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India's aircraft carrier hits more troubled waters

By Siddharth Srivastava
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NEW DELHI - India's long-stated intention to procure an aircraft carrier has suffered a further blow, hurting efforts to match China's growing maritime clout, especially in the Indian Ocean region and the South China Sea, where India has invested to explore for oil and gas.

The deferment by at least a year was conveyed last week by Russia, which is reconditioning the *Admiral Gorshkov* at an already escalated price of US\$2.3 billion. The ship rechristened *INS Vikramaditya* was to have been delivered this year after several delays already.

"We believe the handover of the ship will take place in the fourth quarter of 2013. The ship encountered a big malfunction with the main power plant and boiler. I hope its sea trials will resume next April," Russian Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov told reporters in New Delhi.

His statements followed a meeting with his Indian counterpart A K Antony, who in turn said he had communicated India's "serious concern" over the deferments. The bilateral meeting was a build-up to Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to New Delhi on November 1.

The delay comes after China last month put its first aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*, into service in the wake of tensions with Japan.

The Russian Navy's 45,000-ton *Admiral Gorshkov* was launched in 1982. The retrofit was originally to cost \$750 million but has ballooned since.

Deferrals have meant that India's sole, elderly aircraft carrier INS *Viraat*, built for Britain's Royal Navy as HMS *Hermes* in 1959 and transferred to India in 1987, and which was to have been junked by now, has had to be refitted to operate for five more years, by which time India hopes to get more carriers.

Reports suggest that India's attempt to develop an indigenous aircraft carrier in its own shipyards is also delayed and is likely to be operational only by 2018.

India's independent audit agency, the Comptroller and Auditor General, meanwhile, has severely criticized the delay in the delivery of the Russian carrier. In a report placed before Parliament in July 2009, the CAG said: "The objective of induction of [*Gorshkov*] as an aircraft carrier in time to bridge the gap in Indian Navy capabilities has been defeated. The decision to go in for repair and refit of a second-hand ship has become questionable, as a new aircraft carrier would have cost much less and would have had twice the lifespan."

Indian Navy commanders have steadfastly tried to impress on the political leadership the need for at least three aircraft carriers, for the eastern and western seaboard, while the third may be refitted and upgraded to secure strategic interests that stretch from Africa's east coast to the Strait of Malacca.

Aircraft carriers will form a crucial cog in India's defense-modernization efforts, estimated at \$100 billion, over the next decade with twin aims of creating an effective long-term deterrence against China and being battle-ready against Pakistan, should the need arise.

The *Gorshkov* postponement also underlines the difficulties that India faces in continuing its defense engagements with Russia, a relationship that harks back to the Cold War era. Over recent years Russia's traditional role as India's main defense-equipment supplier has been gradually substituted by countries such as Israel, France, and lately the US.

In early 2007, India purchased a 36-year-old warship, USS *Trenton* (rechristened INS *Jalashwa*) from the United States. It has a gross tonnage of 16,900 and cost \$50 million. INS *Jalashwa* was the first warship ever purchased from the US by India and is the second-largest it now possesses, after INS *Viraat*.

There is not much more that India can do except express its frustration over the delayed *Gorshkov* project, as it has already invested huge capital in refitting the carrier. Further, it cannot afford to annoy Moscow. Despite the reduced importance, India continues to depend on Russia to supply major military hardware such as fifth-generation stealth fighter jets, BrahMos cruise missiles, warships, nuclear-powered submarines and tanks.

Russia leased nuclear-powered submarine INS *Chakra* and has helped India build its indigenous nuclear sub INS *Arihant* that substantially enhances the country's underwater attack and surveillance capabilities several notches.

A lot of the existing defense equipment depends on spare parts, service and maintenance on

Russian state entities. India and Russia also continue to share long-standing ties in energy and atomic power. Russia is implementing the controversial Kudankulam nuclear project in Tamil Nadu state.

This month, state-run gas utility GAIL India signed a 20-year deal with Russian gas major Gazprom to import 2.5 million tonnes of liquefied natural gas annually. India's state-owned explorer Oil and Natural Gas Corp (ONGC) is invested in Russian oil and gas assets.

Keeping such perspectives, New Delhi has so far not pushed for imposition of any penalties as per procedures over the delay in delivery of the *Gorshkov*. It can only hope for the best.