

Indian Navy Operations and Wars



Operation Trident: A Triumph of the Indian Navy in the 1971 Indo-Pak War

Introduction

The Indo-Pak War of 1971 was the first war when the Indian Government engaged all three Services on a large scale. The war was fought on two fronts, the Eastern and the Western. On the Eastern side, Pakistan adopted the defensive strategy to delay the ingress of Indian troops, while on the Western side, it adopted the aggressive policy to occupy some Indian territory so as to force the Indians to give up gains in East Pakistan and divert troops to the Western front. In contrast, India adopted a defensive strategy on the Western front and an offensive strategy on the Eastern front.[i]

Role of Indian Navy

The Indian Navy performed exceptionally well in both the theatres. The Indian Naval offensive started on 04 Dec, when INS Vikrant based aircraft and ships of the Eastern Fleet struck military targets in East Pakistan. Round the clock attack by the naval aircrafts caused extensive damage to Pak military installations and harbours. Cox's Bazar airfield was damaged, and fourteen Pakistani ships/coasters and six gunboats were destroyed. The Pak submarine Ghazi was sunk off the coast of Vishakhapatnam. On the Western side, daring attack by the Indian Naval Task Group on the night of 04 and 08 Dec on Karachi caused much consternation to the enemy and colossal damage to the Karachi harbor. Indian Navy lost anti-submarine frigate Khukri during the naval operations in the Arabian Sea. The captain of the ship, Captain MN Mulla in the highest traditions of the navy refused to be evacuated and went down with the ship. Indian Navy indeed achieved its primary objective by establishing effective supremacy over the Arabian Sea. Pakistan Navy remained bottled up in the sanctuary of Karachi harbor for the entire duration of war. This Operation by the Indian Navy was called Operation Trident.

Planning and Objectives of Operation Trident

Operation Trident stands as one of the most remarkable naval operations in the history of the Indian Navy, executed during the Indo-Pak War of 1971. This daring offensive by the Indian Navy played a pivotal role in crippling Pakistan's naval capabilities during the war. It was a meticulously planned and executed operation, showcasing the strategic acumen and courage of Indian naval forces. On the morning of 03 Dec 1971, Admiral SM Nanda, the Naval Chief, had gone to Bombay to address his officers and men about his intentions to take the war on the sea to Karachi, if, and when, the war breaks out. In the evening of the same day, the war started. The Pakistanis attacked our airfields, including Okha, at about 1830 hours on 03 Dec 1971.[ii]

The plan had been to strike Karachi with a composite force on the very day that Pakistan carried out their first act of war. Since it was not possible for our forces to arrive at a point 150 miles from Karachi to commence the run-in the same evening, it was decided to launch the operations on the following day, i.e., the night of 04/05 Dec 1971. Commander Babru Bhan Yadav was a specialist in anti-submarine warfare and with one year on missile boats, he was considered an ideal candidate to command a Frigate. With the threat of war looming, Commander Babru Bhan, on 02 Dec 1971, was given the command of 25th 'K' (Killer) Squadron.[iii]

On 04 Dec 1971, the Task Group for the operation consisted of three Vidyut class missile boats, Indian Navy Ship (INS) Nipat, INS Nirghat and INS Veer from the 25th 'Killer' Missile Boat Squadron, escorted by two Petya Class Frigates, INS Kiltan and INS Katchall, and a Fleet Tanker, INS Poshak.[iv]

The task group was led by the Commanding Officer of the 25th Squadron, Commander Babru Bhan Yadav, embarked on INS Nipat. The Pettyas were intended to provide communication and control and with their better radar give indications of suitable targets. In the event of an emergency, they could take a boat in tow and, if necessary, give fuel. The two types of vessels use the same fuel, though the missile boats use extra refined diesel of special specifications. At 1730 hours, they were off Dwarka, which is approximately 150 miles from Karachi. The order was given for Operation Trident to commence, and the force raced towards Karachi by the direct route. Out of the four, one missile boat was ordered to remain on patrol off Dwarka to provide cover for the force on its way back. Execution of the Operation

The Task Group reached 250 nm (about 285 miles) south of Karachi and stayed in the area during the day, outside the range of Pakistan Air Force (PAF). The plan was to attack Karachi at night because most PAF aircraft did not possess night-bombing capability. In the evening on 04 Dec 1971, INS Kiltan and the three missile boats approached Karachi, evading Pakistani reconnaissance aircraft and surface patrol vessels. The Pakistani authorities had warned all merchant ships bound for Karachi not to approach the harbour to within 70 miles between sunset and dawn. This meant that any unit picked up on the radar within that distance was most likely to be a Pakistani naval vessel on patrol. Leaving the

