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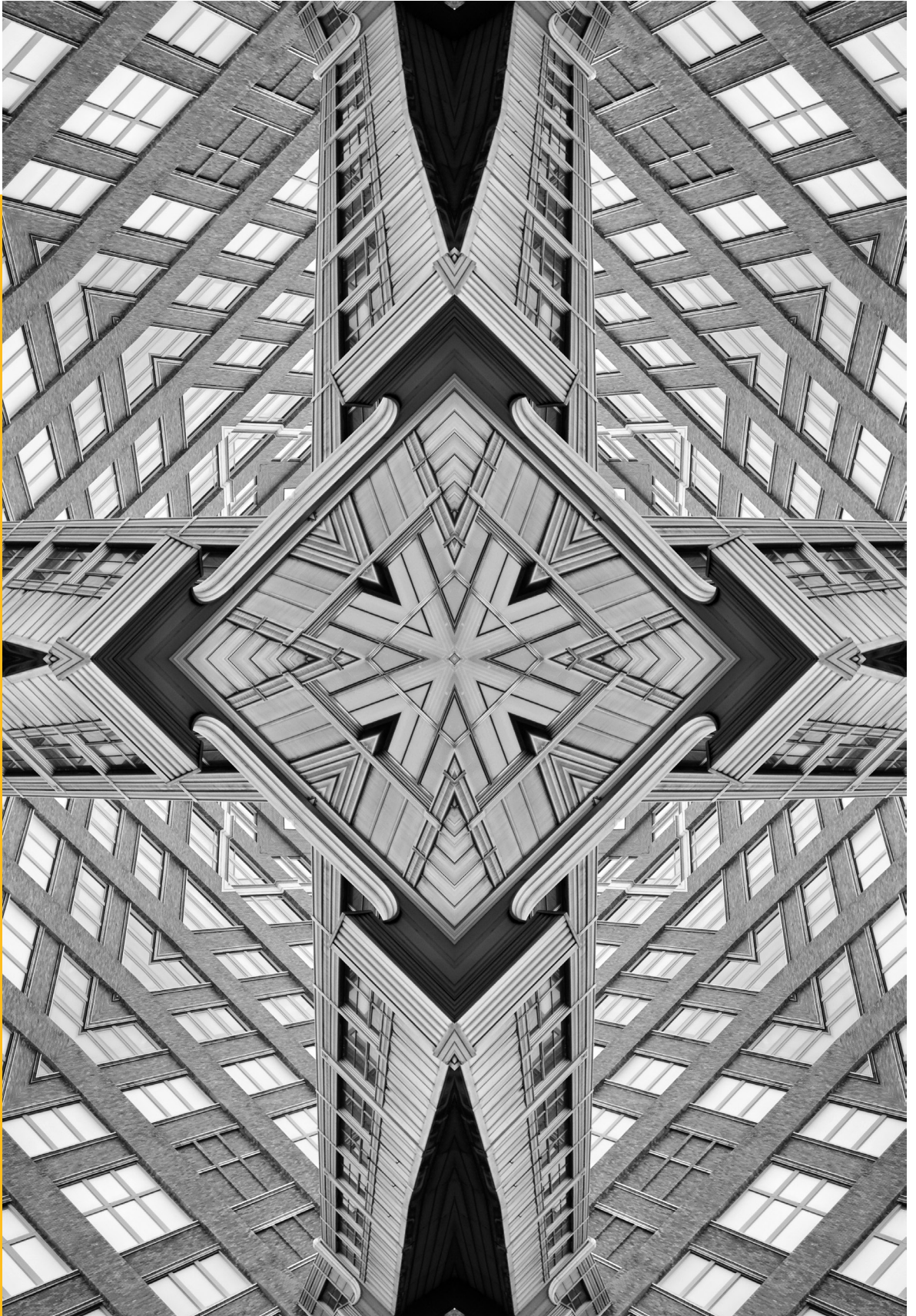
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Nehru's Navy: India's Tryst with Aircraft Carriers

Yogesh Joshi

Abstract

The commissioning of the homegrown *INS Vikrant* in September has revived debates within India's strategic community and the decision-making elite, on the desirability and viability of aircraft carriers for the Indian Navy. It remains unclear how these debates are settled among the political, bureaucratic, and military classes, and how decisions are made around the Navy's force structures, particularly on the issue of aircraft carriers. This paper offers a historical account of how India acquired its first aircraft carrier in the 1960s, the various forces that have either supported or resisted the idea of a carrier-centric navy, and the consequences for the Navy. It argues that both, the Indian Navy's organisational obsessions, and Jawaharlal Nehru's pride, were responsible for India's tryst with aircraft carriers.

On 2 September, Prime Minister Narendra Modi commissioned India's first indigenously built aircraft carrier. The IAC 1, named *Vikrant*, will displace 43,000 tons when fully equipped, making it the largest warship ever designed and constructed in the country. Prime Minister Modi hailed *Vikrant*'s arrival thus: "If the goals are distant, the journeys are long, the ocean and the challenges are endless – then India's answer is *Vikrant*."¹ Defence Minister Rajnath Singh was equally effusive in his remarks, saying, "It is an icon of pride, power, and resolve of the Nation."² If political leaders were underlining *Vikrant*'s contribution to self-reliance in India's defence, the Navy was focusing on how the aircraft carrier would help the country realise its combat potential. As the Vice Chief of Naval Staff, Vice Admiral SN Ghormande argued, "It will provide the required deterrence against the growing strength of the neighbour. It will promote peace and stability in the Indian Ocean region."³

The Navy used the occasion of *Vikrant*'s commissioning to underline the requirement of a 3rd aircraft carrier for seamless control of the Indian Ocean whether during peace or war time. The strategic community also highlighted the warship's importance to India's maritime power.⁴ As ORF analyst Abhijit Singh wrote in September, aircraft carriers provide unprecedented access to littoral seas, allow for effective command of the sea, and, most importantly, could "alter the psychological balance" against the adversary who has to take the capabilities of the aircraft carrier into account in its naval strategy.

Not everyone is convinced, however, of the contribution aircraft carriers make to India's naval strategy.⁵ As the late former Chief of Defense Staff, Gen. Bipin Rawat, had once questioned the Navy's penchant for aircraft carriers: "When we know that there would be two aircraft carriers there, and if the submarine force is dwindling, then our priority should be for submarines."⁶ The Navy has, however, adhered to its requirement for three aircraft carriers. Argued Admiral

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Karambir Singh, former Chief of Naval Staff: “As the Navy chief, I am convinced that the country needs three aircraft carriers, so that two are operational at all times. And it should be 65,000 tonnes with electromagnetic propulsion.”⁷

INS Vikrant's recent commissioning has once again stoked serious debates within the country on the desirability and viability of a three-carrier program for the Navy. The debates are not restricted to the strategic community but occur at the highest echelons of India's decision-making class. The public, however, have little understanding of the decision-making process around the Navy's force structures, particularly on the issue of aircraft carriers, and how these debates are settled between the political, bureaucratic, and military classes. What drives these debates—strategic necessities, prestige, bureaucratic and organisational interests, or individuals? More importantly: how are the debates settled within the government, and on what grounds? Using recently declassified documents from the archives of the Indian and British governments, this paper offers a historical account of how India acquired its first aircraft carrier, the various forces that have supported or resisted the idea of a carrier-centric navy, and the consequences for the Navy.

