

# Operational Aspects of the 1971 War in the Maritime Domain

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*The 1971 Indo-Pak War can be described as the Indian Navy's (IN's) finest hour. Until then, save for limited action in Liberation of Goa in 1961 and defensive operations in the 1965 Indo-Pak War, the IN had not been called 'into harm's way' or for offensive action in a major manner. Consequently, the spectacular show in 1971 may have surprised or even stunned many observers or analysts in the military/maritime realm.*

*A brief overview shows that the IN operated in two distinct oceanic spaces—the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal and undertook the entire gamut of naval operations—aircraft carrier operations centred on sea control and destruction of the enemy war waging potential, surface warfare that included Fleet operations in East and West and the audacious missile boat attacks on Karachi, amphibious operations (albeit not so successful), anti-submarine warfare, deception, riverine operations, subversive operations inside then East Pakistan and so forth. Strategic missions of maritime warfare such as blockade, Sea Lines Of Communication (SLOC) disruption and cutting off supply lines between the two wings of Pakistan were conceived and executed to different degrees and were, arguably, impactful.*

*While the war has been written about in general reportage terms, especially in the golden jubilee year, it bears mention that there are*

**Authors' Note:** *While an attempt has been made in this article to give a synopsis of various naval operations of the 1971 Indo-Pak War before delving into the lessons, constraints of space preclude greater elaboration of the background and presume readers' knowledge in this regard.*

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a number of important operational lessons and insights then (and subsequently) that came to the fore which need to be studied and analysed as well. While losses and defeats in war are assiduously studied for causes and reasons, victory is seldom studied the same way. However, it stands to reason that all actions both in victory and defeat need to be analysed for lessons and understanding. While it may be argued that the naval war on the whole was a consequence of bold thinking, meticulous planning and intrepid execution, it still necessitates having a relook at both the successful missions and those not so successful. The latter would include events such as of the amphibious landing at Cox's Bazaar, the sinking of the *Khukri* by *PNS Hangor* and the perceived inability of Western Fleet and submarines to play a major role in the war. The run up to the conflict and the conflict itself saw many glitches at the operational and tactical level in terms of equipment breakdowns, frequent change of plans, lack of communication and personality clashes. While some of these owed to the 'fog and friction of war' and ultimately fortune favoured the brave, an analysis of these would offer useful operational perspectives.

Other aspects of the naval war of 1971 also merit attention. The legal dimensions of targeting 'neutrals' which were discussed at Naval Head Quarters (NHQ), the threat posed by the *USS Enterprise* carrier group that was sought to be deployed in the Indian Ocean and the international 'ping pong' that accompanied it, the challenges faced by top naval leadership in persuading the political apex on the use of sea power as an effective tool in statecraft, the differences of opinion in the top naval leadership on many deployments, the impact of charismatic leadership on rank and file and above all the advantages bestowed by the acquisition of combat hardware in the decade before the war, are all worthy of study and analysis. Overall, within the Navy, it could be argued that there was an upsurge of self-confidence which led to an attitude of overcoming problems and focusing on professionalism and innovative thinking. However, that too merits more study.

The article aims to harmonise some of these diverse strands and carry out an evaluation of the many operational aspects and lessons of the war which can offer valuable takeaways for the future. However, constraints of space and the fact that the article is intended to be in the unclassified realm using open source documentation may render this exercise somewhat incomplete, though still useful in chronicling these lessons/issues of the naval war.

Keywords: 1971 Indo-Pak War; Operational Aspects; Maritime Operations during 1971 Indo-Pak War

## BACKGROUND

The outcome of the elections in Pakistan in December 1970 was a shock to the dominant West Pakistani ruling elite since the Awami League won a clear majority in the federal as well as provincial assemblies, thereby

laying legitimate claim to form the government.<sup>1</sup> Since the verdict was not palatable to practically anyone in West Pakistan, a political stalemate led to violent protests in the East, which slid into a civil war. General Tikka Khan, the military governor, himself conceded that 'the West Pakistani troops killed as many as 30,000 people'.<sup>2</sup> Presumably, the true figure was much higher. India was flooded with nearly 10 million refugees.<sup>3</sup> Feeding, accommodating, and caring for this massive influx of refugees was a near impossible task for India.<sup>4</sup> The ensuing months witnessed substantial diplomatic activity wherein India tried canvassing the United Nations and many other nations for political and diplomatic assistance to create conditions for the refugees to go back.<sup>5</sup> However, this was to be of no avail. By end of April 1971, the political decision had been taken, to prepare for military intervention in East Pakistan, by the end of the year, in case a satisfactory political situation had not been found by then. Accordingly, Naval Head Quarters (NHQ) prepared itself for the ensuing war. Operational plans were made and discussed. War-gaming of various scenarios was done iteratively to refine efficacy of plans and liquidate shortcomings. Accordingly, tasks were assigned to the Western and Eastern Naval Commands and forces allocated. The Operational Commanders carried out intensive training and rigorous work-up of units. The maintenance agencies such as Dockyards went into overdrive to bring ships, including the aircraft carrier, INS Vikrant into the best material state possible. Op-logistics also received considerable attention and bases such as Okha were augmented to function as Forward Operating Bases (FOB) for ships. The Navy's success in December 1971 was the outcome of the way in which these preparatory activities eventually synthesized into a gamut of operations which had far-reaching strategic outcomes.<sup>6</sup>

## THE WESTERN THEATRE

### **A Brief Synopsis of Maritime Operations in the Western Theatre**

The Naval leadership's concept of operations was straightforward: take the offensive, attack Karachi, lure the Pakistan fleet to battle and sever the Sea Lines Of Communication (SLOC) between West and East Pakistan. By end November–early December 1971, assessments by the operations staff at NHQ made it evident that hostilities were imminent and the possibility of a pre-emptive attack by Pakistan was very high. On 2 December, the then Chief of Naval Staff (CNS) Admiral SM Nanda issued orders to the ships of the Western Fleet to sail from Bombay Harbour as soon as possible, which proved to be just in the nick of time.

The Western Fleet was deployed with the objective of posing a threat to Karachi. This would consequently result not only in bottling the Pakistan Fleet at Karachi but also causing the Pakistan Navy (PN) to centre their attention on the *IN*'s Western Fleet, thereby allowing the missile boats to execute their pre-planned attacks from the Saurashtra Coast. Three missile boat attacks were initially planned and were codenamed as Operation Trident (night of 4/5 Dec), Operation Python (initially planned for the night of 6/7 Dec but later executed on the night of 8/9 Dec) and Operation Triumph (initially postponed and later cancelled). To mitigate the risk of air attack, the Western Fleet was to remain outside the 250-mile arc from Karachi during the day and make forays inwards at night. This arc represented the seaward radius of operation of the Pakistan Air Force aircraft.<sup>7</sup>

As per the operational plans, the missile boats were to be escorted by frigates, which were equipped with enhanced radars and command and control facilities, to the vicinity of Karachi under the cover of darkness so that the lethal missiles could be launched at the ships in the harbour and on port installations.<sup>8</sup> The withdrawal of the missile boats had to be expeditious as they would be within the coverage of the shore-based radars in Karachi and would therefore be under the risk of retaliatory action after the initial surprise of the attacks was overcome.

