The Indian Navy's Maritime Outlook: The Path Walked since Independence

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Introduction

It is an obvious fact to any student of history that India's security lies on the Indian Ocean: that without a well-considered and effective naval policy, India's position in the world will be weak, dependent on others, and her freedom at the mercy of any country capable of controlling the Indian Ocean. India's future, therefore, is closely bound up with the strength she is able to develop gradually as a naval power".[1] These words of KM Panikkar's, written around the time of independence, preordained the maritime activities of nations in the Indian Ocean like the withdrawal of the British, the entry of the US and Soviets, the gradual rise of India as a maritime power, and the entry of China into the Indian Ocean. Over the years, India's relative position in terms of economy, military power, mode of governance, and good relations with most of its neighbours have aided India to be seen as a stable nation in what had once been termed as 'A Sea of Uncertainty'[2] or 'the stage for the new Great Game'.[3]

The Indian Navy (IN) has been central to the rise of India as a maritime power and is today the nation's principal maritime agency with a wide ambit that covers all the four roles of any modern navy. The IN has evolved from a coastal force to a modern navy which has earned, in the IOR, the tag of 'first responder in the maritime domain'. The path travelled has not been easy and the IN owes its growth to the maritime vision of strategic thinks, both in and out of uniform, who have contributed immensely to its development. This article attempts to trace the path traversed since 1947 and place in perspective many issues that merit attention.

Initial Perceptions and the First four Decades

According to Panikkar, post-World War II, "The new era ushered in by the defeat of the axis powers fundamentally altered the political structure of the areas bordering on the Indian Ocean".[4] In the late 1940s, the reduction in British influence was starting to be realised and at this juncture, the British took some steps that, in a way, lay the foundations of the path that India's maritime strategy followed post-independence, which has possibly influenced generations of maritime strategists. During the late 1940's a committee had been formed to look into the planning requirements of the Indian Armed Forces.[5] The committee based its reports on three assumptions:

- Japan would be defeated.
- USSR and USA would be the principal powers in the east.
- China and India would maintain sufficient forces to overcome a minor power, and would be able to hold out against a major power until Imperial Forces could arrive.

The committee, apparently, did not take into account an independent India and the ensuing partition of India and Pakistan, or perhaps chose to ignore the possibility of independence. These apprehensions contained in the volumes published in 1980 by the British Government covering top secret and secret correspondence just prior to 1947, reveal the basis for developments in the Indian Ocean and the Anglo-American mind-set during the second half of the 20th century. These issues paved the way for Anglo-American strategic anxiety and, perhaps, resulted in the west seeing India as a Soviet ally, which came with the attendant ramifications played out during the Cold War[6]:

- Threat of a Soviet invasion post departure of the British.
- Implications for Imperial Defence if India opted out of the Commonwealth and became susceptible to Russian influence.
- Feasibility of backing Pakistan against threats from India and Russia.

- Soviet domination of India would result in communications with Australia and New Zealand being cut off.

- Effect on the British Commonwealth Defence System should India cease to be a member.

It was evident that “the British wanted an Indian Navy which would assist in serving the wider Allied cause, not one for independent power projection”.[7] However, this aspect was stalled, post-independence, by the first two Commanders-in-Chief of the then Royal Indian Navy, Rear Admiral JTS Hall and Vice Admiral Edward Parry, who ironically were British. These Admirals had the allegiance of the British staff officers under them which made the job easier. The inclusion of Indian officers in the planning stages from the start ensured future consistency in the maritime outlook and enabled emergence of a nucleus of Indian naval planners.[8] It can be said that the base of an India-centric Maritime Strategic thought was established by these two Admirals in the form of an outline plan for the reorganisation and development of the Indian Navy that laid out four roles for the Navy[9]:

- To safeguard Indian shipping.

- To ensure that supplies could reach and leave by sea in all circumstances.

- To prevent an enemy landing on India’s shores.

- To support the army in sea borne operations.

These roles clearly laid the basis for India’s rise as a regional power with a framework laid down in the ten-year plan for expansion formulated in end 1947, which envisaged two fleets based around a light fleet carrier with an increase to four by 1968.[10] The first result was the plan papers of 1947-1948 prepared by a mix of British and Indian naval officers. However, there were some factors that stalled the modernisation plan[11]:

- Absence of government directives regarding defence policy.

