

Why Indian Navy must have a third aircraft carrier



INS Vikrant (R11) and INS Vikramaditya (R33) during a joint exercise. (Photo: IN)

September 2, 2022, was a red-letter day for India as Prime Minister Narendra Modi commissioned the first indigenous aircraft carrier, INS Vikrant. It is the fourth carrier ever operated by the navy and the largest warship ever made in the country indigenously. It represents the newest chapter in the history of the Indian Navy that began with the commissioning of INS Vikrant (ex HMS Hercules), the country's first aircraft carrier, on 30 April 1957. India is currently looking for a second home grown aircraft carrier to maintain a simultaneous three carrier fleet. However, the feasibility of investing huge amounts in such a programme against a not so large submarine fleet, has become a hot topic for debate among navy veterans, historians, researchers and enthusiasts alike.

In 1924, HMS Hermes became what can be said to be the first precursor of modern aircraft carriers. Since then, carriers have dominated the sea and naval conflicts, ultimately shaping the outcome of the conflicts. World War II marked the largest deployment of aircraft carriers by both warring sides. The aircraft carrier was the primary

instrument for delivering airpower far from the region. The rapid progress of powerful naval engines, radars, communication, command and control, aviation technology and various other aspects quickly shaped the tenders into a floating behemoth carrying new generation planes capable of delivering heavy punch, which easily superseded the capability of mighty battleships! A new kind of warship gradually gained huge importance in a relatively short time.

From the beginning, independent India was able to fully understand the importance of aircraft carriers (and submarines) for the security and sovereignty of the nation. Under the fifteen year plan for refurbishing post-Independence, four fleet carriers were recommended, which were to be abandoned in favour of a much smaller but affordable approach. Gradually, India would procure three foreign aircraft carriers in the next sixty years. Ultimately, in 2013, India launched the first indigenously developed and manufactured aircraft carrier, the IAC-I, the "INS Vikrant". After the IAC-I, the navy is eyeing the IAC-II, a second indigenous aircraft carrier. The navy seeks a three carrier force where two carriers will always keep safeguarding the seas in case one platform has to go under refit or maintenance. And this platform was envisioned to be a larger CATOBAR (Catapult-Assisted Take-Off But Arrested Recovery) platform. Now, mainly three questions arise at this point. One, can India successfully have a CATOBAR aircraft carrier? Second, should India at all invest in another carrier rather than more submarines? Third, can India afford a behemoth investment at this time?

The answer to the first one is quite easy, yes! CATOBAR is no alien to the Indian Navy. In fact, India's first aircraft carrier, INS Vikrant had been such a tender until 1989, when it was converted into a V/STOL (Vertical/Short Take-Off and Land) configured ship. Under the 1988 Indo-French MoU, INDLT (Indian Naval Design and Liaison Team) worked with DCN (Direction des Constructions Navales) and a 40,000T platform was



HMS Hermes (Photo: Wikimedia)