

The Indian Navy and PLA Navy in 1962

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Abstract

Though the Indian Navy was not directly involved in the conflict of 1962, it had by then slowly created a significant surface force and had one aircraft carrier but was yet to induct submarines. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), on the other hand, was primarily geared for coastal defence but had a growing fleet of submarines. The sole naval threat from the PLAN was the possibility of deployment of its submarines. Yet, on this anniversary of the 1962 war, it is clear that any future conflict with China will spread to the Indian Ocean through which the great trading power's Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) traverse. These SLOCs are the potential targets and obviously require guarding. The growing Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean attests to that. This article attempts to put forth the maritime picture in 1962 so as to induce thinking on the Chinese maritime threat in the future.

Introduction

The Indian Navy was not involved in the conflict of 1962. The

historical account of the Indian Navy for that period devotes only two pages to the Chinese threat. Memoirs of distinguished naval officers mention the conflict in passing only. In 1962, the PLAN was an inconsequential navy and posed no threat. The same is not the case in 2020 when the PLAN is the second largest Navy in the world and slated to become the largest by 2035.¹

The first naval operation undertaken after Independence, 'Exercise Peace', was the landing of Indian Army personnel and equipment to secure Junagadh. Landings were undertaken at

Porbandar on 05 October 1947, Jaffarabad on 17 October 1947 and Mangrol on 01 November 1947.² The Indian Navy saw action in 'Operation Vijay' for liberation of Goa, from 17 to 20 December 1961. INS Delhi operated off Diu in support of land operations. INS Betwa, Beas and Cauvery enforced a blockade off Goa and neutralised the Portuguese sloop Alfonso de Albuquerque in Marmagao harbour. INS Mysore and Trishul took over Anjadip Island.

Growth of the Indian Navy after Independence till 1962

After the partition of assets with Pakistan, the naval fleet of India in 1947 consisted merely of four sloops, two frigates, one corvette, twelve minesweepers, one survey ship and other auxiliary vessels.³ The first proposal for modernisation and expansion of the Indian Navy (Naval Plans Paper 1/47) was brought out as early as 25 August 1947.⁴ Laying out the force requirements for the next ten years, it envisaged two light fleet carriers, three cruisers, eight destroyers, four submarines and other smaller vessels.⁵ This ambitious expansion plan got modified and scaled down in subsequent plans over the next decade. Despite this the Indian Navy grew.

His Majesty's Indian Ship (HMIS), (later Indian Naval Ship (INS), Delhi was commissioned on 05 July 1948 as the first cruiser and reached India on 16 September 1948. His Majesty's Ship (HMS) Avenger, a Landing Ship Tank (LST), was acquired and commissioned as HMIS Magar on 11 April 1949. This was followed by the commissioning of three "R" Class – Rajput, Ranjit and Rana destroyers in 1949. In 1953, there was a further addition of three Hunt Class destroyers – Godavari, Ganga and Gomati. A Fleet Requirement Unit was approved in 1951 and a squadron of Sealand aircraft was procured in 1953. A fleet tanker was purchased from Italy and commissioned as INS Shakti on 20 January 1954. Two inshore minesweepers were commissioned in 1955 and four coastal minesweepers – Karwar, Kakinada, Cannanore and Cuddalore were commissioned in August 1956. On 29 August 1957, INS Mysore, the second cruiser, got commissioned.

Eight new frigates were procured from the United Kingdom during 1958-60. Unlike earlier procurements, they were newly constructed specifically for the Indian Navy. These were three Blackwood Class Type 14 anti-submarine frigates (Kuthar, Kirpan and Khukri), three Leopard Class Type 41 anti-aircraft frigates (Brahmaputra, Beas and Betwa) and two Whitby Class Type 12 surface escort frigates (Trishul and Talwar). The first aircraft carrier, INS Vikrant, was commissioned on 04 March 1961. Its integral flight consisted of ten Seahawk fighters, six Alize reconnaissance aircraft and two Alouette helicopters.