- Funding.[12]

- Perceptions of military threat.
- Absence of naval threat.
- Acquisition difficulties from England due to resistance from the Admiralty.
- Absence of a defence industrial base.
- Inadequate training facilities.

Some of these factors are still prevalent, in original, such as funding and the absence of a strong defence industrial base, or with changed contours such as acquisitions and threats. As the years rolled by, the IN grew slowly with modernisation voids due to slow economic growth and recessions. The dominance of the land-based threats, after the 1962 and 1965 wars, slowed down the growth of the IN as a balanced force and restricted its capabilities till 1971. “Despite fiscal stringency—India has established the most powerful naval forces based in the region. After the war with Pakistan in 1971, India developed a very strong sense of naval mission, and it may not be too bold to suggest that she attempted, at least ideologically, to recapture the ocean that bears her name”.[13] The 1971 war saw the emergence of the IN as a potent maritime force.

To the best of this author’s knowledge, in the absence of any other literature in the open domain, the IN’s advocated maritime outlook can be traced to 1998 in the form of directives, doctrines, vision and maritime strategy documents.

1998 and Beyond

Since 1998, the IN has come out with a number of vision documents, and strategic guidance for transformation, which placed the IN’s maritime outlook in perspective with the changing maritime and security environments. This outlook, and accompanying maritime strategic thought and concepts, have been expressed in two unclassified strategy documents and three maritime doctrines.

In May 1998, the Indian Navy carried out a Strategic Defence Review (SDR) that indicated four major roles[14]:

- Sea Based Deterrence.

- Economic and energy security.
- Forward presence.
- Naval diplomacy.

These roles encompassed those initially conceived in 1949 and also catered for the change in threat perceptions, India's growth as a regional power and blue water capability. A fundamental issue that was apparent was that the IN was looking at being a capability-based navy rather than threat based one, seeking cooperation with the navies of like-minded maritime nations. This was evident from the SDR that looked at capabilities[15] of firstly, sufficient maritime power to defend and also further India's maritime interests, raise the threshold of intervention or coercion, and deter any military maritime challenge; secondly, surveillance over large areas; thirdly, assets and weapons to escort, support economic and energy carrying assets; fourthly, presence in areas of interest; fifthly, support national diplomatic initiatives in the region. The SDR also espoused, "..That navies enjoy complete international legality on the high seas can, therefore, operate well away beyond the territorial limits of a nation in different situations covering a variety of contingencies both during war and peace and that the Indian Navy should have the capability to be regarded as of consequence in the region".[16]

Although by this time the IN should have developed into a balanced force, the non-placement of orders for ships for the period 1986-1996,[17] the low budgetary allocations of the 1990s due to the financial crisis of 1991, and disintegration of USSR resulted in a reduction in force levels[18]. The number of ships commissioned in the 1990s (24 were commissioned) was less than the numbers decommissioned. This impacted the ability of the navy to fulfil the roles envisaged in the SDR. This was further accentuated by the holding of only one aircraft carrier since 1961 as against the initial two envisaged in 1947. This resulted in limitation on operations and blue water capability as the operational philosophy of the IN is aircraft carrier centric with operations based on Sea Control. The strength of carriers will, in the near future, increase to two with the Indigenous Aircraft

Carrier 1 (IAC-1), INS Vikrant, joining the INS Vikramaditya, and this would strengthen the IN's operational philosophy.

