

SPECIAL ARTICLE

NAVAL HEGEMONY AND DETERRENCE: AIRCRAFT CARRIER STRATEGIES AND POWER PROJECTION IN ASIAN WATERS

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Aircraft carriers continued at the apex of states' maritime surface strength strategies in 2025, for national prestige, power projection, to deter and threaten, to cooperate and coerce. Maritime competition was evident during 2025 around maritime Asia, through the aircraft carrier strategy pursued by China and the response to this by India and Japan, as buttressed by their cooperation with the carrier deployments by France, the UK and the US. Part of this competition is demonstrated by the various carrier construction and carrier-conversion programmes being pursued around maritime Asia. Part of this competition was also on show with aircraft carrier deployments. With regard to China this is on show with its increasing range of carrier deployments and increasing stranglehold on Taiwan. With regard to India and Japan, but also the US, UK and France, their carrier deployments show not only a focus on maritime Asia but also a criss-cross flexible geometry of mutual carrier-support and cooperation. This reflects the wider maritime balancing taking shape towards China.

KEYWORDS – Asia; geopolitics; maritime; naval; aircraft carriers.

1. Introduction

Across maritime Asia, aircraft carriers continued to dominate maritime security and maritime strategies during 2025. Aircraft carriers, and their Carrier Strike Groups (CSGs), remained at the apex of maritime surface strength, as a matter of national prestige, in construction and deployment. Despite the rival merits of submarines, and the carrier vulnerability posed by anti-ship missiles, aircraft carriers demonstrated an enduring military utility across Asian waters, and highly visible signalling devices for adversaries and allies. Their mobility made them particularly suitable for power projection across maritime Asia, bringing airforce capability to bear without the need for land bases, able to deter, threaten and coerce, and also able to cooperate with other navies in exercises and naval diplomacy. Aircraft carriers both reflected and affected wider regional order. Carrier technology

continued to develop. Aircraft carriers range from super to heavy, medium, and light tonnage, manned air-wings have been supplemented by drones, and Landing Platform Docks (LPDs) have emerged, able to carry manned planes, helicopters and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), i.e. drones.

During 2025, only six states operated aircraft carriers in maritime Asia; namely France, the UK and the US, who deployed aircraft carriers across the Indo-Pacific, the underbelly of Asia; as well as resident powers China, India, and Japan, who were locked into regional carrier competition.

The political context was threefold. First, the still-troubled waters of the Red Sea, where the Houthis continued to threaten shipping for much of the year, until announcing their halt in November, following the fragile Gaza cease-fire agreement made in September. Second was India-Pakistan friction. Third, and perhaps most significantly, was China's growing naval shadow in East Asia and the South China Sea, increasingly threatening Taiwan, effecting and affecting the wider maritime competition

2. *Europe*

Carrier-deployments by France and the UK across maritime Asia in 2025 reflected the European Carrier Group Interoperability Initiative (ECGII) «sequencing of more persistent European carrier strike group presence in the Indo-Pacific» [Government of the UK. Prime Minister's Office 2023, 10 March]. In this vein, the preceding Italian CSG deployment in the second half of 2024 was followed by French CSG deployment in the first half of 2025 and UK deployment in the second half of 2025. National prestige with blue water naval power projection was on show by France and the UK, as well as signalling of their tacit balancing with other China-concerned states. Like Italy in the previous year, in each case France and the UK conducted exercises with India on both outward and return legs across the Indian Ocean; and like Italy, neither the French nor UK CSGs conducted any exercises with China in East Asian waters. However, they did conduct particularly pointed exercises with the US and Japan across these waters.

France's carrier strike Group (CSG), a powerful seven-ship group, led by the *Charles de Gaulle* aircraft carrier commanded by Rear Admiral Jacques Mallard, and carrying 22 Rafale Ms, transited the Suez Canal on 24 December 2024 and returned on 10 April 2025. Various exercises were carried out with friendly countries as a very deliberate «strategic signal» [Mallard 2025]. Initially this was with India in January 2025. This was followed by the *La Perouse* exercise in mid-January, in which the French CSG led substantive maritime security and cooperation drills with the Indian, Australian, Canadian, UK and US navies. In addition to these established partners and allies, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore participated in *La Perouse* for the first time. The next major event for the French deployment was participation in

the inaugural *Pacific Steller 2025*, a tri-carrier event in the Philippine Sea, in which the French CSG was joined by the Japan's carrier JS *Kaga* and the US carrier USS *Carl Vinson*, and their CSGs. It came to light after the deployment was finished that, as the French CSG transited the Luzon Strait, a Chinese frigate followed and closely monitored the CSG [Manaranche 2025, 7 July]. The final substantive operation for *Operation Clemenceau* was the bilateral *Varuna* carrier-to-carrier exercise with India's INS *Vikrant* in March.