The paper reconstructs the process by which the Indian Navy acquired its first aircraft carrier in the 1960s. It argues that rather than being driven by astute assessments of threat perceptions, security requirements, and the role of naval power in India's military strategy, the Navy's obsessions with aircraft carriers was a result of its ambition to take the imperial role of the British Navy in the Indian Ocean. It underscores the roles of key individuals, who became far more critical amidst the absence of concrete security and strategic imperatives. The entire process depended not only on their access to the centre of political power in modern India—i.e., then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru—but also their ability to fulfil Nehru's aspirations for India's place on the global stage. The Indian Navy's organisational obsessions, and Nehru's vanity, were thus primarily responsible for India's earliest tryst with aircraft carriers.

The Origins of the 'Cinderella' Service

In August 1947, the Royal Indian Navy prepared its first plan paper for post-Independence India.⁸ Under the British, the Indian Navy remained minuscule compared to the Army or the Air Force. For one, whereas massive land forces were required for the “defence of India and for its policies abroad,” for naval defense, Delhi relied mainly on the supremacy of the Royal Navy. Moreover, India’s inward orientation and limited external trade did not require any extensive maritime presence in the Indian Ocean. However, in the Navy’s calculations, independence from the British necessitated a reevaluation of India’s maritime aspirations.

For the Naval Headquarters in New Delhi, “a navy commanding the respect of the world” was not a “luxury” but an “essential” prerequisite for “preeminence and leadership” in South and South East Asia and to maintain its “position in the world strategy as the focal country of the Indian Ocean.” Mahanian vision of the Navy’s role in India’s future wars drove the force’s outlook: India’s maritime security could best be achieved by “destroying or neutralizing the enemy naval forces and by ensuring that enemy shipping is deprived (of) the use of the seas.” For such missions, the Navy required a balanced force comprising two light fleet carriers, three cruisers, eight destroyers, and four submarines. The need, as Vice Admiral W.E. Parry, was to develop a “real modern Navy.....containing all types of ships and aircrafts, on the sea, over the sea, and under the sea.” Even when the Royal Indian Navy was primarily a coastal defence force, post-Independence, the Navy needed to develop offensive capabilities “against any hostile force in the Indian Ocean.”⁹

Within a decade, the Indian Navy planned to create two naval task forces led by aircraft carriers and comprising 66 vessels. The navy wanted to expand along all vectors: surface, air, and subsurface. In the Navy’s logic, such multi-azimuth expansion was required to develop a balanced naval force that was a characteristic not only of great navies but also of those victorious in the battlefield, unlike the

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highly skewed navies of the Axis powers during the Second World War. The 10-year expansion plan was one of the most ambitious in the entire developing world.

The Navy's grand plans were based on several assumptions, first of which was that the Indian Navy was the rightful heir to the British domination over the Indian Ocean. The Navy also expected the erstwhile colonisers to support its expansion generously. The third assumption was that India's political decision-makers would support the growth of the service. In November 1947, in the hope that both these conditions would be met, an NHQ delegation to London under the leadership of India's then Defence Secretary HM Patel requested the Admiralty to prepare a detailed breakdown of the cost of its 10-year expansion plan.¹⁰ According to this plan, the two fleet carriers were to be acquired by 1954 and 1956. These Colossus-class ships were priced anywhere between £2.5 million to £3.5 million without the aircraft, aircraft maintenance, and armament stores. The running cost of a single fleet carrier was £90,000 a year; the cost of a new Swordfish-class submarine was at £4.3 lakh, with a running cost of £27,000 per annum.

The Admiralty initially appeared enthusiastic about the Indian Navy's plans, even when it recognised that such ships were not available for sale. As the head of the Military Branch in the Admiralty argued, it was "not only desirable that India should look to this country (Britain) to procure warships rather than elsewhere" but also that "every encouragement should be given to the RIN to build up their naval strength."¹¹ However, such positive attitude of the Admiralty was conditional: As long as India remained within the Commonwealth, it could be treated like the other dominions of the British Empire. Otherwise, such preferential treatment would cease to exist, and India will be treated as a "foreign power."¹²

Early British enthusiasm for the Navy's request for costing the Naval Plan Paper No. 1, as was proved by subsequent events, did not entail sponsorship of the latter's expansion plans. In the Admiralty's

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scheme of things, even though the Indian Navy's primary task was to provide for the "security of India," it also had to "contribute to the overall security of the British Commonwealth," mainly through control of the sea lanes of communication in the Indian Ocean.¹³ By March 1948, the Admiralty's appreciation of the future naval requirements of the Indian Navy for the next 10 to 15 years consisted of three Cruisers, eight Destroyers, eight Frigates, 12 Minesweepers, and other miscellaneous crafts.¹⁴ Contrary to the force structures envisioned in the Naval Plan Paper No. 1, the Admiralty considered it premature to incorporate aircraft carriers and submarines into the Indian Navy's force structure.

Yet, the Navy's second and third assumptions were more fateful, not only because the political class held the purse, but it was equally consequential for India's foreign and defence policy. The place of the Commonwealth in India's foreign and defence policy was central to the Admiralty's support for the Indian Navy's expansion. If such was the case, the naval leadership had grossly overestimated the case for expansion. Politically, India's decision-makers neither shared the Navy's vision of the country's strategic objectives nor did they appreciate the operational role of the Navy in its military strategy or how it aims to employ force in pursuit of its objectives. As early as February 1947, PM Nehru wrote a confidential assessment of India's armed forces in the post-independence period.¹⁵ Skeptical of the claims around India becoming a significant military power in the next decade, Nehru's military objectives were limited to ensuring "internal and frontier security." For such limited aims, India required "land forces not greater than the pre-war level" and, of course, "the air forces," which Nehru saw as the "most efficient weapon" for "immediate action" against any external "aggression."

The Navy, however, did not fit into Nehru's vision primarily due to the absence of any specific maritime threats but more importantly, the presence of friendly powers in the Indian Ocean. Therefore, the Navy needed to be kept at a "minimal" level. British military strategists such as PMS Blackett, whose advice Nehru often sought regarding India's defence requirements and posture, reinforced this

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belief. In a classified report submitted to India's Ministry of Defence (MoD) in September 1948, Blackett argued that the Indian Navy should "look after the coastal and local defences, and the escort of convoys in the Indian Ocean, leaving the major fighting units to be provided by the great powers."¹⁶ Blackett argued that fighting a battle fleet comprising carrier-led task forces is not only beyond the means of the Navy but is also highly improbable because none of the littoral states could command such a fleet in the foreseeable future. In case of a hostile extra-regional power, the British presence would provide the necessary deterrent. To protect coastal shipping, Blackett proposed a force structure comprising "escort vessels with anti-submarine and light anti-aircraft equipment" and "shore-based reconnaissance" and "anti-ship" aircraft. Blackett argued that escort carriers, a much smaller version of aircraft carriers, could be useful for protecting ocean convoys.

