

## Aircraft Carriers

*What are we trying to fix?  
And how does getting rid of our carriers fix it?*

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From where I stand, the aircraft carrier, when combined with its air wing and surface escorts, remains the core of a flexible naval force structure capable of massing power when and where needed to deliver strategic, operational, and tactical level effects. It is the most flexible option to fulfill the Secretary of Defense's pledge to "fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows."

As Pacific Fleet Commander, I oversee naval operations in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region – including those of aircraft carriers and strike groups. The ships' execution of port visits, Distinguished Visitor (DV) fly-outs, partner-nation engagements, freedom-of-the-seas and presence operations, and myriad other activities make news, but what they really provide the nation is an ability to project power and control the sea as part of an integrated system of systems. The capacity and capability they deliver are in balance with the other weapons systems of a fleet designed to support our national security objectives in every domain.

Though I consider the aircraft carrier central to our fleet, I am also duty bound to continually examine and critique our fleet design. I have been watching, listening, and at times directly participating in the on-going dialog about the value and viability of the carrier in today's current and tomorrow's projected threat environment. I applaud and actively encourage this debate. But such debates, regardless of view, lose value if not well-founded. We can no longer sit back and let the high demand for these versatile forces serve as proof of their worth as they deploy forward, executing every task the National Command Authority requests. We must likewise not allow their value to be diminished by poorly reasoned arguments. It is imperative to ensure truthful and accurate information about their value drives the debate. I write not to support one side or another. Rather, my intent is to hone the debate.

Naval Aviation's value is firmly rooted in history. In a 1914 *Proceedings* magazine article on "Naval Aviation: Its Value and Needs," LTJG R. C. Saufley observed:

"Aviation, though still fraught with dangers, is no longer the occult science that for years baffled Langley, Dumont, and Wright, nor is it merely an aerial acrobatics feat performed for exploitation... Aviation has taken a definite status as an element of maritime warfare."

Saufley's article proved prophetic as the decades unfolded. As Naval Aviation matured – from fleet reconnaissance and coastal patrol to land and surface strike, to sub-hunting and command and control – the last century has seen technological advances enable greater capabilities demanded by a chang-

ing world. In the Pacific theater, Naval Aviation and the aircraft carrier have proven their value in controlling the sea, and American Naval Aviators have proven their mettle in projecting their power. Since the end of WWII the carrier strike group has served as the "go-to" capability for a Navy increasingly called upon to support our national objectives. This capability was further enabled as sea control was progressively assured and all but guaranteed in the wake of the Cold War. In today's maritime environment, where real threats lurk beneath, on, and above the seas, however, U.S. dominance of the maritime environment can no longer be taken for granted.

Looking ahead, it is fitting and proper to reexamine our future Navy's design. The future of Naval Aviation and the aircraft carrier is inevitably central to that discussion. As the world changes and technology advances, policy makers, planners, and pundits are right to scrutinize the relevance of aircraft carriers and the design of our fleet. They are also well-served by asking fundamental questions such as, "Why do we as a country need a Navy?" and "What do we need our Navy to do?" followed by "What capabilities are needed to do it?"

In considering different views, managing risk, and assessing our forces' performance, it is useful to contemplate the larger national security strategy and the effects, capabilities, and functions needed to fulfill its goals. The U.S. National Security Strategy and our enduring national interests serve as imperatives for naval power. The strategy acknowledges that in maintaining the

security of the U.S., protecting its citizens, assuring allies and partners, providing air and maritime security, and preserving the international order, our obligations extend well beyond our borders and shores. It further declares that as a nation we must maintain the capability to ensure the free flow of commerce, to respond quickly to those in need, and to deter aggression. Clearly, our national interest – as well as our Constitution – calls for a capable maritime force to deliver military power, at sea, under the sea, and in the air, wherever and whenever needed - in short, a global Navy, which has and still today centers on Naval Aviation and the carrier strike group.

Analyzing the validity of the various capabilities is certainly within the scope of my role as Fleet Commander. That said, my natural inclination is to manage risk thoughtfully and assess the performance and validity of our means to fight and to win our nation's wars. I often hear that the value of carrier strike groups has come and gone. I would say that is not the case in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region, and, based on the demand for more of them, neither is it the case for the rest of the Geographic Combatant Commanders.



**In January 2012, USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN 72) and USS John C. Stennis (CVN 74) join for a turnover of responsibility in the Arabian Sea. (MC2 Colby Neal.**

I assess our fleet design, to include the centrality of the aircraft carrier, as valid and relevant. But do not mistake me for a Fleet Commander so committed to a singular path that I am unable or unwilling to consider other options. Though I believe in – and depend on – CVNs, I invite well-conceived countering views and remain open-minded to thoughtful and well-argued alternatives based on serious analysis anchored on relevant and purpose-driven metrics that go beyond their costs. What's a better alternative to maneuvering 4.5 acres of American sovereignty and firepower anywhere and everywhere international law and conditions permit? What is the better choice? Why is it a better choice?