Similar signalling to adversaries and allies was on show with the UK deployment, *Operation Highmast*, which went across maritime Asia from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Sea of Japan. High profile public stops in Singapore and Tokyo were interspersed with substantive carrier-to-carrier exercising by the *Prince of Wales* with US (Timor Sea, July), US and Japan (North Philippine Sea, August), Japan (Sea of Japan, September) and India (Arabian Sea, October) carrier counterparts. In another first, the *Prince of Wales* led the *Bersama Lima* exercise, reinforcing regional security arrangements, bringing together the navies from the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore in the Five Powers Defence Force Arrangement (FPDFA). Allied interoperability was enhanced with F-35Bs from the *Prince of Wales* engaging in trilateral exercises with US and Japanese planes east of the Okinawa chain in September, while the *Prince of Wales* bilaterally exercised with Japan's carrier JS *Kaga*. In terms of wider European involvement, Norway's HNoMS *Roald Amundsen* stayed with the British CSG from start to finish, while Spain's frigate ESPS *Méndez Núñez* joined the CSG from the Mediterranean across the Indian Ocean.

3. The United States

For the US, in the Indo-Pacific «in 2025, aircraft carriers remain the indispensable backbone of its operational prowess» [Henry 2025, 2 September]. Five aircraft carriers (out of a total strength of 11), with supporting CSGs, were deployed at various times across maritime Asia during 2025: namely USS *George Washington*, USS *Carl Vinson*, USS *Nimitz*, USS *George Washington* and USS *Abraham Lincoln*. At times their focus was on West Asia (especially the Red Sea), coercive power with the Houthis and Iran in mind, and at other times their focus was on East Asia (especially the South China Sea) with competition with China very much in mind. Deployments were thus made between East Asia and West Asia, with further juggling through Caribbean commitments in late 2025. US carrier presence in maritime Asia was also supported by its *America*-class amphibious carriers, USS *America* and USS *Tripoli*, which carry F-35Bs, and are able to operate as medium-size aircraft carriers, with just over 45,000 ton displacement.

The *Harry S. Truman* started the year three months into an eight-month deployment to the Red Sea. Under attack from Houthi missiles in

March 2025, it played a central role in *Operation Rough Rider*, launching numerous air sorties against the Houthi infrastructure and leadership in Yemen. It returned home in June, amid some embarrassment. In mid-February 2025 a collision between the *Harry S. Truman* and a Panamanian merchant ship near Port Said led to the dismissal of the *Harry S. Truman*'s commander Captain Dave Snowden, in late-April a Super Tornado fell into the sea while being towed inside the carrier hangar, and in early-May, a Super Hornet attempting to land plunged overboard when an arresting cable snapped.

The *Carl Vinson* had been deployed out from San Diego in November 2024 for a regular West Pacific tour, operating in the South China Sea from December-January 2025, including exercising with the Philippine navy in January. The *Carl Vinson* CSG participated in the *Pacific Steller* exercise in February, along with a French CSG and Japan's carrier JS Kaga, inter-allied cooperation to the fore. March had the *Carl Vinson* CSG operating in the Sea of Japan, where it was buzzed by a Chinese reconnaissance plane, involving mutual signalling between the two sides, before the Chinese plane was in turn escorted away by two fighters from the aircraft carrier. Next, the *Carl Vinson* moved into the East China Sea for trilateral drills with Japan and South Korea, again representing Allied cooperation. In April the CSG was re-deployed from USINDOPACOM to CENTCOM, over to the Arabian Sea to join in the ongoing *Operation Rough Rider*, involving coercion against Iran. The *Carl Vinson* CSG left the Arabian Sea in mid-July, returning to the Pacific via the Indian Ocean and South China Sea. Its final exercising was in *Northern Edge*, along with USS *Abraham Lincoln*.

