

Prestige and Naval Power: A Look at India and China

Written by Robert Potter

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ROBERT POTTER, AUG 21 2012

In modern times the transforming of a country into a great power has traditionally coincided with the development of a powerful navy. The prestige associated with the Battleship led many countries to invest huge amounts of money into weapons platforms that they neither needed or in many cases could afford. A very good documentary series on the history of the platform can be found here. What made the acquisition of these weapons so attractive was that they were seen as an expression of national power.

In much the same way, nuclear weapons, nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers now act as expressions of national power. It need not matter how old the carrier, the possession carrier is seen as mark that a state is important, that it is formidable and needs to be taken seriously; at least by those states that want to acquire them. As a result, states with little or no desire to project power, can end up fielding expensive carriers and nuclear submarines.

The path from a Potemkin navy to a real power is a slow one however both India and China are progressing towards highly capable navies. In the case of India the intention is quite openly stated, however in the case of China the signals are much more mixed. On the one hand it claims that the carriers it is seeking to build will not be used for direct power-projection purposes and on the other hand it is seeking to expand its power into the Indian Ocean.

One of the interesting places where the progression towards serious naval development is occurring is in each state's ballistic missile submarine (known as an SSBN) development. India has been attempting to develop an indigenous SSBN capability since 1984. Previously, India has relied on purchasing nuclear submarines from Russia. The purchase of complete systems has the advantage of cutting down on the cost of development. However, many navies progress from the purchase of complete platforms to the development of locally produced systems.

The Imperial Japanese Navy initially purchased many of its naval vessels from offshore. The Japanese flagship at the Battle of the Yalu River, the *Matsushima*, was built in France and the flagship at the Battle of Tsushima, the *Mikasa*, was built in Great Britain. Japan then pursued a policy of naval autonomy and eventually used the lessons it had learned from operating its purchased fleet to develop its own naval building capability.

India is following this trend and its first locally built SSBN, called the INS Arihant is expected to launch sometime in late 2012. The development and deployment of this ship is a milestone, as it shows that India possesses the technical skills and facilities to construct these ships.

The PLAN has been building its own SBN platforms since the late 1970's. The Chinese effort develop an autonomous shipbuilding capability began much earlier and as such their program is more mature. The Chinese are presently fielding their second locally produced class of SSBNs. The benefit of having a small group of vessels, as opposed to a single unit, is that it creates strategic redundancy; some ships can be in port for refitting, others can be in transit. The present group of SSBNs operated by the PLAN gives them the ability to maintain at least one submarine on continuous patrol.

The PLAN has limited SSBN patrol experience but these developments show that they are attempting to develop further. The Chinese also lack an effective communications method for operation use of these submarines. The PLAN however, appears committed to the improvement of its capabilities. Concurrent with the production of the new

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submarines, the Chinese have also constructed an offshore patrol base on Hainan Island, which is a serious facility equipped with underground storage and local demagnetisation facilities. The development of this offshore facility, equipped with what appears to be their first demagnetization facility, is an affirmation of their desire to develop a sea-based deterrence.

Both of these submarines lack capabilities of their Russian and US counterparts but represent milestones in each country's progression towards a locally developed naval capability. Each also shows that these states are interested in the development of a credible deterrence capability. In the case of China, the SSBN program has been tied to an attempt to build national prestige as a 'great power' (Liu Huaqing, *The Memoirs of Liu Huaqing* (Beijing: People's Liberation Army Press, 2004), p. 476). These platforms will no doubt be built upon as each state makes a case as to why it should be considered a great power and attempts to build their own naval capabilities.

The naval ambitions of both India and China can also be described through the lens of their desire to produce a carrier force. Carriers are the most expensive, the largest and the most complex ships in a navy. Along with the costs associated with producing these vessels, they must also be outfitted with an air-wing and assigned a large amount of protective support, in the form of other, quite expensive ships.

India has followed a similar pattern in the development of its carrier force as it has in the development of its SSBN capability. The first carrier fielded by the Indian Navy was originally constructed by Britain during the late 1950's. The Indian Navy purchased the carrier and it remains in service. India has also purchased a *Kiev Class* carrier from Russia and has spent a large amount of money converting it into a more modern platform. This vessel is presently undergoing sea trials.

The Indian Navy is also attempting to produce a natively built carrier. This effort has been continuously disrupted by overruns and unforeseen difficulties. The Indian Navy has stated its intention to develop a locally produced carrier capability and although they are facing large delays both in converting older units for service and in local production, it is a goal they will achieve in the coming decades.

In the case of China, the PLAN purchased a number of carriers from other countries for study. Including the ex-Soviet carrier *Varyag*. The *Varyag* has been outfitted for service and is presently undergoing sea trials. The PLAN is also developing a locally produced capability, at present reports relating to the construction of a locally built carrier are not confirmed but it is the next logical step for their ship building program to go.

Carriers are linked directly to the ability to project power and are seen as a core component in the development of a blue-water navy. As each of these countries continues to develop these capabilities, their exact role remains undefined. What these various projects are however expected, at least by their constructors, to provide is national prestige. These high cost and high visibility acquisitions act as an announcement to the world, that these states want to be considered great powers.

The leaders of these states are no doubt aware that it was through the development of a locally constructed Battleship force that the United States chose to announce its arrival on the international stage as a great power. Roosevelt's 'Great White Fleet', developed locally, circumnavigated the world during the early Twentieth Century. The Japanese victory over Russia with their own fleet also announced that they had arrived on the scene as a great power. The possession of a fleet, equipped with expensive capital ships was then and remains now, inextricably linked to a state's desire to be considered a great power. Though the platform has shifted to carriers and submarines from Battleships, the intention remains the same. Though an expression of their national military, both China and India want to join the great power club.

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