

Indian Navy: A Force for Good and a Partner in Peace

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The Indian Navy (IN) dons many hats in the service of India's national interests. Over the decades since independence, the Navy's actions, both in times of peace and conflict, have firmly established its reputation as a self-assured and professional arm of the country's defence forces. Even though India has fought its wars primarily on land and in the air, it is the IN which has consistently garnered wider recognition for the extremely varied range of responsibilities it shoulders and the challenges it faces in securing India's future. As the 2018 Navy Day celebrates the 47th year of the IN's display of its combat potential and effectiveness in the western theater of the 1971 conflict, it is the shape and outlook of this service's future which should occupy our thoughts.

As India's dependence on the oceans have grown, so has its acknowledgment of the centrality of its relations with the states that form the littoral of the Indo-Pacific region. Pursuant of this goal, the IN has seamlessly transformed into a benign diplomatic asset for the country and a provider of global public goods in the region. Its sailors, ships, and aircraft are now in regular and deliberately reassuring presence in the ports and sea lanes of this oceanic space where they build and enhance the littorals' capabilities; voluntarily sail in for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) missions; and pitch in to share the burdens of willing international coalitions for tasks ranging from search and rescue (SAR) to anti-piracy. The salience of the scale of these efforts grows even further when viewed in proportion to the limited capacity available to the IN, which is also the smallest, in terms of manpower, in comparison to its sister branches, the Indian Army and the Indian Air Force.

This consciously cultivated self-image notwithstanding, the Navy is also perceived in many quarters both at home and abroad, as an armed force that will ultimately secure for India the elusive status of a feared great power. The internet, of all

platforms, remains awash with speculations of the 'versus' kind where the IN must either win or lose a match of battlefield potential against its likely adversaries. While these click baits last for less than a few minutes, today's keyboard warrior's obsession with a 'clash of civilizations' taking place at sea during his lifetime is chronic. It is not necessarily unrealistic. However, it is an incessant noise which drowns out some particularly germane conversations currently taking place in India, especially within the seafaring strategic fraternity that also comprises the Navy's present and future leadership.

These conversations bear out that the Navy has been painstakingly studying the rise of great powers throughout history and the historic hinge factors which have either led a state to global hegemony or down the road of violence and decline into oblivion. It has learnt humbling lessons that have been the staple of strategy for eons but that, ironically, have also been deemed least glorious and therefore least appealing to those at the helm of deciding a nation's strategy. It has learnt that India as a nation with a vast peninsular orientation, straddling millennia-old busy international shipping lanes, is at once both blessed and at permanent risk. It recognizes that India's northern geographic configuration and the historic arc of its relations with the northern neighbours combined with its sea-based economic lifelines make it an 'island' in classical geopolitical imagination. With India's maritime territorial and economic zones likely to span an area as large as the country's landmass itself, the Navy has the onerous task of ensuring that India's lifelines remain alive. India's power status in the world order is all but of secondary interest to this critical consideration.

It is from here on that the Navy's chosen bearings take it toward unconventional thinking whereby it views itself not as the sole master of India's maritime strategy, but as one of the custodians of a maritime nation's freedom to chart its own course, a symbol of its sovereign interests in the 'global commons', and an insurance against threats emanating from sea. To reiterate this identity, the point of maximum thrust for the Navy when it comes to national policy is to be employed first, and whenever preferable, as an instrument of diplomacy. The character of the world's oceans, the international legal regimes governing them, and the customs of the global seafaring community render the Navy capable of unambiguously symbolizing India and communicating India's posture to both friend or foe, grey-hulled or merchantman, a state or a whole region, in open seas or even in deeply contested maritime zones. A rational understanding of this privilege of sailing 'innocently', responding proactively,

and reacting flexibly is at the heart of the IN's Indian Maritime Doctrine 2009 (updated in 2015).