The *Nimitz*'s departure in March from San Diego followed the reassignment of the USS *Carl Vinson* to the Middle East. The *Nimitz*'s first port of call was Guam in April. Drills were conducted with the Japanese navy in the Philippine Sea, and around the Malacca Strait in May. However, amidst the escalating air war between Israel and Iran, a planned visit to Vietnam by the *Nimitz* in June was cancelled. Instead the CSG was re-deployed to the Arabian Sea, arriving the same day that the US struck three Iranian nuclear sites as part of *Operation Midnight Hammer*. In August the *Nimitz* Carrier Group visited Bahrain, home of the US Naval Support Activity base. After three months deployment in the Arabian Sea, the *Nimitz* returned to the South China Sea, albeit accidentally losing a fighter jet and a helicopter in October. US teams were sent to recover the sensitive technology from the seabed before China could get to it, and they successfully concluded their recovery operations in early-December [Tiwari 2025, 9 December]. In November the *Nimitz* departed the South China Sea for its home port, after a trilateral exercise near Scarborough Shoal with Japanese and Philippine warships, which attracted overflights by Chinese bombers and protests from Beijing, with mutual signalling in play again. The *Nimitz* left Pearl Harbor at the start of December, reaching Seattle on 16 December; it is now set for decommissioning, originally set for April 2025 but subsequently extended by 12 months until May 2026.

The *George Washington* had returned to Japan in November 2024, after a lengthy mid-cycle refitting as the permanently forward-deployed carrier (replacing USS *Ronald Reagan*). This was the first operational deployment for the F-35C with the embarked Carrier Air Wing 5, signalling a «new era of Navy fifth-generation air power permanently stationed» [Wilson 2025, 11 December], showing capabilities signalling to the region. A lengthy six-month deployment took place from June-December 2025. Having called at Guam, patrol duties in the South China Sea were followed by a friendly port call in the Philippine in July, which was immediately denounced by China [Feng 2025, 4 July]. Allied cooperation was on show during the year as the *George Washington* carried out carrier-to-carrier exercises with the UK's *Prince of Wales* CSG in the Timor Sea in July, followed by participation in the large multilateral exercises *Talisman Sabre* in early-August. From Northern Australia, the *George Washington* CSG then went to Guam later in August. Trilateral carrier exercising was on show in the Philippine Sea in August as the *George Washington* exercised with the UK's *Prince of Wales* and Japan's *JS Kaga*. In the fall of 2025, the *George Washington* participated in U.S. Indo-Pacific Command joint exercise *Northern Edge*, in the Gulf of Alaska, now equipped with the new AIM-1174B missile. In November it conducted a four-day Carrier Strike Group Exercise (CSGEX) with the South Korean navy. The *George Washington* then entered the South China Sea by the Luzon Strait, replacing the *Nimitz*. The start of December saw the *George Washington*'s second visit to Guam. Next, the aircraft carrier conducted an information-sharing drill off the Kanto coast with the Japanese destroyer, *JS Akizuki*. By mid-December it was back in Yokosuka.

Homeported at San Diego, the *Abraham Lincoln* CSG participated in the *Northern Edge* exercise in August in the Gulf of Alaska. It was quietly deployed from San Diego in November. Reaching Guam in mid-December, it then operated in the Philippine Sea.

On the LPD front, USS *America* participated in the *Talisman Sabre* exercise, including launching F-35Bs, in the Coral Sea. It then joined the triple carrier (USS *George Washington*, HMS *Prince of Wales*, *JS Kaga*) exercise in the Philippine Sea in August, with F-35B cross-decking flying from the *America* to the *Prince of Wales*. Having been deployed for six years in the region, the *America* was replaced by the USS *Tripoli*, which arrived at Sasebo in June. The *Tripoli* visited Da Nang in December, having carried out F-35B flight operations over the South China Sea [Chan 2025, 10 December], signalling operations to China.

4. India

India's carrier profile entered 2025 with a two-carrier Navy, based on INS *Vikramaditya*, the refurbished and modernized ex-Soviet ship the *Admiral Gorshkov*, and its own indigenously-built carrier INS *Vikrant*. These two car-

riers, with battle groups, are indeed the «backbone of India's Blue Water Strategy» [Mann 2025, 26 May]. However, following its carrier-to-carrier exercise with Italy's ITS *Cavour* in October 2024, the *Vikramaditya* retired for the duration of 2025 for a scheduled modernization refit. India's carrier operations in 2025 thus centered on INS *Vikrant*, India's indigenously-built aircraft carrier, and very much a national prestige vessel.