On the eve of the 1962 war, the Indian Navy was a fairly competent force. Budgetary allocations in the decade 1950 to 1960 remained 9% to 12% of the Defence budget. By 1960-61, it had dropped to 3% probably because it was felt major acquisitions had been done. Also, the British still maintained a sizable presence east of the Suez and while the Indian Navy envisioned a balanced force with integral air power and submarines, capable of operating in the Indian Ocean, the view from London was that it should primarily focus on coastal defence. This resulted in the United Kingdom being selective in transferring assets to the Indian Navy. The Royal Navy perceived the threat to its interests in the Indian Ocean from submarines of communist nations. Hence, it was agreeable to procurement of anti-submarine warfare (ASW) frigates by India while not allowing transfer of submarines.

Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in 1962

The British influence in the IOR, though ebbing, was still strong in 1962. In the east, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaya and Singapore were independent. It would take a few years more for the nations to settle to their present-day borders. In March 1962, the Burmese military took over the nation and steered it towards socialism. Sri Lanka was still the Dominion of Ceylon. The British controlled defence and external affairs of the Maldives. Mauritius and Seychelles were British colonies. The Chagos archipelago was a part of Mauritius. It would be carved out to become part of British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) in 1965. The British had military presence in South Arabia (Aden), Persian Gulf (Bahrain, Sharjah and Masirah), Mauritius, Maldives, Malaya, Borneo, Singapore and Hong Kong. In the Maldives, it was in Gan and Hitaddu Islands in

the southernmost Addu atoll. The Royal Navy Far East Fleet was based at Singapore. Singapore had six British military bases of the three Services.⁶

The spread of communism was seen as the greatest threat by the Anglo-American duo. Two alliances were formed to counter it. The Baghdad Pact was founded in 1955 by Turkey, Iraq, Great Britain, Pakistan and Iran. It was renamed the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) in 1959 after Iraq pulled out of the Pact. Similarly, in 1954, the United States, France, Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia, the Philippines, Thailand and Pakistan formed the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO). Pakistan was the 'link' between these two regional organisations and benefitted from it. Moreover, in 1954, USA signed a Mutual Defence Assistance Agreement with Pakistan. In 1956, USA committed to directly supply two destroyers and eight minesweepers, and pay Britain for refurbishing and supplying a cruiser and four destroyers.⁷ By 1959, Pakistan got one cruiser, five destroyers, eight coastal minesweepers and a squadron of Albatross aircraft for antisubmarine patrols.⁸ The flow of military equipment to Pakistan from USA and UK forced Indian naval planners to reassess the threat from Pakistan.

In addition to Pakistan, there was another naval power growing in the east. From 1956 onwards, Indonesia had started receiving massive military and economic aid from the Soviet Union in response to CENTO and SEATO. In 1960, Moscow provided \$ 450 million with low interest rate for procurement of one cruiser, six destroyers, 12 Whisky Class submarines, seven frigates, eight escort vessels and other smaller vessels.⁹ Between 1959 and 1964, the naval military equipment supplied by the Soviet Union included one cruiser, 18 destroyers and frigates, 12 submarines, 67 corvettes and motor torpedo boats, 12 missile boats, 21 minesweepers, 11 landing ships, six landing craft, four transport ships and four oilers.¹⁰ This, along with strained relations with India, emboldened Indonesia to directly support Pakistan in 1965 though the Indian Navy held its first ever joint naval exercise, outside the Commonwealth, with the Indonesian Navy in July 1960.¹¹ Besides, India was also providing training facilities for a large number of its sailors and officers.¹²

The PLAN and India

The PLAN was officially established in May 1950. The primary worry was an invasion of the mainland by Taiwan or the USA. The PLAN expanded with the support of the Soviet Union. Soviet naval officers were deputed as advisers. The PLAN imbibed the Soviet strategy of countering a larger naval force with smaller and, hence, more manoeuvrable vessels and stealthy submarines.¹³ General Xiao Jinguang, the first Commander of the PLAN, stipulated that the key mission was to accompany the ground forces in war and that the navy should be capable of inshore defence. The basic characteristic of the navy was to be 'light' so as to enable it to be deployed fast.¹⁴ Thus, this 'maritime guerrilla warfare' was sought to be fought with small vessels (fast patrol boats and torpedo boats), submarines and land-based naval aircraft. Doctrinally, the PLAN remained subsumed within the prevailing PLA doctrine of 'People's War'. Technology and weaponry was considered as insignificant compared to the revolutionary fervour of soldiers imbued with Mao's ideology.¹⁵

