



Book Review

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Harsh V Pant, ed., *The Rise Of The Indian Navy*. London, Ashgate, 2012, pp. 186, ISBN 9781409430872.

It can be said, without undue immodesty, that the Indian Navy (IN), although the smallest of our armed forces, has, through its vision, foresight and strategic sense, created a special place for itself in the national security matrix. By opting for a growth model which focused on indigenous development and production; and by setting its sights on a larger geo-political vision of influence in the Indian Ocean region, rather than on immediate threats, it has raised its own and the country's profile in the eyes of the international community.

While the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war saw the IN being blooded in action, the 2004 tsunami marked a defining moment which established its credibility as a proactive maritime force. The sea-lift operations to evacuate refugees from war torn Lebanon in 2006, and Libya in 2011, and the successful anti-piracy operations have reinforced its image as a force of substance and resolve. Navies which regularly exercise with the IN hold it in high professional esteem, and it would be no exaggeration to say that such evaluations have favourably influenced the political stance of many countries including the USA.

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Having doggedly chipped away at their indifference and scepticism, the IN has created a “maritime awakening” amongst India’s national security elite. This, coupled with the looming threat posed by China’s growing military power, has helped loosen the budgetary purse-strings. Even if India’s reduced GDP growth-rate demands caution, the expenditure of about US \$25–30 billion, already committed to acquisition of naval hardware, will place the IN amongst the front ranks of modern maritime forces over the next decade.

The rise of the IN, termed as “dramatic” by foreign scholars and analysts, has led to a spurt of curiosity amongst many. While excitement at the prospect of such a large market for naval armament is to be expected in the international arms industry; as far as academia is concerned there are other causes which go beyond mercantile considerations.

One is the connotation of maritime power. Such is the reach and significance of maritime power, that any changes in the existing naval balance, even at the regional level, receive full scrutiny for all their implications. In this context, it is interesting to note that India has, for many years, fielded a powerful army and air-force, respectively, the third and fifth largest in the world, without causing a ripple in the global strategic community. Secondly, it is not every day that a traditionally continental nation decides to stride the world-stage wearing the mantle of a maritime power. And finally, one wonders if this curiosity is tinged with resentment about the aspirations of a “third-world parvenu” to build a powerful navy, and to shoulder, what was until recently, the “white man’s burden”.

This outburst of academic interest has manifested itself in a series of articles, monographs and books which discuss the rationale behind India’s naval re-armament programme. An interesting feature of these investigations is the proclivity of researchers to try and match-up Indian thought-processes, actions and developments with known and recognisable paradigms. However, India’s culture, logic and historical developments, often, do not conform to templates that are familiar to the Western intellect; with the risk that the analyst may arrive at erroneous conclusions.

The latest addition to this exploratory discourse is a compendium of essays, entitled: “*The Rise of the Indian Navy*”, which, in the words of the editor, “. . . examines a range of domestic and external issues that have shaped the broader context of the recent rise of Indian naval power over the last two decades.” The slim,

186-page volume, edited by Harsh V Pant, contains eight thoughtful chapters written by an eclectic selection of scholars, researchers, analysts and journalists. Possibly in an effort to preclude monocular vision, as well as the kind of pitfalls pointed out above, Pant has ensured that five out of the eight are Indians; three being former naval officers.

Harsh Pant, a Reader at King's College, London with a deep interest in Asian security affairs, believes, like many others in the West, that the "intellectual debate about the Indian Navy's trajectory remains unresolved." This compendium represents yet another quest for ascertaining the "strategic rationale" that underpins India's naval expansion, in the absence of which, fears Pant, India's security dilemmas with other regional and global powers may become exacerbated. The book is divided into two halves; the first dealing with internal dimension of India's evolving maritime capability.

In an early chapter, Walter C Ladwig III, apprehensive that the IN modernisation programme may "pose a risk to stability" or trigger "an arms race in Asia", tries to ascertain the drivers of India's naval development by undertaking an analysis of its force-architecture *vis-à-vis* contemplated missions. Using indices like budgetary allocations, warship-tonnage and warfare capabilities (such as submarine, aviation, air-defence, amphibious and anti-shipping etc.) Ladwig has attempted to draw certain conclusions about the navy's mission priorities.

Later, Iskander Rehman places India's Maritime Doctrine under the microscope to discern its underlying motivations, against the touchstone of four putative schools of thought; Continentalist, Pan-Oceanic, Soviet and Monrovia (derived from the Monroe Doctrine), which he imagines exist in India. One of Rehman's conclusions is that the IN would "need to undergo exponential increase in size" in order to accomplish all the tasks, missions and objectives outlined in the Doctrine, which he dismisses as "more advocatory and aspirational rather than genuinely reflective of reality."

C Uday Bhaskar reminds the reader of India's blinkered vision which has, largely, failed to capitalise on the numerous windows of opportunity offered by the IN, in the field of pro-active naval-diplomacy as well as contribution to global public goods in the form of maritime security. This is attributable to rigid adherence to "strategic restraint" and a doctrinal ambivalence about the use of force. While noting that the evolution of a viable military-diplomatic synergy is a "work in progress",

he recommends the need to venture beyond the pale of “UN aegis” which has, so far, circumscribed India’s deployment of military force overseas.

Raja Menon strikes a note of optimism as he describes the “unique” transformation of the IN, from a “brown-water navy” to a “blue-water navy”, while leap-frogging a generation in technology and maximising indigenous content of naval systems. As he traces the navy’s progress in various technology disciplines, he applauds the “perseverance of the admirals in keeping faith with the aircraft carrier” in the face of the underwater threat, while vigorously pursuing submarine acquisition programmes.