The first missile attack, Operation Trident was successfully executed on the night of 4/5 December by the missile boats *INS Nipat*, *INS Nirghat* and *INS Veer*, escorted by the frigates *INS Kiltan* and *INS Katchall*. The oil tanks at Keamari were set ablaze and the PN destroyer *Khaiber*, minesweeper *Muhafiz* and the Liberian registered commercial ship *MV Venus Challenger* were sunk. The latter was carrying a critical load of arms and ammunition for the Pakistan Armed Forces.

The second missile boat attack was carried out on the night of 8/9 December by the missile boat *INS Vinash*, escorted by the frigate *Trishul*. For the second time, the oil tanks at Keamari were set on fire. The attack caused the Panama registered vessel *Gulf Star* to sink and damaged the PN's fleet tanker *Dacca* and the British vessel *Harmattan*. The damage inflicted was so high that PN promptly recalled all ships into the safety of the inner harbour and even ordered the reduction of their war outfits of ammunition thereby signalling its inability to engage any further with the *IN*.<sup>9</sup>

On 9 December 1971, two anti-submarine frigates *INS Khukri* and *INS Kirpan* were deployed on a mission to locate and hunt down the

Pakistan Daphne class submarine Hangor, whose presence in the Indian waters was 'threatening Indian shipping'. In this engagement, the PN submarine PNS Hangor torpedoed the Indian frigate INS Khukri which happens to be the only ship we lost in that war.

The *IN* launched its entire available force for Operation Falcon post the sinking of INS Khukri to rescue the survivors and conduct massive anti-submarine operations including the deployment of anti-submarine ships, shore-based surveillance aircraft, Alize and Seaking anti-submarine helicopters to hunt the Pakistan submarine Hangor. For four days, ships reported carrying out attacks on probable submarine detections. A total of 67 survivors were rescued and yet the search for the submarine proved elusive as PNS Hangor evaded detection. Finally, on 13 December, the search operation was called off as the Indian forces were beginning to approach within the range of shore based Pakistan Air Force (PAF).

The third missile boat attack, Operation Triumph, was planned to be undertaken on 10 December. However, since Operations Trident and Python had already neutralised the targets, there remained no great strategic gains to be made by a third attack. Moreover, the hunt for the Pakistan submarine and Search & Rescue (SAR) operations for the survivors of INS Khukri, as also the loss of the element of surprise after the first two attacks, caused the Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief (FOC-in-C) West to further postpone the attack and then ultimately cancel it altogether.

The Western Fleet carried out a wide range of operations—multi-dimensional surveillance, SLOC protection, and capture of enemy merchant ships, contraband control, anti-aircraft (AA)/Anti-Submarine (A/S) operations, and providing mutual support to the missile boats, all in order to establish Sea Control in the North Arabian Sea. The Western Fleet achieved the objective of rendering the PN ineffective as they bottled the latter up in Karachi Port.

### **Lessons from the Missile Boat Attacks**

#### *Ingenious Deployment of Missile Boats*

The ingenious 'out of the box thinking' and a spirit of taking the offensive to the enemy by attacking Karachi, the primary and most heavily defended port of Pakistan, led to unprecedented success. The missile boats were towed/escorted by bigger ships and released closer to the enemy shore, to overcome their limited endurance.<sup>10</sup> The deployment

of these small Soviet-built crafts on the high seas and use of radar-homing missiles which devastated ships and shore targets in Karachi were, undoubtedly, a display of the Navy's ingenuity and innovative spirit at work.<sup>11</sup> Ironically, the Pakistani Navy too had been offered six of the same Osa class missile boats by the Soviets in July 1968 but they declined the offer due to their limited range, endurance, lack of anti-aircraft defence and poor sea keeping due to their size.<sup>12</sup> Given these limitations, the PN perceived them to be suitable only for harbour defence. Resultantly, PN did not anticipate the *IN*'s innovative tactics of using the missile boats in an offensive role. Loss of ships and damage to harbour infrastructure resulted in considerable panic in Karachi. Further, neutral merchant ships in Karachi harbour began to seek permission from Government of India for safe passage out of the harbour. In effect, these ships acknowledged the supremacy of the *IN* in the waters around Karachi and the north Arabian Sea.<sup>13</sup>

#### *PN Dependence on PAF*

Pakistan's Naval leadership was confident that any surface threat posed by the Indian ships to the West Pakistan coast could be dealt with by their nation's Air Force. This confidence was bolstered by their information that Vikrant had been deployed to the Bay of Bengal. In hindsight, this proved to be a costly assumption as the *IN* missile boats pressed home their attacks with devastating results.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Training and Modifications to Support the Operation*

Several modifications and training sessions were resorted to in order to use the missile boats the way they were. The crews of both the towing vessels and the missile boats worked up relentlessly to reduce the time required to connect/disconnect to the briefest possible.<sup>15</sup> A new necklace was designed, and strengthened elbows were fixed on the rear struts with the help of the Naval Dockyard to divide the strain over a larger area.<sup>16</sup> The cumbersome steel-wire-rope (SWR) bridle was replaced with nylon hawsers. This innovation made towing easier to handle, and in the long run, the use of the SWR cables was ceased, and the *IN* adopted nylon hawsers for towing as a standard practice. The missile boats did not have cooking or bathing facilities, which limited sea sorties for the crew to less than ten-hour periods. To overcome this limitation, a small galley was added and the water tank was enlarged to hold 5 tons.<sup>17</sup>

### *Effect on Enemy Morale*

The Indian Naval forces in the West, through the missile boat attacks, had exemplified sound preparation, superior tactics and offensive action.<sup>18</sup> Effective use of the element of surprise led to the enemy being caught completely off guard. The Pakistani Navy which had been convinced that the *IN* would never dare to attack its impenetrable stronghold was left surprised and demoralised.<sup>19</sup>

### *The Advent of Missile Warfare at Sea*

The missile boat attacks on 4 and 8 December 1971 ushered the *IN* into the realm of missile age. Any such paradigm change would not have been possible without meticulous training, confidence, professionalism and their integration into the fleet's tactics.<sup>20</sup> The top leadership was visionary in this regard and communicated effectively between all echelons.

### *Need for Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) and Identification-Friend-or-Foe (IFF) Systems*

After the attack, the Trident Task Force was to rendezvous Kiltan off the Dwarka Coast, but mistook her to be a Pakistani Naval warship and nearly fired at her. However, this 'blue-on-blue' situation was averted at the last moment. This illustrated the need for having good MDA, seamless information sharing and IFF systems. However, this has to be seen contextually against the technology available at that point of time. The *IN* today has hoisted those lessons and has made MDA one of the key aspects of its operational philosophy. Indeed today, the advancements made in MDA, satellite based communications and C4I2SR<sup>21</sup> systems make the *IN* of today more formidable force than what it was in 1971.

### *Need to have well-defined Task Organisation and Command & Control*

The initial plans envisaged INS Trishul to be the accompanying escort to the missile boats in the Trident Task Force. However, this was changed to INS Kadmat leading to the reworking of the procedures and plans. At the last minute Kadmat was replaced by INS Kiltan. INS Kiltan had never worked up or trained with the missile boats. This resulted in some co-ordination problems as the missile boats had planned, exercised and developed confidence with one set of ships but ended up being escorted by another one. It was probably this reason that at the last minute, Cdr BB Yadav, the Squadron Commander of Missile Boats Squadron (K 25),

decided to embark INS Nipat to provide direct leadership and cohesion to his force. These events highlight the need to have task organisation structures laid out well in advance by the leadership so that training and plans can be aligned tightly.