The first Indian Maritime Doctrine (IMD), published as an Indian Naval Book of Reference (INBR) in 2004, was replaced by the next edition in 2009. The 2009 edition has further been updated by the 2015 online edition, bearing the nomenclature Naval Strategic Publication 1.1.[19] This change in nomenclature from the earlier INBR is indicative of the IN's effort to streamline strategic publications. The first unclassified strategy document titled 'Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy' was published in 2007 (IMMS 2007). This was subsequently replaced in 2015 by 'Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy' (IMSS 2015) as Naval Strategic Publication 1.2.[20] To augment and streamline conceptual thought and strategic thinking, the IN established the Directorate of Strategy, Concepts and Transformation (DSCT) in 2005 and in 2006 the office of the Flag Officer Doctrines and Concepts (FODC) and the Maritime Doctrines and Concept Centre (MDCC).[21] To ensure collectiveness of thought, monitoring and mentoring at the higher levels of the IN, the Indian Naval Strategic and Operational Council (INSOC) was established as the governing body for the FODC. The Chairman of INSOC was the Chief of the Naval Staff and the then Principal Director of Strategy, Concepts and Transformation (PDSCT — now Commodore SCT) it's Member Secretary, and thus DSCT automatically became the INSOC secretariat.[22] There is also mention of a Maritime Military Strategy written in 1988, which was a classified document.[23]

While evaluating the IMMS 2007 and IMD, references have been made to India's Monroe Doctrine[24] and its mismatch between ambitions and capabilities[25]. Notwithstanding these perspectives, IMMS 2007 spoke of a primary national interest, which pointed to the road that the IN was intending to take, "Our primary national interest, therefore, is to ensure a secure and stable environment, which will enable continued economic development and social upliftment of our masses. This, in turn, will allow India to take its rightful place in the comity of nations and attain its manifest destiny".[26]

IMMS 2007, in addressing India's areas of maritime interest, amplified that "Keeping in mind our existing resources, the present strategy will only focus on areas of primary interest. Areas of secondary interest will come in where there is a direct connection with areas of primary interest, or where they impinge on the deployment of future maritime forces".[27] The document contained three constituent strategies for peace, conflict, and force buildup. While IMMS 2007 has been criticised for aspects like soft-pedaling its combat role, no mention of the IN's role in conflict with Pakistan, no mention of any interface with the Indian Army and Air Force, and containing multiple strains that run counter to each other, it has also been viewed as the first insight into how India and the IN would use maritime power to support its national interests.[28]

IMSS 2015 expanded the base of IMMS 2007 and incorporated changes brought about by the existent maritime security environment, rise in non-traditional threats, increasing interface with other navies, assistance to friendly nations, and the terrorist attack in Mumbai on 26 November 2008.[29] IMSS 2015 consists of five constituent strategies, namely, Deterrence, Conflict, Shaping a Favourable and Positive Maritime Environment, Coastal and Offshore Security, and Maritime Force and Capability Development. The strategy for 'Shaping a Favourable and Positive Maritime Environment' simply articulated the regional actions and interface the IN had been doing for some time. It also made clear the intent of 'Ensuring Secure Seas'.[30] The strategy for 'Coastal and Offshore Security' provided the insight, follow-on actions, and intentions after the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) placed the responsibility for overall maritime security, including coastal and offshore security on the IN.[31] The actions of the IN — like mission-based deployments in India's areas of maritime interest (both primary and secondary),[32] rendering assistance to nations under the ambit of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) and during the ongoing Covid pandemic, evacuation of civilians from areas of instability under the ambit of Non-combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO), and development of capacity and capabilities — clearly indicate that the tenets of IMSS 2015 are being followed.

Conclusion

"Very few nations in the world geographically dominate an ocean area as India dominates the Indian Ocean from strategic and locational considerations".[33] The islands in the east and west and the mid position of India, especially with respect to the straits and narrow waterways, accord access to the waters of the Indian Ocean and provide a distinct advantage that few nations have. The two strategy documents, IMMS 2007 and IMSS 2015, took cognisance of this factor as well as choke points and placed the IN's maritime outlook in the open domain. Both the documents provided insights into the rationale for strengthening India's maritime security in the coming years, and clarified a few misnomers about India's intents. Some analysts question the absence of threats faced from China and Pakistan, and actions to address these threats, in the documents. The IN is a capability-based force which would address all possible conceivable threats, and add on capabilities to address changes in the security environment including hostile. Navies, the world over, who face multiple challenges always have plans ready to address various situations, and the IN is one such navy.

Endnotes

[1] KM Panikkar, "India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History", George Allen and Unwin, 1945, p 92.

[2] "Indian Ocean – A Sea of Uncertainty", Future Directions Publication February 2012, Available at https://www.futuredirections.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/IndianOceanASeaofUncertainty-.pdf, accessed on August 30, 2020.

