إسراء سيد | نشر في 8 April ,2026

American Aircraft Carriers: Has the Era of “100,000 Tons of Diplomacy” Ended?

“American steel and American hands have sent a 100,000-ton message to the world: America’s strength is unparalleled. Wherever this ship sails over the horizon, our allies will feel reassured, and our enemies will tremble with fear, knowing that America is coming with force.”

With these words, President Donald Trump, during his first term in July 2017, announced the addition of one of the most advanced aircraft carriers to the United States Navy: the USS Gerald R. Ford, named after the 38th President of the United States. Gerald Ford, who passed away in 2006, served as a lieutenant commander in the U.S. Navy during World War II.

Trump’s words reflected his immense pride in this carrier as a symbol of American naval and military power. They also echoed the description of American aircraft carriers as “100,000 tons of diplomacy,” a phrase coined by Henry Kissinger nearly half a century ago during his tenure as U.S. Secretary of State, highlighting the role these naval vessels play in supporting diplomacy. But what is the significance of the navy in the U.S. military? And why do Americans insist on maintaining the strongest navy in the world?

“100,000 Tons of Diplomacy”

This famous phrase, associated with the covert role of American aircraft carriers worldwide as powerful tools for enhancing diplomacy, exerting pressure, and bolstering deterrence, has its roots in the 19th century when Western colonial powers employed a specific method to secure their colonial interests.

Political and commercial representatives of these powerful nations would visit other countries and negotiate with their leaders, often dictating terms supported by their navies without the need for operational use of the ships. Simultaneously, warships would station near the targeted nation’s coasts, making their presence known to the host country.

This threatening and common method later became known as “gunboat diplomacy,” involving the use of force, and entered the lexicon of international relations. Despite nearly two centuries passing since those days, this form of diplomacy remains in use.

British naval officer and diplomat James Cable spent over two decades documenting the limited use of naval power for political purposes, categorizing its uses into four types: decisive force to impose or remove a fait accompli, targeted force to change a specific policy, person, or group, incentivizing force designed to offer a range of options to decision-makers, and expressive force to send a political message.

American Naval Supremacy

The United States sits atop the hierarchy of aircraft carrier ownership, possessing more active carriers today than all other nations combined. These carriers are the most powerful warships in naval fleets, essentially serving as mobile airbases capable of launching and recovering aircraft, allowing naval forces to project air power over long distances.

The U.S. Navy currently operates ten Nimitz-class aircraft carriers, capable of carrying a mix of Super Hornet fighters, surveillance aircraft, and various support planes and helicopters. Additionally, it has one Ford-class carrier and nine smaller amphibious assault ships.

To understand the immense American expenditure on the navy, let’s examine the specifications of the latest and largest aircraft carrier developed by the U.S., the USS Gerald R. Ford. Its most recent deployment was after the October 7, 2023, attack, when President Joe Biden ordered its movement to support the U.S. naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, specifically to “support and protect Israel and deter Iran and its allies.”

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Washington deployed the world’s largest aircraft carrier to the Eastern Mediterranean to signal the U.S. government’s support for Israel.

Washington extended the deployment of this carrier three times to maintain deterrence and prevent the war from escalating into a regional conflict before the Pentagon suddenly ordered its departure from the Middle East in early 2024, leaving the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower alone in the Eastern Mediterranean to serve as a deterrent to other actors that might become involved in the war. This move angered the Israeli government, which at the time sought urgent clarifications from Washington, especially amid escalating tensions with Lebanon.

This warship is the most modern and advanced American aircraft carrier in 40 years, currently the largest in the world and the first of its kind in a new generation of carriers. It carries over 4,500 personnel and 90 fighter jets, measuring 335 meters in length and 76 meters in height, with a weight of 100,000 tons and capable of displacing another 100,000 tons of water, making it a true “floating city” rather than just a large ship, dwarfing other carriers by comparison.

Construction of the carrier took 12 years of planning and building, costing approximately $13 billion—more than the budgets of countries like Lebanon, Georgia, or Armenia—excluding the costs of repairing new technologies, the

aircraft operating from its deck, and the expenses of deploying the carrier on the high seas for several months at a time.