The second half of the book, which examines the bearing of external factors on the rise of India’s maritime power, contains contributions by three experts in addition to the editor. Probal Ghosh traces the growth trajectory of the PLA Navy, outlines its strategy and speculates on future postures *vis-à-vis* its neighbours. Pant points out the gap between “soaring” Indian ambitions in the Indian Ocean and its actual capabilities, accentuated by its doctrinal and organisational shortfalls as well as competition from other major powers.

James Holmes, commenting on US–India cooperation reminds New Delhi about the limits to “free-riding”, and urges it to abandon its “long-standing assumption that the US . . . can provide for Indian Ocean security, more or less indefinitely”. Nitin Pai rounds off by drawing attention to the serious implications of non-state threats for the IN and the need for doctrinal and structural changes to address them.

This small anthology of essays does provide many original views and opinions, as well as useful insights, of current relevance, about the phenomenon of a growing IN. Of equal importance to an Indian reader would be the glimpses that it provides, of how others view the steady growth of the IN – a process that Indians themselves see as innocuous, inoffensive and, generally, beneficial for the region. Knowledgeable readers will also be struck by the interpretation put, by foreign analysts, on Indian developments, and the conclusions drawn by them, both coloured by their own experiences.

In my capacity as an “insider” rather than as a reviewer, I take the liberty of offering a few personal opinions and clarifications, to provide an alternate point of view to readers before they draw inferences from the content of this book.

First, its growing economy notwithstanding, India remains a poor, developing nation whose defence expenditure extracts a heavy social price. It is for this reason

that India's defence expenditure as a percentage of GDP is amongst the lowest world-wide. The size and capability of the IN must, inevitably, remain circumscribed by economic sustainability. The weakness of India's defence industrial and technological base has also placed a severe limitation on the navy's growth, and there is a "critical mass" beyond which the IN cannot go. The use of terms like "global" or "hegemonic" in the context of India's maritime growth, or hints that India is trying to emulate the British by attempting to "control the Indian Ocean", thus must be seen as mere hyperbole.

Secondly, the IN's leadership is aware that just as Admiral Mahan's theories of sea power were developed in an era and context which has little relevance or utility in formulating a contemporary Indian maritime strategy, it would be quite absurd for an Indian to associate himself with the imperial visions of Lord Curzon, a British viceroy who considered himself the "last of the Moghuls". Similarly, just because Nehru referred to the Monroe Doctrine in the specific context of Portuguese occupied Goa, does not mean that India has, forever, embraced it as a national policy; quite the contrary. I would, therefore, advocate that adjectives such as "Mahanian", "Curzonian" or "Monrovia", used in the context of the IN's doctrine or strategy need to be viewed with a degree of scepticism.

Thirdly, the historical images that haunt the collective Indian memory are those of Vasco da Gama and Robert Clive, creating a deep subliminal urge to insulate the country against foreign intervention from the sea. While the recent phenomenon of globalisation has sensitised Indians to the criticality of sea lanes, China's bellicosity on land and at sea has jolted the security elite out of its traditional complacency and disregard of the navy. It is, essentially, on the basis of these stimuli, and common sense, rather than nostrums and mantras, that India's maritime force has been conceptualised.

Fourthly, the IN is, by necessity, and by choice, a minimalist force, adequate to safeguard national interests – which happen to include nuclear deterrence. Those who quibble about numbers or warfare capabilities, and feel that India's maritime doctrine is "very ambitious" for the force levels available, need to remember that navies do not need to undertake all missions simultaneously or all the time. Modern naval platforms inherently embody multiple roles, and while excelling in one, they can cope with many others. For example, the *Brahmaputra* class (designated as frigates) carries

SSM, SAM, and gun armament as well as anti-submarine weapons and an electronic-warfare suite, and at a pinch could also land 150 troops on a hostile shore.

As a postscript one might add that the planning and sustenance of the navy's force levels is hostage to three major factors; all of them beyond its power to control. These are: the Kafkaesque procedures involved in obtaining sanction for major hardware acquisitions, first at the bureaucratic and then at the political level; the dismal productivity of India's public sector shipyards; and the poor reliability of foreign (mainly Russian) suppliers. Critics must, therefore, bear in mind that most IN plans that have lagged or gone awry, and force shortfalls are attributable to delays imposed by one or more of these.

The unorthodox nature of the logic underpinning India's maritime growth confounds many, and that is, possibly, why Pant sounds exasperated about the rationale of the IN's trajectory. This trajectory has been guided, mainly, by the vision of India's naval leadership with its gaze firmly focused on national maritime interests and regional stability. This paradigm will prevail until, in the fullness of time, the political/national security establishment collectively acquires the capacity to address strategic challenges and thereby enable the political-executive spectrum to devote more time and energy to national security issues.

Pant sums up the situation when he says, "The ability of Indian policy-makers to think strategically on national security and defence issues has been questionable . . .". Given their deep-rooted urge to emphasise the principle of civil control over the armed forces, one would expect Indian politicians to eagerly grasp Carl von Clausewitz's advice about every military undertaking having a political underpinning to be meaningful. And yet India's political class has flinched, not just from outlining national aims and objectives, but also from providing guidance regarding strategic aims and end-states to the country's armed forces in every post-independence operation.

By compiling and editing a volume such as *The Rise of the Indian Navy* Pant has, possibly, held up a mirror to the IN, and if that leads to some introspection, he would have rendered valuable service. This is an interesting and intellectually stimulating anthology which, I am sure, would be of interest, not only for naval officers and maritime scholars, but also for the lay reader who may have nautical interests.