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About the Author

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Abhijit assisted the erstwhile official historian of the Indian Navy, late Vice Admiral GM Hiranandani (Retd.), in the authorship of the third volume of Indian Naval History “Transition to Guardianship”.

The Indian Navy's New 'Expeditionary' Outlook

“As the pre-eminent maritime power in the Indian Ocean, we must possess and maintain a capability for sustained operations in our area of interest, including power projection”.

Admiral (Retd.) Arun Prakash¹,
Chief of the Naval Staff in 2005

India's defence policies and strategic outlook have evolved over the years, but nowhere has this been more visibly perceptible than in its maritime policy. Having languished for long as the 'Cinderella' service—garnering a piffling share of the defence budget—the Indian Navy, today, is a fast growing enterprise, gathering assets, capability and experience at a rapid pace. The long list of the Indian Navy's existing and planned inventory underscores the urgency with which the service has sought to renew itself. After acquiring top-of-the-line ships and submarines—including its latest aircraft carrier, INS Vikramaditya²—the Indian Navy (IN) is set to acquire airborne maritime surveillance assets, shore-based and carrier-based aircraft, and unmanned aerial vehicles. The operational revamp is not just confined to accreting combat assets. The service is upfront and upbeat about its plans to upgrade small outposts on island territories and refurbishing existing facilities.

In July this year, the Indian Navy commissioned its latest naval base in the Indian Ocean. The new outpost, christened INS Baaz, is an air station

located at Campbell Bay on the southernmost fringe of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.³ The base is a valuable addition to India's strategic maritime assets, not just in terms of its crucial geographical position overlooking the Strait of Malacca and the Six degree channel, but also as a forward operating base and logistics hub for Indian naval ships.

The commissioning of the “Baaz” is another link in a chain of evidence affirming the new strategic 'heft' in India's maritime policymaking and operational thinking. In the past few years, the Indian Navy has demonstrated a vision for itself in the Indian Ocean and regions beyond. It has actively pursued modern platforms, cutting edge technology and all-round assets that can be deployed in both tactical situations and the pursuance of long-term economic and security objectives.

The Imperative of Projecting Power

The maritime geography of the world is dominated by extended sea-lanes that require air and naval assets to play a major role in the projection of force. Acutely aware that it needs to contend with operational dynamics beyond those pertaining to coastal and near-regional defence, the Indian Navy is beginning to rethink its operational philosophy. Increasingly, there are signs that a new dimension is emerging in the navy's strategic outlook: a desire to project power far beyond India's shores.

Developments in the Indian Ocean in the past few years have convinced the navy that it cannot be confined to its near regions, and that it must have presence and relevance in distant seas and far littorals. In keeping with India's growing power and regional responsibilities, the Indian Navy had been steadily enhancing its expeditionary and military intervention capabilities. India's 12th Defence Plan, approved in April this year, lays

emphasis on the need to develop “adequate stand-off capability” for “sea lift and expeditionary operations”—the ability to undertake military operations far away from the homeland.⁴

The new defence plan reinforces the strategic dimension of the navy's operational plans. The past two years have seen the navy initiate an expansive acquisition drive that has resulted in the accrual of significant surface-operational and strategic under-sea capability. While *INS Vikramaditya* and the recently inducted *Shivalik*⁵ and *Teg*⁶ class ships have strengthened the surface fleet, the broad spectrum of maritime missions that each one of these new platforms are geared to undertake points to a new focus on 'strategic posturing' and long-term maritime missions. The same applies to undersea capability. Both recent inductions—*INS Chakra*⁷ (an Akula class submarine from Russia) and *Aribant*⁸, the indigenously produced nuclear powered submarine with ballistic missile—are strategic assets meant to play a role in conflicts away from Indian shores.

The navy has additionally drawn up plans for the acquisition of six new conventional submarines with air independent propulsion (AIP) and cruise missile capability that will further add to its strategic power projection capability. Two fleet tankers have already been acquired from Italy to give the Indian Navy the "Long Legs" that are critical for long-range operational deployments. The recent decision to procure three additional frigates, reportedly the superlative Krivak IV class from Moscow, is also likely to add heft to the navy's robust maritime posture.⁹

The most significant of the navy's declared plans is the indigenous construction of seven frigates and four Landing Platform Docks.¹⁰ The Cabinet Committee on Security recently gave its nod to the proposal to indigenously build the four ships. Reportedly, the navy has initiated the

process of inviting information from global vendors for supply of Landing Craft Mechanised (LCMs) that can be carried by the warships.