Petya behind, the boats speeded up to 32 knots on the approach to their destination. At 2230 hours Pakistan Standard Time, the Task Group converged about 70 nm (about 80 miles) South of Karachi and detected Pakistani targets, about 43 miles to the North-West and North-East.[v] The contact to the Northwest was engaged by missile boat INS Nirghat with two missiles. The Pakistani destroyer Pakistan Navy Ship (PNS) Khaiber was patrolling the Southwest approaches to Karachi and only at about 2215 hours was she able to appreciate that an enemy force was approaching Karachi. She then altered course and increased speed to intercept INS Nirghat, the rate of closing was about 60 knots. At about 2240 hours, when PNS Khaiber was within range. INS Nirghat fired her first missile. PNS Khaiber opened fire with her close-range anti-aircraft guns but did not succeed in preventing the missile from hitting her. Her boiler room was hit, and her speed came down to eight knots. A second missile was ordered to be fired at her and after the second hit, her speed came down zero and dense smoke started rising from the ship. She sank after about 45 minutes approximately 35 miles South-Southwest of Karachi. The contact to the Northeast was engaged by missile boat INS Nipat with two missiles. INS Nipat was able to get her within range and fired the first missile which scored a hit. A second missile was fired soon after and when this hit the ship, a huge flash went up to about twice the height of the ship. It was learnt later that this was a merchant ship MV Venus Challenger. A third contact appeared to the North. It was engaged by missile boat Veer with one missile. The ship was set on fire by this missile and was seen burning fiercely for over 70 minutes, and finally sank in that position about 19 miles to the South of Karachi. It was learnt later that this was the Pakistan Navy coastal minesweeper PNS Muhafiz.[vi] Meanwhile Commander Yadav, the Commander of the missile boats, ordered Nipat and Veer to proceed further towards Karachi and press home the attack. INS Nipat was ordered to fire one more missile on a shore target if no ships were seen in the anchorage. INS Veer which was close to the harbour identified two targets close to each other and carried out a missile attack on both with only one missile.[vii] INS Nipat selected the oil refineries at Karachi harbour and fired one missile at them exactly at midnight, causing a tremendous flash and an orange glow which could be seen for miles over that part of the coast. Commander Yadav then issued the order for the boats to withdraw. Due to a fade out in communications, the Commander of the Task Group in INS Kiltan did not receive this withdrawal signal. He continued to close Karachi. When he arrived at the predetermined point, 20 miles South of Karachi he found himself all alone. Except for missile boat INS Veer, everybody else had turned round and was headed back towards Saurashtra at full speed. Due to a machinery problem, INS Veer had reduced speed to effect repairs. At that point, the task force pulled back. In due course, ships of the Task Group arrived on the Saurashtra Coast in ones and twos, refuelled on 05 Dec 1971 and arrived in Bombay on 06 Dec 1971. Conclusion The missile attack by the Indian Navy was expertly planned and executed. The attack caught Pakistan's Armed Forces Command completely off guard and caused significant disruption. While PNHQ was unaware of the sinking of PNS Muhafiz, a disorganised and chaotic rescue operation was initiated to find and recover survivors of PNS Khaibar. The survivors of PNS Muhafiz, who were saved when a patrol boat headed towards its flaming debris while looking for survivors from the PNS Khaibar, informed PNHQ of the fate of the ship. With no casualties or damage to the Indian Task Group, which made a safe return to Indian ports, Operation Trident was hailed as a great success for the Indian Navy. For the first time, anti-ship missiles were used in the region. Commander Babru Bhan Yadav was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra for his gallant action, and the Navy celebrates 04 Dec as 'Navy Day'[viii] to honour the battle. The success of this operation prompted another successful attack on Karachi on 08 Dec 1971, known as Operation Python. In today's time, Operation Trident exemplifies the strategic significance of maritime power in contemporary conflicts. Its legacy inspires modern doctrines emphasising joint operations, the utility of advanced missile systems, and the importance of maintaining dominance in [i] Stories of Heroism (PVC & MVC Winner). Dr. BC Chakravorty (1995). Allied Publishers Limited and Ministry of Defence, Government of India [ii] Hiranandani, G M. 2000. Transition to Triumph: History of the Indian Navy, 1965-1975. New Delhi: Director Personnel Services (DPS); New Delhi London. [iii] n.d. Gallantry Awards Portal. <https://www.gallantryawards.gov.in/awardee/5039>. [iv] Cardozo, Ian. 2021. 1971: Stories of Grit and Glory from the Indo-Pak War. Noida, Uttar Pradesh: Ebury Press. [v]