Before INS Nipat and INS Veer sailed from Bombay, a briefing was held in the Maritime Operations Room (MOR), where the Missile Boat Commanding Officers (COs) and K-25 were briefed that INS Kiltan and INS Katchal would accompany the missile boats and since Commander (later Commodore) Gopal Rao, CO INS Kiltan, was senior to K-25, he would be the Officer in Tactical Command (OTC) of the Force till the group arrived 75 miles from Karachi. Thereafter, the escort force (Kiltan and Katchal) would fall back, and the missile boats would proceed under the Tactical Command of K-25. However, on the evening of 4 December 1971, when the Trident Force was on its way to Karachi, Headquarters Western Naval Command (HQWNC) sent a signal informing that Escorts were to remain in company of the missile boats throughout. Though the signal was silent on who would assume the Tactical Control, INS Kiltan assumed that since she was the senior-most ship in company, she would retain Tactical Command. However, K-25 and the missile boats were clear that having arrived 75 miles of Karachi, K-25 was in Tactical Command, irrespective of the fact that INS Kiltan was in company. This dichotomy manifested itself when immediately after the missile attack on ships, the missile boats reversed course and withdrew at high speed while Kiltan continued on a northerly heading. K-25 claimed he decided to withdraw taking into account the likely confusion between friendlies due to the dispersal of own forces and the possible development of air and surface threat.<sup>22</sup> However, CO Kiltan's stand was that K 25 was not authorised to order withdrawal. This was his prerogative as the OTC.<sup>23</sup> Vice Admiral Kohli, the then C-in-C WNC, was of the opinion that a serious command and control problem had engulfed the Trident force which could have led to serious difficulties and that, it was just as well that the attack was broken off by K-25.<sup>24</sup> This brings out the need to have a clear understanding of command and control by all concerned at any point in time. Any changes made to the orders also need to be explicit in their communication.

### *Communication Gaps and Differences of Opinion*

There were differences of opinion between the Chief of Naval Staff (CNS) and Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief (FOCINC) West regarding the



missile boat attacks. There were also differences of opinion between the FOCINC West and the Fleet Commander regarding the employment of fleet ships. There were certain differences between CO Kiltan and K-25 regarding command and control as brought out above. Whether these differences may have jeopardised any mission is hard to evaluate. However, it is necessary not to 'over read' them. Firstly, in any campaign of such nature spread over a large canvas such differences are natural and, arguably, healthy since they contribute to overall development of plans. Secondly, whatever the differences (and they are matter of public record) all personnel concerned closed ranks once plans were finalised and war was fought. The takeaway from these episodes is to recognise the fact that such things may happen in future and we must guard against the possibility of differences of opinion, necessary as they may be, diluting the combat effort.

#### *Action Information Organisation (AIO) and Exchange of Information*

During Op Trident, after firing the initial missiles on the contacts detected on radar, it was expected that when there were no contacts on radar, all the ships of the Task Group should have continued to close Karachi and, from the predetermined point promulgated by INS Kiltan, each missile boat should have fired one more missile at Karachi thereby inflicting maximum damage on the adversary installations. However, the missile boats turned back mistaking the anti-aircraft tracer rounds fired from Karachi, to be enemy aircraft thereby possibly missing out on an opportunity to inflict more extensive damage.<sup>25</sup> This, however, has to be balanced by the fact that the missile boats had limited AIO facilities and could not have an adequate picture to be built up for the Command.<sup>26</sup> The facilities for such command and control on the Petyas (the escorting ships) were also limited. But apparently, the existing facilities were not used to best advantage.<sup>27</sup> It may be possible to argue, in hindsight, that they could have maintained a better surface plot.<sup>28</sup> Coordination of AIO between the escort ships and the missile boats could have possibly been handled better. It seems from the differing accounts given by Commodore Vijay Jerath in his book, *25 Missile Boat Squadron* and by Commodore KP Gopal Rao in his article, 'Distortion of Indian Naval History—1971 Period (*Indian Defence Review*, July 1990)' that either an accurate surface plot was not maintained or that information was not passed or not received adequately. Either way, this implied that knowledge of the friendlies and the enemies in the area was

not completely available to the units, and therefore, possibly the missile boats after achieving the damage turned back, leaving us open to the question, 'Could they have inflicted greater damage if they had better situational awareness?'

### *Communication*

Anomalous Propagation (ANAPROP) conditions which are prevalent in the Arabian Sea during certain months often result in communication interception over very long ranges. To overcome this, ships communicated on Very High Frequency (VHF), made use of communication code in Russian and, otherwise, tried to communicate within loud hailer range, thereby denying Pakistanis the valuable chance to decipher the messages in time. Concurrently, the Pakistani Naval Code was broken by our signal intelligence teams which gave us a big advantage. However, there were one or two occasions when the ships out of Very/Ultra High Frequency (V/UHF) range did not switch over to secondary communicated circuits on H/F and this resulted in loss of communication. In some cases, the 'fog of war' increased by the fact that there were different IFF codes between ships which was not checked prior to the operation.<sup>29</sup> Over the years, these lessons have been analysed by the *IN* and substantial emphasis were laid on development of seamless communication policies and facilities.

### *Flexibility of Plans*

Operation Python was launched further seaward than Trident and took place in more unfavourable sea conditions causing the operation to be delayed to the night of 8/9 December. After the first missile attacks on Karachi, the PN was keeping the approaches to Karachi from Saurashtra under close surveillance, and it would not have been possible for the missile boats to approach Karachi from that direction undetected. Moreover, NHQ had intercepted Pakistani Navy's signals of the Pakistani Air Force strafing its own Frigate PNS Zulfiqar, in a clear case of mistaken identity. Consequently, concern was raised in the mind of the CNS, Admiral SM Nanda that it would not be prudent to expose the Python task force to such a high probability of attack by an alerted enemy.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, Flag Officer Commanding Western Fleet (FOCWF) not only decided to launch the second missile attack from west-southwest but also altered the Fleet's course westward.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the second missile attack also went in undetected.

### *Fleet Action off Makran Coast*

At the same time that the Trishul group had been detached to attack Karachi, FOCWF had detached the Mysore group to bombard Jiwani Port with the aim of distracting PN Ships away from Python Task Force. On the evening of 8 December, 75 miles south of Jiwani, the Mysore group, encountered, boarded and apprehended Pakistani merchant ship Madhumati registered in Karachi but masquerading as a neutral. FOCWF assessed that the aim of creating a distraction was achieved and decided not to waste ammunition bombarding worthless targets on the Makran coast. To some, this produced the impression that the Fleet had not done much in terms of offensive action or having a 'glory moment' of its own. However, as brought out earlier, the Fleet had carried out many operations and gained sea control in the north Arabian Sea apart from enabling Missile Boat attacks. There were no worthwhile targets at sea. On the other hand, many Senior Officer including Admiral Nanda felt that the Fleet could have bombarded Jiwani, Gwadar, or Pasni on Makran Coast with the objective of raising own morale and demoralising the enemy.<sup>32</sup> This is an issue that has adherents to both points of view and can be discussed by students of the subject in future.