The new LPDs, along with the eight specialised vessels or LCUs (Landing Craft Utility) cleared for acquisition in September 2011¹¹ (to be built by the Kolkata based Garden Reach Shipyard) will boost, considerably, the country's amphibious warfare and island protection capabilities. With the ability to swiftly transport thousands of troops, heavy weapon systems and infantry combat vehicles over long distances to take the battle right to the enemy mainland, the new capability is being seen as a genuine 'force-multiplier'. Significantly, the new LCUs are likely to be based at India's first and only regional 'theatre command', the strategically-located Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC)—an indication of the growing importance of the ANC in India's strategic plans.

Rationalising Expeditionary Operations

Despite its popularity among naval practitioners, Indian naval strategists have often questioned expeditionary capability: *Why is a 'stand-off' operations capacity so important for it to be developed at the cost of other seemingly more critical capabilities?* The answer is provided (partially, at least) in the Indian Navy's maritime doctrine (2009).¹² A nation's maritime security force is defined by its ability to carry out security, constabulary and humanitarian missions far away from its shores. Doctrines of powerful navies are, therefore, contingent upon their ability to conduct maritime operations in far regions. This entails developing a robust distant-operations capability.

For many years, India's military apex was unwilling to discuss the question of expeditionary operations openly. Its 'chariness' about expeditionary capability owed something to the fact that it was perceived to involve the

presence of an armed force in a foreign country, sent with the specific purpose of performing an 'offensive mission'. Those were days when India could not see itself intervening militarily on external issues, even if it involved Indian interests.

It was in 1999, when a senior political functionary, first made a public reference to a 'distant maritime capability' for India. Addressing a combined conference of Indian Military Commanders, former Defence Minister George Fernandes noted that the Indian Armed Forces should set up a Rapid Reaction Force (RRF) that would be “able to reach any corner if a threat arises”.¹³ He qualified this by observing that such a force would have to be a “tri-service” one. There were others too, like Mr. K.C. Pant, Former Deputy Chairman, India's Planning Commission, who expressed similar views. He noted, “Over the years, the Indian Navy has developed into a multi-dimensional force with lethal weaponry and sensors, and enhanced reach.... Three elements appear to be at the core of the Indian Navy's doctrine—the development of rapid reaction maneuverability, along with the concentration of firepower, and land-attack capability to influence the war on land.”¹⁴ However, beyond token references and broad vision statements towards developing a stand-off maritime capability, little happened in substantive terms.

Things began to change in 2005, when Admiral Arun Prakash, the then Chief of Naval Staff, made a strong pitch for real-time and robust expeditionary capabilities and directed the Indian Navy's Directorate of Plans & Operations to begin preparing the Staff Qualifying Requirements (SQRs) for procuring a fleet of Landing Platform Helicopters (LPHs) with a great sense of urgency. However, despite all the coaxing and nudging from the navy's top echelons, and the unveiling of a doctrine for effecting maritime manoeuvres from the sea and amphibious operations,

things did not quite move swiftly enough on the procurement front. The 'pivotal' moment for the IN's 'expeditionary' aspirations came in 2007, when it acquired the ex-*USS Trenton* from the US.¹⁵ By getting the *Trenton* (rechristened *INS Jalashwa*), the Indian Navy did not just acquire a ship, but also imported the whole idea of expeditionary warfare that it had so far been uncertain about. It was the first sign that the IN was beginning to seriously entertain the idea of power-projection and far-sea operations.

In 2010, Lt General (Retd.) Satish Nambiar's book, *For the Honour of India—A History of Indian Peace Keeping*, discussed in detail the idea of India developing a force for “preventive deployment”. In his book, General Nambiar called for the creation of a capability to deploy a force able to counter threats within the region.¹⁶ He delineates this capability as liable for deployment only under the auspices of a United Nations (UN) mandate—such as Chapter VII of the UN charter that authorizes the use of force against a state, which has shown or is showing overt aggression towards another state.

India has never used the term “expeditionary force”. But it does have an alternate term for the idea that it has often used in the past: preventive deployment. In his book, General Nambiar explains the imperative of expeditionary forces and preventive deployments quite persuasively: “The mechanism of preventive deployment would appear to be a useful tool... in extreme cases even to the extent of threatening use of force to put pressure on what are seen as uncooperative governments. I am of the view that we should be pro-active on this aspect as we may well be called upon to take the lead role in the immediate and extended neighbourhood.”¹⁷

Of late, India has re-doubled its efforts at acquiring an expeditionary capability. The navy's plans for expeditionary assets have been sufficiently endorsed by policymakers. The 12th defence plan validates the need for a stand-off capability for sea lift and expeditionary operations. The aim, it states, must be for the navy to achieve “desired power projection force levels, undertake military operations other than war, and the ability to influence events ashore”. In April this year, the Indian Parliament's Standing Committee on Defence, was handed a detailed brief by the Defence Ministry, outlining plans to strengthen India's naval capabilities, in which the proposal for expeditionary assets was highlighted as a major potential capability.

