

**The Rise of the Indian Navy: Internal Vulnerabilities,
External Challenges**, edited by Harsh V. Pant, UK: Ashgate
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India's path to greatness does not lie in the dusty plains and frozen passes of its northern reaches. If it is to be found at all, it will be at sea—out in the dark blue of the Indian Ocean.

– Iskander Rehman, *India's Aspirational Naval Doctrine*

Since antiquity the Indian Ocean has been the centre of human progress, a great arena in which many civilizations have mingled, fought, and traded on important trade routes criss-crossing the waters around India for thousands of years. The entry and exit is to this vast water body is through four 'gates' or choke points: the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb; around South Africa's Cape Agulhas; the Strait of Malacca; and past Australia's Cape West Howe. The bulk of the global energy trade originating in the Persian Gulf needs to traverse yet another 'gate', the Strait of Hormuz, before it reaches open waters.

At the hub lies the Indian subcontinent, itself the site of ancient cultures in the Indus valley. Whilst there was much turmoil as conquering armies spawned in the remote steppes of Asia swept down to overthrow old empires and impose new dynasties, the oceanic approaches remained benign and trade with the known world continued unhindered. Around the twelfth century, quasi-religious imperial orders prohibited overseas

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voyages, of crossing the '*kala paani*', ostensibly to stem the brain drain to Baghdad, the silicon valley of those times. This made Indians insular. They forgot that the seas are the great 'commons' of civilization and naval power to protect merchant fleets has always been the determining factor in the political struggles of nations. Shipping and marine infrastructure decayed and seaborne trade passed into the hands of the Arabs. For centuries, national strategy focused on dealing with threats through the passes in the Hindu Kush and maritime security was ignored.

History has taught India a bitter lesson. The neglect of the seas resulted in loss of sovereignty to traders who arrived on ships from outside the region, and ultimately became its masters, proving the old adage that whoever controls the Indian Ocean has India at its mercy. Naval thinkers realized this—the diplomat–strategist K.M. Pannikar envisaged a 'steel ring' around India where the Indian Navy would be paramount, whilst Keshav Vaidya in 1949 spoke of an invincible navy to not only defend India's coastline but also her oceanic frontiers.

In the post-Cold War modern world, the prospect of a major global conflagration is low. However, India lives in a dangerous neighbourhood, occupying strategic space in the middle of an 'arc of instability' that extends from the Levant to Mindanao. Few other countries face such implacably hostile neighbours and the security environment is fragile. A proxy war aimed at 'bleeding India by a thousand cuts' is underway and other conflicts perpetrated by inimical nations and non-state actors cannot be ruled out. As India emerges, its strategy must be to synergize its sea power with other elements of national power. Unfortunately, its maritime intentions remain shrouded in mystery.

The Indian Navy does not have a maritime tradition in the 'Mahanian' sense, of fleets operating in the blue oceans far away from their bases for long periods of time. Descended from the colonial Royal Indian Navy, its strategic thinking was limited to coastal patrols and the 'defence of the homeland'. Despite an array of impressive surface ships, it still lacks a 'balanced fleet' in the mould of Sir Julian Corbett's exposition. It has limited fleet aviation and a dwindling submarine force to execute an anti-access and sea denial strategy even though the navy has acquired the contours of a 'fleet-in-being'. However, its power projection capabilities in a Mahanian sense are rudimentary. It lacks the capacity to control the sea for a limited period of time to land boots on the ground across the beach in a hostile littoral environment to establish zones of influence.

Consequently, Harsh V. Pant's collection of articles by an range of

eminent authors, professional as well as academics, foreign and Indian, on the rise of the Indian Navy is a timely tome. It should form the template for further discussion and debate on India's maritime strategy in the twenty-first century in the Staff and War Colleges. This is more so as China's increasing challenge no longer looms over the horizon, rather its influence has surreptitiously seeped into India's backyard. There is a need for serious dialogue with intellectual rigour within the navy to establish a strategic maritime direction, to find purpose, role and structure for itself, forgoing the existing bottom-up approach that is sometimes confusing.

