



## THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER REMAINS THE CAPITAL SHIP OF THE NAVAL FORCES

Centerpiece of the offshore navies, the aircraft carrier is now, more than ever, essential to any maritime power. While the testing of the Chinese aircraft carrier *Liaoning* has attracted attention, it should not obscure the many other programs or projects that flourish on all the world's oceans...

### A TOOL FOR MARITIME SUPREMACY

Since the Second World War, the aircraft carrier has replaced the battleship as the capital ship of surface combat forces. The decisive ship in the conduct of operations, she is capable of securing an area, posing a threat, and striking deep in the operation theatres. The aircraft carrier is the perfect tool to ensure maritime supremacy and, to some extent, air superiority. Gradually, she became a remarkable platform for power projection on land. Moreover, it is in this role that she was employed in operations spanning from Indochina to Syria, as well as in the interventions in Afghanistan and Libya.

Whether we speak of conventional aircraft carriers or lighter ones, those ships are true mobile airbases, keys to a diplomatic strategy and its military component. The carrier battle group ("GAN" in French) gathered around this high-value unit is traditionally composed of a submarine, destroyers and sometimes minesweepers, with the support of a maritime patrol aircraft. The effectiveness of the aircraft carrier depends on the quality of this system.

### AN OBJECT THAT ATTRACTS LONGING

To that extent, the aircraft carrier is both a political and military symbol: all five permanent members of the UN Security Council happen to be equipped with aircraft carriers. Wishing to assert themselves on the international scene, many emerging nations are now striving to acquire that capability.

If the ten US Navy nuclear powered aircraft carriers provide the US an overwhelming superiority, France, with the *Charles de Gaulle*, holds its own. The Royal Navy will soon come back to the front of the naval scene and secure a prominent position with *HMS Queen Elizabeth* and *HMS Princes of Wales*. As for Russia, it still relies on a single aircraft carrier, *Admiral Kuznetsov*, but is considering a new class of multipurpose aircraft carriers.

Navies of emerging countries are involved, too, in the race. With the experience gained with the *Liaoning* and the ambition to ultimately operate a navy with global reach, China embarked on the national development of a second, nuclear-powered, aircraft carrier. India, meanwhile, has had a naval capacity since 1956. To replace its aging units of British origin, the country first bought the *INS Vikramaditya* from Russia (former *Gorshkov*), then launched a local program: *INS Vikrant* will make its first sea trips in the near future, for admission to active duty in 2018. These units are at a minimum the assertion of regional ambitions in the Indian Ocean, and a response to the Chinese naval expansion. Brazil too has regional ambitions. To date it only has the *São Paulo* – formerly the venerable French *Foch*. But the country won't settle for that: the *Prosuper* program

aims at rejuvenating the surface fleet and plans to build a new national carrier.

### LIGHTER AIRCRAFT CARRIERS AS A SUBSTITUTE

However, not all navies have the technical, financial and human capabilities to build an aircraft carrier. The required shipbuilding technology is very sophisticated. The skills required for the design and implementation of systems specific to embarked planes (catapults, elevators, stopping strands ...) and the required experience for the crew don't leave room for improvisation. A great technological expertise is needed and the high level of technical training to implement and operate carrier aircraft ipso facto limit the number of countries that may acquire it...

This is why some nations are now trying to equip with smaller and less efficient aircraft carriers. The technique of short take off and vertical landing has allowed smaller navies to develop both a projection capacity and air defence.

The reach of such ships is obviously not equivalent to that of a full-size aircraft carrier, but this alternative has allowed Spain, Italy, Thailand, Australia and Japan to have platforms adapted to external naval operations and thereby establish their regional power status.

