

Hauling Down and Hoisting of the Chief of the Naval Staff's Flag in *Indian Naval Ship (INS) India*

Commodore Mukund B Kunte, AVSM (Retd)

There is an odd significance to 31 October, the day Admiral Sureesh Mehta assumes office as the new Naval Chief. He, like Admiral Arun Prakash, is a naval aviator and there is a connect to that date because the mantle of Prime Minister fell on the shoulders of a distinguished flier, Rajiv Gandhi, following the brutal gunning down of Mrs Indira Gandhi. The then Naval Chief Admiral RH Tahiliani was also a naval aviator and a test pilot. Thus it came about that a green signal was given for the Navy's Sea Harriers to fly on 29 January 1985 in Delhi, in spite of some reservations of the Indian Air Force. The Air Force, who rightly consider airspace as their own exclusive turf, were not too pleased with the idea of naval fighter aircraft stealing the show. Their objection was that the Sea Harriers were single-engined and hence an endangered species, posing a risk to spectators. But, with two distinguished fliers in the cockpits of the Nation and the Navy, it was smooth sailing and thus history was created by then Commander Arun Prakash. He led a flight of the most modern, new technology, variable-geometry aircraft over Vijay Chowk. To the delight of crowds gathered for the Beating Retreat ceremony, a flight of four of these magnificent jump-jets arrived over Raisina Hill. And then, in the backdrop of the majestic domes of North and South Blocks, they executed 'a hover' at zero speed before flying off at super-sonic speed towards India Gate.

It is the first and only time it happened and demonstrated the capability of the silent service to reinforce its credentials as a blue-water navy. And incidentally, but for the visionary ideas of a young Prime Minister, the Navy wouldn't have so readily got the second aircraft carrier Indian Naval Ship (INS) *Viraat* nor the nuclear-powered submarine INS *Chakra*.

Our Prime Ministers have generally been sympathetic to the needs of the Navy. Nehru, a towering figure with a vision to take the Nation forward in the international arena, recognised the importance of maritime power. Panditji chose to sail to Indonesia

Commodore Mukund B Kunte is a former Head of the Military Wing and Additional Secretary in the Cabinet Secretariat.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXXXVI, No. 566, October-December 2006.

in the cruiser INS Delhi and wrote in the ship's visitors' book, "As I gazed at the receding coastline of India and thought back centuries ago to the times when India was invaded from the north but never enslaved and how when the Englishmen came from the sea they made us into a colony. How sea power was critical for our survival as a free nation."

Lal Bahadur Shastri, perhaps influenced by his Army Chief, may have kept the Navy out of action in the 1965 War but Indira Gandhi more than made up in 1971 allowing a stellar role for the Navy. When Admiral Nanda proposed a plan to attack Karachi with sea-launched missiles, she did not hesitate to give approval.

The Janata Party under Morarjee Desai and Charan Singh, the Janata Dal under VP Singh and Chandra Shekhar, and the United Front under Deve Gowda and Gujral had very brief encounters at governance and made little impact for the Navy. Mr Narasimha Rao had a full term but in his *Chanakyesque* style, also known for his cost-cutting ways, was sympathetic to no one. That included the Navy too, which came down quite a few notches having once climbed to global heights, according to a 1989 *TIME* cover story. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) under Vajpayee was navy friendly, in spite of the unceremonious sacking of the then Naval Chief because of a willful Admiral and an equally willful 'Bolshevik' *Raksha Mantri*. However, under their 'feel good' and 'India shining' phase, the Navy did not figure high on priorities. The United Progressive Alliance, under Dr Manmohan Singh, just halfway through their Parliamentary innings, is showing promising ideas having approved acquisition of a second aircraft carrier INS *Vikramaditya* and the indigenous third carrier being prepared for launching from the Cochin shipyard. As also, among other projects, building the 'Scorpene' class submarines.

The Navy under the helm of another aviator should be smug in spite of recent adverse publicity. That naval forces play a key role in a nation's foreign policy has been proved in the two Gulf wars. Efficacy of sea power was also abundantly established in the Falklands and Balkans. The latest example is the mission of evacuation by our ships in Lebanon.

An effective security system is best based on a coherent and well founded foreign policy encompassing a three dimensional navy. As Nehru said, "To be secure on land you have to be supreme at sea." Words that have been used by successive naval Chiefs to get favourable budgets for ship building and strengthening the Navy. Maritime power at and from the sea is an all time necessity. Admiral Gorshkov, heading the Soviet Navy for a quarter of a century, used to constantly remind his politburo that the Navy has its task cut out 'as an instrument of State policy'.