Still, they could not carry long-range bombers and fighter aircraft for which fleet aircraft carriers were needed. Yet, he opposed fleet carriers as they suffered from significant disadvantages: they were "too expensive" but also required "significant anti-aircraft cover." Blackett, therefore, proposed a force structure comprising "escort destroyers and sloops," "one or two squadrons of shore-based anti-submarine and anti-ship aircrafts," "Long range reconnaissance aircrafts," an "escort carrier," and a few "medium range submarines." Indeed, Blackett extolled the capabilities of submarines: "Their existence is a useful deterrent against enemy ships loitering near India's coastlines," but would also help provide the much-needed "anti-submarine training" for the Indian Navy.

The decks were therefore loaded against the Navy's 10-year expansion plan. In 1947-1948, India's defence budget, excluding the Kashmir operations, was around ₹133 crore. The Navy's share was merely ₹5 crores.¹⁷ The defence budget was planned at ₹122 crores for 1948-149. However, the revised budget inflated to almost ₹155 crores due to Kashmir and Hyderabad operations. In January 1949, MoD's proposal for an additional ₹13 crores for 1950-51 rang the alarm bells

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in the Ministry of Finance (MoF). John Mathai, then India's finance minister, complained to Nehru of the inflationary and debt pressures entailed by such an increase in defence budget. Nehru thus instructed the Minister of Defence Baldev Singh, "Defence budget is out of all proportions to our income and every effort should be made to cut down the figure to the absolute minimum."¹⁸ The Chief of Naval Staff (CNS) Vice Admiral W.E. Parry, in October 1948, then promulgated a less ambitious plan.

The new plan, as quoted by Admiral Satyendra Singh from the documents available at Naval Headquarters in New Delhi, envisioned "one fleet carrier, three cruisers, seven destroyers, six submarines, one survey vessel, one landing ship tank and some other supporting paragraphs" for Navy's force structure in the decade of the 1950s.¹⁹ As John Mathai told Nehru, even this plan would result in an additional expense of ₹20 crores per annum on the exchequer.²⁰ Mathai categorically told the Navy that "it was not possible to consider this plan separately without having an overall picture of the costs involved." If the financial crunch was crippling, Nehru's non-alignment had also put off the Admiralty in London. For the Admiralty, a favourable inclination towards the Indian Navy's expansion plans was predicated on India joining the Commonwealth security architecture. Nehru, however, was hardly interested. When then British Prime Minister Clement Attlee raised the issue of defence talks with Nehru during the London conference of the Commonwealth countries in April 1949, Nehru said that "he would be embarrassed if (British) side initiated the proposals to hold them."²¹

Notwithstanding its earlier inclination toward a balanced force and the revision of its expansion plans by 1948, the Navy's emphasis was primarily on naval aviation and fleet carriers. In June 1949, during his visit to London, Vice Admiral Parry appealed to the Fifth Sea Lord to support the Indian Navy's air arm. He argued that "no navy without its own air arm can be contemplated for a country which is dependent on the sea for all her exports and imports, as India must always be."²²

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Given India's financial troubles, Parry asked Admiralty to prepare an "austerity plan" for the next three years but mainly focused on a "fleet air arm." In anticipation of a fleet carrier at some stage, the Navy now planned to "limit itself to training personnel, taking over of two airfields, buying the necessary training aircrafts" and "forming a fleet requirement unit." Parry's appeal notwithstanding, the crucial question before the British was "what sort of Navy did we want India to have?"²³ This question was critical to the overall "Commonwealth strategic concept" until and unless the British had decided to "allow India to plan her Navy for purely national Indian defence requirements." London wanted more from the Indian Navy and that, too, on an official basis. It was decided that a formal advisory would be issued to the Indian Navy that it should concentrate on "cruisers, destroyers etc."

British apathy was reinforced by political apathy at home. Nehru believed that the Navy was inconsequential to India's military requirements and strategy. In April 1950, the Defence Committee of the Cabinet (DCC) presented its plan paper for a balanced military force for India, a task given to the DCC in October 1949.²⁴ In a letter to Baldev Singh, the Minister of Defence, Nehru stated that the "Airforce is likely to play a more important role in our defence than the navy." "Modern scientific and competent opinion," Nehru argued, "is all against big ships, which are just targets for the newly developed submarines" and India should avoid spending "large sums on acquisition of big ships." For Nehru, as he told India's Ambassador to the United Nations BN Rau, "our navy is in its babyhood and is likely to remain at that stage for a considerable time."²⁵ Then Foreign Secretary Girija Prasad Bajpai, agreed: "USA and UK may be all-powerful on the seas at the moment, there is enough experience to justify that a weaker naval power can effectively impede sea communications to the disadvantage not only of belligerents but also of neutrals."²⁶ It was apparent that there was a divide in strategic thought on the Navy's force structure between India's civilian decision-makers and the Navy.

Spotlight on Northeast India

In Nehru's view, India's defence forces and the entire defence ecosystem involved only "home defence".²⁷ The Navy did not figure in India's home defence, nor did India's foreign and security policy require any "expeditionary forces." The policy translated into practice: As the anti-Hindu riots flared up in east Pakistan in early 1950, Nehru asked the Chiefs of Staff Committee (CoSC) to prepare a military intervention plan to end the violence.²⁸ 'Operation Matador', a precursor to India's liberation operations in Bangladesh in the 1971 war, revolved around the Army and the Air Force, with minimal action for the Navy. The continuing apathy for the Navy was again evident in the defence budget for 1950-51. Out of a total of ₹168 crores, if the Army received a revenue portion of ₹130.97 crores and a capital share of ₹4.30 crores, the Navy's revenue share was merely ₹8.26 crores with a capital allotment of ₹0.6 crores.²⁹

Any growth of the Navy was contingent on the downsizing of the Army, which had more than doubled since independence mainly because of the operations in Kashmir. Even when the DCC was tasked to trim the army during its meeting in 1949, the anti-Hindu riots in East Pakistan and India's interventionary plans did not allow for any cost-cutting. By July 1950, the DCC realised that "rate of expansion of the Navy and the Air Force needs to slow down."³⁰ Since the Navy's expansion was predicated on the "money coming out from Army's reduction," India-Pakistan tensions left Navy development "unpredictable."