“Bravehearts of Killer Squadron: Recalling Indian Navy’s 1971 Valour.” n.d. Indian Defence Review. Accessed April 4, 2024. <https://www.indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/braveheartsof-killer-squadron-recalling-indian-navys-1971-valour/> [vi] Sethi, Captain S S. 2021. “Western Maritime Front and the Naval War of 1971 - Defence Research and Studies.” Defence Research and Studies. May 11, 2021. <https://dras.in/westernmaritime-front-and-the-naval-war-of-1971/>. [vii] “The Veer Ahir Who Set Karachi Ablaze.” 2013. Hindustan Times. June 23, 2013. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/chandigarh/the-veer-ahir-who-set-karachi-ablaze/storyQn5CTypParRpoT36AGQeoJ.html>. [viii] <https://www.thehindu.com/videos/watch-why-india-celebrates-navy-day-on-december4/article68948214.ece> Saransh Srivastav is a Research Assistant at the Centre for Military History and Conflict Studies (CMHCS), United Service Institution (USI) of India. He holds a Master's degree in History from Ambedkar University Delhi. At USI, his work includes specific research on Wars and Operations carried out by the Indian Military post-independence and developing an archival repository for a joint project on Gallantry Awardees of India between the Ministry of Defence and USI. Dhanajay Shinde has been a researcher with multiple think tanks. Presently he is at USI, where he is engaged in intense defence-related research and has contributed extensively in the form of articles to the project of recording India’s post-independent military history. Article uploaded on 31-12-2024 Disclaimer : The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the organisation that he/she belongs to or of the USI of India.



Naval action The Indian Navy also prepared to blockade the Pakistani ports (primarily the Karachi port) to cut off supply routes under Operation Talwar. The Indian Navy's western and eastern fleets joined in the North Arabian Sea and began aggressive patrols and threatened to cut Pakistan's sea trade. This exploited Pakistan's dependence on sea-based oil and trade flows. Later, then-Prime Minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif disclosed that Pakistan was left with just six days of fuel to sustain itself if a full-scale war had broken out.

The Indian Navy in the Battle of **the Atlantic in World War 2**

By Professor Derek Law





THE INDIAN NAVY IN THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC IN WORLD WAR 2

the Japanese. Three of the six were awarded the Battle of the Atlantic Battle Honour, so their contribution to the battle was not small. For much of the time they were based in the West of Scotland. This story too is almost completely unknown even to Indian and Pakistani naval historians.

These are two stories of bravery, courage and sacrifice which show how the Royal

This pamphlet describes two unknown stories of the Indian and Pakistani contribution to the Battle of the Atlantic in World War 2. The first tells the tragic tale of the sinking of a ship carrying refugee children to America, but the story of the death of the Indian boys on board has never been told. The second tells the tale of six Royal Indian Navy ships which fought in the battle of the Atlantic protecting convoys and attacking U-boats. Both stories focus on links to Scotland.

Professor Derek Law,

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INTRODUCTION

You are about to read two linked stories which tell the almost completely unknown tale of seamen from all over India and Pakistan who served, fought and died in the Battle of the

Atlantic in the Second World War. My interest in this was in part sparked by the discovery of three Commonwealth War Graves in Glasgow. The first two belong to merchant seamen who died when the liner s.s. City of Benares was sunk in the Atlantic in 1940. The third is for a seaman who died while serving on HMIS Kistna, a Royal Indian Navy sloop which was fighting a major battle in the Atlantic to protect a convoy in 1943. I believe this is the only grave of an Indian seaman from World War 2 which exists in the UK.

I researched the first story when I discovered that while a huge amount is known about the British victims and survivors of the U-boat attack on the s.s. City of Benares, almost nothing is known about the Indian crewmen beyond their names.

The second story comes from an article published by the Maritime History Society in Mumbai, in which I tell the story of six Indian naval ships built in the UK in 1939-42, which served in the Battle of the Atlantic for various periods of time before heading home to fight

Indian Navy and Merchant Navy contributed directly to the defence of Great Britain in World War 2. These men should not be forgotten.

