

Holistic Maritime Security Challenges facing India: Mitigation Imperatives and options

Captain (IN) Kamlesh K Agnihotri (Retd.)

31 March 2022

ABSTRACT

India, by virtue of having a large coastal frontage in the northern Indian Ocean, is faced with a wide range of maritime security challenges in both, traditional and non-traditional domains. While traditional threats arise primarily on account of the largely-inimical agendas of Pakistan and China and the related activities of their maritime entities in the northern Indian Ocean, the non-traditional risks manifest themselves either through activities of non-State rogue elements operating from-, at- or through- the sea, or emanate from natural/man-made causes. It therefore becomes imperative for the Indian maritime-security establishment to adopt a multi-pronged approach of accepting, avoiding, controlling, reducing and monitoring such challenges, so as to be able to chart a path towards ensuring India's own holistic maritime-security, as also being a net provider of security for its immediate maritime neighbourhood.

“The vital feature which differentiates the Indian Ocean from the Atlantic and the Pacific is not the two sides but the sub-continent of India which juts far out into the sea for a thousand miles to its tapering end at Cape Comorin. It is the geographical position of India that changes the character of the Indian Ocean.”

— KM Panikkar¹

Even though India paid a heavy price for its proverbial ‘sea-blindness’² in the past, despite holding a naturally endowed predominant position in the Indian Ocean region (IOR) as succinctly summarised by Sardar Panikkar, it has now recognised its rightful place in the geopolitical affairs of

¹ KM Panikkar, “India and the Indian Ocean”(George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London 1945), p 19.

² The term “sea-blindness” has often been used to indicate compulsive and systemic politico-bureaucratic neglect of the maritime spaces surrounding India, to the detriment of its national security and economic progress.

See Admiral Arun Prakash, “China has become a Maritime Power: It’s time India caught up”, *Indian Express*, 21 June 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-china-rivalry-maritime-power-navy-7367947/>

the region. It accordingly acknowledges the emerging security challenges posed by contemporary geopolitical dynamics, in addition to non-traditional threats brought about by natural calamities and manmade causes; and is ready to play its legitimate part as a credible “net provider of security” in the region.

In this context, this article first explores traditional and non-traditional maritime challenges that face India. Thereafter, the ways and means, and available options for their mitigation are suggested.

Traditional Threats to India’s Maritime Security

Contemporary India’s maritime security has traditionally been threatened on account of the proactively inimical agenda of two States — Pakistan and China — and the related activities of their maritime entities in the northern IOR, in particular. Against this backdrop, two security scenarios could possibly emerge for India. The first would be on account of Pakistan’s ‘concept of operations’ in the Arabian Sea, duly supported —overtly or covertly —by China. The other could manifest itself when an increasingly high technology-enabled Chinese naval force and China’s other maritime assets signal an unambiguously proactive intent within the IOR —and particularly within its northern portion —with the potential to adversely impact India’s economic and security interests.

Scenario 1 – Pakistan’s ‘Concept of Operations’ in the Arabian Sea

Pakistan released its first ever Maritime Doctrine, entitled “*Preserving Freedom of Seas*” in December of 2018, wherein it considers the north Arabian Sea as its primary area of interest, and the broader Western Indian Ocean as its extension.³ This doctrine assesses that the “*nuclearisation of Indian Ocean by the adversary [read India]*⁴ *has raised stakes in the region ...*”⁵ The Pakistan Navy (PN), in order to ensure suitable deterrence against this supposed enemy’s intent, advocates an *approach of provocative and flexible mobility using sea space...*” The PN approach also includes “*hit first with maximum effects and minimum application of force.*”⁶

Pakistan’s maritime doctrine advocates the use of submarines to cause “*high-intensity diversion and disruption of enemy’s sea lines of communications (SLOCs)... to dominate the war theatre*”.⁷ The Yuan Class submarines, fitted with air-independent propulsion (AIP) systems—eight of which are being imported from China⁸— and equipped with modern fire-control and decision-making systems, would certainly be prime platforms-of-choice in this endeavour. It is, however, obvious that the PN, with its current level of capabilities, would not be able to undertake the overarching tasks envisioned

³Cdr (Retd.) Azam Khan, “Pakistan launches first formal Maritime doctrine,” Pakistan Defence Forum, 12 February 2019, <https://defence.pk/pdf/threads/pakistan-launches-first-formal-maritime-doctrine.608697/>

⁴ Words in parenthesis have been added by the Author for imparting better clarity to the statement.

