Warship Developments:
Soviet Aircraft Carriers Then and Now

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In the two decades prior to the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the Soviet Navy expanded exponentially in all directions: total numbers, unit size and capability, fleet support, amphibious operations, you name it. They were exciting days for those of us interested in naval intelligence. The Soviet fleet included 500 submarines, from small coastal boats to the huge Typhoon nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) and Oscar-class nuclear-powered guided-missile submarine (SSGN), and the surface fleet was growing too, including a program to counter Western carrier aviation. The strange-looking Moskva-class helicopter cruisers were followed by the much larger Kiev-class in the 1970s and 1980s. Two more classes of increasing complexity and capability were in the pipeline: the Kuznetsov-class of short-take-off-but-arrested-recovery (STOBAR) carriers (i.e., no catapults but a bow ramp and arrester wires on the after flight deck to recover high-performance jet fighter-bombers); and the even larger nuclear-powered Ulyanovsk-class which would compete more directly with US Navy carriers of the Nimitz-class. Indeed Ulyanovsk was laid down and 40% complete before the program was cancelled and she was scrapped in 1992. The aircraft carrier Kuznetsov, an infrequently deployed and arguably somewhat unsuccessful ship, is the last remnant of these vessels in Russian service.

This article is about the last Kiev and the second Kuznetsov. The former (ex-Admiral Gorshkov) is in the process of being refitted for India and the other (ex-Varyag, ex-Riga) is now conducting sea trials in China and reportedly named Liaoning after the province where she was refitted. Politics and international intrigue have paid a big role in their lives to date, and I believe that will continue.

The empty hull that has become Liaoning, the first Chinese aircraft carrier, was bought from the Ukraine, the owner of the vessel after the break-up of the USSR. It was purchased for $20 million by a Chinese travel agency ostensibly to be converted into a floating hotel and casino in Macao – ex-Soviet Kiev-class carriers Kiev and Minsk have already been preserved in China as part of military theme parks. Negotiations to permit her passage through the Bosphorus Strait were long and convoluted, as was the subsequent risky tow through the Straits of Gibraltar and around Africa en route to China, arriving in February 2002 – nearly four years after her purchase! In April 2005 she was moved to a dry dock and an extensive restoration began. Her emergence as an apparently operational aircraft carrier after years of subterfuge and misinformation would make for improbable fiction, but it has now become fact. After what must have been a huge expenditure to fit her out with new propulsion machinery, weapons and sensors, initial sea trials were completed in August 2012 and media reports indicate that she has now embarked aircraft and missiles for weapon system trials.

Sketch of Soviet aircraft carrier Ulyanovsk.
has morphed into a US$2.3 billion extensive refit and delays. The delay is an embarrassment to India and its navy, and this saga is doing Russia’s reputation for quality shipbuilding no good.

When India expressed concern about construction setbacks and cost escalation in November 2008, a Russian defence ministry official stated that if India wouldn’t pay the money – at this point about $617 million – Russia would keep the ship for itself. After all the delays and negotiations, I suspect that India’s navy is crossing its fingers and hoping for the best. Certainly Russia has a lot to lose if the final product is defective after its delivery. For many years, India has been Russia’s number one customer for defence equipment. However, poor quality workmanship and equipment in ships, submarines and other major acquisitions and refits since 1991 has led India to look to other states for some of its recent purchases, such as France for submarines.

Unlike China, India has operated carriers for many years. INS Vikrant, a Majestic-class light fleet carrier similar to Canada’s Bonaventure, initiated that capability after her commissioning in 1961, and was replaced by Viraat (ex-British Hermes) in the late 1980s. Hermes was laid down in 1944, so she is now more than ready for replacement. Indeed India is constructing its own aircraft carriers – also delayed – with plans to maintain three carriers in service, including Vikramaditya. The indigenous design is smaller than Vikramaditya and is a key part of the Indian Navy’s expansion plans.

Both India and China will have discovered by this time that building aircraft carriers is an expensive proposition. Costs will continue to mount when these and follow-on ships are built, together with the aircraft, supporting warships and tankers, and the extensive training and supply infrastructure necessary to equip and operate carrier battle groups. Such costs are not for the faint of heart, even for major states such as China and India. These large vessels confer prestige and combat capability upon their states, rather like dreadnought battleships did in the early 1900s. The other interesting factor to note about the dreadnoughts was that some aspiring states (Argentina, Brazil and Chile with their naval arms race come to mind) bought two or three such vessels to show the flag and keep up with the Joneses. Will that be the case with Liaoning and Vikramaditya? Their story is about much more than just two large ships: it is about the states involved, many billions of dollars in defence expenditure, national prestige, big power politics and international diplomacy. Let us see what happens with them and their navies over the next few years. It may be a bumpy ride!

Notes
2. INS Vikrant is a museum ship in Mumbai, the only WW II-era British-built aircraft carrier to be preserved.