

Admiral Arun Prakash on

The Kuznetsov mishap and the future of Aircraft Carriers

As accidents go, Russia's sole aircraft-carrier, the *Admiral Kuznetsov* being put out of action on 29 October 2018, was indeed bizarre news. But what missed the headlines was an even more dramatic event that preceded it: sinking of the world's largest floating dry-dock, the PD-50, in the north-western Russian port of Murmansk.

United Shipbuilding Corporation had, optimistically, declared that the damage would be repaired "soon". But the non-availability of PD-50 may have put paid to hopes of restoring aircraft carrier to service in the near future. Serious questions are also arising whether it is worth attempting to salvage the warship, given its history of machinery breakdowns and poor reliability.

maritime deterrence or reliable power projection. The ship infrequently went to sea and seems to have been maintained as a symbol of national prestige that kept alive hopes of a Russian maritime resurgence.

The high point of the ship's career was its 2016 deployment in the Mediterranean. Her air-group undertook 400 operational missions against Syrian rebels, but the loss of two fighters, in quick succession, reportedly owing to arrestor gear malfunction, cast doubts on its reliability. What really served to detract from its image and credibility was the continuous presence of a tug in its company, as measure of abundant precaution against breakdowns far from home.

From all accounts, the *Kuznetsov's* fate now hangs in the balance, for many reasons. Whether the ship is scrapped, repaired or replaced, given the Indian Navy's (IN) linkages with Soviet/Russian carrier-aviation, it is appropriate that we delve into their recent history and reflect on what the future holds.

The Soviet 'Aviation Cruisers'

The post-WW II Soviet Navy had considered aircraft carriers as expensive instruments of 'capitalist imperial aggression', and tactically, as vulnerable "sitting-ducks" for their submarines and air-launched anti-ship missiles. However, this prejudice



The Russian aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov.
(Photo: Norway Royal Airforce, via European Pressphoto Agency)

Since all seven Soviet-era aircraft-carriers had been built at the Ukrainian shipyard of Nikolayev, the Russian Federation has lacked an aircraft-carrier building and repair facility. The PD-50 was the only dry-dock, in Russia, capable of hosting the 67,500 ton aircraft-carrier for its scheduled 30-month repair and refit programme which commenced in September 2018.

The un-docking of a ship from a floating dry-dock is a complex operation, since it involves the 'controlled sinking' of the dry dock to permit the berthed ship to float out. Any malfunction of the large pumps and valves involved in flooding and pumping out can have serious consequences – as indeed happened.

Even with the apparent damage to the *Kuznetsov*, a large gash on the deck caused by a falling 70-ton crane, Russia's

During its 29-year existence, the *Kuznetsov* could never, really, perform her assigned missions of conventional



A Yak-38 with folded wings on the deck of a Soviet aircraft carrier