

'INS Vikramaditya will be a game-changer'

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The "mother" will now get a "grandmother" for company. And while the former may be getting slightly toothless with age, the granny will pack a formidable punch capable of knocking down adversaries wanting to challenge her.



Known in naval circles as the "mother" since she was commissioned in 1987 as a second-hand warship bought from the UK, India's solitary aircraft carrier INS Viraat is now 55-year-old. Though it still constitutes two acres of sovereign Indian territory cruising on the high seas, this 28,000-tonne old warhorse is left with just 11 Sea Harrier jump-jets to operate from its deck.

On Saturday, it will get a granny almost double its size. INS Vikramaditya, the refurbished aircraft carrier Admiral Gorshkov packed with sensors and weapons, will join the Indian combat fleet when it's commissioned by defence minister A K Antony at Severodvinsk in Russia on November 16.

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"INS Vikramaditya will be a game-changer, a potent floating airfield with supersonic fighters ready to fulfill India's blue-water naval aspirations far across the oceans. It's virtually a new ship after the refit. It will prove to be worth every penny invested," said a senior officer.

"Once it reaches India by early next year, and becomes fully operational thereafter with MiG-29Ks being flown by Indian pilots from its deck, it will be 44,570-tonnes of Indian military diplomacy patrolling the seas to guard the country's strategic interests," he added.

Power-projection is the name of the geostrategic game. And nothing does it better than an aircraft carrier capable of moving 600 nautical miles a day, ready to unleash its fighters, helicopters, missiles to take the battle to an enemy's shores if it comes to that.



The US has as many as 11 Nimitz-class "super-carriers" deployed around the globe. Each is over 94,000-tonne, powered by two nuclear reactors and capable of carrying 80-90 fighters. China, too, is now furiously building new carriers — dubbing them "symbols of a great nation" — after inducting its first conventionally-powered carrier, the 65,000-tonne Liaoning, slightly over a year ago.

With INS Vikramaditya becoming the biggest-ever warship to be inducted, the Navy's long-standing ambition to operate two full-fledged "carrier battle groups" - one each for the eastern and western seaboard - has come close to fruition. But it will become an actual reality only after the long-delayed 40,000-tonne INS Vikrant, being built at the Cochin Shipyard, is ready for induction by end-2018.



INS Vikramaditya itself has had a tortuous journey. The Soviet fleet inducted Gorshkov in 1987 but decommissioned it in 1996 due to high costs in the post-Cold War era. A cash-strapped Russia first offered the partly-burnt Gorshkov to India as a free "gift" in 1994, provided the costs for refit and fighters were paid.

Protracted negotiations followed, with the refit cost jumping from \$400 million to \$700 million. In January 2004, a \$1.5 billion package deal was eventually inked, with \$974 million earmarked for the refit and rest for 16 MiG-29Ks. Gorshkov was then to be delivered by August 2008.

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But more was to follow, with Russia milking India on the ground the refit work had been grossly underestimated. Amid the bitter wrangling, which injected a distinct chill into bilateral ties, the then Navy chief Admiral Sureesh Mehta even accused Russia of renegeing from what was a "fixed price contract".

Finally, a fresh deal was inked in 2010, with the refit being pegged at \$2.33 billion and another \$2 billion for 45 MiG-29Ks. But there were more hiccups to follow. As per the re-revised timeframe, INS Vikramaditya was to be delivered by last December but serious engine/boiler malfunctions during sea trials derailed it yet again. The long saga will end on Saturday.

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INS VIKRAMADITYA



Height
60 metre
(20-storey tall, with 22 decks)

Length
284 metre

Displacement
44,570 tonne

Max Speed
30 knots

Max Range | **7,000 nautical miles**
at economical 18 knots speed.

CAPACITY (34 aircraft)

24
MIG-29Ks

10
Helicopters

Angled ski jump for fighters to take off.



Arrestor gear for jets to hook on to after touchdown on flight deck.

Crew
1,600-1,800
Sailors

OPERATIONAL AIRCRAFT CARRIERS

<p>US 11</p>	<p>2 India</p>	<p>2 Italy</p>	<p>China, UK, France, Russia, Spain, Brazil, Thailand</p> <p>1 (each)</p>
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