
Smart Maritime Power for India's Integrated Military

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Abstract

The importance of maritime power as the determinant of global power needs no emphasis. India is a maritime nation with its future inextricably linked to the sea. However, due to a continental-centric approach to national security, the maritime domain has not got its due attention. With the maritime orientation of the Indo-Pacific and the likely great power contestation in these waters, India's maritime power will have a critical role to play in shaping the outcome on land. Technology will have a large role to play across the entire spectrum of conflict, both, in the maritime domain as well as on land; militaries will have to adapt these as effective force multipliers both in planning and prosecuting the conflict. The integration of the country's maritime power in the country's security matrix will be a prerequisite to shape the future contours of the region.

Introduction

Maritime power has always been a critical and decisive element in shaping global power equations. Through the pages of more than two millennia of history to the more recent times of two world wars, a four-decade-long

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Cold War and innumerable regional conflicts, the course of events in the maritime domain have often influenced the outcomes on land with maritime superiority being the key to global dominance. The 21st century is no different and has been referred to as the

century of the Oceans. The current shift in the global geopolitical centre of gravity from the Euro-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific also has a distinct maritime orientation. Ninety per cent of global trade travels over the oceans in an increasingly interconnected world with trade dependencies and critical supply chains transcending geographies. Humankind has already begun turning to the seas for its future sustenance as the effects of climate change and global warming play havoc on land. This dependence is going to grow exponentially till the end of the century. It is also evident that the emerging great game for global supremacy is going to be played out in the oceans, and as far as India is concerned, uncomfortably close to home.

As this paper is about ‘smart’ maritime power, there are two major differentiations in interpreting that term which merit highlighting. The first is the difference between the widely accepted definition of smart power and the focus on ‘smart’ power in this article which has a more military connotation; the second is the difference between maritime power and naval power—in this case, the focus will be on the latter.

Smart power is commonly defined in the contemporary geopolitical discourse as the ability to combine hard power and soft power resources into effective strategies.¹ As Alan Chong in his essay on Smart Power writes, “Smart power supposedly heals with the velvet-gloved hand of policy while judiciously resorting to the mailed fist only when extreme circumstances warrant it.”² However, in the context of this article, smart

maritime power will be described to highlight the smart utilisation of the country's comprehensive maritime resource, be it civilian or naval, as an important constituent of an integrated military. Here it is important to emphasise that the focus inevitably will be more naval-oriented.

India's Maritime Credentials

India is essentially a maritime nation with its security and economic sustainability dependent on the sea. Its strategic location astride some of the most critical international sea lanes (ISL) and its peninsular tip jutting almost 1,000 miles into the Indian Ocean gives it a pivotal position in the Indian Ocean. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands straddle the approaches to the strategically significant Straits of Malacca through which most of the trade and energy flows into the Pacific and feeds the dragon's insatiable appetite for energy and resources. China sees this as a critical vulnerability which has led to this being termed as its Malacca Dilemma. To mitigate this vulnerability, it is establishing connectivity to its mainland directly from the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) from the Pakistani deep-water port of Gwadar and Myanmar's deep-water port of Kyaukpyu³ respectively. A favourable maritime geography provides the Indian Navy with a commanding presence on its eastern and western seabords to degrade the economic lifelines and war-waging capability of both its principal adversaries.

India's maritime assets—a coastline of 7,516.4 km, an Exclusive Economic Zone covering more than 2 million sq km, and the strategically located island territories on the western and eastern seaboard are also a vulnerability. Successfully protecting and defending these from the wide spectrum of traditional, non-traditional and transnational security threats poses a considerable challenge. Additionally, with 90 per cent of India's trade by volume and almost 70 per cent by value being seaborne, and 80 per cent of India's oil and gas requirements being imported over the

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oceans, the security of these is critical for India's economic well-being and future development. With the Indian economy expected to cross US\$ 5 trillion in the next few years and US\$ 10 trillion within a decade from now, the extent of India's economic security on the sea will increase exponentially. This further highlights the importance of securing India's maritime frontiers and ensuring that its national interests

in the maritime domain are not jeopardized or constrained by inimical forces.