In April 1950, China captured Hainan from Taiwan. The Korean War brought the US naval fleet into the Taiwan Strait and halted plans of further attacks. The Naval Aviation Wing (PLAN Air force) was formally established in 1952. In 1954, the submarine arm was formed with the transfer of boats from the Soviet Union. Events in early 1960s constrained development of a seagoing navy. Naval modernisation was hampered by the devastating economic failure of the Great Leap Forward. The commencement of Sino-Soviet split resulted in the withdrawal of all Soviet naval advisers from China in 1960.

In 1962, the PLAN was considered as 'not an offensive force' and 'ineffective except for inshore defence'.¹⁶ The principal combatants and submarines of the PLAN in 1962 are tabulated in Table 1.¹⁷ Except for the four Kiangnan Class frigates, all the principal combatants were of World War II vintage. Among submarines, the Whisky Class were the only ones of contemporary construction and capable of operating in the IOR provided logistic support was available in the region. When the conflict broke out in 1962, the combined threat from China and Pakistan was assessed in India.¹⁸ As per Rear Admiral Satyindra Singh, the PLAN had one

cruiser, five destroyers, 16 frigates, 25 submarines, and 400 shore-based aircraft in addition to smaller vessels.¹⁹ He assesses, “Only the submarines could pose a threat to our shipping or ports, as 21 of the submarines could have operated in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. If adequate replenishment facilities were made available, seven or eight Chinese submarines could have operated at one time”.²⁰

Table 1 : Principal Combatants and Submarines of PLAN in 1962

Principal Combatants				
Quantity	Description	Class/Type	Standard Displacement (tons)	Vintage
01	Light Cruiser	Pei Ching	1020	1945. Damaged in 1949 and salvaged. Doubtful operational capability.
04	Destroyers	Ex-Soviet	1657	1936-41.
		Gordy Class		
04	Frigates	Kiangnan Class	1200	1956-57. Chinese construction.
01	Escort	Ex-Japan	940	1945. Repaired after
	Destroyer	Ukuru Class		damage in 1950. Rearmed in 1955.
01	Escort	Ex-Japan	870	1943. Rearmed in
	Destroyer	Etorofu Class		1955.
01	Sloop	Ex-Japan	950	1941. Rearmed in
	(Gunboat)			1955.
06	Corvette	Ex-Japan	745	1944-45. Rearmed in 1955.
01	Corvette	Ex-Canada	1100	1944.
02	Corvette	Ex-Britain	1020	1940-41. Converted from merchant vessels.
01	Gunboat	Ex-Britain	815	1941. Converted from mine sweeper/ merchant vessel.

Submarines

Quantity	Class/Type	Standard Displacement (in tons)	Vintage
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13-17	Soviet Whisky Class	1050	Assembled in Chinese yards between 1956 and 1964.
04	S (Srednaya) Class	780 Series	Series IX-bis (1941-43) and IX-bis 2 (1947-48). Transferred from Soviet Union in 1954-55.
04	Shchuka Class	577	Series V-bis 2 (1933-36). Transferred from Soviet Union in 1954-55.
04	M (Malyutka) Class	283	Series XV (1950-51). Transferred from Soviet Union in 1954-55. Only for coastal operations.
02	M (Malyutka) Class	160	Series VI (1933-34). Used only for training. Not operational.

A final assessment “ruled out the naval involvement of China in the conflict *though the presence of Chinese submarines had been confirmed, both in the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal*. The likelihood of Pakistan joining hands with China to pose a combined maritime threat was considered low” (as Pakistan was still in the Western camp).²¹ Consequently, the Indian Navy saw little use in the 1962 war.