### **A Brief Synopsis of the Sinking of INS Khukri**

The presence of a Daphne Class Submarine off the Gujarat Coast, south of Diu, was intercepted by the Navy's communication intelligence stations and having assessed that it posed a potential threat, the Western Naval Command took the decision of conducting anti-submarine operations. Despite being aware that the latest Daphne class submarine was far more advanced than the *IN's* submarines and surface ships, urgent operational orders were drafted in consultation with Captain M.N. Mulla, the Senior Officer (F 14) of the 14th Frigate Squadron (14 FS). Since the 14 FS comprising INS Khukri (F-14), and INS Kirpan (INS Kuthar was not available as explained later), as well as few Seakings, were the only force available for the mission, it was decided to use them as 'Hunter Killers' and the ships set sail on 8 December for the submarine's last known position. As per the plan, the Seaking helicopters were asked to operate closer to Bombay while the Frigates were to operate closer to Diu in the northern sector.

There were two ships against a submarine. Conditions at sea favour a submarine in warm waters. Moreover, the ships had sensor equipment

with far lesser capabilities as compared to the submarine. On 9 December, PNS Hangor fired a torpedo at Khukri and was able to sink it along with 18 Officers including the Commanding Officer Captain M.N. Mulla and 176 sailors. It even fired two torpedoes at Kirpan that missed either due to the torpedo misfiring or due to Kirpan's evasive action. Realising that the ship was torpedoed, Captain Mulla stayed on the bridge assisting others in the limited time span he had as most of the ship's crew was trapped in the lower decks. Captain Mulla preferred to go down with the men and the ship following the old maritime tradition. The heroic act of Captain Mulla and his valiant crew still serves as an exemplary act of unyielding spirit and indomitable courage. At that moment when INS Khukri was torpedoed, INS Kirpan realised she too was a target and took evasive measures. She fired Anti-Submarine (A/S) mortars at the torpedo bearing, but when her mortars became inoperative, she cleared the area at full speed as per the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP). She returned to the location the next morning after rendezvousing with INS Katchall to continue the hunt as well as assist Search and Rescue (SAR) operations.

The loss of Khukri posed several other questions of which the following stand out:

- (a) How much did the absence of Kuthar affect the overall combat capacity and whether this brings to light sub optimal maintenance by ship's crew/ dockyard staff.
- (b) Should the Seakings have operated directly under the OTC/ SAC at sea than the shore authorities?
- (c) Should IN have been experimenting with a new sonar during war especially considering that the sonar under trial required slower speeds for optimal performance whereas normal anti-submarine tactics required much higher speeds?
- (d) Operationally, the question most discussed is whether it would have been more prudent to sidestep the submarine totally and let it be. Its position did not pose a threat to Western Fleet which was much to the West and the deduction of the submarine being a 'threat to Indian shipping' seems far-fetched. Even the missile boats operating there and, unlikely targets by themselves, could have been directed to use high speeds and operate close to Coast or further west to sidestep the Hangor.
- (e) If it was indeed a threat should the weight of attack have been more and should more ships and air-borne anti-submarine

warfare (ASW) efforts been directed to this effort as was done after the attack.

### **Lessons from the Sinking of INS Khukri**

#### *Improved Focus on All Things ASW*

The sinking of INS Khukri was a signal for the *IN* to improve its ASW capabilities. Long-range sonars and longer range weapons had to be inducted if ships were to have a fighting chance against modern submarines and their homing torpedoes. The incident resulted in the navy's emphasis, in post war years, on development of indigenous sonars, improvement of ASW drills, induction of potent Maritime Reconnaissance (MR) ASW aircraft, development of better torpedo evasion techniques, compliance to life jacket and life raft release inspections and drills and better damage control arrangements especially in combat. ASW tactics were revised to cater for situational decision making, and of putting air ASW assets under the control of the Scene-of-Action Commander (SAC). Systematic efforts began to keep up with the rapid advances taking place in submarine and ASW, sonars, anti-submarine weapons, torpedo homing mechanisms and torpedo decoys and integrate all this into an effective anti-submarine doctrine. Post 1971, major tactical exercises and debriefs were organised under NHQ's direct supervision to emphasise these concerns. These helped to gradually standardise ASW doctrines and enhance operator efficiency.<sup>33</sup>

#### *Development of Indigenous Tactical Publications*

One consequence of the legacy of British training in initial years was the commonality of tactical publication being used by both navies. Hence, the Pakistani submarine commander knew exactly which search plan was being carried out. Even if it is argued that the course of events would not have been any different, if we had put together and used our own search plans, it would have made the submarine commander's task less easy.<sup>34</sup> Consequently, the post war years saw greater focus on *IN* devising indigenously developed tactical publications and doctrines.

## **THE EASTERN THEATRE**

### **A Brief Synopsis of Operations in the Eastern Theatre**

The Eastern Fleet carried out contraband control, severed the SLOCs between East and West Pakistan, thereby preventing reinforcements/

supplies to Pakistan forces in the East or their potential escape. INS Vikrant and her squadrons of aircraft—Seahawks and Alizes—carrying out sustained operations, inflicted heavy damage, on the enemy installations and airfields at Cox's Bazaar and Chittagong and at many other places and also on enemy shipping. The *IN* achieved the important feat, right at the outset of war, of luring and sinking the Pakistan submarine PNS Ghazi off Vishakhapatnam.

A riverine operation was mounted by 'Force Alpha', a maritime task force comprising two gunboats Padma and Palash, loaned from the West Bengal government, Chitragada, a watercraft of the Border Security Force (BSF) and INS Panvel, a seaward defence boat, as the command ship. The Force undertook a maritime attack from the riverine route on the port complex of Chalna and Mongla, thereby achieving an offensive on the adversary from the sea, and further affected the enemy's war waging potential which was being sustained through shipping at these crucial river harbours.

By 9 December, a need was felt for amphibious landing operations to be conducted at Cox's Bazaar. For this purpose, two Landing Ship Tank (LSTs), INS Gharial and INS Guldar along with a merchant vessel Vishwa Vijay were used. The operation was to be carried out using an infantry battalion 1/3 Gurkha, two companies of 11 Bihar and 881 Light Battery with Army Service Corps (ASC) and medical platoons. An amphibious landing was attempted on 15 December at the Reju Creek, South of Cox's Bazaar.<sup>35</sup> However, due to the difficulties faced in landing the troops only one platoon could be landed and later the amphibious landing of troops was moved to Cox's Bazaar. This issue has been discussed in more detail later in this article.

By 10 December, the Navy controlled all the approaches to Bangladesh ports. East Pakistan harbours and installations at Chittagong, Chalna, Khulna, Mongla, and Cox's Bazaar had been subjected to round-the-clock attention from the air. The PN merchant craft that had assembled at Narayanganj and Barisal which could have been used for troop transportation had been sunk or disabled. Mongla and Chalna had already been evacuated.<sup>36</sup> Ultimately, Pakistan forces in East Pakistan surrendered on 16 December 1971.