India's Continental Bias

India's preoccupation with its adversaries across its continental borders with five wars and numerous skirmishes in the last 75 years, continues unabated with China raising tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and Pakistan with its state-backed low intensity conflict across the Line of Control (LOC) in its fifth decade, despite that country being on the brink of an economic and governance crisis.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the maritime domain, despite its critical importance and significant security challenges has failed to get the attention it deserves. It was only after the Navy's stellar performance in the 1971 war, its total domination of the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, and the effect this had on precipitating the speedy end of that war—that the Navy's worth was truly understood. Since then, the navy has been effectively deployed in the subsequent standoffs to ensure not only that the maritime threat is contained, but also to ensure that India always retains a favourable maritime situation in the Indian Ocean, and that too without firing a shot.

However, given the normal discourse that ‘victory is still measured by foot’ and ‘boots on the ground’ are the essential prerequisites to determine the outcome, the navy has come to terms with this and is not at odds with

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acknowledging this. However, it is perhaps the army and the air force that need to better understand India's maritime security imperatives and the significant role naval forces can play in supporting the effort on land and in the air. Hence the need for enhancing jointness in every aspect of structuring, planning and executing an operation becomes so essential. In the past, synergy between the three forces has been effectively achieved during the 1971 war for the liberation of Bangladesh, during Op Pawan in the Sri Lanka conflict and subsequently during Op Vijay (Kargil), despite the structure being single Service in nature.

Moreover, the importance of the oceans makes navies an essential instrument for the state not only in war but also in peace. They provide prosperity to the state through the protection of trade and ensuring good order on the high seas, which are otherwise outside the jurisdiction of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). However, countries continue to underestimate the importance of maritime capability and naval forces. This is not peculiar only to India; history is replete with such instances of under-utilisation of maritime capability. In fact, a Swedish military pamphlet of 2004, states, in its idea of the operational concept of the future Swedish naval forces that, “Maritim verksamhet har härmed inget egenvärde utan skall ses som ett nödvändigt komplement till landoperativ verksamhe”. This roughly translates into stating that maritime forces have no value by themselves but should be seen as a necessary complement to land operations. Ironically this is coming from a country with a strong maritime tradition and a strategic maritime location.

There is no doubt that the importance of navies notwithstanding, the final outcome of a military engagement, in most cases, will be decided on land. Sir Julian Corbett, one of the two doyens of maritime strategy articulated this when he said in his seminal work, ‘Some Principles of Maritime Strategy’, “Since men live upon the land and not upon the sea, great issues between nations at war have always been decided—except in the rarest cases—either by what your army can do against your enemy’s territory and national life, or else by the fear of what the fleet makes it possible for your army to do”. He also defines maritime strategy as “the principles which govern a war in which the sea is a substantial factor”.

The Maritime Challenge

In India’s case too, the issues with both China and Pakistan will ensure that the focus of the Indian military and polity will remain continental-centric and future outcomes will be decided across our land borders. However, the importance of the maritime domain in India’s strategic neighbourhood and China’s focus on developing its maritime and naval capability in the Indian Ocean to become the dominant global maritime power en route to its ambition to become the global numero uno, is going to shape the military dynamics of future Sino-Indian relations. The emerging China-US great power contestation is going to play out in the Indian Ocean where China, which is handicapped by an unfavourable maritime geography of its own, will find the sea space to project its maritime power and also get access to the Atlantic. The PLA Navy already has a permanent presence in the Indian Ocean and this is set to grow substantially by the end of this decade. Its base at Djibouti is being extended to accommodate an aircraft carrier, it has built a submarine base for Bangladesh and is in de facto control of the Pakistani port of Gwadar.

China is also foraying into the Bay of Bengal and could soon pose a challenge to India’s dominant and unchallenged naval presence in

these waters. The recent operationalisation of a Chinese-built submarine base in Bangladesh called BNS Sheikh Hasina⁴ will soon be less about supporting Bangladesh's two 40-year-old Ming class submarines, and more about providing the wherewithal to enable the PLA Navy to deploy its submarines into these waters, something that China was hesitant to do so far because of the logistic challenge of supporting its submarine deployments more than 9,000 miles from its mainland.