Cooperation with allies (and tacit counter-balancing signalling to China) was on show in February, when INS *Vikrant* engaged in a carrier-to-carrier *Varuna Exercise* with France's *Charles de Gaulle* CSG, which is useful as the *Charles de Gaulle* is equipped with Rafale M aircraft that India is seeking for its aircraft carriers. Indeed, in April, India signed a deal with France for 26 Rafale-Marine 4.5 Generation fighters, made by Dassault, to be deployed on its two carriers by 2030. The Ministry of Defence announced it as an «addition of a potent force multiplier to the Indian Navy's aircraft carriers, substantially boosting the nation's air power at sea» [Government of India. Ministry of Defence 2025, 28 April; Asthana 2025, 30 April]. The official Press Information Bureau emphasized «the strategic importance for India» of the deal, in which «the introduction of the Rafale-Marine will significantly bolster the Indian Navy's operational capabilities, particularly in the Indian Ocean region» [Government of India. Press Information Bureau, 2025, 29 April]. The deal was considered in India as one which «targets China, Pakistan maritime challenges» (Kathju 2025, 29 April; Vinod 2025, 10 April). It was also seen, in India, as superior to the J-15s carried on Chinese aircraft carriers [Kunde 2025, 10 January].

INS *Vikrant* played a leading role in India's confrontation with Pakistan in the Spring. Following the Pahalgam massacres in April 22, India launched air strikes from land during May under *Operation Sindoor*. However, the Navy had already been dispatched to the Arabian Sea during April for coercive deterrence. Vice-Admiral Pramod, Director Naval Operations, described how:

The Indian Navy's Carrier battle group, surface forces, submarines and aviation assets were immediately deployed at sea with full combat readiness. We tested and refined tactics and procedures at sea during multiple weapons firing in the Arabian Sea within 96 hours of the terrorist attack. Our forces remained forward deployed in the Northern Arabian Sea in a decisive and deterrent posture with full readiness and capacity to strike select targets at sea and on land, including Karachi, at a time of our choosing. As we speak, the Indian Navy remains deployed at sea in a credible deterrent posture to respond decisively to any inimical action by Pakistan [Times of India 2025, 12 May]

The Indian media was certainly satisfied with headlines like «INS *Vikrant*: A floating fortress that gives India decisive edge against Pakistan navy» [Zee Media Bureau 2025, 9 May]; and «Silent but supreme: How INS

Vikrant caged Pakistani Jets during Operation Sindoor and reaffirmed Indian Navy's dominance in Arabian Sea» [OpIndia Staff 2025, 12 May].

Six months later and Prime Minister Modi celebrated Diwali, and national prestige, on INS *Vikrant* in October, ready to extol the prowess of the aircraft carrier:

I have this giant, INS Vikrant, embodying infinite powers. Vikrant is vast, grand, awe-inspiring.... Our INS Vikrant today is a powerful symbol of 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat' (self-reliant India) and 'Made in India'. Cutting through the ocean, the indigenous INS Vikrant reflects Bharat's military strength. Just a few months ago, we saw how even the very name of Vikrant sent shockwaves through Pakistan, stealing their sleep at night. Such is INS Vikrant, a name that alone can crush the enemy's courage. That is INS Vikrant! That is INS Vikrant! That is INS Vikrant! [Government of India. Prime Minister of India 2025, 20 October]

The Government argued, looking back on the year, that the *Vikrant* CSG played «a key role in strategy of compellence, thereby forcing Pakistan Navy to be in defensive posture and requesting for urgent ceasefire» [Government of India. Press Information Bureau 2025, 24 October].

India is seeking to increase its surface fleet. Contracts were agreed in October for Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders and Swan Defence and Heavy Industries Limited to partner for the LPD project of the Indian Navy. The agreement includes both design and construction of four 30,000-ton vessels. The first vessel built should be ready for delivery within 60 months of the contract being signed, while the remaining three should be delivered at one-year intervals. The role of the vessels includes the operating bases for fixed-wing naval drones, in effect drone-carriers [Admin 2025, 24 September]. However, commissioning of China's third aircraft carrier, the *Fujian* was greeted with palpable concern in India over an emerging «carrier gap» [Bedi 2025, 10 November; Kumar 2025, 7 November; Singh 2025, 11 November]. Now overtaken by China in aircraft carrier numbers, India sought to further strengthen its two carriers' assets and punch power. In November, it was confirmed that *Abhimanyu* drones would be joining the air-wings on both of the carriers, a force multiplier [Baidya 2025, 5 November]; and that India was «accelerating» plans to equip its existing MiG-29 and new Rafale M fighters with 160km+ range Astra Mk2 Air-to-Air Missiles to combat China's PL-15 long-range missile used by Pakistan [Patel 2025, 13 November].