## Lessons from Operations in the Eastern Theatre

### *Deception and Destruction of Ghazi*

Being well aware that Pakistan would deploy its submarine PNS Ghazi to sink the aircraft carrier, the Eastern Naval Command, before the war

broke out, was successful in convincing the Pakistanis that INS Vikrant was in Vishakhapatnam whereas, in fact, she was in the Andamans. Large quantities of rations were ordered from the local contractors to indicate the presence of the carrier in and around Vishakhapatnam.<sup>37</sup> INS Rajput was used as a decoy to try and deceive the enemy into believing that she was the Vikrant and was sailed about 160 miles off Vishakhapatnam. She was directed to generate high volume of dummy signal traffic to masquerade as a big unit. As another deception measure, an intentional breach of security was done by making an unclassified signal—a private telegram from one of Vikrant's sailors, asking about the welfare of his mother who was seriously ill.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, the PN, based on the intelligence received, directed PNS Ghazi to occupy Zone Victor (codename for Vishakhapatnam) to lie in wait for Vikrant. This was the position where it was finally sunk on the night of 3rd/4th of December 1971. In a communication recovered from the wreck, Commodore Submarines in Karachi sent a signal to PNS Ghazi on 25 November informing that "Intelligence indicates Carrier in Port" and that she should proceed to Vishakhapatnam with all dispatch. Hence, *IN's* efforts of deception succeeded, and the Fleet was able to operate with greater freedom with the Ghazi now eliminated.

#### *Importance of War Watching Organisation*

In the weeks before the war, special efforts were taken to contact various fishing communities in and around Vishakhapatnam and motivate them to act as visual lookouts over the vast expanse of waters for anything out of the ordinary, e.g., a periscope or a snort, that they may see when out fishing. They were briefed exactly on what to do with any information gathered. Integrating the vast network of fishermen to act as the eyes and ears of the Navy was a precursor of the War Watching Organisation that has today become well entrenched in Naval plans. Today, it has come a long way and the Navy constantly maintains a close liaison with coastal and fishing communities under the National Committee for Strengthening Maritime and Coastal Security (NCSMCS) construct.<sup>39</sup>

#### *Offensive Use of Naval Air Power*

During the 1965 war, INS Vikrant was kept inside Bombay harbour and did not go out to sea. In 1971 if a situation like that of 1965 war repeated itself, INS Vikrant would have been considered to be a 'White Elephant' and hence it was imperative for INS Vikrant to be deployed.

Despite the cracks and leaks in INS Vikrant's boilers and the risks that were encountered in deploying it, the CNS was resolute in his decision to use the carrier in an offensive role under all circumstances.<sup>40</sup> The Dockyard and the ship's crew used imaginative and innovative means to make repairs and modifications and the *IN* was able to harness its combat potential despite some limitations.<sup>41</sup> When the balloon went up on 4 December, a high volume of air strikes were carried out by Vikrant's Alizes and Seahawks on Chittagong, Cox's Bazaar, Mongla, Chalna and Khulna. This was achieved despite Vikrant's speed limitations and marginal wind conditions which placed aircraft at risk during launch and recovery.

The cumulative effect was that in addition to substantial destruction or damage of several port cities of East Pakistan, about 11 merchant ships (totalling 57 thousand tons) and three PN Ships Jessore, Comilla and Sylhet were destroyed.<sup>42</sup> Without INS Vikrant, the limited number of ships that constituted the Eastern Fleet could not have coped with the many merchant ships in the area.<sup>43</sup> Thus, Vikrant's assistance in contraband control was invaluable and its effective implementation helped the *IN* to establish a strangle-hold on East Pakistan's SLOCs.

### *Success of Force Alpha*

With the aim of mounting a sneak attack on Chalna and Mongla using the riverine route, a small task group called Force Alpha (Force A) was created with elements of the *IN* personnel, Mukti Bahini and erstwhile Bengali East Pakistan Navy personnel who had defected. In an example of good jointmanship, the task force operated directly under the orders of the Eastern Command (Army) at Fort William and not the Eastern Naval Command.<sup>44</sup> This was possibly the *IN's* first and only riverine operation. Force Alpha's story is of a disparate group assembled from limited resources scoring big in the war. They braved navigational and other challenges to penetrate deep into enemy heartland. They risked capture with attendant consequences. Be it the interception of Pakistani merchant ships or the destruction at Khulna, the naval task force proved its mettle due to good leadership.<sup>45</sup>

### *Mechanisms for Prevention of 'Blue on Blue' Incidents*

On the morning of 10 December, while undertaking a raid through the Pussur river, the ships of Force Alpha were engaged by Gnat fighter jets of the Indian Air Force (IAF). Analysis of this 'Blue-on-Blue' incident



reveals that it was precipitated by the IAF fighters' lack of identification of the yellow flags as was pre-arranged, as well as the fact that Force Alpha was not supposed to go to Khulna—it was an impromptu and brave decision taken when it was found that the Pakistani troops had withdrawn from Mongla. Even if Commander MNR Samant, the Senior Officer of the Force, had informed his headquarters of his decision, it is doubtful whether the information would have reached the Gnats in the few hours that it took Force Alpha to go up the river from Mongla to Khulna.<sup>46</sup> Such incidents can be prevented only by having more jointness whereby real-time information sharing of ongoing operation in a theatre is known to all elements of the three services. Further, at the tactical level, having IFF systems on maximum or all units is necessary. However, these are easier said than done as they need to balance requirements of security and compromise of plans.

#### *Lessons from the Amphibious Landing*

The Eastern Army's rapid advance between 4 and 8 December led to an assessment that Pakistani troops might attempt to escape southward into Burma past Cox's Bazaar. To prevent this from happening, it was decided, albeit at a very short notice, to mount an amphibious landing of a battalion of troops at Cox's Bazaar at dawn of 12 December. However, assessing that the landing might face opposition at Cox's Bazaar, the landing was ultimately carried out on 15 December on a beach further south near the town of Ukhia. This landing operation is now regarded as not having achieved its objectives. Army troops earmarked had not trained in amphibious operations and the surge in numbers did not, possibly, cater for sufficient life belts, scramble nets or suitable landing craft and most importantly, the troops from the 1/3 Gurkhas had never been to sea. The *IN* had limited amphibious assets—two LSTs along with a requisitioned coal carrier, *Vishwa Vijay*—and, therefore, if a landing were to be planned, it required more careful planning and extensive rehearsals. However, this could not happen as there was no clear joint operational scheme existing at that time and, admittedly, because the time was short. It, therefore, comes across as an *ad hoc* decision. V. Adm Hiranandani attributes this to the 'lack of detailed planning'.<sup>47</sup> These constraints were exacerbated by the fact that the planners neither had adequate intelligence of the area, nor proper charts, nor survey information of feasible beaches, all of which are understandable retrospectively. In view of these circumstances, the initial plan was to beach the landing craft

and refloat them at high tide whereby the troops would land 'dry shod'. However, as this entailed risks to the ships, the plans had to be changed at short notice thereby resulting in the unfortunate outcome.<sup>48</sup> However, what must not be forgotten in this is that 600 troops were landed, that it sent the tottering East Pakistan further signal of our resolve and it sealed off escape routes for the fleeing West Pakistan personnel.

There were many lessons to be learnt. Amphibious operations are, arguably, the most complex joint operations in the collective repertoire of armed forces. They mandate formalising clear Command and Control structures, extensive joint training and elaborate procedures. There is little room for error as command errors or incompatibilities are often at the origin of failures. This was seen in the landings on 15 December 1971 when the landing ships did not reach the designated beach on time as tidal conditions had changed. Three Gorkha soldiers drowned and Gharial almost broached. For the *IN* which, since 1971, has built up formidable amphibious capabilities, the 'unsuccessful or partially successful' landings of the war offer several lessons about jointness in planning, execution, training, doctrine development and logistics. This extends to the other two services as well and several efforts have been made in this regard over the past decade to bridge the gaps.