As Nehru told Lord Mountbatten in early 1951, given India's defence commitments against Pakistan on the land frontier, the Navy's expansion had received a "heavy blow."³¹ By early 1951, the Indian Navy's initial plans for naval expansion were diluted considerably.³² Even when economic stringency forced the naval expansion to a "minimal rate of development,"³³ the Navy was fixated on the concept of "carrier task forces" providing enough strategic and tactical mobility to maintain "control of the seas" around the Indian Ocean.³⁴

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For much of the 1950s, the focus would remain on acquiring a fleet aircraft carrier primarily tasked with anti-submarine warfare.³⁵

Within the first three years of independence, the Navy's plans had come to a cropper, preparing the grounds for its ultimate designation as the Indian military's "Cinderella" service.³⁶ However, the fault was not entirely of the political class. The Navy overestimated its future role in the Indian Ocean and British generosity in supporting its expansion plans. Most importantly, the Navy's strategic appreciation of its military role was entirely out of tune with India's requirements. India's decision-makers viewed the Army and the Air Force as efficient instruments in the country's use of military force vis-à-vis the security threat from Pakistan; the Navy's imperial ambitions and strategy, driven by sea control, were beyond India's military requirements.

“Given India's defence needs against Pakistan on the land frontier, the Navy's expansion in the early '50s received a 'heavy blow'.”

Nehru, Blackett, Panikkar, and the Aircraft Carriers Debate

Economic stringency, India's non-alignment, non-availability of spare British ships due to the Korean war, and political apathy among civilian decision-makers all led to the grinding halt of the Navy's ambitious expansion plan in the early 1950s. Even when the Indian Navy became independent of the Royal Navy with the declaration of the Republic on 26 January 1950, the reliance on British equipment continued. In March 1951, the Indian High Commission in New Delhi desired to loan three Hunt –II class frigates from the Royal Navy to replace the Cruiser *Jamaica*, which the Royal Navy had promised but did not deliver.³⁷

After detailed discussions between the Admiralty, the British Ministry of Defence, and the Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO), London agreed to loan these Frigates to India in October 1951. The decision was not an easy one. The CRO was concerned that once loaned, a neutral nation like India might not return these frigates in the event of war. For the British diplomats, the principal obstacle was the lack of a defence pact with India. On the other hand, the Admiralty was keen to lend these frigates as it would help them avoid the costs of maintenance. The frigates were loaned on the condition that they will be returned in case Britain faced a war-like situation and would not be used in war by India. New Delhi readily accepted these conditions³⁸ and the frigates were transferred to the Indian Navy in 1953.³⁹

By then, as India-Pakistan relations entered a period of relative calm and the economic situation was improving, the long-held ambition for a fleet carrier was once again expressed by the NHQ. Given that the British had hardly any spare ships available and the Indian exchequer could not afford to buy ships, Vice Admiral Mark Pizey, now CNS, proposed that India loan a Colossus-class fleet carrier from the British Navy for five years, to be followed by an outright purchase of a Majestic-class ship by 1960-61.⁴⁰ Even when modern fighter jets could not operate from the flattop of Colossus-class carriers, the Navy believed that for the time being, it could operate

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its air arm comprising vampire aircraft from shore-based installations. The NHQ's insistence provoked debate within the Defence Ministry.

For one, the MoD was not keen on loaning another ship whose total costs were ₹7 crore. Rather, it was interested in outright purchase of a Majestic-Class fleet carrier that could host jet fighters and thus had some “operational value.”⁴¹ The costs were estimated to be around ₹18 crores. For the Navy, it was a problem for the Finance and Defence ministries to sort out: “Naval Headquarters agreed that if the Government can find the money it would be preferable to buy a Majestic-class carrier straightaway.” Whether the British could spare the hull of a Majestic-class carrier and modernise it for the Indian Navy was yet to be confirmed.

More controversial was the very question of building a naval force structure around a fleet carrier. MK Vellodi, then Defence Secretary, was highly sceptical. He approached KM Panikkar and PMS Blackett to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of buying an aircraft carrier for the Navy. Vellodi's choice of outside expertise was both brilliant and cunning. It was brilliant because Nehru was impressed by the insight and expertise of both Panikkar and Blackett. He had already availed Blackett's services to define the trajectory of India's military expansion and the establishment of its indigenous defence research organisations. He had also appointed Panikkar as India's first ambassador to communist China. Panikkar's thesis on India's place in the Indian Ocean also elevated him to being the foremost authority on India's maritime needs and destiny.⁴² As Nehru once told his sister Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, “Panikkar is a man of extraordinarily acute intelligence and power of observation.”⁴³ The choice was also cunning: it helped Vellodi appear neutral to the constant demand of the Navy for an aircraft carrier. Blackett had opposed the fleet carrier as early as September 1948. Panikkar was sure to support the Navy's request.

The drama played out as Vellodi intended. Blackett “seriously doubted the need for an aircraft carrier for the Indian Navy” for the reasons he had underlined in his 1948 report.⁴⁴ Panikkar, on the

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other hand, supported the idea enthusiastically. Panikkar believed an aircraft carrier was an “absolute necessity if we have to maintain our Navy as an effective task force”⁴⁵ and outlined two possible conflict scenarios which India may encounter: one would entail a global war in which India was uninvolved, and a second pertained to a limited local war with a hostile neighbour. In both scenarios, Panikkar believed that a carrier task was “absolutely necessary.”

In a global war where India professes neutrality, the Navy’s force structure required “necessary forces to keep the sea lanes open for our (India’s) traffic.” Not only the “British Navy will not be available,” but London would expect the India to “fulfil this role in the Indian Ocean.” Protection of India’s expanding merchant marine in the future will be the Navy’s “primary task.” Moreover, in case of a global war, states on both sides would require India’s goods, rendering protection of Indian trade a valuable security goal. Panikkar also believed that the security and trade protection of other neutral states such as Ceylon, Burma, Arab Sheikdoms and Indonesia would also fall upon the Indian Navy.

A limited war with a neighbour like Pakistan would entail far more assertive use of Indian naval power. Panikkar outlined four crucial tasks for the Navy: protection of India’s coast from “raids by hostile naval forces”; prevention of communications between the eastern and western wings of Pakistan, and interception of all “naval and maritime crafts operating between the two wings”; convoy protection for India’s “coastal and other shipping”; and destruction of “enemy naval forces at sea and if possible at their bases.” Panikkar believed that such missions, for scenarios involving both a great war or a limited war, cannot be performed without an adequate air arm: “without an air arm our navy will be ineffective” and for an air arm, “aircraft carriers seem to be essential.” Panikkar’s appeal was based on grand ideas on the role of Indian Navy in future conflict without an adequate appreciation of how aircraft carrier task forces would perform convoy security missions in an area as vast as the northern Indian Ocean.

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Panikkar's argument was beset by many weaknesses such as low endurance of the Majestic-class fleet carriers and limited reach of the fleet aircraft to operate seamlessly in this geography. But also why such missions could not be performed by long-range shore-based anti-ship aircraft. Similarly, in the case of limited local war, Panikkar ignored the balance of arguments between force structures built around sea denial tactics such as submarines, and sea control assets such as aircraft carriers. Panikkar advocated his established beliefs rather than providing an objective assessment of a carrier-centric force structure: the need for the Navy to take up the British mantle in the Indian Ocean. The most glaring deficiency in Panikkar's arguments was evident when he told Vellodi that just one aircraft would suffice for the above tasks: "the number of aircraft carriers does not seem to be particularly important at this stage as we will be able to manage with one", as the Andaman and Nicobar Islands provides a stationary carrier.

