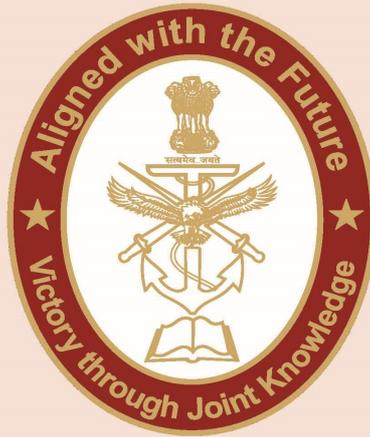


CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



CENJOWS

TIME TO SHIFT FOCUS TO ENHANCING NAVAL POWER

Introduction

The completion of the first deterrence patrol by INS Arihant marks the successful integration of the triad in nuclear deterrence. However, reports indicate that India is still short of Chinese capability. China has four Jin Class SSBNs (ballistic missile submarines) and nine SSNs (nuclear powered submarines). It is evident that India is seeking to enhance its military capabilities to counter China rather than Pak, as it is already way ahead of Pak in conventional capabilities and nuclear deterrence.

At the same time India is enhancing its military to military engagement with ASEAN nations. While army and air force exercises with ASEAN countries is solely aimed at projecting Indian military soft power, as these will only participate in limited training exercises, it is the navy which by its visits and joint exercises in areas of potential conflict will project true Indian military power.

India is simultaneously playing a larger role in the QUAD, where the major involvement is of the navy. The US is of the perception that the QUAD is a crucial element in its Indo-Pacific strategy for 'a free, open and rules-based order'. It is aimed at containing Chinese aggressiveness in the region. India, on the other hand, remains opposed to open militarization of the QUAD as it seeks to avoid challenging China and enhancing tensions. It therefore refused to upgrade the QUAD from a joint-secretary level dialogue to a secretary or ministerial level.

India is aware of the importance of Andaman and Nicobar Islands in projecting its military power and dominating the Malacca Straits, through which majority of international maritime shipping moves, as also of its role in choking Chinese forays into the Indian Ocean. It has therefore handed over the ANC permanently to the navy. Further, the present Lt Governor of Andaman and Nicobar is Admiral DK Joshi, the former navy chief. The possible intention is to enhance berthing facilities for the navy in the region. The navy is therefore the element of power projection of Indian military might beyond its shores.

Enhancing Military Power

Military power of a nation does not stem from the its military strength and outreach alone but also from its alignments. Military power has two broad categories, nuclear and conventional. The nuclear element, in the modern context, is more aimed towards deterrence from a hostile nation. Pak has continuously employed the nuclear threat to deter Indian military offensive plans.

The conventional, on the other hand, has a two-fold aim. It is the force which would be employed for defensive and offensive operations, below nuclear threshold and for backing a nation's political and economic policies. Enhancing this element of power and retaining its pre-eminence status is an expensive proposition. It faces the constant 'guns versus butter' debate.

India is possibly the only country in the world which has hostile nuclear armed adversaries on both its borders. Both desire Indian territory while India has no territorial designs. It has faced wars and hostile situations with both neighbours. It therefore needs both categories of military power, nuclear and conventional.

In India's context the conventional element can be further subdivided into two sub-elements. These are forces essential for the security of the nation and those which have a secondary role of power projection.

Forces deployed within to ensure security of its land borders and act as a deterrent to misadventures by neighbours involve largely the army and the air force. Both face shortfalls in equipment and need upgradation of their equipment profile, which is an ongoing process. To harness their present capability and exploit existing terrain advantages, these two would need to operate in tandem and complete harmony. Thus, emerges the need for

theatre commands within the nation. The navy, equally essential for security of the homeland would however be employed almost independently, though as part of the overall master plan.

Integrated Commands

The existing independent service commands spaced by geographical distance and controlled by service HQs indicates a lack of cohesion in employment. There is also an increased trust deficit between them. The army has begun seeking Apache helicopter gunships to enhance its own firepower, ignoring that such weaponry has so far been provided by the air force. The navy's air arm is on the rise. The air force has gained control of the strategic forces command to control missile and nuclear weapons, though its employment would be more in conjunction with a land battle.

The perception in which a future war would unfold is also viewed differently by each service, making each service consider its role independent of the others. There is a perception in the air force, that considering the terrain advantage enjoyed by the nation along its borders, a future war with China would be dominated by missile and air power, hence the strategic forces would operate alongside air power. The army firmly believes that the land battle will be the start point. The navy perceives the next Indo-China conflict may be confined to the high seas.

Most importantly is the resistance by service chiefs themselves in accepting integrated theatre commands as they fear their role changing from being 'force employers' to 'force providers'. Internal theatre commands for the defence of the mainland would largely evolve between the army and the air force.