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The USS Gerald R. Ford features a nuclear power plant designed to allow cruising speeds exceeding 30 knots (55 kilometers per hour), powered by two new nuclear reactors providing three times the electrical energy of previous carriers, enabling it to sail across the ocean for 20 years without needing to refuel. It also has a smaller island located at the rear of the ship to facilitate and expedite refueling, rearming, and launching aircraft.

The Gerald R. Ford possesses stealth features to evade radar detection and is one of 11 carriers—more than the total number operated by the rest of the world—managed by the U.S. Navy, asserting its dominance over the world’s seas.

These carriers are distributed across several fleets, concentrated in three main operational areas: the Pacific Ocean, where carriers operate within the Seventh Fleet focusing on the Western Pacific and East Asia; the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, where carriers serve in the Sixth Fleet covering Europe, Africa, and the Mediterranean; and the Middle East and the Arabian Gulf, where carriers function within the Fifth Fleet focusing on the Middle East and the Arabian Gulf.

While the United States enjoys overwhelming military superiority in all domains, it leads significantly in naval power over its competitors. The U.S. Navy maintains

its own dedicated forces, including an air fleet, infantry, special operations units, and an intelligence agency, with a budget exceeding the entire military expenditure of China.

The naval air power of the U.S. Navy is considered the second-largest air force in the world

The Secret Lies in Geography

In a world where two-thirds of the surface is covered by water, the United States finds itself compelled to be, above all, a maritime power. To maintain its global influence, it must assert control over the high seas and dominate international waters across vast oceans.

The famed British historian Julian Corbett defined maritime dominance simply as the ability to control sea lines of communication—whether for military or commercial purposes. The true aim of naval warfare, he wrote, is to command these lines, including the vital supply routes for fleets, rather than to seize land as in traditional ground wars.

In his seminal work The Influence of Sea Power upon History, the legendary American naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan argued that decisive maritime strength drives enemy flags from the seas, except in retreat. Mahan believed the only way for the United States to preserve its global presence was to guarantee naval supremacy—a strategic principle that has guided US policy since the late 1940s.

A second pillar of this strategy is the protection of trade. Washington maintains control over the world’s busiest maritime trade routes, generating vast economic gains from sea lanes linking North America to East Asia and Western Europe. By safeguarding these commercial convoys, the US effectively encircles the Eurasian continent with naval power—protecting the post–World War II free trade order built by its allies.

Mahan placed special emphasis on America’s need to reach new markets abroad. Securing such access, he argued, required three essentials: a commercial fleet capable of transporting American goods across the “great highway” of the oceans; a war-ready navy to deter or defeat rival fleets; and a network of naval bases to refuel, resupply, and keep communication lines open between the US and its foreign markets.

How Effective Is This Strategy?

The historical importance of aircraft carriers in military conflicts cannot be overstated. A look back at World War II reveals how carriers were instrumental to American naval dominance, enabling the U.S. to win decisive battles,

especially across the Pacific theater.

In the decades following the war, aircraft carriers became the foundation of America’s ability to project power globally. These massive, costly, and lethal vessels have long served as the cornerstone of U.S. security strategy. But with rapid advances in missile design and naval warfare, their dominance is now being questioned. Can they still retain their strategic edge?

One of the strongest arguments against the continued reliance on giant aircraft carriers is the threat posed by modern long-range, precision-guided missiles that cost a fraction of what a carrier does but could easily sink one of these billion-dollar “floating airports.”

Eighty-five legal examinations launched by the Israeli army are currently under various stages of review [Reuters]

America’s main maritime rivals—China, Iran, and Russia—are among the world’s leading developers of anti-ship missile technology, and their arsenals are specifically designed to target and disable U.S. carriers. Chief among these threats is the fearsome Kalibr missile, capable of carrying a 500-kilogram warhead with a range of up to 4,500 kilometers in its most advanced iteration—making it a nightmare for any target on land or sea.

Defense experts increasingly view aircraft carriers as obsolete, questioning whether they still justify their astronomical price tags in an age of advanced missile warfare. The potential loss of even a single carrier to a cheaper, long-

range anti-ship missile would constitute a devastating blow.

Despite their overwhelming capabilities, American carriers have vulnerabilities. The U.S. Navy has a limited number of shipbuilding and maintenance yards, and constructing or servicing a carrier is an enormously expensive endeavor. Even the missiles used on board are prohibitively costly.