Nehru was hardly convinced. While extolling Panikkar's brilliance to his sister, Nehru had also cautioned her against his penchant for exaggeration: "In fact, his mind is so keen that it overshoots the mark and goes much further than the facts warranted."⁴⁶ Nehru found Panikkar's view on the role of the Indian Navy during a global war too far-fetched. More importantly, for Nehru, the question for the government was not simply of purchasing a fleet carrier but the "balance of advantage" such a purchase provides for India's defence.⁴⁷ As he wrote to Vellodi, the opportunity costs of investing massive amounts into a single piece of naval hardware were huge: "How can we best spend this money to ensure our defence?" PMS Blackett, in his 1948 report, had underlined the need for the Navy to focus on coastal defence and therefore adopt a strategy of sea denial using shore-based air support and possibly submarines rather than invest in aircraft carriers that required significant air protection but also were too expensive. Nehru was "inclined to prefer" Blackett's view. However, he also wanted to follow an age-old praxis: when in doubt, consult Mountbatten.

On 30 January 1955, Nehru met Lord Mountbatten in London. He updated Mountbatten on the ongoing debate over the Indian Navy's desire to acquire an aircraft carrier. Even when Mountbatten agreed with Blackett's view that "cruisers were useless" for India's defence and that Delhi should focus on destroyers instead, he disagreed with him on the usability of the aircraft carriers.⁴⁸ Mountbatten pressed upon Nehru why an "aircraft carrier was much more useful and important than a cruiser both for protection of the coast and for a variety of other purposes, such as the mass transportation, relief work, and evacuation. Countering Blackett's point that shore-based long-range aircraft can provide coastal defence, Mountbatten reasoned with Nehru that it was impossible to "have airfields all over the coast with aircrafts stationed there."

As far as the threat of sea denial platforms such as submarines was concerned, which Pakistan was keen on acquiring from the US, Mountbatten claimed that anti-submarine helicopters stationed on fleet carriers can practically eliminate the submarine threat: it is impossible for submarines to function in its (carrier's) neighbourhood." Nehru concurred and told Mountbatten, "it is better to have an aircraft carrier than a cruiser." Having convinced Nehru on the versatility and desirability of an aircraft carrier, he convinced him that the Indian Navy does not require a new aircraft carrier which would be "terribly expensive." Instead it should loan an old aircraft carrier from the British, a proposition which the MoD had already rejected. Yet, Nehru considered it "worthwhile." He wrote to Vellodi, stating the proposal made by Mountbatten was "favourable" to India as it would save the country money and provide training to the Navy.⁴⁹ He asked Vellodi to estimate the financial situation but keep it unofficial until Mountbatten starts serving as a "First Sea Lord" of the British Admiralty.

In April 1955, Mountbatten became the First Sea Lord and Chief of the British Naval Staff. The discussions between the MoD and the Admiralty over the aircraft carrier were stalled on several issues.⁵⁰

Mountbatten's Magic

First, the MoD was disinclined to loan an aircraft carrier until the modernisation of an India-specific aircraft carrier was complete. Mountbatten also insisted on the Indian Navy getting a refurbished Leviathan-class carrier rather than the more modern Majestic-class carriers. Even when he found Indian officials like Minister for Defence Organisation Mahavir Tyagi and Defence Secretary MK Vellodi quite “enthusiastic” about the prospect of getting an aircraft carrier, Mountbatten complained to Nehru about the lack of domain knowledge and expertise in India’s defence ministry. As he told Nehru in a letter in September 1955, “it seems to be that Tyagi had a very hazy opinion of what an aircraft carrier was, and looked like,” and this “lack of knowledge of aircraft carriers is common to most of the Government of India.” To influence the Indian political and bureaucratic class, Mountbatten proposed sailing British aircraft carriers to Bombay as it would help “ensur[e] a favourable decision.” Centaur and Albion, two modern Hermes-class British aircraft carriers, were ordered to provide demonstrations off the coast of Bombay in February 1956.

When Nehru forwarded Mountbatten’s letter to the defence ministry, his claims astonished the newly appointed Defence Minister KN Katju. Katju wrote a scathing letter to Nehru clarifying that the ministry did not sponsor Mountbatten’s plans. Our “polite silence,” Katju said, has been inferred by Mountbatten not only as proof of inexpertise within the ministry but also as “enthusiastic assent and approval” of his plans.⁵¹ The question of the aircraft carrier was hardly settled within the political class. Katju believed that the necessity of India’s defence required strengthening of the air arm to its “highest peak” and it was still not clear “how to best deal” with the naval question. Katju’s opposition stemmed from a number of doubts.

First, he was unconvinced that one aircraft carrier could establish a robust naval force structure, given India’s coast that necessitates more than one aircraft carrier. Moreover, which potential enemies would cross the Ocean to harm India, especially when the Western naval forces were prevalent in the Indian Ocean. As Katju stated, “I do not conceive of any enemies coming across the Ocean, and then further

from our land base our air force can adequately deal with any attacks from the sea.” Katju’s logic mirrored Nehru’s observations before Mountbatten entered the debate. For Katju, “dignity” and “prestige” associated with aircraft carriers had to be carefully weighed against the need for effective defence of the state.

Mountbatten had sensed MoD’s resistance during his talks with Vellodi and Tyagi, and Katju was no different. However, he knew Nehru was the most important decision-maker in the Indian cabinet. Therefore, the success of the aircraft carrier demonstration planned in February was crucial.⁵² In January 1956, he again wrote to Nehru, emphasising that a light fleet carrier would be India’s “greatest single acquisition” for its defence forces.⁵³ The fleet carrier would not only “add immeasurably to India’s prestige but would provide the only thing that could raise India’s naval power to modern levels.” However, Mountbatten’s talks with the Indian defence bureaucracy hardly yielded favourable results; Tyagi’s and Vellodi’s opposition remained steadfast. The defence ministry had more pressing concerns regarding India’s defence compared to Mountbatten’s appeal to India’s prestige.