Importance of Naval Power

The navy, which should have by now grown into a formidable force for its multifarious tasks has been the most ignored. Apart from ensuring sanctity of the nation's Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) and protection of offshore assets in peacetime, to destruction of enemy's naval power and bases in operations, it also has the role of projection of India's military power across the nation's area of interest and influence. It has in recent times enhanced its international reach and exercises with friendly nations, however lacks the ability to project true force.

Therefore, while remaining a part of land dominated theatre commands for coordination of operations, the navy would need to create and head its own theatre command directed for both operations and power projection.

Thus, in many ways, the navy, whose role and task even in peace time is equally important, must be equipped and tasked accordingly.

Admiral Mahan's comments from the early twentieth century are noteworthy. He had stated, 'Whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate Asia. The Ocean is the key to the seven seas. In the 21st Century, the destiny of the world would be decided in its waters'. India's military engagements with the ASEAN, the QUAD, Chinese forays into the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean along with the creation of the string of pearls are all indicators of the reality in Mahan's thoughts.

The national leadership is aware of the need to dominate the Indian Ocean. Vajpayee as the PM stated in 2003 that India's security environment ranged from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca, across the Indian Ocean and SE Asia. Manmohan Singh stated in 2007 that India's strategic footprint covers the region bound by the Horn of Africa, West Asia, SE Asia and beyond to the far reaches of the Indian Ocean.

PM Modi in Dec 2015 chaired the combined commander's conference on board INS Vikramaditya, the aircraft carrier. During his address he highlighted that India's history has been influenced by the seas. He added that the passage to our prosperity and security also lies on the Indian Ocean, while it holds the key to the fortunes of the world.

Enhancing Naval Power

The navy presently has 137 ships which it plans to raise to 200 by 2027. It is also likely to get five more nuclear submarines. India's second aircraft carrier is likely to be inducted by the end of 2019. Its plans for a third has been shelved for the moment. The navy remains the best judge to determine the variety of warships, submarines, anti-ship and anti-submarine helicopters which it needs for the fulfilment of its role in projection of national power across the region. It should also assess the requirement of raising a marine corps as its role in the international environment continues to rise.

Over the years other services aimed to restrict the navy from expanding as emphasis remained on security of the mainland. In the present context, when India's outreach has increased, it is the navy which is the element projecting power of the nation overseas. Hence, with passage of time, the navy needs to be equipped accordingly and made self-sufficient.

Interestingly, developing naval power takes the maximum time. While China launches three battle ships every year, India would be considered lucky if it launches one in three years, despite any tall claims of the

dockyards involved in building them. Further, cost of enhancing naval power is taxing on the defence budget. However, increasing threats and responsibilities as also an enhanced role makes it imperative to develop this power in earnest.

Relocating Naval Resources

Over the decades, the navy has continued maintaining its bases and controlling HQs in locations which are presently redundant. Post-Independence, with the emergence of East and West Pakistan, Visakhapatnam and Mumbai were ideal locations for two major naval forces as they provided command and control over the fleets dominating the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. It also created assets to match threats emerging from both directions.

Post 1971 and the creation of Bangladesh, threats in the Bay of Bengal reduced significantly. Simultaneously with the need to monitor and influence shipping moving through the Indian Ocean as to also project naval power in our zone of interest, Port Blair, with HQ Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) was envisaged as the most ideal location.

The initial conversion of the ANC into one of the three joint commands headed by services in rotation had the three services reducing their allocation of resources to it. Now the ANC permanently under the navy needs to be converted into the equivalent of the Eastern Naval Command, though maintaining its status of a joint command as that would ensure additional resources essential for the fulfilment of its role.

Port Blair, though ideally located, lacks the necessary infrastructure to harbour the desired numbers of ships. Hence, till it is developed, it could become a naval command HQs with ships under its control presently spread upto the naval base of Visakhapatnam. Therefore, the navy should consider closing its Eastern Naval Command (ENC) and using its facilities there as a base for the main command to be located at Port Blair.

Conclusion

Amongst the three services, the navy has the major responsibility of power projection, alongside its role of defence of the mainland. The image of the military element of power of the nation would be determined by the quality of vessels which participate in exercises with friendly nations, seeking to partner with India. The movement of naval ships into disputed waters, including the

South China Sea indicates the military power of the country, even during periods of peace.

This dual responsibility implies enhancing the capacity and capability of the force on priority for fulfilment of its mission. The navy too needs to consider closing its base in Visakhapatnam, shifting its assets to Port Blair, leading to manpower savings which could be employed for other tasks. Unless naval power is given its due weightage, the nation's military power would never be strongly projected overseas.

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