I don't write simply to defend the continued validity of carriers. Given the massive investment required to build and sustain them, their validity must stand on its own merits. That said, it seems a fool's errand to discard their utility without ensuring we get something better, and with at least as much bang for the buck. I am skeptical of those who say we should steer away from our carrier strike groups as a key element of

our naval power. Current arguments against aircraft carriers tend to rest on one of two theses: First, there are those who argue that carriers should be replaced by smaller carriers, presumably to reduce costs, so the U.S. can field more of them. Second, there are those who suggest that with the advent of Anti-Access/ Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities, a carrier strike group is vulnerable and thus no longer viable. I have not heard a compelling argument for an alternative yet.

As a commander facing one of the most robust A2/AD capabilities in the world, I disagree with those suggesting the advent of A2/AD capabilities have made the carrier strike group obsolete. First, "advent" is synonymous with "arrival" or "dawning." A2 / AD is not some new concept that just "arrived" or "dawned." This doctrinal concept has been part of warfare since the first stone was thrown. It has been manifest in helmets, slingshots, castles, rifled barrels, and in the transition from sail to steam. When nuclear weapons were developed many said we would never know conventional war again. How many conventional wars have we suffered since? How many nuclear wars? The point here is that history is full of examples to examine how we might get after this new/old challenge we face today of managing cost and defensive counters to offensive capability.

A2/AD is a cost-imposing strategy that is defensive to its core, designed to counter key elements of an offensive strategy.

The last thing we should do is "buy into" such a strategy by investing in all-new concepts and trying to spend our way out of the dilemmas these strategies are designed to create. So, what to do? Hint, though phenomenal new capabilities are being developed today, getting rid of carriers might be a bit premature. Some have rightfully described A2/AD as a game-changer. I think they have it exactly right. Step one, decide to change the game. The first step in that process is to thoughtfully consider what must be accomplished and how best to go about it, and think differently about how to negate an adversary's defensive counters to what should be recognized and branded as "the old plan." This is hard. My experience is as humans, we don't "do change" well. Part of step one is to think differently. Embrace change, but do so thoughtfully and not just for its own sake.

As alluded to earlier, some have argued that change should come in the form of smaller, and my experience leads me to believe what would be, less capable carriers. Frankly, though open to it, I don't understand the "smaller is better" argument as it pertains to aircraft carriers. If the thought is that "smaller

is cheaper, therefore we can procure more," well, that proposition is arguable as it stands, but only if made in context of a pervasive prevalence of "Phase 0" (peacetime engagement ops) based thinking. The requirements for our fighting forces must be grounded in the ability to persevere in "Phase II/ III," or war-fighting operations. I'll grant that the "less is more" argument has validity, but think of it in context of firefighters and smoke detectors. You can supplement firefighters by installing more smoke detectors and be safer, but you cannot replace firefighters with smoke detectors and achieve the same effect. Mass (capability and capacity) matters both in projecting and absorbing kinetic effects. Our ability

to mass power when and where needed, at a speed that outpaces our adversary's is an enduring requirement as true for today's maritime leaders as it was for Admiral Nelson at Trafalgar or Admirals Fletcher and Spruance at Midway. That capability, however, comes at a cost. A basic rule I have taken from my experience in the Navy is that less is less. I am not sure less is what I am looking for since my demand signal for operational effects continues to grow.

But to shape the conversation based solely on cost would be unwise; risk must also be taken into account. Rising costs can certainly price any weapons system out of consideration, but driving costs out of weapons systems, when not carefully managed, can increase risk and result in driving war-fighting



Naval vessels from five nations sail in parade formation for a rare photographic opportunity at sea. From top row, left to right: the Italian Navy (Marina Militare) ship *Maestrale* Class Frigate MM *Maestrale* (F 570), French Navy *Tourville* Class Destroyer De Grasse (D 612), Nimitz Class Aircraft Carrier USS *JOHN C. STENNIS* (CVN 74), US Navy *Ticonderoga* Class Cruisers USS *Port Royal* (CG 73), French Navy *Charles de Gaulle* Class Aircraft Carrier *Charles De Gaulle* (R 91), Royal Navy *Helicopter Carrier*, Her Majesty's Ship, HMS *Ocean* (L 12), French *La Fayette* Class Frigate *Surcouf* (F 711), USS *John F. Kennedy* (CV 67), Netherlands Navy *Karel Doorman* Class Frigate, Her Majesty's Netherlands Ship, *Harer Majesteits*, (HNLMS) *Van Amstel* (F 831), Italian Navy *De La Penne* (ex-*Animoso*) Class Destroyer, MM *Luigi Durand De La Penne* (ex *Animoso*) (D 560). The coalition forces are deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.



value out along with costs. My point isn't that affordability isn't a critical factor; it is. My point is that, as is the case with all weapon system design considerations, cost needs to balance carefully against desired capabilities driven by our strategic imperatives and our tolerance for risk.