In 1953, as India experienced a period of peace with Pakistan, the DCC directed the Army to reduce its combatant force by 10,000 men every year until 1957.⁵⁴ Trimming the Army was fundamental to achieving an economy of resources and capital investments in other services. Reduction proceeded as planned for a couple of years, but by 1956, there were serious concerns within the Army headquarters. The re-equipment and re-organisation of the Pakistani military under the CENTO and SEATO agreements changed the local balance of power to India’s disadvantage.⁵⁵ In January 1956, the India’s Chief of General Staff estimated that if the ongoing trends continued apace, by mid-1957, Pakistan would attain parity with India in both army and equipment. The Army put its foot down, with Gen. S.M. Shrinagesh telling the Defence Ministry that under no condition can the strength of the Army go below 300,000 men. The lack of a clear understanding of defence policy, of which Nehru’s acceptance of aircraft carrier requirement was an example, was making it extremely hard for the defence secretary to “formulate defence plans.”⁵⁶

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If Mountbatten appealed to Nehru's pride, Vellodi targeted his anxieties. "If the government believes that a well-armed and well-equipped Pakistan is a danger to our security," Vellodi wrote to Nehru, "we should plan to equip our Army and the Airforce."⁵⁷ In January 1956, the DCC discussed the defence budget and concluded that strengthening defence measures would require "giving up some parts of our other plans."⁵⁸ The casualty of such difficulties could be the Navy. The defence ministry directed the CoSC to prepare a new threat assessment in light of the Pakistan military's modernisation and prepare a composite plan for defence allocation.⁵⁹

Mountbatten was well-aware of the resistance within the MoD, and targeted them both professionally and personally. Mahavir Tyagi received the harshest criticism: He was not only an ignoramus whose opposition was based on "failure to understand what a carrier was and what it should do", but also a "mercurial" personality prone to indecision.⁶⁰ Mountbatten appealed to Nehru to not make a decision before the demonstration by the Albion and Centaur in February 1956. He requested that if the opposition continued and Nehru still could not decide after the demonstration, then the PM should defer the decision until his (Mountbatten's) forthcoming trip to India, where he once again planned to convince India's Ministry of Defence. Since the US, France, the UK, and even the Netherlands had aircraft carriers, Mountbatten cautioned Nehru that "without an aircraft carrier" the Indian Navy "cannot seriously be considered to be ranked among the modern navies."

Nehru visited Bombay on 21 February for a demonstration by Albion and Centaur but no decision could be reached even after the demonstration. The CoSC was yet to submit the "composite plan," and the Ministry of Defence remained opposed. Mountbatten's tour of India began in mid-March, visiting Delhi and the naval installations in Bombay, Cochin, and Madras. On 15 March, Mountbatten met Katju and reiterated his argument for why India needed to acquire an aircraft carrier.⁶¹ When Katju raised the issue of Pakistan acquiring submarines and the threat they posed to the aircraft carrier,

Mountbatten argued that there is “no danger of the Carrier being destroyed by submarines.” For one, Pakistanis “would not know how to handle the submarine.” Second, submarines were “liable to destruction” by ASW helicopters onboard the carrier.

A day before leaving for Rangoon via Madras, Mountbatten again wrote to Nehru from *INS Venduruthy* in Cochin. He was “immensely impressed” by the Indian Navy whose “spirit and enthusiasm was truly magnificent.”⁶² What the Navy needed to maintain its morale was Nehru’s “personal support” for which the approval of the aircraft carrier deal was the perfect start. All great navies spend a substantial percentage of their defence budget on the Navy. Even Pakistan spends 7 percent compared to India’s 5 percent. Since India had “one of the longest coastlines of any country,” and the whole of the Indian Ocean to “dominate,” the least it could do was to “try so as well as Pakistan.” Mountbatten left India, exhorting Nehru that if he is “finally able to approve it (aircraft carrier) the morale and enthusiasm of (your) navy will know no bounds” and it “will grow in stature in every way.”

In March, the DCC met to discuss the Chiefs of Staff Committee’s ‘Composition and Size of the Armed Forces’ report, which highlighted the new threat scenario and presented a composite plan for defence allocation and modernisation.⁶³ The CoSC assessment stated that by June 1957, Pakistan would have received US military equipment,⁶⁴ and this would pose a challenge to the Indian military. The Army Headquarters were of the view that the Army’s “striking force”^a would be massively inadequate to meet India’s military strategy. The Infantry divisions possessed fewer guns and no anti-tank weapons, whereas Pakistan’s infantry divisions had been modernised, with integrated armored divisions. With the acquisition of the American tanks, the Pakistani armor was going to be qualitatively and quantitatively superior. The Army also underlined the shortage of war-like stores, including infantry and artillery weapons, radars, and vehicles. Its involvement in policing duties also sapped its energies from concentrating on core missions.

a Comprising one Armoured Division, one Independent Armoured Brigade, and three Infantry divisions.

The Air Force similarly outlined its failings and requirements. US aid was increasing Pakistani Air Forces' "strike element." Eight Indian Airforce fighter bomber squadrons of Toofanis/Vampires and two bomber squadrons of "obsolete" Liberators, in the future, would face a refurbished Pakistani air force comprising eight fighter bomber squadrons "equipped with Sabre jets/ Thunder Strikes," two bomber squadrons of Canberras/ Neptunes and 40 Bristols. US aid also forced the Air Force to dedicate substantially to air defence requirements rather than support India's ground forces and its naval attachments. The Air Force's warning was dire: without modernisation, the Pakistani Air Force could "attain air superiority over this country." The Air Force not only required new light bombers and night fighting jets but also for the total strength to increase from 10 to 16 squadrons.

Compared to such tactically detailed and strategically informed appraisal by the Army and Air Force, the Navy's presentation failed to clearly outline the role of force structures in fulfilling military objectives. India's naval strength was marginally superior to that of Pakistan's, but that balance could shift drastically because of US aid. Many of the Navy's ships were due for replacement. The three Hunt-destroyers obtained from Britain under loan could not be employed against Pakistan during the conflict. Therefore, the Navy's force structure, according to the same CoSC report, would lose its "marginal superiority" by 1960. Particularly troublesome for the Navy was the acquisition of three submarines by the Pakistan Navy, which would provide it with the wherewithal to "assume very much more offensive role and make our positions at sea untenable." The Navy's only answer to its prospective troubles was the acquisition of an aircraft carrier: Naval headquarters considered that such a move would "re-establish the balance of power in (India's) favour."

The Navy knew that its obsession with aircraft carrier was neither militarily nor politically salient. Therefore, it underlined that the expenditure for the carrier "should not materially come in the way of the build-up of the Army and the Air Force." The Chief of Army Staff and the Chief of Air Staff accepted the Navy's demand, and CoSc recommended the acquisition as long as it does not affect the

other essential programmes for re-equipment. The Navy finally won the inter-service battle for its most coveted military hardware. Vellodi then submitted the report to Nehru for his final approval, underlining how a “variety of causes” supported the Army and the Air Force requirements. On the other hand, the Navy “has not made any specific proposals” except reiterating “the need for acquiring an aircraft carrier as early as possible.”⁶⁵ DCC finally accepted the Navy’s need for an aircraft,⁶⁶ and in April 1956, the Cabinet approved the plan to purchase the aircraft carrier and instructed the MoD to commence negotiations with the British.