Developing Strategic Outreach

The idea of strategic outreach is not new to the Indian Navy. During the South East Asian tsunami in 2004, the navy was at the vanguard of rescue and relief operations. Over 30 Indian Navy ships had set sail with rescue teams and provided relief material in less than 72 hours of the disaster.¹⁸ Indian naval ships on a goodwill visit to European countries during the Lebanon war in 2006 lifted and brought back nearly 5,000 Indian refugees. However, despite the significant role in outreach programmes, many defence policymakers in India did not take the idea of India developing a specific strategic outreach capability seriously.

With *INS Jalashwa* burnishing the Indian Navy's credentials as a force capable of undertaking out of area contingency operations, many within the politico-bureaucratic system sat up and took notice of its expeditionary potential. Since then, there has been more support in the bureaucratic establishment for IN's expeditionary plans. The developments so far have been quite encouraging. *Jalashwa*, with its four landing

crafts, six Sea King troop carrying helicopters and a battalion of 1,000 fully-armed soldiers or a squadron of tanks over large distances, continues to be the mainstay of the navy's expeditionary capacity. Along with the *INS Airavat*¹⁹, the IN's new Landing Ship Tank (LST), it has, for the first time, given the navy a truly strategic sea lift capability. The IN has since 2008 also been trying to establish an Advanced Amphibious Warfare School and Fleet Support Complex on the east coast.²⁰ Once set up, the facility will be used to raise three naval infantry battalions (to eventually become a Brigade-strength formation). The Army, for its part, has contributed substantively to the cause of expeditionary ops by air-marking three amphibious brigades.

The Indian Navy would do well to take a cue from the PLA (N) which is in the nascent stages of becoming an expeditionary force. China's naval anti-piracy deployment to the Gulf of Aden—active since 2008—and the use of naval and air assets to support the evacuation of Chinese citizens from Libya in February and March 2011 have shown that Beijing has an aspiration for expeditionary capability. China, reportedly, has already built two Type 071 Landing Platform Docks (LPDs).²¹ In January 2012, the fourth ship of this class was launched at a shipyard in Shanghai.²² China is likely to build several additional expeditionary vessels, including the much larger Landing Helicopter Dock (LHD), the Type 081 (20,000 tons).²³ The PLA (N) is also currently in the process of testing a domestically built heavy lift helicopter (AC313), which could likely operate from any of its LPD or LHD. India, clearly, isn't the only regional actor thinking seriously in terms of 'expeditionary capabilities' and distant power-projection.

Responding to Regional Crises

At its very core, an expeditionary capability is about having an effective crisis response ability. The Indian Navy has, since the 80s, responded to political and operational crises in the near region with alacrity. In November 1988, when there was an attempt to overthrow the Gayoom regime in Maldives, the IN intervened decisively to defeat the coup-makers. Another example of the Indian Navy's sterling activism was provided during *Operation Pawan*, when it undertook maritime operations in the waters around Sri Lanka. Palk Bay, which was frequently used by the LTTE's 'Sea Tigers' for carrying out strikes against the Sri Lankan naval forces and to keep the arms supply lines open at sea, was effectively sealed by the Indian Navy to keep out militant cadres.²⁴ The capture of the hijacked *MV Alondra Rainbow*, in November 1999 is another classical case of the IN's rapid response to keeping Indian Ocean sea-lanes safe. Expeditionary operations involve dealing with similar crises—only in a broader time-frame, and on a much larger scale.

Over the past decade or so, India's continental defensive mind-set seems to have undergone a change. New Delhi's strategic geography now extends far into the Pacific Ocean in the East and to the Red Sea in the West. There is an increased awareness among the mandarins in South block of the need for the defence services to develop the capacities to secure India's regions of influence. There are maritime contingencies that could arise from an attack on Indian diaspora by terror groups or local militia; or even by catastrophic disasters like a tsunami. The issue of safety and well-being of the many ethnic Indians living in the Pacific Islands of Fiji, Mauritius in the Indian Ocean or Indian minority living in distant lands of the Middle East, or even Trinidad and Guyana could trigger a crisis response by the Indian government.