⁵ Hamzah Taoqeer, “Maintaining Command of the Sea: Maritime Doctrines of Pakistan and India”, Modern Diplomacy, 07 August 2019, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/08/07/maintaining-command-of-the-sea-maritime-doctrines-of-pakistan-and-india>

⁶*Supra* 5, Hamzah Taoqeer, “Maintaining Command of the Sea: Maritime Doctrines of Pakistan and India,”

⁷ Hamzah Taoqeer, *ibid.*

⁸ The News, “China Building Eight Submarines for Pakistan”, 17 July 2018, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/342558-china-building-eight-submarines-for-pakistan>

in the Pakistani maritime doctrine. Thus, the only way to meet its doctrinal guidance of “*bitting first with maximum effects and minimum application of force*,” is by allying with China. This scenario is, therefore, built on the premise that Pakistan will execute this ‘concept of operations’ in its area of maritime interest with covert — and indirect — support being provided by China; and, indeed, Pakistani scholarship acknowledges as much.⁹

This will enable the PN also to benefit operationally from Chinese high-technology support-infrastructure. For instance, with access to ‘restricted’ positioning-signals from the Beidou satellite navigation system that is available to Pakistan,¹⁰ PN ships and submarines would be able to carry out precision-targeting of enemy assets, as also interdict Indian SLOCs in Pakistan’s near-coast areas.

Scenario 2 –Proactive Presence of Chinese Maritime Assets in IOR

The Chinese Navy’s envisioned role of ‘conducting international cooperation in distant waters’ as first articulated in its Defence White Paper of 2008; had, by 2015, progressively expanded to ‘protecting its strategic SLOCs and overseas interests.’¹¹ Towards this latter objective, China has been prioritising the high-technology-driven development of its naval hardware and revising its operational plans. Its accelerated pace of warship-building¹² continues to provide numerical superiority and capacity-accretion to the PLA Navy. Chinese shipyards have been constructing between 17 and 20 ships/submarines annually, since 2013.¹³ If this trend continues, the PLA Navy, with about 270 blue water capable ships, is projected to become the world’s largest navy by 2035.¹⁴

This entire force can obviously not be deployed in the Indian Ocean. Contemporary geopolitical dynamics and the resultant maritime security compulsions in the Pacific Ocean will, perforce, necessitate that the majority of PLA naval force are deployed closer home. However, if China allocates even 10 percent of its deployable blue-water forces—taking about two-third operational availability amounting to 170—for the Indian Ocean, this would theoretically amount to 17 platforms. After excluding its strategic-role nuclear-missile-armed submarines (SSBNs), and the conventional submarines required for tactical employment in the western Pacific, the net force level that could be deployed in the IOR would comprise around 12 vessels —eight destroyers/frigates,

⁹*Supra* 5, Hamzah Taoqeer

¹⁰ Global Times, “Pakistan 1st foreign nation to fully benefit from China’s BeiDou system,” 17 May 2017, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1047421.shtml>

¹¹ Chinese Defence White Paper of 2015, “China’s Military Strategy”, Section IV.

¹² Over the last two decades, China has commissioned two aircraft carriers, 13 nuclear-powered submarines, 24 destroyers, 30 large frigates and 60 missile corvettes.