Mountbatten had offered India one of the unfinished Majestic-Class fleet carriers. Still, the Ministry of Defence wanted to know whether the Admiralty would be willing to offer one of the more powerful Hermes-class ships. Before Nehru’s visit to London in June 1956, Minister for Defence Organisation Tyagi put forth the ministry’s view, telling the PM that the British had initially offered a Colossus-class ship which New Delhi had rejected. London was therefore offering the Hercules of the Majestic-class instead, which Tyagi said was inferior to the Colossus.⁶⁷ Albion and Centaur, the two Hermes-class ships Nehru had visited in February 1956 had twice the propelling power of the ship currently being offered. Hercules did not have the speed required of a modern aircraft carrier. The Hermes-class could also support double the complement of aircraft and the more powerful ones. Tyagi, therefore, cautioned Nehru against making any commitments before thinking through the class of the ship to be purchased. He wanted India to negotiate for a Hermes-class ship, even if it was more costly. Unlike Hercules, Hermes-class would also not require extensive refitting and could be commissioned into the Navy quickly.

This time, Defence Minister Katju disagreed with Tyagi. Soon after Tyagi’s submission, Katju wrote to Nehru that while a Hermes-class carrier may be superior, India’s financial position would not allow it to purchase one.^{b,68} Admiral Shorty Carlill, now CNS, had told Katju

b The Hercules would cost the Indian exchequer ₹17 crore rupees (£ 13.25 million), while the Hermes-class, around 31 crores (22 million pounds). These costs excluded the provisions for guns, aircraft, and equipment, which would require an additional outlay of 10 million pounds. See: NMML, “Purchase of an Aircraft carrier,” undated, Nehru Papers, Subject File 455 (Top Secret).

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that the Admiralty had no Hermes-class carriers to spare, and it would take some nine to 10 years to build a new one. The timeline for the Hercules was 1960; for the Hermes-class ship, 1965. The Navy was keen to get its hands on what was available as soon as possible. Katju, however, left the final decision to Nehru. In late June, Nehru met Mountbatten and agreed to buy what the British were willing to sell.⁶⁹ Mountbatten convinced Nehru that not only would a Hermes-class ship be prohibitive, but it would also take the British a long time to deliver one. More importantly, for a Navy like India's, the Hercules was sufficient. Nehru concurred, and in January 1957, India purchased the Hercules and Mountbatten was "delighted".⁷⁰ Mountbatten's flattery and Nehru's vanity landed the Indian Navy its first aircraft carrier. Yet it would take another five years, in March 1961, before Hercules could be commissioned in the Indian Navy as *INS Vikrant*.

“Mountbatten's flattery and Nehru's vanity landed the Indian Navy its first aircraft carrier in 1957, which would be commissioned as Vikrant in 1961.”

Vikrant's Shadow on the Indian Navy

Soon after India sealed the deal on the Hercules, Russian Defence Minister Marshall Zhukov visited India. Before leaving, Zhukov submitted a detailed note^{c,71} where he spoke of how the Indian Army had impressed him the most, as it was attuned to the demands of war and military strategy at that time and was very considerate of India's "peculiarities." The Navy, on the other hand, gave him the "worst impression": it lacked a modern understanding of naval warfare and was overinfluenced by "British conceptions" of tactics and strategy. Zhukov's assessment of the Navy's force structure was a scathing critique of its fetish with carrier-led task forces and its sea control strategy. Indian Navy's force structures and training, Zhukov argued, was geared less on the country's defence but more on the "fulfillment of tasks which are beyond the limits of the national interests of the immediate defence of the country." The Navy's primary task was defending India's coastline and its coastal commitments, and therefore did not need an aircraft carrier until it was "operating far from the land airfields." Zhukov's assessment was close to Blackett's constant reminders of the limited role of the Navy in India's defence. Zhukov considered the Navy's surface-heavy force structure wholly inadequate. India needed sea denial platforms such as "medium submarines and high-speed over-see ships, equipped with rocket weapons." The note was so disparaging of the Navy that Nehru asked the Defence Secretary not to share it with the Naval headquarters.⁷²

To be sure, Zhukov's judgment was driven by how the Russian military assessed the role of the Navy in its military strategy. Yet, there was a grain of truth in his warnings, as well as those of Blackett's, regarding the Navy's role in India's military strategy and the problems which a service driven by a Mahanian vision would encounter, given India's national security requirements, the limits of its security commitments, and shortage of financial resources. *Vikrant* did herald the Indian Navy where no other developing country's navy had dared to venture. At the same time, it left a long shadow on the Navy's development and, most importantly, its strategic thinking.

c The Note was titled, 'Some Conclusions as a Result of the Acquaintance with the Indian Armed Forces and the Tour through India'.

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First, the fetish with aircraft carriers created a highly unbalanced force. During the debate over the acquisition of *Vikrant*, the problem of adversary's sea denial platforms, such as the submarines being acquired by the Pakistan Navy, were either ignored or thought to be easily manageable through the power and capabilities of a fleet carrier. Yet, by mid-1958, the Navy showed severe anxiety vis-à-vis the threat posed by Pakistan's sea denial strategy.⁷³ Discussions were aplenty within the Naval headquarters on how to "obtain training on a live submarine" and a "long-term plan for the building of a submarine arm."⁷⁴ The Navy's highly lopsided force structure left it vulnerable to enemy submarine action. Naval headquarters, therefore, proposed a new plan to the government in April 1959, arguing that "the very fact that we possess submarines will impose a considerable submarine effort on the enemy and thus indirectly curtail his offensive power."⁷⁵

The Indian Navy guardian angel, Lord Mountbatten, however, was unwilling to provide India with even the most basic submarines to practice anti-submarine warfare.⁷⁶ Mountbatten had earlier opined that the Pakistani Navy was incompetent to handle submarines effectively. Vis-à-vis India, he shared a similar opinion. The Indian Navy had no organisational capability to operate such complex machines: "Without an organisation to provide for such maintenance support, no submarines, however manned, could be kept running for any worthwhile period."⁷⁷ Going for the fleet carrier also left the Navy with little capital, both economic and political. The decision to buy the aircraft carrier resulted in a significant rise in the Indian Navy's capital budget between 1957 and 1961, though it decreased significantly thereafter.⁷⁸ The Navy hardly saw any further additions to its force structure until 1965.⁷⁹ The unbalance created by *Vikrant* in the force structure took the Navy almost a decade to compensate for. Only with Russian assistance starting in the late-1960s did the Indian Navy add sea denial platforms such as submarines, Petya patrol crafts, and Osa fast attack missile boats in its inventory—these would prove useful during the 1971 war for Bangladesh liberation.⁸⁰

Second, if *Vikrant* exuded India's power and pride, it also exposed it to significant risks on the battlefield. The preeminent punisher of the Indian Navy required adequate protection during wartime. No other military hardware in Indian inventory was so indispensable; the whole