This is more than a 'rhetorical' justification for developing rapid reaction maritime capability, as some critics of expeditionary operations are inclined to believe. The case of the Falklands Islands is instructive in this regard. When the Argentine defence forces occupied the territory in the Eighties, the Royal Navy arrived on the scene to protect 600 British citizens who had remained in Port Stanley.²⁵ The Falklands occupation wasn't a uniquely British crisis. This is a situation that India could well find itself confronting in the near future on a distant land with Indian citizens. If it has to secure its interests, there is no substitute to building a credible rapid reaction force with a strong sealift capability to sustain maritime offensive and humanitarian operations.

Towards a Functional Expeditionary Force

It is important to highlight the strategic underpinnings of the IN's future operational plans. In a complicated regional power dynamic, India now sees itself as a stabilizing power in southern Asia. As a net security provider in the Indian Ocean, the Indian Navy realizes it needs to have presence in and around the critical choke points and island territories of the IOR. The recent developments in Maldives have proved conclusively that now, more than ever, India must play an important role in stabilizing the region. This can only be done effectively if the IN has an expeditionary capacity—the ability to rapidly move and deploy troops and combat force. Moreover, if India is to, indeed, shift to an expeditionary approach to warfare/conflict resolution, there are key endeavors that the Indian Armed Forces will need to collectively undertake to transform their force into one that meets the criteria for being expeditionary.

To ensure that the Indian Navy has the capability to fight and win in distant waters, it must be transformed into a force with regional reach and

advanced capabilities: strategically and operationally agile, technologically and organizationally innovative, network enabled, highly joint, and effectively integrated. To the extent that the requisite capacities must be acquired, platforms remain critical in formulating an effective maritime response to crises in the oceans. Notwithstanding the ongoing debates about the doctrine of 'reconnaissance and reach', the Indian Navy must continue the process of building a true blue water capability.²⁶ The thrust of its efforts must be to construct a fleet that can conduct combat operations anytime, anywhere—with maximum effectiveness and minimum risk and with utmost rapidity.

'Jointness' is the most vital component for expeditionary operations. A 'stand-off' expeditionary capability typically requires a movement and manœuvre function which encompasses disposing joint forces to conduct campaigns, major operations, and other contingencies by securing positional advantages before combat operations commence and by exploiting tactical success to achieve operational and strategic objectives. This function includes moving or deploying forces into an operational area and conducting manœuvres to operational depths for offensive and defensive purposes. In essence, the expeditionary operations capability entails providing sustenance to maritime operations (both in terms of logistics and personnel services) until mission accomplishment.

There is another caveat for large nations, that they must build up amphibious capabilities on the basis that the final naval capabilities and platforms are seen to be moving to become 'expeditionary in nature' and therefore all the three Armed Forces must have an interest in the buildup of their amphibious capabilities.²⁷ The 1982 Falklands War, the 1991 Gulf War and 2003 'War on Terror' underlined the expanding roles and

missions of modern navies, and the need for them to develop expeditionary capabilities. These operations also demonstrated that major ground and air elements ashore depend heavily upon the delivery of heavy equipment and the sustained supply provided by the expeditionary forces. Maritime forces are, in a sense, the umbilical cord of any military operation and must facilitate transportation of forces into the theatre of conflict and the uninterrupted flow of logistical support.²⁸

Even though India appears to be actively pursuing an expeditionary capability, there are related issues for it to consider. Foremost is the need for effective command and control—an objective that requires the enabling presence of a networked environment for the individual forces to function in. In the 2000s decade, there was hope that the navy would be allowed to develop a distant operations capabilities. But in the absence of funding and clear political direction, it did not quite materialize. Now, the IN and the political establishment appear to have developed the will, but the question of command and control still needs to be effectively addressed.

Among the capabilities that the Indian Navy has been looking at, the landing platform dock (LPD) seems to have exerted the most appeal. But the amphibious assault ship (LPH), with its on-board fleet of multi-purpose utility helicopters, landing craft (LCMs and LCVPs), and air-cushion vehicles (LCACs)—is another attractive asset. Both the LPD and LPH have proven track records of undertaking asymmetric warfare and expeditionary amphibious campaigns (such as the one undertaken by the Royal Navy in 1982 to retake the Falklands Islands), and low-intensity maritime operations involving vertical envelopment tactics, also popularly known as “operational manoeuvres from the sea” (OMFTS).²⁹ Each has a highly developed command-and-control capability and vast

holding spaces that give the Indian Navy a definite edge in distant operations and disaster relief operations.