As journalist David Larter, a naval warfare correspondent at Defense News, put it: “If you want to operate an aircraft carrier, you also need highly sophisticated defensive systems to protect it.” He added that advances in land-based missile systems and cruise missiles launched from bombers now pose a significant threat to carriers.

A Bloomberg report underscored this danger, stating that the U.S. Navy’s newest and most expensive warships may not be able to withstand a coordinated missile attack. A Pentagon testing office concluded that the Ford-class carrier’s systems “have yet to demonstrate effective capability” to defend against anti-ship missiles and other advanced threats.

Even top Navy officials have acknowledged the challenges. In an op-ed for The Virginian-Pilot, Admirals John Meier and Craig Clapperton noted that it is not unusual for the lead ship of a new class, such as the Ford, to face unexpected technical hurdles and delays. Yet this vessel is meant to serve as the centerpiece of carrier strike group operations in the 21st century and support U.S. strategic goals.

In the context of Israel’s war on Gaza, American aircraft carriers and destroyers—worth billions—have come under persistent harassment from drones that cost the Houthis only a few hundred dollars to deploy. From the coast of Yemen, the Houthis have repeatedly launched unmanned submarines, suicide boats, and anti-ship missiles that cost only a fraction of the advanced interceptors used by U.S. forces to shoot them down.

These asymmetric attacks have raised serious doubts about the effectiveness of American deterrence. In fact, the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower was eventually forced to withdraw from the Red Sea to the Eastern Mediterranean.

This came after it had been deployed from mid-October 2023 through June 2024 as part of a U.S.-led operation to protect shipping routes and counter Houthi military capabilities—launched in response to Houthi attacks on vessels linked to or headed toward Israel, which began in November 2023.

Despite the military imbalance, the mere ability of such non-state actors to disrupt global maritime traffic reveals a troubling reality: the United States’ floating fortresses are no longer untouchable. And yet, nations around the world

are still racing to acquire aircraft carriers. Why?

The Utility—and Vanity—of Carriers

There are two main reasons behind the global push for carriers: utility and prestige.

From a practical standpoint, even with their high costs and visibility to radar, aircraft carriers remain more secure than land-based military installations. Their mobility makes them less vulnerable to missile strikes and allows them to support fifth-generation fighter jets like the F-35B—now used by air forces in the UK, Italy, Japan, Spain, Turkey, and Australia.

The second reason, as described by Business Insider, is symbolic. Flying a national flag from the deck of a massive carrier and sending it on port calls around the world is a statement of power and global reach. This naval pageantry is not lost on China’s People’s Liberation Army, which has increasingly showcased its maritime assets even without using them in conflict. Similarly, Russia once dispatched its lone carrier to the Syrian coast merely to show it could.

Rivalries in the Heart of the Ocean

Historically, countries like Britain, Russia, Japan, India, and France have made significant investments in aircraft carriers, a tradition dating back to the early 20th century. Despite their efforts, none of these powers has yet emerged as a serious rival to the United States, which still boasts a massive fleet—particularly its Nimitz- and Ford-class carriers.

But this dominance is increasingly being challenged. As the U.S. Navy continues to modernize, other countries are accelerating their own carrier programs in hopes of closing the gap and asserting influence over key maritime regions.

India, for example, is building its own indigenous aircraft carrier. The United Kingdom has two new carriers nearing full operational capacity. Spain, France, and Italy have either built or are in the process of designing, constructing, or deploying new carriers and amphibious assault ships—with an emphasis on airpower projection.

Japan, too, has joined the elite club. Tokyo has announced plans to convert its Izumo-class helicopter carrier to accommodate F-35 stealth fighters, while South Korea is working on a light aircraft carrier capable of deploying the same advanced jets acquired from the United States.

Topping the list of competitors is China, which now possesses the world’s second-largest navy by number of vessels. By 2035, it plans to operate six aircraft carriers and is investing heavily in modernizing its fleet, building both fleet

carriers and amphibious assault ships. Among its most notable platforms are the Shandong, the Fujian, and an expanding arsenal of nuclear-powered submarines—signaling the arrival of a credible challenger in this global arena.

To strengthen its naval industrial base, China merged its two largest shipbuilding conglomerates in November 2019 to form the world’s largest shipbuilding company, holding a 20% share of the global market and $110 billion in assets. This tight integration between state strategy and industrial capacity gives China a major advantage over shipbuilders in democracies.