The Naval Aviation community is well known for organizing chaos and taking measured risk. We launch and recover planes and helicopters from pitching decks in any weather, day or night – crazy as that might sound – and go in harm's way as a matter of routine. It is that boldness and ingenuity – paired with incredibly capable platforms operated at the edge of their envelope – that will deliver our nation's desired effects well into the future. In my view, despite arguments to the contrary, Naval Aviation – to include the CVN and its firepower, capacity, endurance and flexibility – is a capability whose heyday truly is yet to come. In the meantime, I remain vigilant for our game changing technology that will make nuclear aircraft carriers obsolete.

So far I have discussed some of what I view to be poor arguments aimed at making the case that the U.S. should divest itself of carriers. What's the alternative? Terrific advancements have already been made in Naval Aviation. Unmanned aerial vehicles such as Fire Scout, UCLASS, and Triton represent some of these new capabilities and the blending of functions (surveillance, targeting, and communications), systems (manned and unmanned) and domains (air, sea, and cyber) that our current and future operating environments demand. These systems, with their potential to fulfill a variety of missions – ranging from Strike, to Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance, to Suppression of Enemy Air Defense, to Close Air Support – can fill the gaps when the sea base is maneuvering and provide persistent presence in complement to manned systems today. In the Pacific expanse, if you're not mobile, you're not relevant – and these systems hold great promise for enabling our new operating concepts vital to sustaining and even broadening our advantage, but today, they are best suited to supplement and enhance, though not replace our carrier strike groups.

When it comes to combining existing and nascent capabilities, history has some lessons for us. It wasn't until WWII that carriers and their air wings took center stage. Until then, surface ships – specifically the iconic battleship – were the centerpiece of the U.S. Navy. Battleships remained the Navy's backbone long after the aircraft carrier proved a potent and relevant capability, especially in the Pacific Theater. The debate over the role and relative importance of naval aviation raged.

As so often happens, disparate events conspired to introduce empirical data into the battle of ideas. First, after the battleship's heyday in the early 20th Century, post-WWI naval treaties sought to prevent an expensive arms race by limiting the number of battleships in each nation's navy. As result, the U.S. Navy further emphasized development of aircraft carriers, whose numbers were not subject to those limitations. Second, demonstrations of airpower against battleships proved their vulnerability to foes lurking beyond the horizon, maneuvering from the air. The critical element of protecting battleships from aircraft was to provide a defensive force of aircraft to defend the battleship, ironically, to enable them to go about



**In June 2016, in the Philippine Sea, a combined formation of aircraft from CVW-5 and CVW-9 pass USS Ronald Reagan (CVN 76). Reagan was conducting operations with USS John C. Stennis (CVN 74). (LCDR Vidal Dejesus)**

their business of engaging other battleships. Why not just use carrier based aircraft to attack battleships? That debate ended when the attack on Pearl Harbor damaged or destroyed eight battleships – by the adversary's carrier-based aircraft. Lesson delivered, lesson learned. We learned a hard lesson about refusing to change the game in the face of game-changing technological advancements. The Battle of Coral Sea which took place beyond the visual range of belligerent forces validated the lesson.

Looking to the more recent past, we need to be careful. One lesson was certainly taught to us by the Japanese Imperial Navy at Pearl Harbor and validated through the war in the Pacific and since. The other, is another lesson more relevant to the issues addressed by this article: lessons we teach ourselves are much less painful than those forced upon us by others. This current discussion on the value of carrier strike groups to the nation is critically important for the simple truth that it is much better to have this discussion with ourselves rather than to have it taught to us as painfully as was done during our Pearl Harbor experience.

So, let the debate rage on. But it should rage through passionate, reasoned arguments founded in fact, research, and study; not based on emotional, anecdotal, cultural, community-centric arguments. Using the former, we will continue to be masters of the present and future of the maritime domain. Using the latter, I have no confidence we will transition to the next best thing in maritime warfare in a thoughtful and informed way, but rather be compelled to lurch from one pundit's perspective to the next, until a worthy adversary eliminates what is weak, leaving only what is strong. I'd certainly prefer not to learn the hard way, so I'm excited to be part of a thoughtful discussion that promises to fundamentally re-shape our Navy where necessary to meet the challenges of tomorrow; a discussion about aircraft carriers that asks: what are we trying to fix? And, how does getting rid of our carriers fix it?