Derek Law

University of Strathclyde, Glasgow

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About the Author

Derek Law is an Emeritus Professor at the University of Strathclyde and a Vice-President of the Society for Nautical Research. He has written regularly about the naval battles of World War Two, including the Battle of the Atlantic and has always had an interest in the smaller navies who fought there, whether Polish, Norwegian, Dutch, French or Belgian. But although he has visited the countries of south Asia several times, it was only in the last eighteen months and quite by chance he discovered that the Royal Indian Navy had also fought in the battle.

When it became clear that almost nothing was known about this he decided to spend the time of covid lockdown in discovering what really happened. The result has been the publication of several articles on the subject and a wish to ensure that these stories are widely known.

THE SINKING OF THE s.s. CITY OF BENARES

Background

There are two Commonwealth War Graves in the Glasgow area which bear the names of World War 2 seamen from the Indian sub-continent who died in Battle in the Atlantic. These graves are to be found at Greenock Cemetery, Sec. 3B. Lair 530.

They are for Seaman Ibrahim Balla who died on 17th September 1940 when the liner the s.s. City of Benares was torpedoed and sunk by a German U-boat in the North Atlantic. There is no record of where he and his family came from. In the same place is the grave of Lascar Abbas Bhickoos who was on the same ship when she was sunk. He was rescued but died two weeks later on 02 October 1940. He was 22 and the husband of Fatma Bibi, of

Sangameshwar, Ratnagiri, in India just south of Mumbai.



The grave site in Greenock Copyright, Commonwealth War Graves Commission

The Battle of the Atlantic lasted for most of the Second World War. As an island, Great Britain was wholly reliant on the convoys which carried everything from food to weapons to the country. The convoys also sailed from Great Britain carrying troops, tanks, planes and supplies to the armies in North Africa, the Mediterranean and India. Without the convoys the armies would not have been able to survive. Winston Churchill himself said of the Battle of the Atlantic: "The only thing that ever really frightened me during the war was the U-boat peril."

The British Merchant Navy fleet was the largest in the world in 1939 with about one third of the world's tonnage and employing around 200,000 men and women. It proved to be a highly dangerous job - 30,248 men lost their lives during World War 2 — a higher rate than any of the armed services. Many of the seamen came from all over the British Empire, including India, Hong Kong and West Africa. Almost a quarter of the crewmen of the British merchant navy — over 40,000 men - were Indian and played a very substantial role in keeping the Allies supplied, a fact recognised at the time, but largely forgotten since. In 1943 the British Indian Merchant Navy Club for seamen was set up in New York on West Thirty-Eighth Street to cater for them. Set over three floors it provided Indian food and recreation for up to eighty men at a time. Their sheer numbers meant that a high proportion of the merchant navy deaths were Indian.

The Sinking of the s.s. City of Benares

The sinking of the City of Benares provides a good example of how the casualty numbers were high but the names of those who died are largely forgotten. The City of Benares was a luxury liner used on the England to India run. She was an 11,080-ton, 480-foot liner launched in 1935. Known for her speed, which was her best defence against submarines, she was painted a dusky brown for camouflage.



The Children's Overseas Reception Board (CORB) was set up by the British government in 1940. The Board was created to manage a programme which evacuated 2,664 British children from England, so that they would escape the threat of German invasion and the risk of enemy bombing. The children were sent mainly to the four Dominion countries, Canada 1,532 (in nine parties), Australia 577 (three parties), New Zealand 202 (two parties), and South Africa 353 (two parties), but also some to the USA.

But some were to die on the ships carrying them to safety. On Friday, September 13,

Convoy OB-213 composed of twenty merchant ships and three naval escorts sailed from Liverpool for Quebec and Montreal, with the s.s. City of Benares as the flagship of the convoy. On board were 191 passengers, 90 of whom were child evacuees under the CORB programme, along with 216 officers and crew.