See Liu Xiaobo, “Sino-U.S. Naval Warfare Capabilities amid Great Power Competition”, CSIS Update, 26 May 2020, <https://amti.csis.org/sino-u-s-naval-warfare-capabilities-amid-great-power-competition/>

¹³ China Military Online, “Opinion: Intensive Commissioning of PLAN Warships in line with China’s Goal to Safeguard its Maritime Rights and Interests”, 09 January 2014, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2014-01/09/content_5727866.htm

¹⁴ Michael A McDevitt, “China’s Navy will be the World’s Largest in 2035”, USNI Proceedings, February 2020, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2020/february/chinas-navy-will-be-worlds-largest-2035>

one/two replenishment ships, one LPD, one nuclear-powered attack-submarine (SSN), along with its support-ship.¹⁵

Indeed, this pattern of deployment by the PLA Navy is becoming increasingly visible. The total number of Chinese warships, submarines, deep-water research ships, support ships, and intelligence-collection and survey vessels, present in the Indian Ocean, has, at times, exceeded 15.¹⁶ Since 2013, the pattern of deployment of PLA Navy submarines in the IOR — and particularly in the Arabian Sea — incorporates at least one submarine with a support-ship being deployed for a duration of three to four months. Considering China’s fast-paced shipbuilding programme — including aircraft carrier construction — and the establishment of Indian Ocean operating-bases such as Djibouti and Gwadar (with additional ones reportedly being negotiated, the PLA Navy would be able to deploy many more units to the IOR in future, even while managing its existing maritime challenges in the Western Pacific.

This force level could well include an aircraft-carrier strike group (CSG). Combined with other types of support- and special-purpose vessels, which are also being rapidly inducted in large numbers, the ‘Chinese maritime force’ (CMF) could, in aggregate, comprise 26-28 vessels. It does not require a domain expert to visualise the enhanced threat quotient associated with such a large force being continually present in India’s primary areas of maritime interest.

Non-Traditional Maritime Security Challenges

Non-traditional maritime challenges can be described as those arising primarily out of non-military sources, but which present a substantial level of risk to the survival and well-being of the State and its people. Such challenges facing India— as also the rest of the Indian Ocean littoral — can broadly be categorised on the basis of the level, scale, and the gravity of their impact on national security. They would include:

- State-supported acts of non-State rogue elements at- or from- the sea
- Non-traditional security challenges of human making
- Non-traditional security challenges arising from natural causes

Acts of non-State Rogue Elements at or from the Sea

Acts of terror at sea or emanating from the sea, and related activities such as gunrunning and the transportation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) — with or without State support —

¹⁵ This estimate has been arrived at by the Author, purely as a conservative and prudent assumption, considering the critical requirement for naval forces in the western Pacific Ocean, as also taking into account operational availability of ships, their endurance and sustainability at extended ranges, as also mission profile in distant waters.

¹⁶ The PLA Navy and associated support ships – referred to as “PLA Navy+” – in fact, created a record of sorts, when 19 ships were present in IOR between June-August 2017. This information was compiled by the Author from various Chinese news sites.

constitute the gravest of the non-traditional security challenges for India. Maritime terrorism, according to one maritime analyst, maybe manifested in the following ways¹⁷:

- Armed robbery to finance terror activities
- Direct attack on offshore oil/gas platforms and Single Buoy Moorings
- Direct attack on ships at anchorage or alongside or on a port facility/harbour
- Direct attack on near-coast nuclear/industrial installations
- Indirect attack from hijacked ships on shore installations/cities
- Infiltration for attacks in the hinterland
- Disrupting safe navigation by sinking ships/boats in straits/narrow channels

Of course, for India, perhaps the most visible act was the Mumbai terror attack of November 2008 by Pakistan-supported terrorists. This is commonly referred-to simply as “26/11”. The ability of such terrorists to move freely across largely unregulated seas, constitutes the greatest contemporary threat to all globally interconnected economies.

Cross-border gun-running through sea route is considered to be much easier. A major instance of such occurrence came to light during the investigation of the serial blasts of 1993 in the city of Mumbai, wherein it was found that huge cache of arms, ammunition and explosives had been landed on the coast of Raigad (near Mumbai) for this purpose.

