



RISING POWERS INITIATIVE POLICY ALERT

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Launch of Indigenous Indian Aircraft Carrier Prompts Reactions from Asian Powers

On August 12, India launched its first indigenous aircraft carrier INS Vikrant, joining the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Russia in the elite club of nations capable of building similar ships. The INS Vikrant, along with progress on India's indigenous nuclear submarine fleet, supports India's broader naval strategy toward a blue-water navy. In this Policy Alert, we examine commentary from India, China, and Japan on the implications of these developments for international security across the seas in Asia.

INDIA

In his Independence Day address, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh applauded "the Navy on its successes." While the Vikrant is [not expected to be battle-ready before 2020](#), some commentators praised the launch as a major step forward for India's naval strategy:

- At the launching ceremony, India's Defense Minister, A.K. Antony declared "the need for a [strong and vigilant Navy](#)" and that the launch "marks just the [first step in a long journey](#), but at the same time, an important one."
- In a *Business Standard* column, Premvir Das, a former Commander-in-Chief of the Eastern Naval Command, wrote that these "[watershed events in the life of a Navy](#)" were a "matter of great pride for our countrymen" as these new "capabilities at sea" will be necessary in India's future security.
- Writing for the Nationalist leaning *The Indian Express*, Manu Pubby called Vikrant a "[37,500-ton defense statement](#)" that can carry 36 aircraft as India demonstrates its "self-reliance in this field."

Others threw cold water on this optimism, citing gaps in India's naval capabilities and the rising capabilities of its neighbors. Besides, India's submarine fleet ended up experiencing both a success and a tragedy in August. On August 10, the INS Arihant's [nuclear reactor reached criticality](#) - a significant step to becoming battle-ready - helping to replace India's aging fleet of conventional diesel-electric submarines. But on August 14, kilo-class submarine INS Sindurakshak [suffered a series of explosions that killed 18 sailors](#) in India's worst peacetime naval accident.

- *Business Standard* editorialized that the "Navy's plan to field three aircraft carriers [remains a pipe dream](#)." The paper continued that "when INS Vikramaditya gets here from Russia, it will be more than five years late. The vintage INS Viraat is to be decommissioned by 2018-19" and the "Navy continues to dither over the specifications of the Vikrant's successor."
- Great-Power Realist C. Raja Mohan in his *Indian Express* column looked beyond INS Vikrant and warned about the [end of India's monopoly over naval airpower](#) in the region. As Australia,

China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea expand their airpower capabilities, Raja Mohan expected "much jockeying for positions of advantage in the waters of Asia."

- T.S. Subramanian, Associate Editor for the left-leaning/Nationalist *Frontline*, [opined that the INS Arihant](#) means New Delhi "can assert that it has mastered the technology of developing and manufacturing nuclear propulsion for driving submarines" and will soon acquire "the status of a blue-water navy."

Several outlets commented on how the Sindurakshak submarine tragedy could impact India's naval ambitions:

- Quoted in the Liberal-Globalist leaning *The Times of India*, India's Defense Minister, A K Antony, pronounced the accident as the "[greatest tragedy in recent times](#)." Chief of Naval Staff Admiral D.K. Joshi said "a dent" was left in "Indian Navy's submarine capabilities for the time being."
- In the Liberal Globalist *Economic Times*, Akrun Prakash, former chief of the Indian Navy, argued that "[chronic deficiencies in our defense planning and management](#)" are responsible for the accident, including the Indian military's dependence on imported weapons and lack of expertise on defense matters in government.
- Sushil Kumar, another former Indian naval chief, wrote in *The Times of India* that the accident highlights the "[unacceptable depletion of the navy's force levels](#), particularly its submarine arm which is the most potent component of any blue-water navy globally."

CHINA

In China, views on the INS Vikrant were mixed, with some assuring that its launch would not incite a regional arms race and others questioning what the carrier means for the region's balance of power. Commentary contrasted India's INS Vikrant launch with that of Japan's Izumo helicopter carrier, which was launched on August 6.

- The *Global Times* contrasted India's aircraft carrier launch with that of Japan's helicopter carrier, praising India for adopting "a different attitude than Japan toward territorial disputes with China." Noting that India's overall national strength lags behind that of China, the editorial concluded that "[China perceives Japan rather than India as its biggest neighboring threat](#)."

Several editorials were quick to dispel the notion that the INS Vikrant launch might spur an arms race between China and India:

- "The normal buildup of defense capabilities is no cause of worry," wrote *Xinhua* in a commentary entitled "[Aircraft Carrier Creates No Waves for China-India Cooperation](#)."
- "There is no arms race between China and India," added the *Global Times*.

Others remained wary over how India's newfound naval strength will affect the region's balance-of-power:

- Zhang Junshe, Vice-President of the People's Liberation Army Military Studies Research Institute, said that "India's first self-made carrier, along with reinforced naval strength, will [further disrupt the military balance in South Asia](#)," adding that India is very likely to quicken its pace to steer eastward to the Pacific.
- "By the end of this year, India will become the only country in Asia to have two aircraft carriers. This will enhance their overall capabilities, especially the [power projection capabilities](#) of the Indian Navy," Zhang added.
- Espousing a Realist view, Liu Zongyi, a research fellow at the Center for Asia-Pacific Studies, Shanghai Institutes for International Studies wrote, "[Peace in the Asia-Pacific region must be guaranteed by military balance](#). The launches of the two carriers in Japan and India serve as a warning for China." Liu added that while "China's rise is mainly an economic one, India's emergence is more prominent in the military sphere."

- Citing the Izumo and INS Vikrant, the *China Daily* urged the Chinese navy to develop itself to "[a level that matches its rising status in the international community](#)" and is "capable of safeguarding its national security and increasing development interests." More importantly, the state-run paper warned that China should "not be distracted by the pace of other countries' naval buildup and remember to timely publicize relevant information on its navy's modernization plan to give lie to the 'China threat' theory."

JAPAN

On August 6, Japan introduced a new 19,500-ton helicopter destroyer, *Izumo*, the largest Japanese military vessel ever built since the Pacific War. The flurry of ship-building activity in China, India, and Japan prompted veteran correspondent Donald Kirk to write in *Forbes* of an "[Asian aircraft carrier race](#)" in the region.

- The *Sankei Shimbun*, a newspaper in Japan, noted Kirk's op-ed but [contrasted China's welcoming reaction to India's new carrier and its harsh criticism against Japan's new destroyer](#). For example, *The People's Daily* censured the commission of Japan's new "quasi-carrier" as Prime Minister Abe's "[militaristic ambitions to restore Japan's military forces](#)." *Sankei* questioned this criticism, assuring that *Izumo* is not an aircraft carrier since it is meant to board only helicopters.

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