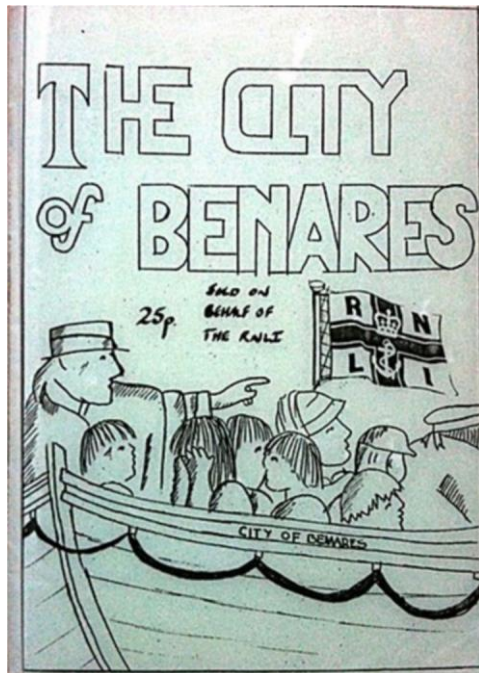
Late in the evening of 17 September, the convoy was sighted by the German submarine U-48, which launched a torpedo attack. One torpedo struck the ship in the stern, causing her to sink within 30 minutes, 253 miles west-southwest of the uninhabited islet of Rockall. Fifteen minutes after the torpedo hit, the vessel had been abandoned, though there were difficulties with lowering the lifeboats. The destroyer HMS Hurricane arrived on the scene 24 hours later, picked up 105 survivors, and landed them at Greenock.

The death toll was high after the sinking. The standard Wikipedia entry tells us that in total, 260 of the 407 people on board were lost. This included the master, the commodore, three staff members, 121 crew members and 134 passengers. Out of the 134 passengers, 77 were child evacuees. Only 13 of the 90 child evacuee passengers embarked survived the sinking. What does not get recorded is that 105 of the crew members who died were Indian, and of those, eighteen were boy sailors aged 14 to 17. So the death toll of children is very much higher than that reported in the popular histories.

One of the most remarkable tales is that of Lifeboat 12. Lifeboat 12 was one of the only s.s. City of Benares lifeboats not to become waterlogged after launching and, although this helped protect its occupants, it meant that the boat drifted far further away than any of the others. By the time help arrived, the lifeboat's course had led it outside the search pattern of the rescuing destroyer. Given the awful weather conditions, it was believed that Lifeboat 12 simply hadn't lasted the night and its occupants were at first listed amongst the dead. Though this was by no means the case, the 46 people aboard the lifeboat were in an unenviable position. Thirty-seven crewmen, six evacuee children with two of their adult escorts, and one private passenger, were sharing an open boat about 8m long. They were in the middle of the Atlantic, roughly 600 miles from land and, though fairly well provisioned with food, there was only sixteen gallons of fresh water on board. Seeing no signs of rescue they had no choice but to head for land, a journey which would take perhaps eight days.

On 26 September 1940, with their situation steadily worsening and water nearly gone, the occupants of the lifeboat spotted a Sunderland Flying Boat. It was flying low, on the look out for U-boats, and it spotted Lifeboat 12. Signalling that they were going to get help, the plane left and returned a few hours later with the destroyer HMS Anthony. Of the 46 people in the lifeboat, 45 survived to be rescued (one seaman, driven mad by the events and by drinking saltwater, had jumped overboard and drifted away to drown). Another crewman died shortly after rescue but, thanks to the care of their escorts and the other adults, the six evacuee boys all recovered from their ordeal and four of them even went on to join the Navy later in life. Perhaps even more surprising is the fact that while the names of the British survivors appear in many books, the names of the Indian survivors are not generally recorded.

The eighteen boy sailors who died in the sinking are recorded by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and are listed in the War Memorials at Mumbai and Chittagong. Sadly, only the first names of four of the boys are known - Roshan, Panchu and two boys named Sulaiman. Boy sailors were officially aged fourteen to seventeen years old, but some were probably younger having lied about their age in order to get a job at sea. Much of the story of the sinking is well known and several books have been written about it, including a pamphlet which was published by class 2F of Falkirk High School in 1985 as a result of a school project about Lifeboat 12. Typically, the story of the British survivors is fully covered, but very little is said about the shared suffering of the merchant seamen and the fact that some of them were boys is mentioned nowhere.



It is also true that only the first names of some of the older seamen are recorded on the Bombay/Chittagong War Memorials, and it seems clear that little effort was made by the shipping companies to record full details of the crew. The fact that one of the two war graves in Glasgow has some information about age and family is quite unusual. The fact that the story of the eighteen young boys who died as part of the crew has not previously been told is both very disappointing and very sad.