Proliferation of nuclear technology is another sinister facet of risks arising from the sea. Periodical seizures of such contraband indicate that these sorts of nefarious activities continue unabated. For instance, in 1999, a North Korean freighter, the *Ku Wol San*, which was bound for Pakistan, and was carrying a consignment of components that were allegedly to be used for the production of missiles, was seized by the Kandla Port authorities. A more contemporary incident relates to the detention, in February of 2020, of a Chinese ship, the *Da Cui Yun*, for carrying an industrial autoclave — used for manufacturing ballistic missiles.¹⁸

Manmade Non-Traditional Maritime Security Challenges

Other non-traditional security challenges, involving rogue elements and criminals at sea, range from piracy, hostage-taking for ransom, armed robbery, drug-running, and human trafficking, to environmental pollution of the oceans, as also illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. Somalia, with its long coastline and defunct governance, became an ideal breeding ground for pirates. At its peak in 2011, 237 out of a total of 353 incidents of piracy and 24 of 33 hijackings,

¹⁷Sujeet Samaddar, “Maritime Threats, Risks and Priorities in the Indian Ocean Region: An Indian Perspective”, in C Uday Bhaskar and Kamlesh K Agnihotri eds. *Security Challenges along the Indian Littoral: Indian and US Perspectives* (Matrix Publishers, New Delhi, 2011), p 70.

¹⁸Shishir Gupta, “DRDO Seizes Missile Autoclave from Chinese Ship, allowed to leave for Pak,” *Hindustan Times*, 21 February 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/drdo-experts-to-study-chinese-vessel-s-cargo/story-mOktwvGijFCOmQZe7xaII.html>

were attributed to Somali pirates.¹⁹ Piracy in the Gulf of Aden and off Somalia could finally be brought under control only through a concerted and protracted multinational naval effort.

Heroin production and trade, originating in the ‘Golden Crescent’ area comprising Afghanistan and Pakistan, continues to be used to finance terrorism. The ‘Golden Triangle’, comprising a clutch of South-East Asian countries, is another important drug trade and transit corridor. The adjacent Chinese province of Yunnan, which acts as a main market as well as a preferred transit-route for South-East Asian drugs, makes this a ‘Golden Quadrilateral’.²⁰ Drug-running cartels from this Golden Quadrangle, smuggle drugs through sea-route, via Maldives and Sri Lanka, to countries in Europe and the US.

Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing is rampant in the Indian EEZ, particularly in the Andaman Sea. The prominent players belong to China and Taiwan, although Sri Lankan and Indonesian²¹ fishermen, too, are engaged in poaching and illegal fishing. In one particularly large-scale violation, as many as ten Chinese trawlers—owned by the Dongxinglong Ocean Fishing Company — which taken in aggregate were capable of harvesting a staggering 80,000 tonnes of marine life in a month — were apprehended off Ratnagiri Coast of Maharashtra, in June 2019.²²

Natural Calamities and Disasters

Natural disasters in the Indian Ocean —as in other oceanic spaces —cause immense loss of life and property in coastal areas and bring untold misery upon inhabitants of the affected areas. These may take the form of cyclones, *tsunamis*, global-warming-induced rise of sea level and resultant inundation of land areas, undue salination of soil and potable-water in coastal areas, etc. In fact, a doomsday scenario at current projections of sea-level rise predicts that substantial portions of Maldives will be submerged in next 20 years, with the whole country going under by 2085.²³

The 2004 *Tsunami* in the Indian Ocean caused widespread fatalities and damage to property in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and the coastal stretches of Tamil Nadu, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Banda Aceh in Indonesia, and many other areas along the rim of the Bay of Bengal. Super-cyclone *Nargis* that hit Myanmar in 2008; *Phailin*, which caused massive devastation in Odisha in 2013; *Hudhud* which devastated Visakhapatnam in 2014, and the *Tauktae*, which severely affected the Konkan coast and Mumbai, in May 2021: are a few recent examples of such natural disasters.

¹⁹ICC Commercial Crime Services, “Annual PiracyReport-2011”, <http://www.icc-ccs.org/piracy-reporting-centre/piracynewsfigures>

²⁰ Rommel Banlaoi, “Maritime Security threats in post 9/11 South East Asia: Regional Responses,” in Herbert-Burns, Sam Bateman, Peter Lehr, eds, *Lloyd’s MIU Handbook of Maritime Security* (CRC Press, Florida, USA, 2009), p 261.

