

Why the U.S. Needs Aircraft Carriers

By ADM Mark Fitzgerald, USN (Ret.)

Several articles have appeared in the press lately asking if the nation needs aircraft carriers, are they too vulnerable, and implying that we cannot afford to lose one in battle. These short sighted articles think that we cannot defend a Carrier Strike Group and there are other ways to assert and protect our national sovereignty on the high seas. They also seem to think that fixed land bases won't be vulnerable to attack but a moving Battle Group on the high seas will be an easy target. Having spent many years trying to solve this moving target problem at sea and the Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance necessary just to fix an approximate position of what may be the target, I believe that the Carrier and its escort present a potential adversary a very difficult problem. And once the position is known, delivering a weapon on a moving defended target becomes an even more difficult problem.

There is also one truism to the production of a new weapons system -- there is always a new counter weapon to defend against it. With the advent of the FORD class aircraft carrier and its huge power generation capacity, the possibilities of directed energy and an energy 'shield' around the ship move closer to reality, as do the deception and kinetic defenses that continue to evolve.

So why do we need aircraft carriers?

For over two hundred years the US has relied on access to global commerce, and freedom of the air, sea, space and now cyber commons to support and grow our economy and promote our national interests. The Navy has been charged with protecting U.S. interests from threats on the high seas and abroad.

Modern trading states depend upon international commerce to generate sales from exports. They rely on freedom of access to the commons of air, sea, space, and cyberspace to allow the import of raw materials and goods. Increasingly, just-in-time logistics support to every industry has become the standard. Small interruptions to global supply trade can result in major disruptions to industrial production and jobs at home. To preserve this system, challenges to crucial global choke points must be minimized and access to trading countries around the globe assured.

As lethal modern weapons systems have proliferated throughout the world, many smaller states now have the capability to disrupt global trade, while larger, totalitarian states have created the capability to prevent access to the global commons. We hear the term Anti Access / Area Denial (A2AD) to describe this capability of regional powers to disrupt global trade. The Navy and Air Force have joined together to develop an operational capability to overcome A2AD called Air Sea Battle (ASB). Leveraging the capabilities of a Carrier Battle Group and Air Force Expeditionary Wing, ASB is developing the tactics and procedures necessary to overcome and A2AD threat.

Today, our ability to deter and dissuade challenges to free trade has maintained a mostly stable world order. Yet the combination of proliferation and instability create tremendous uncertainty. The uncertainty about the intentions and capabilities of numerous state and non-state actors will continue into the future, making our ability to rapidly project credible military power anywhere in the world vital to our economic well-being.

As we have seen so many times in the past and will continue to see in the future, the first military response to any potential conflict is to sail a Carrier Strike Group to the area. In many cases, that is enough to defuse the situation. But we have also seen the critical striking capability, the ability to maintain presence while projecting power, and the long endurance on station of an aircraft carrier as critical to the outcome of these conflicts.

A few cases in point.

1) The current air war against ISIS began with the USS GHW BUSH flying armed sorties for 55 days while diplomats struggled to get clearance from host countries for others to join the fight.

2) In Iraq, Operation Iraqi Freedom was supported in the north by carriers operating in the Mediterranean when Turkey did not allow land based tactical sorties from their soil.

3) In Afghanistan, Operation Enduring Freedom was initially fought by three carrier battle groups operating from the Indian Ocean while diplomats attempted to get clearance for tactical sorties from land bases.

4) And just recently, a Carrier Battle Group steamed off Yemen to dissuade Iran from delivering several shiploads of weapons to the rebels in that country.

And I know there are many more examples. The point is that the Carrier Strike Group is a critical and necessary tool for our National Leaders, and is sometimes the only tool that can send the right signal to a belligerent country. If we want to maintain our leadership position on the world stage and we want to maintain the capability to use the global commons, the aircraft carrier will be a prime instrument in our national arsenal to maintain United States access to global markets and a strong economy.

So back to the question -- why do we need aircraft carriers?

- Maximize Presidential options -- the most visible, flexible, responsive and adaptable system for deterrence and de-escalation.
- Respond with effective operations from the sea to overcome A2AD threats
- Operate without caveat from a sea base that requires no national sovereignty discussions. Four and a half acres of national sovereignty to be precise!!
- Provide a persistent presence capable of delivering large quantities of precision weapons for the Joint Force

The Congress and the American people continue to support the Navy and our Carrier fleet. Other nations continue to strive to build and operate aircraft carriers but all have a long road to travel before they can deliver the huge capabilities we as a nation enjoy from the aircraft carrier. I am confident that the longevity of the aircraft carrier will continue as we evolve the technologies to insert into the gray carrier hulls. Aircraft carriers are evolutionary starting from the day the keel is laid--the Air Wing and the Weapons Systems continually evolve. We need to make sure this story continues to be told to the American public and is supported by our leaders in Congress and in the Administration. Our nation deserves no less.

See RADM Jerry "Bear" Taylor's carrier article beginning on page 46.