The Royal Indian Navy in the Battle of the Atlantic

Background

The third Commonwealth War Grave in Glasgow is that of Ordinary Seaman Peter Mathai, who served on H.M.I.S. Kistna and died in battle in the Atlantic on 17 November 1943 aged 20 years. He came from Travancore in Tamil Nadu at the very south of India. He is buried at

Cardonald Cemetery and his is probably the only grave of a seaman from the Royal Indian Navy anywhere in the United Kingdom. Despite this, almost nothing has been recorded about the service of the RIN in British waters. As the Oxford historian Dr Yasmin Khan has put it: "This wartime history belongs to Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan as much as to India. In the rush to write new histories of nation states after 1947, much of the history of the 1940s was locked out from official memory. Tales of the freedom struggle took precedence. And in Britain and the US, the emphasis was

placed on remembering military contributions to major battles, not on the everyday lives of anonymous workers.”

The Royal Indian Navy in the West of Scotland in World War II

There is a little corner of the history of the Second World War which has gone almost completely unrecorded, but which closely involves Glasgow and the West of Scotland. The story concerns the role of the Royal Indian Navy in the Battle of the Atlantic. At the start of the war six sloops were ordered from British shipyards for the Royal Indian Navy (RIN) and were to be the largest ships crewed by the RIN. Two were built in Southampton and four on the Clyde. All six worked up and served at both the Firth of Clyde and Scapa Flow. Three of them won Battle of the Atlantic Battle Honours. The 385-page Official History of the RIN records this service in a single paragraph and yet, as it states, the service of Sutlej and Jumna alone involved roles in "the Clyde Blitz of 1941 . the Clyde Escort Force, operating in the Atlantic and later the Irish Sea Escort Force, where they acted as the senior ships of the groups. While engaged on these duties, numerous attacks against U-boats were carried out and attacks by hostile aircraft repelled." To this can be added the escort of a WS — "Winston Special" — troop convoy to Capetown and a peripheral role in the hunt for and sinking of the German pocket battleship Bismarck.

It is relatively straightforward to use the logbooks of the ships to say where they were each day but there is an almost complete absence of personal reminiscences and almost no trace of their stay in the West of Scotland. And yet it is difficult to believe that the arrival of hundreds of Indian naval crewmen in Scotland went unnoticed and unremarked. The story of their stay in Scotland and service in the Battle of the Atlantic rests on three published memoirs by Anglo-Indian officers and a single newspaper article by an Indian Petty Officer recording a collision with a merchant ship in convoy

The Ships

Although these ships were the six largest deployed by the RIN in World War 2, the sloops were quite small — some 290 feet in length compared with the paddle steamer Waverley's 240 feet. They all displaced between 1300 and 1400 tons, had a top speed of 19 knots and were armed for anti-aircraft defence. They were built to a standard design used for dozens of escorts built to serve in the Atlantic and elsewhere.

HMIS Sutlej was the first to be built. She was ordered from the Denny of Dumbarton



HMIS Sutlej in 1944

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shipyard in 1939 and launched on 1st October that year by Mrs Amery, the wife of Leo Amery the then Secretary of State for India and Burma and was completed on 23rd April 1941.

HMIS Jumna was also built by the Denny Yard at Dumbarton under the same programme. Also ordered in 1939 she was launched on 16th November at the Denny Yard in Dumbarton by a Mrs Rangasthan, finally being completed on 13th May 1941.

HMIS Kistna was ordered from Yarrow at Scotstoun in 1940, launched on 22nd April 1943 by Mrs Godfrey, wife of Admiral Godfrey, Flag Officer of the RIN and completed that August.

Finally, HMIS Cauvery was also ordered from the Yarrow Yard in 1942, launched by Lady Runganadhan, the wife of the Indian High Commissioner, on 15th June 1943.



The launching of HMIS Cauvery

HMIS Narbada and Godavari were built at the Thornycroft Yard in Southampton

Although the Clyde saw many launch events during the war, one might expect that the launch of Indian ships by major figures or their wives would have attracted notice and comment. Indian officers and crew would also have mixed with shipyard staff as the ships were completed and then carried out their trials in the Firth of Clyde before being commissioned into service.

The Crews

There is little mention and little written anywhere on the composition of the crews or their experiences. But there was a simple binary divide. The officers were Anglo-Indian, and the crew were entirely native Indian. It was to be 1943 before the first native Indian officer served on one of these ships. A picture from August 1943 shows Godavari at Scapa Flow with her Sikh navigating officer Lieutenant Pritam "Peter" Singh Mahindroo, RINR on the bridge. Initially refused entry to the RIN for refusing to cut his hair, he eventually retired as a Rear Admiral after a glowing career. He is the only Indian officer of non-European descent listed during the service of the six ships in Home Waters.



