



Asia Pacific Bulletin

EastWestCenter.org/APB

Number 317 | July 28, 2015

Indian Navy Role in Yemen and Beyond Highlights Range of Objectives

BY SAROSH BANA

Sarosh Bana, Executive Editor of Business India, explains that “India’s naval build-up and maritime outreach are hence marshalled primarily for sea denial and securing territorial waters. But they are increasingly being used for peace-keeping and humanitarian purposes, not only close to shore, but also across the seas.”

As a regional maritime power seeking to consolidate its reach across the seas from the Horn of Africa to the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea, India is taking concerted strides towards bolstering its navy into a three-dimensional blue water force. The country’s protracted planning is finally leading to the enhancement of its submarine force, augmentation of its carrier battle groups and reinforcement of its air power. Over 40 warships are on order with the Indian Navy in Indian shipyards at a cost of over Rs2 trillion (US\$32.3 billion). New Delhi, however, mandates the use of the military for national defense rather than for any offensive – or hegemonic – geopolitical strategy. India’s naval build-up and maritime outreach are hence marshalled primarily for sea denial and securing territorial waters. But they are increasingly being used for peace-keeping and humanitarian purposes, not only close to shore, but also across the seas, and not solely to safeguard the lives and interests of Indian nationals, but to protect other nationalities, friendly forces, and maritime traffic.

This was best highlighted by *Op Rahat* (“relief” in the Hindi language), the mission that between March 31 and April 10, 2015 successfully evacuated 4,640 Indians and 960 nationals from 41 other countries from war-torn Yemen. In a deft initiative of military diplomacy, India staged the massive rescue effort in the midst of the humanitarian catastrophe there, having been appealed to by nations that included the United States, Germany, France, Sweden, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Turkey. The Indian Air Force (IAF) similarly rose to the occasion to undertake vigorous search and rescue (SAR) and airlift missions in the wake of the April 25 earthquake in neighboring Nepal.

With access to airports within Yemen fraught with risk, sealift was considered the safest option. The Indian Navy’s offshore patrol vessel (OPV), *INS Sumitra*, which was on an anti-piracy patrol in the Gulf of Aden, was pressed into action for the rescue mission. The Mumbai-headquartered Western Naval Command (WNC) also dispatched a guided missile destroyer, *INS Mumbai*, and stealth frigate, *INS Tarkash*. While India’s Civil Aviation ministry diverted two Air India planes for the attendant airlift, the IAF deployed two of its Boeing C-17 *Globemaster III* aircraft to transfer the evacuees from the tiny Red Sea state of Djibouti to Indian shores.

Both India and China have been conducting anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden since 2008. Indian seafarers man many foreign and Indian-flagged ships and the Gulf is also a key trade route for the country, particularly for oil and fertilizers. While China’s counter-piracy deployments fall under its Military Operations Other than War (MOOTW), which supports the country’s foreign policy goals, the Indian Navy is part of

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

“Washington had envisaged India as a strategic partner in its “pivot” program. India had balked, anxious to project its neutrality so as not to antagonize the Chinese authorities.”

The *Asia Pacific Bulletin* (APB) series is produced by the East-West Center in Washington.

APB Series Editor: Dr. Satu Limaye
APB Series Coordinator: Alex Forster

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the East-West Center or any organization with which the author is affiliated.

the Combined Task Force 151 (CTF 151), a 30-member U.S.-led coalition force in the Gulf. Indian naval patrols alone have foiled 40 piracy attempts to date.

In its quest to raise its profile in the littoral, Beijing deployed for the first time a nuclear submarine in the Indian Ocean for two months from December 2014. It explained the boat’s presence as part of its counter-piracy mission in the Gulf, but it is widely understood that such an effort does not require submarine support.

As a reaction to the actions of territorial claimants in the South and East China Seas, Washington’s “pivot” strategy in the Asia-Pacific is juxtaposing its decision not to take a position on specific sovereignty claims with the imperative to raise its already formidable profile in that region. Washington had envisaged India as a strategic partner in its “pivot” program, with Leon Panetta, when he was Secretary of Defense, affirming that “defense cooperation with India is a lynchpin in this [pivot] strategy.” India had balked, anxious to project its neutrality so as not to antagonize the Chinese authorities. New Delhi has nevertheless also been concerned by other moves of PLAN to enter waters close to India, as with the docking last September of a Chinese nuclear-powered Type-093 attack submarine in Colombo, in Sri Lanka. This was followed two months later by a similar call at the port by another nuclear submarine, *Changzheng-2*, and a warship, *Chang Xing Dao*.

India has been mindful of the steady build-up in undersea capabilities not only of China, but also of Pakistan, both neighbors with which it has been at war in the past. With one of the largest fleets of attack submarines comprising six nuclear-powered and 53 diesel-powered boats, Beijing is close to deploying a powerful sea-based nuclear deterrent through long-range nuclear-armed submarines. The U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence estimates that China has introduced three new nuclear ballistic “boomer” (SSBN) submarines. China is also reportedly selling six S20 or *Yuan* Class diesel-electric submarines (SSKs) to Pakistan and two Type 035G *Ming* Class SSKs to Bangladesh, northeast of India.

For surveillance of its own maritime zone and to participate in multinational initiatives for securing the seas, India has established a Far East Naval Command (FENC) at its far-flung island enclave of Andaman and Nicobar in the Bay of Bengal, closer to Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia than to the Indian mainland. This outpost helps New Delhi to collaborate in the Malacca Strait Security Initiatives (MSSI) of the littoral to ensure joint air patrol in that region. Underlining the imperative of the Indian Ocean littoral to India, Prime Minister Modi used his visits in March to the three former British colonies of Seychelles, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka to establish a Joint Working Group on the Indian Ocean. But again mindful of Beijing’s misgivings, India did not invite Japan to the preparatory talks for the 19th edition of the annual India-U.S. Malabar Naval Combat Exercise to be held in October off India’s eastern seaboard. Last year, Japan, considered a vital ally by both India and the U.S., was an invitee to this essentially bilateral exercise. Tokyo might still be a late entrant to the October event, though Jimex, the India-Japan naval exercise held for the first time in 2012, is being separately planned for November. New Delhi has been concerned about China’s viewing any multilateral naval grouping in the region as a security axis seeking to contain it.

While India’s naval build-up and maritime outreach are increasingly being utilized for peace-keeping and humanitarian purposes, the high levels of investment leading to the expansion of the submarine fleet and carrier battle groups are not solely for the purposes of humanitarian activities, and the Navy’s resources are likely to continue to be primarily marshalled for sea denial and securing territorial waters.