

## Ajai Shukla urges that



# The Navy (Should) Get the Gravy

*INS Vikramaditya and INS Viraat (in the background) at the International Fleet Review off Visakhapatnam in February 2016*

The Indian Navy, the smallest but most strategic of the three services, is suffering from chronic malnutrition with its share of defence allocations cut from 18 per cent four years ago to just 14.5 per cent today. In dealing with any Chinese military offensive, the Army and Air Force will be on the defensive. The Navy alone can take the offensive, with its control over the Indian Ocean trade routes providing an instrument to throttle China's economy. Yet, short-term preoccupations grab the country's resources. When a high-power, empowered committee visited Russia in October 2016 after the Uri attack, the focus was entirely on making up the Army's shortfalls. Similar committees went to Israel. Meanwhile, many warship and naval acquisitions remain starved of funding while indigenous projects, like the building of a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, have languished for years awaiting clearance.

It should not take an operational emergency to remind planners that the Navy needs urgent attention. Given the years it

takes to build warships or to integrate naval systems into the existing fleet, one cannot rely on makeshift solutions at times of crisis. So here are five vital naval concerns that are seriously worrying the admirals.

First, the Navy needs more warships to discharge the multiple responsibilities of a regional security provider—dominating two seas and an ocean, counter piracy duties, humanitarian aid and disaster relief (HADR) missions, showing the flag in port visits across the world and growing bilateral and multilateral exercises like Malabar. Planning documents - including the Navy's 'Maritime Capability Perspective Plan' and the tri-service 'Long Term Integrated Perspective Plan' - recognise the need for a 198-warship fleet by 2027. The Navy would like 60 per cent of these (some 120 vessels) to be capital warships, a category that includes large, offensive combat platforms like aircraft carriers, destroyers, frigates, corvettes and submarines. The other 40 per cent can be smaller vessels like missile boats, fast attack craft, patrol boats, amphibious landing ships and logistic support vessels.

Against this requirement, the Navy has just 140 vessels today, of which barely half are capital warships. The admirals say they need 24 frigates, the workhorses of any navy, but are ten short of that requirement. Worse, they see no way of making up the deficiencies by 2027.

India's only two yards that build capital warships - Mazagon Dock Ltd, Mumbai (MDL) and Garden Reach Shipbuilders & Engineers, Kolkata (GRSE) - are stretched to capacity. MDL is building four destroyers and four frigates, while the smaller GRSE constructs three frigates and two corvettes. Meanwhile, the largest defence shipyard, Hindustan Shipyard Ltd (HSL), and the smallest one, Goa Shipyard Ltd, have never built capital warships - a lacuna the Defence Ministry should purposefully address, but does not. The same is true of two private shipyards, Larsen & Toubro's Kathupalli Shipyard, and Reliance Defence and Engineering's Pipavav Shipyard, which both have world-class facilities but are still to demonstrate that they can build high-tech warships.