5. China

China entered the year as a two-carrier navy, in which the old ex-Soviet *Admiral Gorshkov*, modified as the *Liaoning*, had been joined by the *Shandong*,

China's first indigenously-designed aircraft carrier. Both carry the J-15s, reverse-engineered copies of the old Soviet-period SU-33, first unveiled in 1987. What was significant during 2025 were their blue water operations beyond Japan and participation in Taiwan-blockade exercises, preparation, threat and coercion on show. By the end of the year, as a matter of great national prestige, they had been joined by a third aircraft carrier, the *Fujian*.

The *Shandong* was deployed east of Taiwan in March, as part of the *Strait Thunder 2025* exercise. The significant was two-fold. First, it was blue water power projection beyond the so-called «first island chain». Second, it was coercive, testing «cutting communications» between Taiwan and the outside world, especially its allies, in the event of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan [Guo and Liu 2025, 2 April]. The *Shandong* then carried out drills in the *South China Sea* in early April.

The next significant moment was the simultaneous two-carrier deployment of the *Laioning* and the *Shandong*, and CSGs, east of Japan – a first time event for them in those waters. This was described in the Chinese media as a «‘train-as-you-fight’ test beyond island chains» [Zheng 2025, 17 November]. The *Liaoning* passed through the Miyako Strait (Ryukyu/«first island chain»), and engaged in drills south-east of Japan. The *Shandong* went further east, south of the Bonin Islands, beyond the «second island chain» to approach the Japan's easternmost island of Minamitori/Marcus Island from the south-west on 7 June. An element of coercive signalling to Japan was present. This eastern outreach by the *Shandong* was considered in the Chinese media as «a bridge to a blue-water future» and very much «an instrument of Beijing's long-range power projection past the first island chain» [Choi 2025, 3 July]

The *Shandong's* arrival, with supporting fleet (the guided missile destroyers *Yan'an* and *Zhanjiang*, and the guided missile frigate *Yuncheng*), in Hong Kong in early July was a deliberate internal [Global Times 2025, 4 July] and external [Liu and Guo 2025, 3 July] show of might.

A further notch up in Chinese carrier-strength was seen in August with the commissioning of its fourth Type 075 amphibious assault ship (LPD), the *Hubei* (c. 36,000 ton displacement), operating as a helicopter carrier, which was immediately deployed with its sister-ship the *Hainan* in the South China Sea. A further carrier was unveiled in November with the successful sea-trials of China's new Type 076 assault ship the *Sichuan*. The vessel includes electromagnetic catapult and arrestor technology for mixed fixed-wing operations (drones and manned fighters), its 40-50,000 ton displacement «granting it the capabilities of a light aircraft carrier» [Cao and Liu 2025, 12 December].

Much anticipation had surrounded the progress of China's third aircraft carrier, the *Fujian*, highly anticipated as a national prestige achievement of the first order taking China «into the deep-blue era» in «a pivotal milestone in the history of Chinese aircraft carriers» [Song 2025, 25 Sep-

tember]. China's first aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*, was Soviet made and its second, the *Shandong*, was built in China but based on the Soviet model. Both use older-style ski-jump type systems to help planes take flight. At the end of the year, the Chinese state media made a point of parading the «burst power» employed on the *Fujian* skips past the steam catapult technology used on most American carriers to employ an electromagnetic launch system (EMAL) found only on the latest US Navy *Ford*-class nuclear super carriers, with planes able to launch at faster speeds and carry heavier payloads [Liu 2025, 25 December]. In its sea trials in September, China simultaneously debuted its J-35 stealth fighter, improved J-15T fighter and KJ-600 radar plane operating from the *Fujian*, a «stunning leap forward» in China's aircraft carrier capability [Newdick 2025, 22 September].