[3] Robert Kaplan, "Monsoon. The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power", Random House, 2010.

[4] Panikkar Note 1, p 82

[5] Satyindra Singh, "Under Two Ensigns: The Indian Navy 1945 – 1950", Oxford and IBH, NEW Delhi, 1986, chapter 2.

[6] GM Hiranandani, "Transition to Eminence: The Indian Navy 1976 – 1990, Integrated Headquarters of Ministry of Defence (Navy) 2005, p 6.

[7] James Goldrick, "No Easy Answers: The Development of the Navies of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka 1945 - 1996", Lancer Publishers, New Delhi, 1997, p 16

[8] Commander AK Chatterjee who was the first Director of Naval Plans and subsequently the fifth Indian Chief of Naval Staff and then Lieutenant Commander N Krishnan who was Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief Eastern Naval Command in the 1971 war were part of the initial nucleus.

[9] GM Hiranandani, "Transition to Triumph: The Indian Navy 1965 – 1975, Integrated Headquarters of Ministry of Defence (Navy) 2000, p5.

[10] Goldrick. op cit., p 19

[11] Rahul Roy Choudhary, "Sea Power and Indian Security", Brasseys, London. 1995, p 29

[12] Funding was affected mainly due to the focus on lesser military spending resulting from the non-aligned stance adopted by Jawaharlal Nehru. The plan for a 69 ship navy was cut down to 49 ships then to 47 ships due to budgetary constraints. Although the budget was boosted after the 1962 war with China, funding still remained a challenge. However, subsequent streamlining of planning towards acquisitions has aided 'value for money' and the build-up of a balanced force as exists today.

[13] Frank Broeze, "Indian Ocean Navy Ports and Geostrategy" Marine Policy, Vol. 21, No. 4, 1997, pp. 355,356.

[14] Rahul Roy Choudhary, , Knowledge World, New Delhi, 2000, p 125.

[15] Ibid

[16] Vijay Sakhuja, "Asian Maritime Power in the 21st Century: Strategic Transactions China, India and South East Asia", Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 2011, p 93.

[17] Indian Ministry of Defence, "Upgradation and Modernisation of Naval Fleet (1998-1999)", Third Report, Twelfth Lok Sabha, 21 December 1998, p 4

[18] Rahul Roy Choudhary, "India's Maritime Security", op.cit., p 128.

[19] Naval Strategic Publication 1.1, Indian Maritime Doctrine online version is available at https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian-Maritime-Doctrine-2009-Updated-12Feb16.pdf, accessed on August 30 2020.

[20] Naval Strategic Publication 1.2, "Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS 2015)" is available at https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_ 25Jan16.pdf, accessed on August 30, 2020.

[21] Vice Admiral Anup Singh, “Blue Waters Ahoy: The Indian Navy 2001 – 2010, Integrated Headquarters of Ministry of Defence (Navy) 2018, pp 312-317.

[22] Ibid, p 314.

[23] Ibid, p 312.

[24] Holmes, James R. and Yoshihara, Toshi “India's 'Monroe Doctrine' and Asia's Maritime Future”, Strategic Analysis, Vol. 32, No. 6, November 2008, pp 997 – 1011.

[25] Harsh Pant, “India in the Indian Ocean: Growing Mismatch Between Ambitions and Capabilities”, Pacific Affairs: Volume 82, No. 2 Summer 2009, pp 279 – 297.

[26] ‘Foreword’, in Freedom to Use the Seas: India’s Maritime Military Strategy, Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence (Navy), Government of India, New Delhi, May 28, 2007, p iii.

[27] Ibid, pp 59, 60.

[28] James Holmes Andrew Winner, Toshi Yoshihara, “Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-First Century”, Routledge, London, 2009.

[29] IMSS 2015, op. cit., p 2.

[30] IMSS 2015, op cit., pp 11, 78-103.

[31] IMSS 2015, op. cit., pp 3, 11, 104-125.

[32] IMSS 2015, op. cit., map 2.4, pp 34-35.

[33] RN Misra, “Indian Ocean and India’s Security”, Delhi: Mittal Publications 1986, p 19.

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