China’s Type 003 carrier is already complete—though not yet considered a match for America’s supercarriers, it marks a critical milestone. Its successor, the nuclear-powered Type 004, is expected to rival or even surpass U.S. carriers in key capabilities, suggesting the long-term emergence of a serious peer competitor.

Strategically, China’s maritime ambitions are embedded in its “Maritime Silk Road” initiative, part of the Belt and Road framework. It has also begun establishing overseas military bases, such as in Djibouti. China’s growing presence in the South China Sea, where it deploys anti-ship missiles like the DF-21D, threatens U.S. naval assets—and this threat is magnified by its growing naval cooperation with Russia.

While China rises as America’s main maritime competitor, Russia maintains strong, though more regionally focused, naval capabilities. Its strength lies not in aircraft carriers or large warships—but in numbers of lethal small and medium vessels, particularly nuclear-powered submarines capable of strategic strikes. Russia focuses on regional control over the Black Sea, the Baltic, and, increasingly, the Arctic.

Moscow has also sought to disrupt Western influence by establishing a permanent naval foothold in Syria. Its Tartus base on the Mediterranean coast—home to part of the Black Sea Fleet—is Russia’s only warm-water naval repair and logistics hub. Because Russia lacks access to the world’s open oceans, its influence remains concentrated around a few marginal seas, despite being the world’s largest country by area.

This strategic limitation drove Russia to unveil a new naval doctrine in 2015 to replace its two-decade-old maritime policy. The new doctrine clearly identifies key regions of economic and military interest, calling for expanded naval operations and a greater shipbuilding effort to meet these goals.

One ambitious project is the “Shtorm” (Storm) carrier, announced in 2015. Designed to be the world’s largest aircraft carrier, it would measure 330 meters in length, displace 100,000 tons of water, and carry up to 5,000 personnel and

90 fully armed fighter jets—including the pride of Russian aviation, the fifth-generation Sukhoi Su-57. It would be outfitted with advanced electronic warfare systems, state-of-the-art radar, and four batteries of the S-500 missile defense system—capable of hitting satellites in orbit.

These specifications would place Shtorm on par with—or potentially ahead of—America’s latest supercarriers. There’s just one problem: it doesn’t exist. The project remains entirely on paper, and Russia has not laid a single keel. The primary obstacle is cost, with early estimates hovering around $9 billion—a figure likely to grow.

A second, more critical issue is Russia’s limited experience with carriers. Its only current carrier, the Admiral Kuznetsov, is a case study in underperformance. Over its lifetime, it has completed just six short deployments in the Mediterranean and Atlantic, totaling only 450 days at sea across 30 years. Its only combat mission—in Syria in 2016—ended in embarrassment, with two aircraft lost due to landing failures. Since then, the ship has been out of service for repairs.

Russia may lag behind in carrier operations, but it boasts an impressive fleet of small, potent vessels. Its navy operates more than 150 patrol boats and over 60 submarines, including 11 nuclear-powered ballistic missile subs. In contrast, the U.S. has more than 100 large surface ships, but fewer small craft.

Iran’s approach to naval power has shifted dramatically over the past 15 years. In October 2009, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei first described Iran as a “strategic naval power.” That rhetorical shift has since evolved into strategic action.

One example is Iran’s 86th Naval Flotilla, which shattered records for distance traveled by an Iranian naval group in international waters. According to Iranian military leaders, the mission was intended as a show of strength and capability.

In May 2023, that flotilla—comprising the domestically built destroyer Dena and the converted helicopter carrier Makran—completed an unprecedented eight-month voyage around the globe. For the first time, Iran traversed the vast Pacific Ocean, stopping at critical ports and regions along the way—all while under heavy international sanctions.

The growing presence of these rival navies isn’t just fueling U.S. military spending—it’s posing a genuine threat to American maritime supremacy, especially in far-flung waters.

Nowhere is this challenge more evident than off the coast of Yemen, where the Houthi movement—an unconventional actor with limited resources—has

disrupted Western naval movement and shipping. If such a force can pressure U.S. warships and threaten global commerce, the question must be asked: Will American naval dominance endure much longer—or is it already being eroded by rising competitors?