China's state media was jubilant in November, with the commissioning of the *Fujian* at Sanya, Hainan Island, the headquarters of the Southern Command, facing down into the South China Sea:

The arrival of the «three-carrier era» signifies that the PLA Navy possesses an all-weather, long-range strike and defense combat system that can be deployed in rotation. It also marks a shift in the PLA Navy's strategy from coastal defense to far seas defense, which has a profound impact on reshaping the world's maritime power structure. No hegemony or pressure can stop China's march toward becoming a maritime power. [Global Times 2025, 8 November]

The *Fujian*'s threat was immediately noted, with concerns, in the US [Shephers and Valino 2025, 14 November], Japan [Arimoto 2025, 17 December] and India [Kumar 2025, 7 November].

Very quickly, the *Fujian* was then deployed into the South China Sea, in mid-November, along with the guided missile destroyer *Yan'an*, and the guided missile frigate *Tongliao* for «live force» training. The *Shandong* was reported nearby. This was regional signalling to other littoral states. Varied types of aircraft, including the J-35 stealth fighter jets, J-15T heavy fighter jets, J-15DT electronic warfare aircraft, and KJ-600 early warning aircraft, completed multiple takeoff and landing training sessions on the *Fujian*.

By then, a week after *Fujian*'s commissioning, firm news had emerged on China's start of construction of a new supercarrier, another milestone in national prestige and potential power projection capabilities, a «100,000-ton game-changer» for Indo-Pacific operations, with a reactor containment structure being installed for a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier [Defence Security Asia 2025, 13 November; Weichert 2025, 27 December].

In early-December, the *Liaoning* (accompanied by the cruiser *Nanchang*, destroyers CNS *Xining* and *Kaifeng* and fast combat support ship CNS *Hulunhu*) deployed through the Miyako Strait, with Chinese analysts noting that «training in new locations can further boost its capabilities in the far seas» [Liu and Liang 2025, 8 December]. Immediate friction was present

as Japan accused Chinese planes of dangerous «radar illumination» carried out on monitoring Japanese plans. The CSG went over north and eastwards reaching 136 degrees east longitude, midway between the two island chains. The *Fujian* then transited the Taiwan Strait, to join the *Liaoning* at Qingdao, nestled side by side at the end of the year.

China ended the year with heavy coercive drill practices, *Justice Mission 2025*, through 29 and 30 December in five blocks of seawater, closely surrounding Taiwan. Twenty ships participated, including the *Hainan* Type 75 amphibious carrier «the PLA ‘light carrier’ key to Taiwan strategy» [Wang 2026, 19 January].

6. *Japan*

2025 was an important year for Japan, following the decision in 2018 to convert JS *Izumo* and JS *Kaga* from helicopter carrier status to full aircraft carrier status, in order to carry Fifth Generation F-35B attack jets. The increasing presence of China’s aircraft carriers, particularly the simultaneous appearance of the *Liaoning* and *Shandong* in July, and the pace of China’s carrier-building programme, has made Japan’s own aircraft carrier conversion programme all the more pressing. It represents counter-balancing, or at least mitigation of China’s emerging carrier programme.

JS *Izumo*, having completed the first part of its structural conversion, commenced the second part of the conversion, changing the trapezoidal shape of the bow to rectangular to make it easier for F-35 Bs to launch. This commenced in March 2025, with all modifications expected to be completed by early 2027. Attention focussed in 2025 upon JS *Kaga*. Its conversion and sea trials were completed with three months deployment to the US, from October–December 2024, where training flights of US F-35Bs were made from the *Kaga*. The JS *Kaga*, now 27,000 ton displacement, having completed its conversion and sea trials during 2024, has spent 2025 exercising with other F-35B-operating navies. All these exercises represent Allied cooperation, tacitly with China a common concern, and with interoperability sought with carrier-held F-35Bs operated by the US and UK.

The *Kaga* completed its first operational mission, sailing alongside US and French aircraft carriers in the Philippine Sea in February 2025 in the *Pacific Steller* exercises, signalling deterrence to China, and denounced in the Chinese state media [Chen 2025, 9 February]. In another powerful trilateral carrier operation, the *Kaga* (and JS *Akebono*) joined the USS *George Washington* and the HMS *Prince of Wales* CSGs in the North Philippine Sea in August, and was duly denounced in the Chinese state media [Liu and Liang 2025, 6 August]. Both US and UK F-35Bs took the opportunity to practice cross-deck flights to and from JS *Kaga*. The *Kaga* linked up again with the *Prince of Wales* CSG in the East China Sea in September. Bilateral exercising

