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Big Carriers Are a Bad Idea | Point of View

The big carrier is a big mistake. In a milieu bristling with proliferating supersonic, and soon hypersonic, anti-ship missiles, aircraft carriers don't stand a chance.

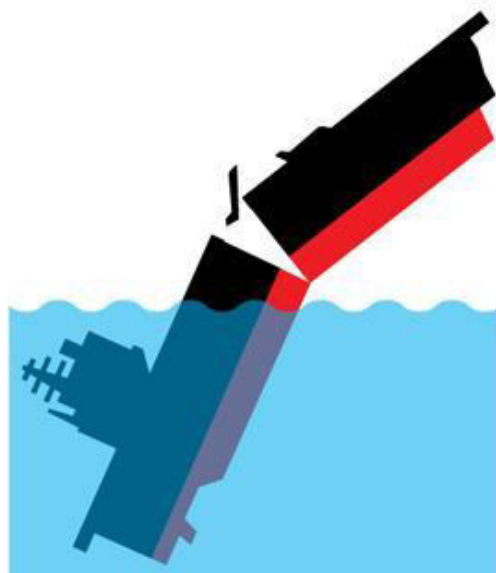
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Importing wrong weapons platforms has consequences beyond stretching the scarce defence rupee. Besides kicking the indigenous R&D and defence industry in the gut and being a perennial financial drain with lifetime costs many times the initial acquisition price, it locks the country into an inappropriate force structure whose frailties are quickly shown up in war. Securing them also leaves little money to obtain less glitzy but more appropriate and necessary fighting assets.

The Indian Air Force, with the cost-effective option of the upgraded Su-30MKI produced at the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) on the table, opted for the manifestly redundant Rafale fighter plane worth Rs 69,000 crore. Four hundred and sixty T-90 tanks valued at nearly Rs 14,000 crore are sought by the army for its armoured formations that are unlikely, under the nuclear overhang, to ever see major action. The T-90, incidentally, got beat by the indigenous Arjun main battle tank in all field tests. Not to be outdone, the Indian Navy, as per the British press, is plonking for an Indian dockyard-built 65,000 tonne Queen Elizabeth (QE)-class aircraft carrier. Given its colonial antecedents, the Indian Navy follows the Royal Navy in everything, including apparently repeating the latter's mistakes.

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And the big carrier is a very big mistake. In a milieu bristling with proliferating supersonic, and soon hypersonic, anti-ship missiles, aircraft carriers don't stand a chance. A broadside of four supersonic Brahmos-type missiles, for instance, can sink this carrier, along with its complement of 36 combat aircraft, and two each of anti-submarine warfare and early warning helicopters. So an air or sea-launched cruise missile salvo costing Rs 40 crore can take out the QE carrier and its aircraft. Some 'exchange ratio'! It is not just speedy cruise missiles but any combination of these and swarms of remotely controlled air, surface and underwater-launched drones and, where China is concerned, anti-ship ballistic missiles, will do in such a ship. No wonder a former chief of the United Kingdom Defence Staff reportedly called this vessel a "vulnerable metal can" and military historian Max Hastings has dubbed it the "HMS White Elephant".

Worse, protecting the high-cost, symbolically high-value big aircraft carriers will

operationally strain the relatively small Indian Navy that may have 50-odd major warships

operationally strain the relatively small Indian Navy that may have 30-50 major warships by 2040. The escort for each carrier—two destroyers, two anti-submarine frigates, a submarine, a tanker and a replenishment ship—will soon result in more of the Indian fleet deployed for aircraft carrier protection than on sea control and sea-denial missions, eventuating in a dangerously thinned-out Indian naval presence in the wide expanses of the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific. Indian admirals, who have attended the US Naval War College, imbibed the big carrier ideology, and pushed for the QE-ships, cannot, however, trot out the same justification for them as the 500-ship strong US Navy does.

Then there's the cost aspect. Given the profligacy of the Indian defence public sector units, the cost of, say, a Mazagon Dockyard-made QE-class ship will be double that of the Royal Navy carrier, or £12 billion. And if, as the navy desires, the unproven, exorbitantly priced US-sourced electro-magnetic aircraft launch system is incorporated into the design, and the Boeing F/A-18E is chosen as its combat aircraft, the total cost of a fully loaded single carrier will be upwards of £18 billion or Rs 1,440 billion. This sum can buy an augmented force of nuclear-powered attack submarines and several missile destroyers and multi-purpose frigates. Spent on the unsurvivable QE-class ships of dubious utility, it will be a humongous waste of national wealth. But when have such considerations stopped the Indian government from making damn-fool decisions?

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Still, one hopes the new government will be sensible, order a full cost and capability review—something never done by any Indian government at any time—and instruct the navy to stick with small carriers it has experience of, that cost a lot less and, because more expendable, can be used offensively in war.

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