The Pakistan Navy, which had thus far largely focused its attention on developing a strong sea denial capability in the littorals to thwart the Indian Navy, is also looking further seawards to play a larger role in the Indian Ocean security matrix;⁵ it has recently acquired four large frigates from China, two powerful corvettes from Turkey and is in the process of acquiring 8 Type 039 AIP fitted submarines—four directly from China and four being built indigenously⁶. While the current political instability and economic crisis in Pakistan may impact this ambitious plan, at present that seems unlikely as China will be keen to develop Pakistan as a useful proxy to contain or counter India's pre-eminent position in the Indian Ocean region.

Hence, China's focus on the maritime domain will shift some attention away from the continental predominance that has prevailed thus far. Not only will the Indian Navy have to play a larger role in projecting India's power at sea to ensure the safety and security of its maritime interests including its trade and energy security, but will also have a central role to play in influencing the larger geopolitical outcomes in the region, besides shaping the course of events on land, both directly and indirectly.

India's Military Transformation

There is an oft-repeated cliché that militaries are always preparing for the last war. While there may be some truth to that, it is not unusual for the basic tenets of warfare, or even the decisive elements to remain similar, if not the same. Navies often face the criticism that they continue to invest

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in traditional platforms like aircraft carriers, despite the vulnerability and limited utility of these leviathans in a modern and agile navy. Armies and air forces too are subject to such criticism. Contrary to this perspective, modern militaries are acutely aware of the need to adapt to contemporary technological advancements as effective force multipliers, while simultaneously adapting traditional platforms to the contemporary battlespace while retaining their fundamental capabilities and strengths.

The Indian Armed Forces are on the cusp of a transformational shift from a traditional single Service-oriented organisation into a joint one; this includes the establishment of tri-Service theatre commands to replace the present single Service commands. Such a transformation is as much about restructuring organisations as it is about restructuring mindsets. The present theatre command structure of the US Armed Forces with joint warfighting capabilities which contribute in no small measure to the US global multi-dimensional military presence, had also required legislation. This was the now famous Goldwater Nichols Act of 1986, which enforced the Theatre structure amongst firmly entrenched single-service hierarchies that were reluctant to exit their comfort zone. Four decades later, despite its unqualified success, challenges still remain. Most contemporary militaries have adopted a joint model. In the UK the transformation, driven primarily by budgetary constraints also faces numerous functional challenges but is here to stay. Nearer home, China, has also restructured its armed forces into five theatre commands, with

the aim perhaps being to relocate these beyond its borders as the country expands its military footprint across the globe.

In India, this process is also well underway. Fortunately, it is being thought through carefully before being implemented. This restructuring will not only impact the organisational structure which is expected to become leaner, but will substantially affect the force level structuring, joint and single service capabilities and capacities, budgetary allocations, training and logistic support; in a nutshell, it will usher in a new paradigm for addressing our national security challenges. It will also have to be in consonance with the country's national security strategy and will require close coordination with the MoD and other ministries and departments of the government. Additionally, India's nuclear capability and posture will also have to be factored into determining the limit of the military's conventional capability.

However, most importantly, it will impact the direct and indirect interaction between the three Services and their ability to operate seamlessly with each other in a joint environment while optimising the complementarity of their capabilities towards shaping the final outcome. Unlike the US and UK models which are largely expeditionary and therefore the joint capabilities seamlessly merge, India has two very distinct theatres of operation—the continental, with two adversarial nuclear-armed neighbours constantly sniping at our heels across disputed borders and the maritime which appears relatively benign at present but encompasses a wide range of security challenges, each of which is detrimental to national security, and the economic well-being of the nation.

Roles of the Navy

Navies have four primary roles; these are the military, the diplomatic, the constabulary and the benign.⁷ While the military role is the most important and is the *raison d'être* of navies in the first place, the changing nature

of the maritime security threat with a proliferation of non-traditional and transnational threats has exponentially increased the importance of the other three in the national security matrix.