and cross-deck activities from the *Prince of Wales*' F-35Bs and also Marines were on show. JS *Kaga* also helpfully refuelled HMS *Richmond* on 9 September, ahead of the *Richmond*'s transit of the Taiwan Strait. By end-September, the *Kaga* was in the *Nichi-Gou Trident* exercise with HMAS *Brisbane* in the West Pacific. JS *Kaga* passed another threshold in October in the *Annuaalex* with the US. First, the exercise was led by JS *Kaga*. Second, it was a broad-based exercise involving a range of US ships, namely the guided-missile destroyer USS *Shoup*, the guided missile cruiser USS *Robert Smalls*, dry cargo ships USNS *Amelia Earhart* and USNS *Wally Schirra*, and fleet replenishment oiler USNS *Tippicanoe* (T-AO 199). It also included aircraft from Australia, Canada, France and New Zealand, multilateral messaging and tacit counter-balancing to China. Thirdly, four US F-38bs practiced landing/taking off from JS *Kaga*, cementing its role as a functioning aircraft carrier [Atlama-zoglou 2025, 21 November].

On the plane front, Japan envisages ordering 42 F-35Bs, 21 for each carrier. Three F-35B arrived in August, delayed from FY2024 due to software issues, which makes Japan the only US ally in the Indo-Pacific with fixed-wing carrier-based stealth aircraft. Their arrival was promptly denounced in the Chinese state media [Guo 2025, 8 August]. Training operations started in November, at Nyutabaru Air Base, which is also the headquarters of the 5th Air Force. Japan's decision to base its first F-35Bs at Nyutabaru Air Base was no accident. Located in Miyazaki Prefecture on Kyushu, it sits close to the Nansei (Southwest) Islands, a chain stretching toward Taiwan and including the disputed Senkaku Islands. Nearby, Mageshima Island, currently being developed as a dedicated F-35B training site, will support short takeoff and vertical landing drills. Once operational, it will host both Japanese and US forces for joint exercises. The significance of the F-35B's is they are superior to the J-15's carried on China's *Liaoning* and *Shandong*. A further five are expected by the end of Fiscal Year 2025, i.e. by March 2026. Equipping its warships with a 5th-generation stealth fighter is «a strategic leap for Japan, sliding the narrative in Tokyo from defence to offence. This isn't just a delivery; it's a turning point in how Japan projects military power» [Bailey 2025, 7 August]. Importantly, F-35B acquisition ensures full interoperability with the US Navy and Marine Corps, allowing for joint training and enhanced alliance coordination, as well as with the UK and Italian navies which also operate F-35Bs.

Japan continues to operate its two *Hyuga*-class helicopter carriers, the 19,000-ton displacement JS *Hyuga* and JS *Ise* with full flight decks, each able to carry 18 helicopters, as well as drones, and missile batteries. For Indo-Pacific Deployment (IPD25) from April to November, JS *Ise* led a powerful CSG, the destroyers JS *Suzunami* and JS *Akebono*, the amphibious ship JS *Ohsumi*, the frigate JS *Yahagi*, and supported by a submarine. The *Ise* participated in *Talisman Sabre* 2025 in July, in *Pacific Vanguard* 2025 from August-September followed by bilateral exercises with the USS *Higgins* around Guam. JS *Hyuga* participated in *Talisman Sabre* 2025 in July, in *Freedom Edge*

with South Korea and the US in September. November witnessed JS *Hyuga* leading the US, Australian and US ships in the *Malabar* exercise off Guam, which was denounced in the Chinese state media [Feng 2025, 7 November].

Japan was particularly concerned about dual-carrier deployment by China. This was first on show in June when with the deployment of China's *Liaoning* and *Shandong* was tracked through Japan's EEZ. Japan complained about Chinese carrier planes having come unusually close, to which the China's Ministry of Defence lodged a «stern protest» over how Japanese ships and aircraft «repeatedly approached and interfered, deliberately creating maritime and air safety risks» [Global Times 2025, 13 June].