²¹ “Indian Coast Guard Nabs Indonesian Fishing Boat with 39 Crew Members for Illegal Fishing”, 31 October 2017, <https://stopillegalfishing.com/press-links/indian-coast-guard-nabs-indonesian-fishing-boat-39-crew-members-illegal-fishing/>

²² Badri Chatterjee, “In Troubled Waters: 10 Chinese Vessels Found Fishing Illegally in Maharashtra”, Hindustan Times, 20 June 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/mumbai-news/in-troubled-waters-10-chinese-vessels-found-fishing-illegally-in-maharashtra/story-FigOPCnmT3o0xuSDeqFjvN.html>

²³ Climate Hot Map, “Republic of Maldives”, <https://www.climatehotmap.org/global-warming-locations/republic-of-maldives.html#:~:text=With%20no%20ground%20surface%20higher,the%20Kiribati%20hot%20spot.3>

Mitigation-Imperatives for India's Maritime Security Agencies

Since traditional and non-traditional maritime security challenges facing India would occur at-, from- or through the seas, Indian maritime security forces such as the Indian Navy and the Indian Coast Guard would, naturally, be the leading responders. However, the redressal, mitigation and control of such a broad spectrum of challenges requires an integrated, 'whole-of-nation' approach. Towards this, the Indian security establishment must adopt a multi-pronged approach of accepting, avoiding, controlling, reducing and monitoring risks, so as to find bespoke solutions that offer the best fit for a particular situation.²⁴

Strategies for Mitigating Traditional Maritime Security Issues

While the 'acceptance' of risks associated with possible maritime warfare arising out of the twin-scenarios mentioned earlier may be considered to be a 'given', the avoidance of such risks is rarely feasible. Consequently, pragmatism would call for 'reducing' these risks through a comprehensive 'monitoring' mechanism and a credible 'control' one. Activities that enhance Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) are the primary means of 'monitoring' the environment. This would logically lead to implementation of robust operational strategies to 'control' such threats.

Monitoring Traditional Threats– Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)

Within the ambit of hard security, MDA comprises the ability to effectively detect, locate, track and identify the presence of likely hostile targets in an uncertain and unpredictable maritime area that is interspersed with presence of neutral shipping. Major elements of MDA include the following:²⁵

- Satellite-based surveillance, duly supported by maritime reconnaissance and AEW aircraft, and long-range UAVs.
- Joint Service identification systems to discern the enemy.
- Subsurface surveillance systems at critical vantage points within the IOR.
- Robust, high-speed large-bandwidth networking-infrastructure, with requisite inbuilt confidentiality.
- Effective cyberspace monitoring capability.

Controlling Traditional Threats: Business-end of Warfare²⁶

- **Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) Operations.** Potential employment of modern submarines and other potent undersea hardware — including unmanned submarines,

²⁴ Kamlesh Kumar Agnihotri, "Preparedness Risks Mitigation – Priorities for the Indian Maritime Forces", Synergy Journal of CENJOWS, August 2021, pp 103-114, p 110.

²⁵"Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy", Integrated Headquarters Ministry of Defence (Navy), New Delhi, 2015, p 134.

²⁶"Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy", Integrated Headquarters Ministry of Defence (Navy), New Delhi, 2007, Chapter-8, "*Strategies for Force Build-up*" pp 117-121.

manned submersibles and UUVs — by Pakistan and China, for sea denial, calls for priority enhancement of the Indian Navy's ASW capabilities at strategic, operational, and tactical levels.