Navies are not only very effective instruments of peacetime diplomacy, but can also convey a strong signal with their sheer presence in less-than-war situations. They have some distinct operational advantages in projecting the nation's power and intent in a developing situation without causing unnecessary provocation or being viewed as hostile. Their inherent mobility (a Carrier Battle Group with its integral air wing can travel up to 500 nautical miles in a day), and the ability to operate without restraint outside an adversary's territorial waters (12 miles from the shore) provide the advantage of manoeuvrability and flexibility to shape the theatre of operations. This is unique to the navy as both, armies and air forces are constrained by distinct land borders and inviolability of another's air space. While the former's mobilisation, manoeuvres and forays could be viewed as hostile, the latter's operations at the edge of the adversary's air space would also elicit alarm and a possible reaction. Navies on the other hand can launch long-range land attack missiles with precision targeting from stand-off ranges at sea to targets deep inland. The successful softening up of the land threat by Tomahawk missiles fired from US nuclear attack submarines and destroyers against Iraq, Al Qaeda, Syria, etc., greatly facilitated the ground forces in swiftly achieving their objectives.⁸

Technology as a Force Multiplier

As smart disruptive technologies get increasingly integrated into the military, they will expand the options available to the theatre commanders and a joint multi-dimensional approach will become an integral part of military planning. The application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other path-breaking disruptive technologies are also being integrated into the development of modern sensors with improved predictive capabilities

offering accurate target detection and identification as well in weapon systems with enhanced guidance and precision targeting at stand-off ranges based on sophisticated algorithms. Unmanned and autonomous technologies are being deployed across the entire spectrum of conflict and are being deployed as effective force multipliers to enhance the country's military capability across the entire multi-dimensional spectrum of conflict from outer space to the depths of the oceans. With future warfare being driven by technology, cross-domain

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capabilities will become increasingly integrated into ensuring that the limitless possibilities that will become available in the decision-making loop and the kinetic prosecution of conflict can be optimally deployed to achieve the aim; these will need to be optimally harnessed in scope and scale towards ensuring the maximum bang for the buck.

The changing nature of the maritime threat has highlighted the importance of effective Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). The Indian Navy's multi-dimensional assets (satellites, maritime patrol aircraft, integral helicopters, surface ships, submarines and various information-sharing mechanisms including white shipping agreements with other regional countries) are deployed across the length and breadth of the Indo-Pacific. They are helping shape a conducive and favourable maritime environment as well as effectively pre-empting a developing situation that could have security and economic implications for the country. The country's coastal security organisation includes, amongst other things, a seamless radar coverage of not only India's entire coastline

but has been expanded to include some of our maritime neighbours as well.

Technology is changing the paradigm of naval warfare. The range and lethality of 'smart' weapons and sensors have increased manifold in an increasingly networked battlespace environment. The transmission of real-time information through a networked communication architecture including tactical and operational data links, strategic communications and multi-static sensors has greatly enhanced the situational awareness of commanders at sea and ashore and is enabling naval assets to be deployed more effectively at greater ranges, thus enabling a much wider coverage of the ocean and in support of joint operations. The days of ship-on-ship action at sea at limited ranges are no longer going to be the decisive factors in war, except to successfully achieve either sea control or sea denial and interdict the enemy's Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC), to prevent the movement of the enemy's trade and energy, thus degrading the enemy's economy and war waging capability. Most naval actions in the future will either be shaped by the desired end state on land or to achieve a maritime objective that will decisively tilt the balance in one's favour.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that in the foreseeable future, the outcomes shaping the world will be decided on land. However, as nations turn increasingly to the sea in this century to meet their existential requirements, the importance of the maritime domain will grow exponentially. Big power contestation, confrontation and conflict will take place on the oceans and will shape the future contours of the global order. The increasing frequency and intensity of the non-traditional and transnational maritime security challenges are going to impact populations on land and trigger external and internal tensions which will pose a threat to national security. Hence a joint and well-coordinated approach will be required to address

these with smart maritime power being the key to shaping a favourable outcome.

Notes

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