Conclusion

After the 1962 war, naval Seahawk and Alize aircraft from the INS Vikrant were deployed to Gorakhpur till October 1963.²² The Indian Air Force had used an Alize to spot Chinese radar stations along the Line of Actual Control.²³ Post 1962, the acquisitions of the Indian Navy moved decisively away from the United Kingdom to the Soviet Union. The Soviet offer of providing submarines paved the way for subsequent Soviet acquisitions. The first submarine, INS Kalvari, was commissioned in 1967. The Western Naval Command, Eastern Naval Command and Western Fleet were formed on 01 March 1968. The Eastern Fleet was formed in 01 November 1971. The Indian Navy’s share in the defence budget also rose gradually to reach 8.2 per cent by 1970-71. India embarked on the path of indigenous ship construction with the Leander project that saw the commissioning of the first ship in 1972. In April 1967, Britain announced its intention to withdraw all British forces from ‘East of Suez’.

In the 1960s, the fear was that the British withdrawal from the ‘East of Suez’ would create a vacuum in the IOR. In India,

submarines from PLAN were assessed as one of the greater threats. There is an analogous situation now. The USA is looking to reduce its international commitments and the perceived threat from the PLAN is much more than just submarines.

Endnotes

¹ Rear Admiral Michael A. McDevitt, U.S. Navy (Retired) China's Navy Will Be the World's Largest in 2035. US Naval Institute, Proceedings, Feb 2020. Accessed Aug 30, 2020 from <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2020/february/chinas-navy-will-be-worlds-largest-2035>

² *Ibid.*, p. 99.

³ Rear Adm Satyindra Singh (Retd), *Under Two Ensigns: The Indian Navy (1945-1950)*, (Oxford & IBH Publishing Co., 1986), p. xii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁶ Hugh Hanning, *Britain East of Suez – Facts and figures*, International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-), Vol. 42, No.2, Britain East of Suez: Special Issue (Apr., 1966), pp. 253-260.

⁷ Vice Adm GM Hiranandini, *op. cit.*, p.7.

⁸ Vice Adm GM Hiranandini, *op cit.*, p.15.

⁹ Vice Adm. Mihir K. Roy, *War in the Indian Ocean*, (), p.75.

¹⁰ Vice Adm GM Hiranandini, *op. cit.*, p.15.

¹¹ GVC Naidu, *The Indian Navy and Southeast Asia*, (IDSA, 2000), p.151.

¹² Vice Adm. RD Katari, *A Sailor Remembers*, (Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd, 1982), p.105

¹³ MH Rajesh, *The Party's Maritime Power: Four Roles and Three-and-a-half Fleets*, China Report, 53: 1 (2017): 46–58.

¹⁴ You Ji & You Xu (1991), *In search of blue water power: The PLA navy's maritime strategy in the 1990s*, The Pacific Review, 4:2, 137-149.

¹⁵ Bernard D. Cole, *The history of the twenty first century Chinese Navy*, Naval War College Review: Vol. 67 : No. 3 , Article 5, p.19

¹⁶ (1962) China, *The Military Balance*, 62:1, 8-8, DOI: 10.1080/04597226208459687

¹⁷ Robert V. B. Blackman (Ed), *Jane's Fighting Ships (1953-54)*, (Sampson Low Martson & Co, London, 1954); Robert V. B. Blackman (Ed), *Jane's Fighting Ships (1968-69)*, (Sampson Low Martson & Co, London, 1968); (1961) China, *The Military Balance*, 61:1, 7-7; (1962) China, *The Military Balance*, 62:1, 8-8, (1960) *China's military strength*, Survival: Global Politics and Strategy, 2:4,141-141; Norman Polmar and Jurrien Noot, *Submarines of the Russian and Soviet Navies 1718-1990*, (Naval Institute Press, USA, 1991).

¹⁸ Rear Adm Satyindra Singh (Retd), *Blueprint to Bluewater: The Indian Navy (1951-65)*, Lancer International (1992), p. 57.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²² Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

²³ Sandeep Unnithan, *When the Indian Navy flew over the desert*, India Today, 22 May 2020.

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