The Chinese double deployment of the *Liaoning* and *Shandong* again to waters east of Japan in December, created further friction. The context was deterioration in Japan-China relations as China took offence over Japan's comments about possibly coming to Taiwan's aid in the event of invasion. The Chinese carriers were shadowed by JS *Teruzuki* and Japanese airforce planes, Tokyo complaining that «radar illumination» by aircraft from the *Liaoning* as «a dangerous act» [Government of Japan. Ministry of Defence 2025, 7 December]. Japan's justification was that:

The scramble conducted by the Self-Defence Forces was both appropriate and necessary. Okinawa Island, Kitadaito Island, Minamidaito Island, and Okidaito Island are located near the waters in which *Liaoning* was operating. It is natural and imperative for the Ministry of Defence and JSDF, which are responsible for safeguarding Japan's territorial airspace and protecting the lives and property of the Japanese people, to appropriately conduct airspace intrusion countermeasures against carrier-based aircraft launched from *Liaoning*. [Government of Japan. Ministry of Defence 2025, 10 December]

China rejected the claims and instead complained of Japanese provocation and «harassment» [Global Times 2025, 7 December; Wang Qiang 2025, 8 December].

7. Looking Forward

As demonstrated, during 2025 issues of national prestige, power projection, and strategic messaging – be it of cooperation and support, or deterrence and coercion – were all in play with aircraft carrier constructions, augmentations and deployments. The biggest maritime issues remain around the response by the US, Japan and India to China's maritime carrier-led surge. In this vein, the Pentagon report to Congress *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* pinpointed China's intent to introduce six more aircraft carriers during the next decade. How does this impact on the US, India and Japan?

With regard to the US, the *John F. Kennedy*, the next more powerful *Gerald Ford*-class nuclear carrier, was originally envisaged for delivery by 2018. However, in June 2025, in the *Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Estimates* on the Carrier Replacement Program, the *John F. Kennedy*'s delivery date was shifted from July 2025 to March 2027 to support completion of its Advanced Arresting Gear (AAG) certification and continuing Advanced Weapons Elevator (AWE) work. This will result in a drop in carrier numbers during 2026. Put it another way, the 11-2 US carrier superiority over China at the start of 2025 will be replaced by a 10-3 superiority during 2026. More worryingly for the US, the annual Pentagon *China Military Power Report*, released in December, judged that China intended to build six more aircraft carriers during the next decade, a carrier every 20 months, giving it a force of nine aircraft carriers, facing between 11 and 12 US carriers, by 2035. Indeed, given US commitment elsewhere this would leave China with carrier superiority in the Pacific by 2035 [Moriyasu 2025, 30 December]. On the light aircraft carrier front, the Budget Estimates also announced that the next two *America*-class ships, the *Bougainville* and *Fallujah*, would be facing a one-year delay in construction and delivery due to shipyard labour challenges. *Bougainville* is currently being fitted out with decks specially strengthened for F-35B operations, but with its previous completion date of December 2025 now extended to August 2026.

With regard to India, uncertainties remained over its aircraft carrier program. The year started with its Ministry of Defence considering the approval given in September 2024 by the Defence Procurement Board for a conventional third aircraft carrier, an IAC-II that would be in the *Vikrant*-style, giving India a three-carrier fleet. By February 2025 there were reports this had been dropped. Instead the *Technology Vision and Capability Roadmap*, released in September 2025, outlined the next 15 years of modernizations. Carrier highlights included the construction of a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier with electromagnetic EMAL launch technology. On the one hand, this would replace INS *Vikramaditya*, whose notional life service runs to 2037 – leaving India still with a two-carrier fleet. On the other hand, this replacement will be bigger tonnage and size (carrying more planes) and more advanced (nuclear propulsion and EMAL launch systems) than the *Vikramaditya*. As such, it will jump past the China's *Fujian* (conventional propulsion plus EMAL launch system) to match both the US *Gerald Ford*-class aircraft carriers and China's envisaged 004 carrier which are/will be nuclear propulsion plus EMALs launch-fitted [Litnarovych 2025, 9 September]. Post-*Roadmap*, the Indian Navy renewed its push, for a conventional third aircraft carrier, an IAC-II that would be in the *Vikrant*-style but with UAV focus and design overhauls [Kunde 2025, 30 October]. In December, the year finished with the Navy Day Conference where the future of India's aircraft carrier fleet emerged as a major theme. Navy chief argued there that «our vision is still to have a three-carrier Navy – one on each coast and one in

reserve for maintenance and contingencies», and remained confident that the «requisite answers» would eventually align with India's strategic needs [Saxena 2025, 2 December].

In a final look forward, two sets of nested confrontations were evident at the end of 2025. One was the China-Japan, China-India and China-US naval rivalries. Second was China's increasing readiness to take out Taiwan, publicly announced for by 2027. Its aircraft carriers (*Liaoning*, *Shandong*, and *Fujian*) and LPD carriers (*Hainan* and *Hubei*) are already in position for 2026.

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