### **A Brief Synopsis of the Enterprise Incident**

By 10 December 1971, the Pakistani offensive in the West had ground to a halt. The Pakistan Army in the East had made its first tentative move to obtain a ceasefire. On the same day, President Nixon of USA ordered the creation of Task Group (TG) 74, consisting of the nuclear propelled aircraft carrier *Enterprise*, an amphibious assault ship *Tripoli*, three guided missile escorts, four destroyers, supply ship and a nuclear attack submarine, and sent it steaming from the Gulf of Tonkin, towards Bay of Bengal. Whether this was a desire to help an ally in Pakistan or prevent its further 'dismemberment' or perceived Indian threat to West Pakistan is not for this article to analyse. Nor does this article seek to discuss the many back channel negotiations that may have taken place in Embassies and Capitals of the countries concerned. Meanwhile, the USSR responded by sending a group of warships northwards from the Soviet Indian Ocean fleet.

In India, the reactions to the TG 74 deployment ranged from some public consternation or perplexity regarding American motives; however, it was met with poise at the highest political level aided by clear

understanding by the Navy at operational level. In Delhi, PM Indira Gandhi was briefed by Naval Intelligence on the gamut of operations TG 74 was capable at sea. The collective judgement of the situation was that USA was unlikely to get involved in the war. Consequently, the Indian government displayed an unfazed attitude to the TG steaming towards the Bay of Bengal.<sup>49</sup>

In the meanwhile, the US Navy's Chief of Naval Operations, Adm Zumwalt halted the TG at Singapore for two days since his advice had not been taken while the orders had been given by the civilian administration. Then, on 12 December, they were ordered to proceed to the Bay of Bengal through the Malacca Strait in broad daylight so as to be as conspicuous as possible. The original orders for the TG were to deploy to a position off East Pakistan. But Adm Zumwalt felt that this would put them in harm's way and he convinced the powers to change their deployment area to a position that was South-East of Sri Lanka. By 15 December, the day Pakistan forces in East Pakistan surrendered, TG 74 was in this station, thousands of kilometres away from the combat zone.

### **Lessons from the Enterprise Incident**

The reconstruction of events yield interesting insights of how, in sensitive situations, naval deployments can convey signals of intent and how these signals are interpreted at different levels, nationally and internationally.<sup>50</sup> Although the naval leadership's immediate reaction was of incredulity and concern, they quickly went about assessing the development and determined its responses to various possible events that may or may not unfold. Indian Naval leadership assessed that the Task Force 74's primary intention was to frighten the Indian Forces into withdrawing their forces from the operational area and let the PN ships break out.<sup>51</sup> Admiral Krishnan, FOCINC East, decided that it must be ensured that Chittagong airport, which had already been bombed and rendered useless to the Pakistanis, must remain in that condition. Also, the five merchant ships that had been camouflaged and concealed by the enemy to be used for evacuation of troops were located after a thorough aerial search and destroyed. That way, with the merchant ships gone, even if the TG 74 was to provide an impregnable air umbrella, the evacuation of Pakistan's trapped army would not be possible.<sup>52</sup> Hence, effective operational assessment by the naval leadership helped convert an unacceptable situation to a manageable one.

Commendably, the *IN* leadership considered all the important variables when deciding on moves to counter the presence of USS Enterprise and come up with viable counter strategies. Having studied the possibilities by which the entry of the Seventh Fleet in the scene of action could pose a threat to *IN*'s smaller Carrier Battle Group (CBG) around INS Vikrant, they also drew a plan which would render swift and maximum damage on the enemy installations before the arrival of the Seventh Fleet, thereby making it difficult for the latter to make any significant contributions to the success of their aims.<sup>53</sup> At the strategic level, it had been correctly assessed that the US ultimately would not risk getting drawn into a war in which it had no real purchase.

Subsequent recollections of some of the naval personnel involved in the war did indicate their thought process. They concluded that the US Navy presence showing was more in nature of strategic signalling to coerce India and be involved when their political leadership thought opportune. While USSR with their own naval forces provided deterrence to such scenarios, the *IN* exhibited imperturbability at the apex level (the oft quoted statement of Adm SM Nanda that he had directed his forces to invite the US Navy Captains for a drink on board) while at the operational level plans were mooted to interdict the Seventh Fleet by deploying ships (INS Beas) and a submarine, and if it came to crunch the Vikrant with her aircraft. While it would have been a hugely asymmetrical force, it would have sent a signal of Indian resolve.<sup>54</sup>

In retrospect, the whole incident turned out to be a futile gesture but provided a lesson to India in coercive realpolitik. To the political elite, it reinforced the case for having a navy with strong sea-denial capability to insulate the nation against foreign interference.<sup>55</sup> After the war, the USS Enterprise incident awakened awareness at the higher decision-making levels in India of the finesse with which the naval forces could facilitate diplomacy. This awareness combined with the public appreciation of the Navy's other achievements in the 1971 war, helped to reinforce naval proposals for a stronger Navy.<sup>56</sup>

#### MISCELLANEOUS LESSONS AND TAKEAWAYS

##### **Submarine Operations**

##### *Strategic Considerations Behind Submarine Operations*

The political restrictions imposed in Rules of Engagement (ROEs) for submarines requiring 'positive identification' (i.e., visual identification by

periscope) prior to targeting, affected their attack capability especially in SLOC interdiction. The PN also had similar restrictions. Consequently, *IN* submarines drew no blood, but a PN submarine sank INS Khukri off the Indian coast in a well-executed tactical action. The *IN*'s ASW weakness was apparent. The ROEs have to be seen in the context of the Law of Armed Conflict and neither side perhaps wanted to precipitate post-hostilities legal issues especially if neutral ships of other countries were involved. Given a choice, perhaps a better line of action would have been to have declared 'War Zones' and sink any ship transiting through those, after a suitable warning period. Only the submarines could have achieved this with impunity in enemy waters.<sup>57</sup> However, it is interesting that no such restrictions were imposed on surface units and during the two missile boat attacks off Karachi, three merchant ships were sunk or disabled. The Venus Challenger and the British-owned merchant vessel Harmattan were sunk and the SS Gulf Star suffered heavy damage. If the *IN*'s missile boats could attack merchant shipping, then the Indian submarines too could have been given some relaxations to carry out the missions. But by absolutely restricting them, they were rendered completely ineffective.<sup>58</sup> The explanation perhaps lies in the fact that the Laws of Armed Conflict at Sea prohibited targeting of neutrals by submarines, and it was a strategic consideration of not dragging other nations into the war or widening the scope of conflict that made Admiral Nanda prescribe restrictive submarine ROEs.