Doctrinal Aspects

Doctrine is a vital ingredient in operationalising a substantive expeditionary capability. To begin with, there must be clarity on the meaning of the term “expeditionary”—what it implies for the three services; and the operational capability it entails, in terms of real-time maritime and ground combat operations and support functions. An 'expedition' is traditionally defined as “a military operation by an armed force to accomplish a specific objective in a foreign country” and an expeditionary force as “an armed force organized to accomplish a specific objective in a foreign country”.

Expeditionary forces are seen to be a tool for crisis response across the “spectrum of operations”, including the capability for forcible entry—the introduction of military forces in the face of organized, armed resistance. Underlying the concept of expeditionary operations is the notion of 'power-projection'. The expeditionary crisis-response force must be specifically organized, trained, equipped, and deployed to apply military power overseas. The vastly variable nature of recent crises in the maritime domain—both political and humanitarian—has shown the need for a multifaceted crises-response team. It should be designed with a broad range of capabilities rather than in response to a specific threat. Not only must it be adaptable and 'general purpose', it must be capable of responding rapidly to broad triggers and of maintaining itself in a continuous state of readiness, whilst also adapting to a broad range of operating environments on short notice”.³¹

Effectively, therefore, a 'stand-off' capability for the navy must mean more than just a force organized to accomplish a specific objective in a foreign country. A former US Marines Corp Commandant, General James L. Jones, once remarked perceptively: An expeditionary force must be agile and flexible enough to accomplish a broad range of military objectives in a foreign country or region. Such a force must be able to deploy rapidly, enter the objective area through forcible means, sustain itself for an extended period of time, withdraw quickly, and reconstitute rapidly to execute follow-on missions".³²

Classically expeditionary warfare involves naval special warfare, mine warfare, amphibious warfare, and expeditionary combat. The centre-piece of an expeditionary evolution is the "ship-to-objective" manoeuvre, but many other operations are needed to facilitate the movement of troops from the sea to the shore. Additionally, an expeditionary force also needs support capabilities, like logistics and sea-based integration. These must allow, among other things, a force to get access to an area of operations despite opposition, or in the absence of host nation support.

The key for a force to lay claim on being expeditionary depends on its ability to fight its way in, and sustain itself in an austere, unfriendly environment. The foregoing underscores the necessity for the navy to work in tandem with the expeditionary wings of the army and the air force. Together the three components must be able to sustain a great variety of operations, often of a contingent nature, maintain a high operational tempo and be deployable almost anywhere in the world—at least in areas of India's strategic interest. The doctrine must cover all aspects of the joint operations. If India is indeed looking at expeditionary warfare seriously, it must be clear on the scale and nature of the varied

capabilities that must be developed. Traditionally, there have been two possible versions of an expeditionary capability: A basic model and an advanced model. The former refers to the ability to respond quickly to crises abroad through the deployment (often over strategic distances) of a task-tailored military force for an operation limited in time. The latter model builds upon the baseline model but adds a series of additional requirements. The first version is a good starting step, but the second model is what the Indian Navy should eventually be aiming to develop.

The multinational nature of contemporary expeditionary operations and the fact that they span the spectrum of operations from humanitarian assistance to a conventional war means that the expeditionary forces sent are rarely complete formations, but more often task forces put together on the basis of the specific mission to be performed and integrated into a larger whole. Therefore, the forces generated need to be modular, capable of being taken from a mother unit and temporarily integrated into a combined or joint task force. The operational plan must account for training of joint forces and integrated operations.

Conclusion

A robust crisis response capability in the distant littorals will need India to deploy the full spectrum of its military capabilities, including the capability for offensive intervention and forcible entry. The expeditionary crisis-response force will need to be organized, trained, equipped, and deployed to project military power overseas. Since there is no predicting a potential crisis, the Indian Navy's response matrix will need to cater to a broad range of possibilities, rather than a specific threat. To begin with, the Indian Navy could revive the concept of a dedicated Maritime Rapid Reaction Force (MRRF) endowed with a strategic sealift capability that

fits in with India's vision of being a rising power in the Asia-Pacific region. To enable the MRRF, the navy could first look at raising a marine force of about 1000-2000 personnel.

The ongoing naval modernisation and build-up in the Asia-Pacific does, in fact, have strong implications for the Indian Navy's order of battle (ORBAT) and its maritime doctrine. The force being developed must have the capability to maintain itself in a continuous state of readiness, ready to deploy rapidly and able to adapt to a broad range of operating environments on short notice. In the final analysis, the navy's expeditionary capability will be critical to India's response to international contingencies where Indian interests are at stake or to avoid the “spillover” effect of crises and prevention in the escalation of human casualties.

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