The book, very correctly, examines a range of issues that have contributed to the navy's rise and shaped the broader context over the past two decades for this rise to occur within the confines of India's grand national strategy; consequently, the book looks at the issues and reasonings that have guided naval thinking but have remained hidden from view, even from policymakers. The book has been divided into two parts: Part I focuses on the internal dimensions of India's evolving maritime prowess; on forces which would almost compel the rise of the navy despite its political relegation to second-class 'Cinderella' status until the Boxing Day tsunami of 2004, a natural disaster of biblical proportions. This resulted in the second geopolitical shift in the Indian Ocean after the advent of the Europeans with Vasco da Gama's landing at Calicut in May 1498. With the altered geopolitical environment, no longer can these 'dimensions' of the navy's rise be ignored.

In Chapter 2, Walter Ludwig looks at the 'Drivers of Naval Expansion'. He starts with bean counting and a comparison of naval expenditure with other regional navies to conclude that the Indian Navy's quest has been for increasingly capable modern platforms, whilst being less concerned with the overall size of the fleet: modernizing but not growing. The submarine arm has dwindled in size and the Ministry of Defence (MoD) does not appear to be concerned with righting this deficiency. The amphibious units are, at best, capable of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) missions. Whilst analysing the drivers of modernization, Ludwig concludes that the objective is quite apparent. It is not to confront hostile powers or to project power on land but to secure the country's sea lanes, Mahan's great highways, and become a benign hegemon in the Indian Ocean to provide public goods for all regional states. As India's economy expands and its overseas trade burgeons, should the focus of sea lines of communication (SLOCs) control and protection not shift to include areas extending from Venezuela to the Sakhalin? Further, China's claim of

the South China Sea being its 'core national interest' has not been really challenged and the right to use the global commons clearly expounded.

In Chapter 3, C. Uday Bhaskar examines 'The Navy as An Instrument of Foreign Policy', where the very nature of the domain it operates in and the calibrated presence-cum-force it can bring to bear in a given space-time/politico-military context makes the navy a very potent instrument of national policy. He is very candid and traces the origins of the politico-bureaucratic nexus which suffers from 'sea blindness' and manoeuvres not only to keep the navy but the military in its perceived rightful place. He goes on to state that the role of the Indian Navy in furthering the nation's foreign policy priorities is, at best, tenuous with little synergy despite the success of Operation Cactus in the Maldives in November 1988 and other operations subsequently. The navy, in its Maritime Doctrine, has identified the diplomatic role it could possibly undertake, the essence of which has not been appreciated by the foreign service mandarins and it remains a work-in-progress exemplified by the initial reluctance to participate in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.

In Chapter 4, Iskander Rehman starts by stating that India is blessed by geography but cursed by its neighbours who have thwarted its sporadic thalassocratic ambitions. The study moves in three parts. Section one dissects India's Maritime Doctrine in great detail and comes to the conclusion that its lofty didactic ambitions, when juxtaposed with current realities, suggest that it is more advocatory and aspirational than genuinely reflective of reality as it lacks the capability for all that it desires to do. Section two ventures that Indian naval thought can be understood as syncretic of the many strands of naval thinking that have emerged over time. Section three looks at different schools or traditions of thought to chart out the potential trajectories for the Indian Navy in terms of its organization. He concludes that strategically minded and outward looking, the Indian Navy could add a much-needed direction to India's slow drift towards great power status.