The presence of native crewmen outside India was a source of comment elsewhere. When advanced parties for Cauvery and Kistna sailed on troopships from India via Durban to Great Britain they marched through the streets of Durban to lay a wreath at the War Memorial there. The fact that the 100 men of the first draft were Indian surprised the Naval Officer In

Command, who's eyes "were on stalks". On reaching Scotland they were accommodated in the grounds of Balloch Castle at Loch Lomond.



Balloch Castle copyright Wikipedia

French, Norwegian and Polish crews were also based there at various times while their ships were built or repaired. There is also one recorded occasion in Devonport when a live sheep was delivered to Godavari to allow Muslim ratings to celebrate Ramadan. It may reasonably be supposed that this happened with the other sloops at other ports or bases.

The Clydebank Blitz

In 1941 the devastating Clydebank Blitz took place over the two nights of 13th and 14th March, shattering the city and its factories and killing or wounding over 2000 people in the greater Glasgow

area as a whole. Over the course of the two nights, a total of 439 Luftwaffe bombers dropped in excess of 1,650 incendiary containers and 272 tonnes of bombs and as a result some 30,000 people were made homeless. Although the main target was Clydebank, the sheer spread of the bombing caused damage from Dumbarton to the Kibble Palace in the West End of Glasgow to Govan and Scotstoun.



The Aftermath copyright the Herald Scotland

The shore based anti-aircraft defence was quite limited, and even ran out of ammunition, but was supplemented by warships in the Clyde. The Polish destroyer Piorun famously provided anti-aircraft cover for the then building battleship Duke of York in dock at John Brown's Yard in Clydebank, but further downriver at Dumbarton, ships at the Denny Yard also contributed to the defence. Sutej and Jumna were within days of completion at the Yard and played an active role in the anti-aircraft defence against the 236 German bombers in the first wave. And Dumbarton was at the centre of the action. Indeed, two other ships building at the Number Five berth in Denny's shipyard had their keels damaged by an exploding mine, while another mine went through the roof of the shipyard canteen without exploding.



A 1000kg "Luftmine" (parachute mine) copyright Wikipedia

Working up

Some of the crew for the two ships built in the south of England were based at the Stamshaw training camp at Portsmouth for a short time in 1942. Until they could join their new ships they underwent a whole series of drills and training on shore.



But the main base where convoy escorts worked up for service was HMS Western Isles at Tobermory. Over one thousand vessels worked up there during the war under the tutelage of Vice-Admiral Sir Gilbert 'Monkey' Stephenson, known as "The Terror of Tobermory".



The work-up standardly involved a set fourteen-day training course, as much aimed at binding together the crews of newly commissioned ships into a team as teaching new skills. Again, the Indian sloops did their training there.

Irish Sea Escort Force and service in the Firth of Clyde

In 1941 Both Sutlej and Jumna went to Scapa Flow to continue working up. After the repair of defects was completed, they then joined the Irish Sea Escort Force, a part of Western

Approaches Command, which mainly escorted convoys from Milford Haven to Belfast at a time of great Luftwaffe activity. In 1941, Heinkel 111's based in Paris carried out regular reconnaissance flights from the Bristol Channel to the Clyde. Then in April and May four major bombing raids took place killing and wounding hundreds of civilians and destroying or damaging thousands of houses in Belfast itself. At the same time Condors of I/KG 40 made many minelaying flights to the Irish Sea. As a result, the defence of the Irish Sea consumed significant resources in the summer of 1941 to ensure the safe transit of men and materials to Northern Ireland, as well as covering Atlantic convoys to and from Liverpool and Glasgow.

Both Indian sloops were heavily involved in this activity and regularly visited the Clyde. Some of the other sloops subsequently escorted convoys to and from the Clyde to Gibraltar, Freetown, and Cape Town. This included major troop convoys, the so-called "Winston Specials". Again, the sight of Indian crewed ships in the Firth of Clyde often stopping for several days as the convoys assembled might have been expected to cause local comment.

May 1941 — Convoy HX127 and the Bismarck Hunt

Convoy HX 127 had sailed from Halifax bound for Liverpool on 16th May 1941, with the ocean escort led by the battleship Ramillies. As the hunt for the German battleship widened,

Ramillies was detached to cover one possible escape route.