- **Air Defence and Anti-Air Operations.** The Indian Navy's capacity for the conduct of anti-air operations has certainly been enhanced with the induction of modern carrier-based aircraft, UAVs, and airborne surveillance systems. In this context, the procurement of AWACS — including carrier-based Airborne Early Warning (AEW) aircraft — needs no further emphasis.
- **Joint Expeditionary Mission-Capabilities.** Since the influencing of events on land is one of the primary roles of a maritime force, the Indian Navy must create strategic sealift capabilities through the acquisition of heavy-lift helicopters and air-cushion vehicles, to prepare for large scale amphibious operations in the IOR littoral. Concurrently, the Indian Army must allocate more role-specific land-force formations, which would require to be closely integrated with amphibious, marine, and special forces of the three Services.
- **Mine Counter-Measure (MCM) Warfare.** The Indian Navy's ability to keep designated channels across choke points and entrance/exit routes from harbours open for the safe transit of warships during a conflict would have a direct bearing on the conduct of further maritime operations. The ongoing critical deficiency in MCM hardware —mine-sweeping and mine-hunting ships and equipment —may cost the nation dearly in either of the above discussed scenarios, and the highest priority must be accorded to made good these deficiencies.
- **Special Operations.** The creation of a combined 'Special Operations Division' under the Integrated Defence Services Headquarters, to counter State-sponsored or non-State acts of terrorism, at very short notice, is a revolutionary step and one that must be further built upon.
- **Joint Operations.** Future wars will invariably be undertaken by forces acting jointly. Coordination and cooperation amongst the three Defence Services and other associated forces such as the Indian Coast Guard, including the promulgation of common doctrines, the coordination of strategies, achieving commonality in equipment and standard operating procedures, etc., are essential to the success of joint missions.

Strategies to address non-traditional maritime challenges

After 26/11, the Government of India effected a major overhaul of its coastal security structures, assets and operating procedures. The Indian Navy was designated as the lead agency, charged with overall Coastal Security, in coordination with the Indian Coast Guard, state marine police forces,

port authorities, and other central/state government organisations. The main steps initiated in order to preclude any recurrence of 26/11 include the following:²⁷

- Joint Operation Centres (JOC) were set up at Mumbai, Visakhapatnam, Kochi, Port Blair; jointly manned and operated by Navy and Coast Guard.
- A National C³I Network was established for real-time maritime domain awareness, linking the Navy and Coast Guard, both, at field and apex levels.
- The ‘*Sagar Prabari Bal*’, comprising 1,000 men and 80 Fast Interceptor Craft (FIC) was formed for the protection of naval bases, Vulnerable Assets (VAs) and Vital Points (VPs) along the coast.
- Surface and air surveillance was enhanced by Indian Navy, Coast Guard Ships and aircraft along the coast and offshore development areas.
- Coastal Radar Stations and Auto Identification System (AIS) Chains were set up.
- Marine Police of coastal states and Union Territories were strengthened.

In order to curb piracy, India has been deploying at least one naval warship continuously, for more than 13 years, in coordination with navies of other countries, to escort merchant ships transiting the Gulf of Aden. The Indian Navy has been quite proactive, with INS *Tabar*, in fact, becoming the first ship ever to decisively fire upon and sink a pirate mother ship, in November 2008.

While the Indian Navy’s mandated military and diplomatic roles, as per the Indian Maritime Doctrine of 2009,²⁸ deal with the traditional challenges mentioned earlier, the actions within its constabulary and benign roles are exactly what is required to address non-traditional challenges. The objectives, missions and tasks for the Indian Navy in its constabulary role, outlined in **Table 1**, are self-explanatory with regard to manmade, non-traditional security challenges, including terrorism at and from the sea.

Objectives	Missions	Tasks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coastal Defence • Security of EEZ • Good order at Sea 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Counter-terrorism ✓ Policing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Counter-Infiltration ➤ Anti-Piracy ➤ Anti-Poaching ➤ Anti-Trafficking

Table 1: Objectives, Missions and Tasks of the Indian Navy in Constabulary Role

Source: Indian Maritime Doctrine - 2009, p. 116

²⁷These are based on the reply of India’s Defence Minister in Parliament. Details are available in PIB Press Release, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=74946>

²⁸ The Indian Maritime Doctrine (INBR 8) of 2009, p.91.

Similarly, the objectives, missions and tasks for the Indian Navy functioning in the Benign Role, outlined in **Table 2** below, adequately cover challenges arising out of natural calamities.

Objectives	Missions	Tasks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote civil safety and security • Project National Soft power 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ HADR ✓ Aid to Civil Authorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Provision of relief material and supplies ➤ Medical assistance ➤ Diving assistance ➤ Hydrographic assistance etc.