### *Effect of Submarine Deployment*

Even though the Submarine arm of the Navy was in its infancy and its deployment was done with some hesitation, the work done by them was commendable as it acted as deterrence by limiting the area of adversaries' shipping. During the war, the presence of the Indian submarine INS Karanj along the enemy coast forced the enemy to confine their shipping to a narrow area and operate only during the dark hours thereby effectively imposing heavy navigational restrictions on them. Consequently, the adversary not only had to step up their aerial reconnaissance but was also constrained to bottle up its warships in havens along the coast.<sup>59</sup>

Viewed from submariner's perspective though, the ROEs were considered restrictive. While INS Kursura and INS Karanj were deployed off West Pakistan, INS Khanderi was deployed in the East. The recollections of Cmde KS Subramanian, CO INS Virbahu and RAdm Arun Auditto, CO INS Kursura<sup>60</sup> bring out their 'frustration' at

not being able to attack shipping while operating freely in proximity of enemy territory.

### **New Hardware Inductions**

The procurement and induction of some contemporary naval hardware in the years preceding the war also played a pivotal role. The *IN* had only some months earlier acquired eight missile boats of the Osa class and their crews, freshly trained in the USSR, were highly skilled and motivated. Further, the Navy also commissioned five Petya Class anti-submarine vessels, four submarines of Kalvari Class, INS Amba the submarine depot ship and smaller Seaward Defence Boat Class of vessels in the period. Indian Naval pilots were also highly trained and those who were away from flying duties were reinstated onboard the Vikrant. They flew together as a team irrespective of rank or seniority, and the Seahawks and Alizes were airworthy and operational, which together made Vikrant a formidable platform even though she was aging and had only three boilers out of four operational. The *IN* had also recently inducted the formidable Seaking helicopters from the UK, colloquially called 'Flying Frigates' because of their advanced capabilities. However, they were flown to Bombay post-haste just when the war broke out and their crews lacked tactical weapon training since their weapon fits were still being inducted.<sup>61</sup>

This factor contributed to success in the war and owes much to the efforts of Adm AK Chatterji, the CNS preceding Adm Nanda. As seen from the loss of Khukri and success of other platforms, induction of contemporary systems and capabilities to counter those of the potential adversaries is an ongoing and critical necessity for the Navy and the same has been enshrined in the Indian Maritime Doctrine (INBR-8).

### **Effect of *Guerre De Course***

The economic dependence of Pakistan on imports of raw material, fuel, food and military supplies by sea made its ports irresistible targets. The *IN* therefore decided to choke the jugular by effectively policing the Pakistani trade routes even as they had blockaded the port of Karachi and enforced contraband control. During the operations, several merchant ships and dhows were intercepted, boarded and seized.<sup>62</sup> Consequent sinking of merchant shipping off Karachi, and the resultant stoppage of all shipping traffic to and from West Pakistan, highlighted the magnitude of effect that *guerre de course* (trade warfare) can have on a strategic level.

### **Investment in Signals Intelligence (SIGINT)**

Radio interceptions by SIGINT units paid huge dividends. During the period preparatory to the war, first fledgling steps towards joint planning were taken, not only amongst the three services but also with the paramilitary forces and the essential services. Lieutenant General JFR Jacob, Chief of Staff of Headquarters Eastern Command, insisted on Eastern Command having its own signal intercept unit, as he felt it would be futile waiting for information from Delhi.<sup>63</sup> This unit was not only able to intercept Pakistani communications between its western and eastern wings but also break the Pakistani Naval Code.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, our Headquarters were able to know in advance much of what the Pakistani Navy was planning. SIGINT conveyed to the *IN*, both in Delhi as well as in Vishakhapatnam, that the submarine PNS Ghazi had entered the Bay of Bengal. Many other such important signals regarding Naval and merchant vessel traffic were shared with all Service Headquarters. This helped the *IN* to analyse the information and decide on the next course of action with a smaller Observe–Orient–Decide–Act (OODA)<sup>65</sup> loop than the adversary.<sup>66</sup> This was augmented by the tactics adopted by the *IN*'s Signal Branch, of creating huge dummy traffic to mislead the listening Pakistani intelligence posts and to cover the actual deployment of our forces. This helped confuse the Pakistani Naval Forces and thereby the *IN* succeeded in carrying out the systematically planned attacks.<sup>67</sup> The importance of Signal Intelligence is as relevant today as it was in 1971.

### **A Case for Indigenous Ship Building and Maintenance–Repair-and-Overhaul (MRO) Facilities**

The war also brought into focus, the sub-optimal material state of some of our ships. For instance, within 72 hours of sailing on 2 December, INS Kuthar had a major blow-up in the engine room and some personnel were injured. She had to be taken in tow by INS Kirpan to return to Bombay and escorted by INS Khukri. In effect it meant that the problem of one ship resulted in three ships being removed from the chessboard. INS Vijeta, one of the two missile boats attached with the Fleet for Op Python, also suffered a breakdown on the day after sailing from Bombay and had to be towed back by INS Sagardeep. Similarly, due to a last-minute defect INS Talwar had to drop out of the Karachi strike group during Op Python. In essence, 50 per cent of the combat capability of the force was denuded. Any material defect in war does not just affect the ship but has other repercussions as well, as it affects the entire force.

Throughout the period the ships were at sea, there were machinery breakdowns which intermittently reduced the speed of the Force and enhanced vulnerability for that duration. The technical crews of the ship responded to the challenges, repairs were carried out and ships were able to get back. One reason for the material state of the ships was that many of these ships were 'hand-me-downs' or bought second-hand from the British and were old. Most of their maintenance was done through British agencies. The Naval Dockyard and the Base Repair Organizations in the ports of Mumbai, Goa, Kochi and Chennai had to work hard to keep the ships in fighting trim.

This conflict was also a lesson for our dockyards and maintenance facilities, to remain abreast of best maintenance practices and technologies to ensure peak availability of units during war. This restates the need for self-reliance in ship-building and dockyards to ensure timely maintenance and quality refits of the ships and submarines.<sup>68</sup> To be fair to the Naval Dockyards incorporation of lot of new equipment meant that their canvas had widened; they had to simultaneously learn about the new Russian ships which had different maintenance philosophies while nursing many old British ships which needed extensive housekeeping. The need for continuous, uninterrupted, long haul and top-class maintenance is one of the key takeaways of the war especially since future wars might not give notice like this one. Navy's emphasis on self-reliance and indigenisation, on being a builder's rather than buyer's navy, to a large extent, is shaped by the experiences of this war.

### **Need for Jointmanship**

There were also some shortcomings in planning, jointmanship and execution. Jointness whenever or wherever it occurred was either on a tactical level or through *ad hoc* mechanisms set up by the operational commanders. A comprehensive joint operational scheme was conspicuous by its absence.<sup>69</sup> Whatever coordination occurred was factually tactical. Greater economy of effort and effectiveness of limited military assets would undoubtedly have accrued through the greater coordination and planning associated with jointness. For instance, the IAF and *IN* had no discussions on airspace management. In fact, a fighter from the Vikrant fired its guns at a UN aircraft bound for Dacca. Fortunately, it missed.<sup>70</sup> The *IN* had initially planned to use its carrier wing to support IV Corps' advance from Tripura. That could not materialise for two reasons. First, the carrier borne aircraft had their hands full in attacking ports and



shipping. Second, they had hardly trained jointly with the IAF for joint offensive air support.<sup>71</sup>

### **Leadership**

The war brought out the quality of naval leadership at several levels. Adm Nanda, the CNS, had seen how the Navy was restricted from playing a major role in the 1965 war. He had determined that 'should another opportunity arise' the Navy would not be left behind and would make significant contributions to the war. He was able to convince the political apex with his bold and offensive plans for 1971. He was also responsible for the modicum of jointness achieved with the Army and Air Force at the level of the Service Chiefs, a fact to which Field Marshal SHFJ Manekshaw attests.<sup>72</sup> Adm Nanda worked painstakingly to bring about a change in the outlook of the Western Command which designed more of a defensive strategy. He faced opposition from some of the staff at the NHQ and other places as they were not in favour of strikes against Karachi. His working style made sure everyone was involved in the planning process. His decision to allocate the *IN*'s sole aircraft carrier INS Vikrant to the Eastern Fleet was a very well thought out decision that ultimately paid dividends.<sup>73</sup> Nanda was a visionary with the big picture in mind while allowing his staff to work out the details.

