



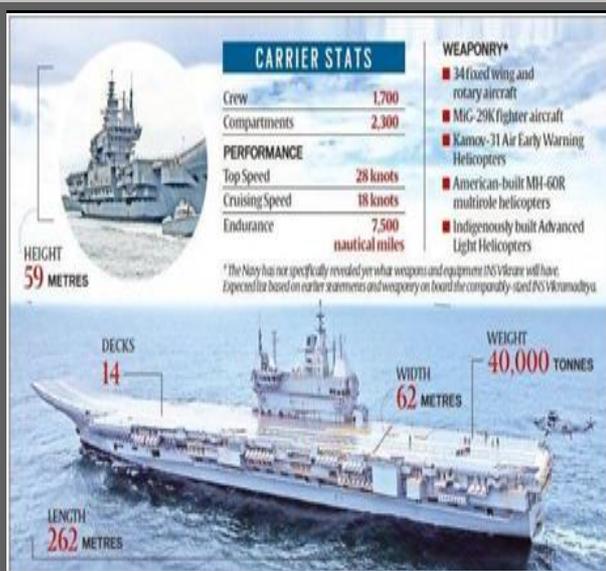
## INDIA'S FIRST INDIGENOUS AIRCRAFT CARRIER: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



From relying heavily on great powers for the development of its naval force to developing its first Indigenous Aircraft Carrier (IAC-1), also known as the INS *Vikrant*, India is on its way to becoming one of the deadliest naval powers in the world. Five-day long sea trials for INS *Vikrant* began on August 4, 2021, and it is set to be commissioned next year. An aircraft carrier is a floating airbase in the sea that “supports and operates aircraft that engage in attacks on airborne, afloat and ashore targets.”<sup>1</sup> The aircraft carrier is undoubtedly a potent maritime asset for the Indian Navy, “which enhances its capability to travel far from its home shores to carry out air domination operations.”<sup>2</sup> Its reach makes it complex and unique from other warships. The INS *Vikrant* has been designed by the IN’s Directorate of Naval Design and built at Cochin Shipyard Limited, a public sector shipyard under the Ministry of Shipping.<sup>3</sup> India is now included in the league of the seven great powers that are capable of designing and manufacturing aircraft carriers indigenously. The

1 “Nimitz Class Aircraft Carrier,” Military.com, August 20, 2021,

<https://www.military.com/equipment/nimitz-class-aircraft-carrier>

2 Krishn Kaushik, “Explained: The Importance of IAC-1, the Made-in-India Aircraft Carrier,” *The Indian Express*, August 11, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/the-importance-of-iac-1-the-made-in-india-aircraft-carrier-7438715/>

3 Martin Manaranche, “India’s New Aircraft Carrier INS Vikrant Starts Sea Trials,” *Naval News*, August 4, 2021, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2021/08/indias-new-aircraft-carrier-ins-vikrant-starts-sea-trials/>

length of this mammoth warship is 262 metres and it has a displacement of 40,000 tonnes. Further details are mentioned in the figure below:



**Source:** Krishn Kaushik, "Explained: The Importance of IAC-1, the Made-in-India aircraft carrier," *The Indian Express*, August 11, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/the-importance-of-iac-1-the-made-in-india-aircraft-carrier-7438715/>

Since its independence, India has been keen on maintaining a strong naval force in its home waters to tackle China and other rivals present in the Indian Ocean region. Its very first aircraft carrier, INS *Vikrant* a 'Majestic class CATOBAR (Catapult Assisted Take-Off but Arrested Recovery) carrier was acquired from Great Britain and commissioned in March 1961.<sup>4</sup> The INS *Vikrant* was then accompanied by another aircraft carrier INS *Viraat*, a 'Centaur class STOVL (Short Take-off and Vertical Landing) carrier,' commissioned in May 1987. The INS *Vikrant* was also later converted into a STOVL carrier and after 36 years of its service, it was decommissioned in January 1997.<sup>5</sup> In March 2017, INS *Viraat* was also decommissioned after 29 years of service with the Indian Navy.<sup>6</sup> Currently, the Indian Navy operates one aircraft carrier, INS *Vikramaditya*, commissioned in November 2013 by Defence Minister, Arackaparambil Kurien Antony, in Russia, while the newly built INS *Vikrant* is to be

<sup>4</sup> "About INS Vikramaditya - The Newest & Largest Ship of Indian Navy," National Informatics Centre – Indian Navy, August 13, 2021, <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/about-ins-vikramaditya-newest-largest-ship-indian-navy>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> "Supreme Court orders Status Quo on Dismantling of Decommissioned Aircraft Carrier Viraat," *The Economic Times*, February 10, 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/supreme-court-orders-status-quo-on-dismantling-of-decommissioned-aircraft-carrier-viraat/articleshow/80783158.cms>

commissioned next year.<sup>7</sup> According to Indian Vice Admiral Chawla, “the Indian Navy is confident that the new Vikrant will carry forward the illustrious legacy of its predecessor and write a new and glorious chapter in India’s maritime history.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the Indian Navy is also pressing on its government for a third aircraft carrier, while 44 other ships and submarines are already being built indigenously.<sup>9</sup>

On India’s eastern border, its rival China currently operates two aircraft carriers; the *Liaoning* which was acquired from the Soviet Navy as an unfinished hull and after refitting it was commissioned into the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in September 2012 and the *Shandong*, which is China’s first indigenously built aircraft carrier, commissioned in December 2019.<sup>10</sup> For more details refer to the table given below:

	Liaoning	Shandong
Pennant Number	CV-16	CV-17
Carrier Type	Type 001	Type 002 (Previously Type 001A)
Length	304.5m	304.5m
Beam	75m	75m
Displacement	60,000 – 66,000 tons	66,000 – 70,000 tons
Launch Type	STOVAR	STOVAR

**Source:** “What Do We Know (so far) about China’s Second Aircraft Carrier,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 16, 2021, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-aircraft-carrier-type-001a/>

Recently, news regarding the launch of China’s third aircraft carrier (Type 003) has been circulating in the media and according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, “in addition to being larger than its predecessors, the Type 003 is widely expected to feature a flat-top flight deck with a CATOVAR system, which would mark a major upgrade from the less advanced ski jump-style

<sup>7</sup> “About INS Vikramaditya.”

<sup>8</sup> “A Floating Island: Onboard India’s first Indigenous Aircraft Carrier INS Vikrant,” *The Economic Times*, August 16, 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/a-floating-island-onboard-indias-first-indigenous-aircraft-carrier-ins-vikrant/articleshow/85320051.cms>

<sup>9</sup> “India Flexes Muscles with new Aircraft Carrier Task Force to Counter China Influence,” *Dawn*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1638957/india-flexes-muscles-with-new-aircraft-carrier-task-force-to-counter-china-influence>

<sup>10</sup> “What Do We Know (so far) about China’s Second Aircraft Carrier,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 16, 2021, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-aircraft-carrier-type-001a/>

system used on the *Liaoning* and *Shandong*.”<sup>11</sup> These Chinese advancements are the major motivation behind the acquisition of aircraft carriers by the Indian Navy and with two aircraft carriers, the Indians believe that they will be capable enough to fight a two-front war against China and Pakistan simultaneously. The former Australian Defence Attaché to Islamabad, Brian Cloughley, describes India's aircraft carriers as “decidedly inferior ineffectiveness in international terms and present no threat to China.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, to compete with China, India is now also planning to build a third aircraft carrier which is currently being referred to as INS *Vishal*. For China, India's power projection in the Indian ocean is somewhat concerning as even though they do not share a direct coastline, India may still be able to impede the movement of the Chinese Naval forces in the international waters and hinder its interests in the Indian Ocean Region, as both India and China are striving for hegemony which is only possible if only one of them is dominant in the region.

Additionally, Pakistan has close ties with India's competitor, China. Chief of the Naval Staff of the Pakistan Navy, Admiral M Amjad Khan Niazi, even expressed the willingness of Pakistan's Navy to conduct an exercise with these carriers whenever an opportunity arises and stated that “Pakistan Navy would continue to welcome further visits by PLAN ships, including aircraft carriers.”<sup>13</sup> Pakistan itself has no current plans to acquire an aircraft carrier as it is a developing economy and has other major expenditures to focus upon. Moreover, Pakistan, being a strong advocate of peace in the region is “committed to the establishment of strategic stability in South Asia, which includes an element of the balance of conventional force and it neither wants, nor is engaged in an arms race in the region.”<sup>14</sup> As far as India's new indigenous aircraft carrier is concerned, Pakistan, according to Ben Wan Beng Ho, “it is difficult for both INS *Vikrant* and INS *Vikramaditya*, to threaten Pakistani land installations as Pakistan poses a credible threat to the carriers, making their use in offensive operations very risky.”<sup>15</sup>

The acquisition of aircraft carriers by India undoubtedly puts the strategic stability of South Asia at risk by increasing the conventional disparities between the two historical rivals, India and Pakistan.

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<sup>11</sup> Matthew P. Funaiolo, “China's Third Aircraft Carrier Takes Shape,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 15, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-third-aircraft-carrier-takes-shape>

<sup>12</sup> Usman Ansari, “Outgoing Pakistan Navy Chief Reveals details of Modernisation Programs,” *Defense News*, October 15, 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2020/10/14/outgoing-pakistan-navy-chief-reveals-details-of-modernization-programs/>

<sup>13</sup> Liu Xuanzun, “Pakistan Navy Welcomes Potential Exercises with Visits by Chinese Aircraft Carriers: Pakistan Navy Chief,” *Global Times*, February 08, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202102/1215246.shtml>

<sup>14</sup> “Pakistan neither wants, nor engaged in Arms Race in South Asia,” *Dawn*, August 31, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1291383/pakistan-neither-wants-nor-engaged-in-arms-race-in-south-asia-envoy>

<sup>15</sup> Robert Farley, “What Good Are the Indian Navy's Aircraft Carriers Against Pakistan?” *The Diplomat*, December 12, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/what-good-are-the-indian-navys-aircraft-carriers-against-pakistan/>

However, the modernisation plans of the Pakistani naval force and the acquisition of a surface and submarine fleet in the next few years will further enhance the credibility of Pakistan's deterrent posture vis-à-vis India. This eventually will provoke the other regional states to develop their navies thus, pushing the already poverty-ridden region into an unending naval arms race. The increase in the defence budget takes away the focus of these states from their trade and economic development, leaving them with no choice but to depend on great powers in the form of loans and aid. Thus, to get the South Asian states out of the league of the third world countries, efforts should be made by the international community to make India realize that the fueling arms race not only affects the region but also India itself.