Table 2 - Objectives, Missions and Tasks of Indian Navy in the Benign Role

Source: Indian Maritime Doctrine - 2009, p. 120

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought in its wake, a set of unique challenges within the maritime domain. The Indian Navy has however, responded quite well by adopting a three-point approach of: (1) keeping its own personnel free from the pandemic; (2) assisting the nation and States in India's proximate neighbourhood to mitigate the impact of the pandemic; and (3) maintaining operational readiness to address traditional and other non-traditional security threats, within the maritime domain.²⁹ Major Covid-related tasks performed by the Indian Navy relate to the repatriation of Indian personnel from Maldives and Sri Lanka in May-June 2020 under mission 'Samudra Setu',³⁰ and the provision of medicines, food, and medical-assistance teams to Maldives, Mauritius, Madagascar, Comoros and Seychelles as part of India's Mission SAGAR initiative.³¹

Conclusion

India does recognise quite well, that evolving risk bearing scenarios in the IOR and contemporary concepts of force-employment require joint forces that are optimally equipped to perform the full spectrum of missions at sea. Towards attainment of this envisioned end-state, the ongoing restructuring of the Indian Defence Forces, revolving around the creation of Joint Commands and Integrated Theatre Commands, which is being steered through the office of the Chief of the Defence Staff, is indeed a very timely and relevant initiative. This will bring about greater integration within the three Services and engender better jointmanship, both, at the conceptual and operational levels.

Within the maritime domain, an integrated maritime theatre, with the Indian navy as the lead Service, would be well-suited to address the whole spectrum of conflict —spanning traditional and

²⁹Indian Navy website, "Chief of the Naval Staff Message to IN Personnel/ Community on COVID-19", 07 April 2020, <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/chief-naval-staff-message-personnel-community-covid-19-07-apr-20>

³⁰ Indian Navy website, "Indian Navy Launches Operation "Samudra Setu", <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/indian-navy-launches-operation-samudra-setu-0>

³¹ The Indian Express, "Indian Navy's Landing Ship INS Kesari Sets Sail on COVID Aid Mission to Indian Ocean countries", 11 May 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/ins-kesari-sets-sail-on-covid-aid-mission-to-indian-ocean-countries-6403557/>

non-traditional threats; as also to project power' up to India's secondary areas of maritime interest. Further, the recent appointment of the National Maritime Security Coordinator (NMSC) under the aegis of the National Security Council Secretariat³²— a step that had remained outstanding since the terror attack of November 2008 — will provide structural robustness and implementational heft to the Indian efforts to secure its non-traditional challenges.

However, the most vital facet of maintenance of 'Core Competencies' over the long term would entail specific focus on niche areas related to warship and submarine building, aircraft production, and the development of a future-ready defence industrial base. Towards these ends, the recent reorganisation and corporatisation of the ordnance factories by the Indian Government is a step in the right direction. Finally, investment in future technology should be progressed as a national level project. This will not only catalyse the Indian naval preparedness to comprehensively deal with non-traditional maritime security challenges, but also ensure that asymmetric advantages that China and Pakistan, acting in collusion with each other, seek vis-à-vis India, are balanced in the maritime domain. This imperative has been succinctly articulated by Rear Admiral K Raja Menon, a noted Indian maritime thinker, who wrote:³³

“... after Galwan and Pangong Tso, we will clearly approach the larger picture from a position of tactical inferiority, unless we develop some punitive capability, which it seems could only be in the Indian ocean...”

About the Author:

Captain Kamlesh Kumar Agnihotri, IN (Retd) is a Senior Fellow at the National Maritime Foundation (NMF), New Delhi. His research concentrates upon maritime facets of hard security vis-à-vis China and Pakistan. Views expressed in this article are personal. He can be reached at kekumaragni@gmail.com

³²“Govt Creates Post of Maritime Security Advisor, Vice Admiral Ashok Kumar Takes Charge”, The New Indian Express, 16 February 2022, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2022/feb/16/govt-creates-post-of-maritime-security-advisor-vice-admiral-ashok-kumar-takes-charge-2420268.html/>

³³ K Raja Menon, “Our Larger China picture: A New Strategy, Combining Diplomatic and Military Means, is Needed to Counter Beijing”, The Indian Express, 17 September 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-china-border-dispute-galwan-valley-ladakh-6598913/>