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naval strategy focused on protecting the fleet's crown. During the Goa operations of 1961, Vikrant hardly played a role. The possibility of a submarine threat forced the Indian Naval command not to employ Vikrant in the warzone. As Admiral Krishnan, the Captain of INS Delhi who later became Vice Chief of Naval Staff, recalled in his autobiography, "Incredibly, INS Vikrant, [India's first aircraft carrier], our latest and newest acquisition was not taking part in the operation, but was going to be deployed somewhere in the middle of the ocean where she would be 'safe'."⁸¹ *INS Delhi's* mission was first to support Army operation off the coast and then provide protection to *Vikrant*. In 1965, the ailing ship was docked in the Bombay harbor for a refit. Though the Navy claims that the 1971 war had finally proved the worthiness of fleet carriers and Vikrant's contribution to Indian naval might, there was significant trepidation within the naval high command over the threat Pakistani submarines posed to the carrier. Deploying Vikrant on wartime duties was, to begin with, an agonising decision for the Navy because of the fear that if the ship "gets torpedoed or sinks, navy and India will lose a lot of prestige."⁸² Therefore, the Navy removed Vikrant from the Western coast, where Pakistani Daphne-class submarines posed a "great potential threat to the carrier."⁸³ The Commander-in-Chief of the Western Naval Command, Vice Admiral Surendra Nath Kohli, was livid. Since the "main naval battles and activity would take place in the North Arabian Sea," Kohli later reminisced, "the depletion in Western Command's fleet and firepower was not justified."⁸⁴ Yet, Vikrant's removal from the Western coast did not eradicate the submarine threat.

Given their low endurance, the Daphnes could only operate in the North Arabian Sea; the Ghazi, however, could be employed even in the Bay of Bengal and torpedo Vikrant in a preemptive strike. The entire carrier task force was stationed off Andamans until the eve of hostilities. Two unforeseen events facilitated Vikrant's role during the 1971 operations: The sinking of Ghazi on 3rd December and the Indian Air Force's decimation of Pakistani air assets in Chittagong and Dhaka. Notwithstanding the bravery and courage of service personnel who operated the carrier suffering an underpowered engine, Vikrant's success owed significantly to such fortunate

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circumstances. As Admiral G.M. Hiranandani writes in the official history of the Navy, “Had this (sinking of the Ghazi and destruction of Pakistani air force) not occurred, the entire pattern of Eastern Fleet’s operation would have been different.”⁸⁵ Most of the Eastern naval fleet would have bogged down in protecting Vikrant, the mobility of the Navy would have been highly constrained, and the tempo of naval operations would have significantly slowed down.⁸⁶ As one of the defence ministry post-mortems concluded, the operational role of the Vikrant was far more “imagined” than actual, given the need for “morale.”⁸⁷

Third, the success of the naval operations in the East only confirmed the Navy’s bias towards fleet carriers, even when sea denial platforms like the Osa missile boats and Foxtrot submarines levied significant punishment on the Pakistan navy, its shipping and territorial targets. Citing Vikrant’s success after the war, the Navy requested a major upgrade of its aircraft complement with new VSTOL aircrafts such as the Sea Harriers, replacing the obsolete Sea Hawks.⁸⁸ India’s decision-makers once again questioned the logic of aircraft carriers.

In 1973, the Apex Group on Defence Planning, under the Planning Commission Chairperson DP Dhar, was “not able to determine the utility of the Aircraft Carrier as an effective operational craft against the strength of the Navy.”⁸⁹ Dhar’s observations were far more scathing: “the Navy has made this more of a question of prestige than utility. The utility of the aircraft carrier in the Bangladesh war was next to nothing.” The Navy’s emphasis on aircraft carriers was devoid of India’s “operational plans” on the Western Front. Indian decision-makers mainly saw the Navy as assisting the Army and the Air Force rather than an independent military vector. For that, sea denial platforms were far more effective. Chief of Naval Staff, Adm. SN Kohli, accepted Vikrant’s increasing “vulnerability” from Pakistani aircrafts carrying Exocet anti-ship missiles but still emphasised the advantage of the “superior task force capability” the carrier could organise.⁹⁰ If pride was the rationale for Nehru’s acceptance of the aircraft carrier, Kohli’s pitch was now on preserving the glorious legacy of fleet carrier operations the Navy had built. The Navy became a prisoner of its dreams: “India, which has developed its Carrier operating techniques and expertise over many years, can ill afford to take a retrograde step such as winding down the Carrier aviation.”⁹¹ The fear of “wasting Vikrant’s potential” would subsequently become the oft-repeated rationale for India’s continuing tryst with aircraft carriers.

This historical account of India's acquisition of its first aircraft carrier does not explain the rationale and requirement of aircraft carriers in the present age. Neither is it intended to provide a critique of Navy's current force structures. That would require a more contextual analysis of India's current security environment as well as a more detailed functional analysis of the technological capabilities of Vikrant and adversary's sea denial capabilities in the Indian Ocean. This paper intended to do neither. Overlearning from history is as fraught with dangers as underlearning is.


What it does is offer some pertinent ideas. First, the Navy needs to realise how important it is for the service to understand India's military needs rather than be obsessed by its organisational ambitions. As this analysis illustrated, the naval leadership, in being too wedded to the idea of taking upon the British responsibilities in the Indian Ocean, had almost neglected the local context in which the country's decision-makers sought to employ military force for their security objectives. The Navy's primary challenge has always been in making itself relevant as a tool in India's employment of use of force, especially when the structural conditions of Indian security—geography and adversaries—have tilted the balance against it.

This crisis of relevance and the Navy's inability to make an intellectual case for naval power, informed by hard military strategy rather than Indian decision-makers' political goals, whether diplomatic or domestic. This has often rendered the service's fortunes hostage to personal interest (or disinterest) of individual decision-makers, whether of Nehru in the 1950s or Rajiv Gandhi in the 1980s. Admiral Arun Prakash came closest to accepting this reality when in 2002, he argued at the United Services Institution in New Delhi that "unless our actions at sea had a linkage, no matter how indirect, with events on land, the Navy's potential would be wasted.

Conclusion

There is now acknowledgement that wars are won only on land, and that the Navy must ensure that its planning process as well as operations are synchronous with those of the army, so that we obtain the maximum synergy.”⁹² The Navy’s punishment strategy vis-a-vis Chinese SLOCs in the Indian Ocean to influence land operations in the Himalaya is a good shift in this regard.

Second, there is no doubt that the Navy is the most innovative of all three military services. Any organisation that faces such political and economic apathy has no other recourse available to it. The Navy has done well to understand the significance of defence production at home and how to leverage India’s diplomatic goals to its advantage, as seen in the role it has played in the transformation of India-US relations and as being the principal vector of India’s engagement with the Quad countries.

As this paper has illustrated, however, it has also been innovative with truth regarding the vulnerability of aircraft carriers to adversary’s sea denial platforms and the role of aircraft carriers in India’s military operations, particularly in 1971, which the service often touts as evidence of the usefulness of such platforms. Such celebration may serve the purpose of the Navy’s organisational needs for funds and morale, but not the purpose of generating military effectiveness. The story of India’s tryst with aircraft carriers only underlines the need for critical analysis of both force structure requirements and their performance within the Navy. 

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