

Air Marshal (R) M Matheswaran on

A third aircraft carrier for India



INS Vikramaditya (image from the internet)

Budget versus Necessity

The Indian military is undergoing what may be its most significant reorganisation since India's independence, with considerable implications for its future strategic posture. One important issue that has been brought to the fore is the role of the Indian Navy as a regional power projection force built around three aircraft carriers. The government's decision on this issue will have significant implications for the region.

The Indian Navy currently operates one carrier, the 45,000 tonne Russian-origin INS *Vikramaditya*, with a second, the indigenous 37,500 tonne INS *Vikrant*, having just entered sea trials, both being 'ski-jump' carriers. But the Indian Navy regards a third, conventional 'flat-topped' aircraft carrier, which is planned to be of 65,000 tonne displacement for superior power projection capabilities, as an absolute necessity.

The Indian Navy's plans for a three-carrier based force structure, first proposed in the early 2000s, has been accepted in principle. This would allow the navy to operate two carrier task groups at all times, with a total fighter strength of more than 150 aircraft.

However, India's new Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat, who took office in January 2020, has stated that budgetary constraints will force the navy to defer plans for the third carrier. Some in the government see the third aircraft carrier as a "frightfully expensive white elephant" arguing that India can ill-afford such expenditure on one single platform when there are many other requirements crying for immediate attention.

This view is reinforced by India's bitter experience in acquiring the *Vikramaditya* from Russia, when the original price rose from US \$ 974 million to \$2.35 billion.

Together with 45 MiG-29K aircraft and additional modifications, the overall price came to somewhere between \$6 billion and \$7 billion.

This experience has been compounded by delays and escalating costs of the first Indian-built aircraft carrier, the *Vikrant*, which is already more than five years behind schedule. With cost overruns and 36 aircraft, the total price is likely to be \$10–11 billion. The third proposed carrier, (INS *Viraat*, although many refer to this as the *Vishal*), still in conceptual stages, is expected to cost \$6–8 billion and take 10–14 years to build. Including its air component of Super Hornets or Rafale Ms at current prices, the total cost is likely to be in the order of \$16–17 billion.

General Bipin Rawat has given hints at his priorities in view of likely budgetary constraints over the next few years. His focus is on strengthening the land defences