraft Carrier is felt. Control and security of control is the relationship that operationally links all maritime forces with the Aircraft Carrier. In the absence of the latter, naval operations are reduced to a series of denial actions limited in time, space and restricted to littoral waters with little impact on the progress of operations on land. It is for this reason that the Indian aircraft carrier programme today envisages a minimum force level of three Fleet Carriers at all times in order to meet the diverse tasks that the navy may be charged with across geographically separated areas of interest under circumstances of change and uncertainty.

**The Uncertainty Paradigm**

As struggles of the post-Cold War era are played out the first

casualty is the still-born hope of an enlightened global order. Endemic instability worldwide is manifest in the number of armed conflicts (over 50) that erupted in this period. The nature of these wars, more than anything else, reflect what may be termed the 'Uncertainty Paradigm' for they ranged from wars of liberation and freedom to insurgencies, civil wars, ethno-racial-religious wars, proxy wars, interventions, armed settlement of historical scores and conflicts motivated by the urge to corner economic resources. In all cases, it was either the perpetuation of a regime, political ambitions, radical religious ideologies, racial animosities or the fear of economic deprivation that was at work.

The unease of nations in this milieu is compounded by the perpetuation of each State, its sovereignty, growth, demand for distinctive aspirations and its right to use force; all of which are features that every individual nation lists as primary national interests. It is also here that the roots of uncertainty often lie.

Against this backdrop, when politics of ‘territorial grab’ and competitive resource access are linked to survival and growth of the State; we have before us the recipe for diverse forms of inter-state, intra-state and bloc conflicts.

**Challenge Of China**

Of all the uncertainties that influence strategic stability, it is China; a self-declared revisionist autocratic power, that will impact and challenge globally. Particularly so, in the maritime domain. And therefore, it is appropriate that the planner examine and understand in some detail the challenge of China.

Of import are China’s dazzling economic growth and strategic military prowess. This has transformed their perspective of the world and their role in it. Beijing places primacy on its beliefs and interests, its comprehensive power gives it the required heft to shape global affairs in a manner that promotes its own well-being. The search for geopolitical space that the emergence of a new revisionist power precipitates, historically, has been the cause of global instability and tensions. Add to this is the ideology of nationalism that is inextricably linked to their military and we are faced with a situation when China’s power and its revisionist urge have the potential to provoke conflicts. Progressively, China appears to be challenging not just today’s economic orthodoxy and order, but the world’s political and security framework as well without bringing about a change within its own political morphology.

China’s claim of sovereignty over the South China Sea; its territorial aggressiveness; its handling of



*Chinese aircraft carrier Liaoning.*

The **make-up of the fleet** must logically be a **material and technological** articulation of **strategic concepts** that prevail

dissent within Tibet and Sinkiang; its proliferatory carousing with rogue states such as North Korea and Pakistan are cases that do not inspire confidence in the change occurring within that nation without turbulence. It is also noted, with some foreboding, the breaking out of China from its largely defensive maritime perimeter into the Indo-Pacific.

**Conclusion**

The ultimate reality of the international system is the place that power enjoys in the scheme of assuring stability in relations between nations. Uncertainty in relations queers the pitch, in view of the expanded space for possibilities. China has unambiguously articulated three

canons that make for its strategic objectives; revision of the existing order, sustained growth at any cost and regional pre-eminence. In the absence of a security-oriented cooperative impulse, the problem with such sweeping strategies is its blindness to recognize that we are in fact dealing with a sea space that is the busiest of all the “vast commons”. The reluctance for collaboration makes the potential for friction high and the only consideration that could deter it is the ability to attain a strategic posture that serves to stabilize. The ready availability of the Fleet Aircraft Carrier and its complimentary group is central to any power equation and in consequence, provides the foundation for stability. **DSA**