In Chapter 5, K. Raja Menon looks at 'Technology and the Indian Navy'. He says that the transformation of the Indian Navy from being a brown-water navy to almost a blue-water navy under technology denial regimes has been unique among Third World navies. This has happened despite the short-sighted policies of the MoD in protecting and allocating work to inefficient public sector undertaking (PSU) shipyards. Hence, planned numbers have never been achieved. Nevertheless, technology has been deployed to increase capabilities in all spheres from power

trains and propulsion systems to increase speed and time on station, to sensors and long-range weapon systems connected through data link. The author goes on to comment on various types of indigenous designs of ships, including the Vikrant-class carrier, and the debate on the nuclear versus the conventional submarine. He cites three strands of motivation for the navy's rise: the determination to escape the Pakistan syndrome to focus on the blue waters; to place faith in naval aviation; and to promote indigenization. This is the reason why the navy has emerged as a powerful tool of foreign policy.

Part II deals with the external dynamics influencing the rise of the navy. This includes the reasoning for the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) entry into the Indian Ocean, ostensibly to safeguard its SLOCs and maritime interests, including energy; an aspirational India wanting a greater diplomatic and military role despite the recent political and economic setbacks; and finally, an essay on Indo-US naval ties which, notwithstanding a standstill on other fronts, has led to an era of 'good feelings'.

In Chapter 6, 'Sea Dragon on the Doorstep', Probal Ghosh looks at the changing profiles of the Chinese Navy with a hawk's eye. Till recently, a neglected force in a communist country with traditional continental leanings, it has received considerable priority in recent years. The perception of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) now is that maritime power often holds the key to enhanced international status, to achieving national objectives and is a means of expanding influence in near and distant waters. The template that emerges is compared with India's maritime calculus to see the emerging contours of congruence and dissonance with the Indian Navy. The PLAN's foray into the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), its increasing footprint and its 'string of pearls' strategy is a challenge, even though there have been attempts at cooperation starting with the anti-piracy patrols in Horn of Africa.

In Chapter 7, 'India in the Indian Ocean: A Mismatch between Ambitions and Capabilities', Harsh Pant establishes the geopolitical importance of the IOR and explains that the Indian Navy would like to establish its preponderance in the Indian Ocean, but its limited material capabilities have constrained its unrealistic ambition and its options given the stakes others have in the region. What is required is a multilateral, multipronged approach to preserve and enhance its strategic interests and to shape the strategic environment. The challenges are many. He concludes that the ambitious modernization programme is geared towards

its emergence as a world-class, blue-water navy that is equipped and willing to meet regional challenges and become a guarantor of regional peace and stability

In Chapter 8, 'The US–India Naval Cooperation: Moving Beyond the Rhetoric', James R. Holmes talks of 'natural allies' and 'good feelings' through lofty sentiments but lacking in specifics. He goes on to list four functional domains—resources, transportation, information and dominion—that are most or least conducive for high seas cooperation. He advocates that the US may not be able to maintain sea lane security indefinitely and India must move beyond being a free rider and accept some responsibility and share of burden in the not-too-distant future, which really fits in quite well with the navy's own thinking.

Finally, in Chapter 9, 'Non-State Threats to India's Maritime Security', Nitin Pai states that non-state actors cannot fight hard power but can blunt the navy's edge, sapping morale, weakening resolve and exposing naval personnel to moral dilemmas and dubious political reasoning. There is need to define what is peacetime and wartime, and this would mean substantial structural and cultural changes.

A country's status and stature are reflected by its sea power, and without a strong navy a challenged India cannot aspire to occupy its rightful place in the comity of nations. Sea power is not simply about what it takes to use the sea; it is also the capacity to influence the behaviour of other people or things by what one does at or from the sea. This defines India's sea power in terms of its consequences—the ends, not the means—and requires two components: the means to use the sea as it desires, and freedom of doing things that are considered necessary to influence the actions of people on land. The classic constituents of sea power have not changed despite the scorching march of technology and, when addressed, would make India not a naval power but a maritime power.

Unfortunately, the intellectual debate about the navy's trajectory, the book claims, has Mahanian underpinnings but this is disputable and is still not resolved. Free and frank discussions would resolve basic dilemmas and establish the strategic rationale for naval expansion, incorporating the aspirations of the government and the other two services so as to meet national challenges. This would shape India's rise to great power status.