Another key figure in the naval leadership calculus was Vice Admiral N Krishnan, the Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief East during the 1971 war. The Eastern Naval Command was continuously worked up under this very demanding and a hard taskmaster C-in-C. His intellect and operational savvy greatly contributed to the plans for the war. As he had commanded INS Vikrant earlier, he knew about its operational capabilities. His willingness to take risks with the aircraft carrier's deployment and the consequent success achieved were attributable in a large measure to his ability to be daring while judiciously viewing the larger picture.<sup>74</sup>

Vice Admiral SN Kohli was the Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief West during the 1971 war. Despite the initial differences with the CNS and coming across as somewhat cautious (or prudent as others may aver), Kohli set about preparing the war plans with meticulousness and as the war progressed he assumed a bolder stance and shouldered the responsibility for all the actions which were unfolding in the Western Theatre. He was disheartened by the loss of INS Khukri, after which he devoted much of his time until the war came to an end in the Maritime

Operations Room (MOR), thinking of possible solutions by which such an incident could have been avoided.<sup>75</sup>

At other echelons, the short but high tempo naval war brought out the varied leadership and other skills of people like VAdm J Cursetji, the VCNS, RAdm EC Kuruvilla and RAdm SH Sarma, the Commanders of the Western and Eastern Fleet respectively; Capt MN Mulla, the gallant Captain of Khukri; Cdr BB Yadav, the K-25; Cdr MNR Samant, the Senior Officer of Force Alpha; Capt OS Dawson at Directorate of Naval Operations and Capt MK Roy at Directorate of Naval Intelligence; Capt Swaraj Prakash; CO INS Vikrant, to name just a few. At the ground level, instances of bravery and overcoming of heavy odds by the men, were the norm rather than the exception, such as during the missile boat attacks, the sinking of the Khukri, the attacks by Vikrant's aircraft, operations by Force Alpha, the Fleets that remained at sea for long durations. All of this was aided by good planning at NHQ and other Headquarters.

#### CONCLUSION

In the previous wars the Navy could not play a major role either due to the government's decisions or due to the inability in the apex to understand the role of the Navy. However, in 1971, where the two wings of Pakistan were separated by sea, gave an opportunity for the Navy to be more involved. The Navy responded effectively through the actions in the Eastern and Western theatres and contributed to the final outcome by inflicting large scale destruction. Through decisive actions and strangulation by ensuring that the enemy forces could not flee or get resupplied, the Navy played a key role.

The *IN* could achieve success in the war because of the stronger willpower and resolve demonstrated by the Indian Naval officers and sailors which in turn stemmed from the top leadership. They were ready to take risks to attack the adversary with whatever they had and at the same time accepted or worked around the shortcomings. The most crucial and vital factor which helped gain victory was their offensive spirit aimed at carrying the battle to the enemy and destroying Pakistani Naval vessels and shore installations.<sup>76</sup> The *IN*'s offensive stance in the war helped to create a completely new paradigm that the *IN* should not be confined to playing a marginal role in India's wars or 'play second fiddle' in future.<sup>77</sup>

Cumulatively, all of this made the political apex and the common people more aware of what the Navy can do and this accorded greater recognition for the Service. It showcased to the political leadership, the

powerful tool of statecraft that a Navy can be and the need for the country to be a sea power to achieve economic, political and military goals at sea. All of this subsequently helped in the growth and development of the *IN* as there was greater commitment, budget allocation and understanding of the Navy's role. While 1971 war has been the Navy's finest hour, it has also been the springboard for subsequent development of the *IN*. Fifty years later we are a bigger, better and one of the most potent navies in the world.

Finally, we also need to hoist the signal that the outcomes that we analyse about war are always in hindsight. There must be appreciation that any war, anywhere in the world, will have its fog and friction and will never play out perfectly as per plans. The 1971 Indian Navy campaign must be seen in that light and the fact that in overall terms it was extremely successful. Considering the resources and other constraints, the conduct of the war at both planning and execution levels were excellent. As with all such conflicts there were many takeaways for the future and the lessons learnt from the 1971 war continue to guide us as we navigate the course ahead.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors are thankful for the research assistance provided by Ms Uma Kabe. The opinions expressed in the article are the authors' personal views and do not reflect the official position of the Indian Navy or the Government of India.

### **NOTES**

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55. Admiral Arun Prakash (Retd), 'Lessons of Maritime Success Story', n. 11.
56. Hiranandani, *Transition to Triumph*, n. 5, p. 170.
57. Ibid., p. 212.
58. Hiranandani, *Transition to Triumph*, n. 5, p. 202; Nanda, *Quarterdeck*, n. 32, p. 7.

59. Kohli, *We Dared: Maritime Operations in the 1971 Indo-Pak War*, n. 13.
60. Nanda, *Quarterdeck*, n. 32, pp. 35–36. This point has been further reiterated in a recent article by Adm VS Shekhawat for *The Tribune* newspaper. Shekhawat was CO INS Karanj during the war.
61. Cmde Ranjit Rai (Retd), *A Nation and Its Navy At War*, Lancer International, 1987, p. 46.
62. Nanda, *Quarterdeck*, n. 32.
63. Admiral Arun Prakash (Retd), 'Lessons of Maritime Success Story', n. 11.
64. Hiranandani, *Transition to Triumph*, n. 5, p. 130; Major General (Retd) Ian Cardozo, AVSM, SM, *The Sinking of INS Khukri*, Roli Books, 2006, p. 34.
65. 'Observe-Orient-Decide-Act'. Having a smaller OODA loop prevents the adversary from seizing the initiative.
66. Hiranandani, *Transition to Triumph*, n. 5, pp. 174, 181.
67. Nanda, *Quarterdeck*, n. 32, p. 217.
68. Hiranandani, *Transition to Triumph*, n. 5, p. 246; and Ahluwalia, *Torpedoed at Sea: The Saga of INS Khukri*, n. 14, p. 4.
69. Shrikhande, *East Leaves West: An Operational Art Redux of the Little Known Indo-Pak War of 1971 that Liberated Bangladesh*, n. 4, p. 12.
70. P.C. Lal (Air Chief Marshal), *My Years with the IAF*, New Delhi: Lancer, 1986, p. 187.
71. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
72. Nanda, *Quarterdeck*, n. 32, p. 11.
73. Rai, *A Nation and Its Navy At War*, n. 61, p. 166.
74. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
75. *Ibid.*
76. Kohli, *We Dared: Maritime Operations in the 1971 Indo-Pak War*, n. 13, p. 98.
77. Nanda, *Quarterdeck*, n. 32, pp. 178, 185.