In the light of these observations, the complete picture of IN's role vis-a-vis the Chinese Navy in the Indo-Pacific region becomes more complex but also broader and open to greater possibilities. As far as the outstanding disputes between India and China are concerned, the IN's accretion of capacity may ostensibly appear to be a measure to *forearm* in anticipation of a fortuitous collapse of bilateral dialogue that could trigger a violent showdown. In fact, as explained above in depth, the IN's nature is anything but that of a hair-trigger military force. Its growth in size and stature mollifies the insecurities in national perception, tempers domestic popular pressures, and helps India negotiate with China from a position of confidence. If another 'Doklam' were indeed to happen, it is even more desirable for both states that many more options of communicating intent, between the two extremes of friendly overtures and a border skirmish, and managing a conflict in its early days become possible.

Further, there is a more fundamental aspect which warrants careful consideration when the IN and Chinese Navy are discussed in relation to each other. The Indian Ocean has historically been a space of unrestricted seafaring and has largely been free from hegemony of a single great power navy. With the decline of Great Britain, this geography has produced an environment where the ocean has accommodated both geopolitical rivalry between the superpowers as well as allowed for a growth in comity among the littoral states. India's outreach to these littoral states has also been to consciously preserve the relative absence of zero-sum competition in this ocean and to shape an ecosystem based on universally accepted values of dialogue, cooperation, and consensus-building. China has not enjoyed a similar favourable maritime geography and the mere mention of the 'island chains' would serve as a reminder of this reality. To make matters worse, China's rude awakening to the oceans was brought upon by some of the heaviest costs imposed by the last World War and the ensuing military preponderance of the United States in extremely proximate waters. The primary objective of Chinese maritime strategy has thus been to dispel the dominant naval power from its 'near seas' and expand its defensive perimeter far out by breaking through the natural barriers.

The two nations' naval forces were also born under different historical conditions and were subsequently shaped by dissimilar national and global outlooks. The IN finds

it origins in the British colonial past but with the country gaining independence, the force dedicated itself to national service and weathered the challenges of dissonance that might have arisen out of its changing identities. It may be singled out for trying to punch above its weight in the early decades but the national vision, of non-alignment among other key tenets, ensured that the IN's journey was apolitical and unmarred by global ideological schisms. In contrast, the Chinese Navy is foremost the Chinese Communist Party's sword arm and its origins lie in a violent national revolution, a civil war, and a grand political ideology which has been directed against the values that have come to be epitomized by the West.

Suffice it to conclude from these two broad considerations, that the core issue is not whether the IN or the Chinese Navy represents the more righteous and enlightened national interest. Instead, to paraphrase Stephen Kotkin's portrayal of US-Russia relations, there is an evident clash of values and interests between India and China. As flag follows trade, the Chinese Navy might well be within its logically justifiable rights to be present in the Indian Ocean. However, its founding strategic imperatives being based on the belief that China's recent history was a "hundred years of humiliation" promises a hardline nationalistic drive to right the wrongs of the past. It risks awakening the destructive forces which are the very antithesis of the constructive and integrative trends in regional cooperation. If the recruitment advertising of the People's Liberation Army is taken as an indication, then 'peace is behind and war is in front'. This mode of thought is an anachronism in the century of the Indo-Pacific and does not sit well with China's own vision of a 'harmonious world'.

A better understanding of China's values and interests allow for a window of opportunity where it can be persuaded to align its actions with its expressed intentions. The way forward is for both the IN and the Chinese Navy to recognize the dangers of a clash and its likely fallout for the Indo-Pacific, which is in its early days of gaining traction as a confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Both countries will need to employ their navies to jointly develop a mutual understanding of the desirable norms and common goods, towards keeping their competition free of hostility, and self-consciously prevent an exploitative impact on the littorals of Asia and Africa. The IN has demonstrated foresight in preparing itself to become capable of managing this relationship. In its benign role, the Navy's stature in the Indian Ocean makes it an incredibly valuable partner in forging peace and cooperation with whoever shows commonality of interest and transparency of intent.

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