Sutlej was still working up at Scapa and was ordered at short notice to lead a force of three destroyers and two other escorts to take over the convoy escort. It is probable that as well as Sutlej the escorts included the Hunt Class destroyers Farndale and Hambledon and the sloop Stork, which were all working up at Scapa at that time. Although all of the action was over by the time they reached the convoy, they had played a useful if peripheral role.

After the active if unprofitable period in the Irish Sea and at Scapa, Sutlej was ordered to India via Capetown and Aden to join the Eastern Fleet, sailing firstly in the escort of the troop convoy WSI 1. This "Winston Special" convoy assembled in the Clyde area near Islay on 31 August 1941 carrying

almost 25,000 troops for the Middle East, Iraq and India. Some eighteen troopships and storeships had an escort of nineteen vessels ranging from the battlecruiser Repulse to two ex US Coast Guard cutters. On 4th September the convoy split into a fast and a slow section some 450 miles north of the Azores. Sutlej, Sennen and Totland and the Armed Merchant Cruiser (AMC) Derbyshire formed the escort for the slow section, re-designated

WSI 1A and consisting of some six ships for the passage to Freetown, arriving there on September 15th. From the 11th onwards Sutlej, Sennen and Totland reported and attacked Uboat contacts with depth charges, but without result. We now know that there were no U-boats in the area at that time, but the contemporary threat would have seemed all too real. On 18th September the reorganised convoy now of seventeen transports and storeships sailed from Freetown with a seven ship escort, in which Sutlej and the corvette Woodruff provided A/S protection until the 20th. Sutlej appears to have detached at that point and made a rather circuitous voyage via St Helena, Durban (including boiler cleaning in East London) and Mombasa arriving at Suez on 4th November and briefly joining the Mediterranean Fleet as an A/A guardship. On 11 December she finally sailed east arriving at Colombo on the 23rd and joining the Eastern Fleet.

Meanwhile Jumna had also been ordered to join the Eastern Fleet. In September she joined the escort of the thirty ship convoy OS6 which had sailed from Liverpool on 12th

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September for Freetown, joining on 17th September and arriving there on the 29. She then went on to Capetown and arrived at Suez in November. On the first section of the trip from Liverpool the escort was shared with what was to become the famous 36th Escort Group of

Cdr F.J. "Johnnie" Walker in the following month, but at this time still working up as a group. Jumna would have been familiar with at least some of the escorts as Walker's ship HMS Stork had been part of the Irish Sea Escort Force. Fortunately, it was an uneventful voyage.

Jumna arrived at Capetown then slowly left the Atlantic for the Eastern Fleet. From Capetown she was ordered to Suez arriving on 18th November, where she stayed until 2nd January when she sailed with troop convoy DMI arriving at Singapore on 13 January 1942.

And so after a frantic year, the first two sloops had safely left the Atlantic. There was then a year of quiet. Apart from the launch of Narbada on 21 November 1941 the remaining sloops were building and it was to be 1943 before the next spell of serious activity commenced.

Soon after their arrival in India, the ships Jumna and Sutlej skipped a standard work up phase headed west again undertaking an en route work up at Aden / Alexandria before taking part in the Sicily Campaign in June — July 1943. Sutlej was Senior Officer of the Anti-Submarine

Patrol.

1943

In January Godavari was launched, followed by Kistna in April then Cauvery in June.

It was May when Narbada completed her trials at Southampton. Her stay in northern waters was to be the shortest of the six sloops. She sailed from Southampton on 21st May in the escort of convoy PW 342, a local convoy from Portsmouth to Milford Haven arriving there on the 23rd and then proceeded to Tobermory to work up.

In June Narbada transferred to Scapa Flow for further work-up with ships of Home Fleet and on several occasions in June was part of groups conducting A/S exercises with the submarine Truant. On 4 July she sailed from Scapa for Greenock, arriving next day. In July she was under repair for defects discovered during work up and by August 12th she was ready for service. On the 18th she joined the escort of troop convoy KMF22 sailing from the Clyde for Algiers. On the 28th she moved across to escort convoy UGS 14 en route to Port Said, arriving there on 2nd September. It was attacked by U-410 on 26th August and two merchantmen were sunk. After a brief stop in Pon Said, she sailed with convoy ABIO on 8th September from

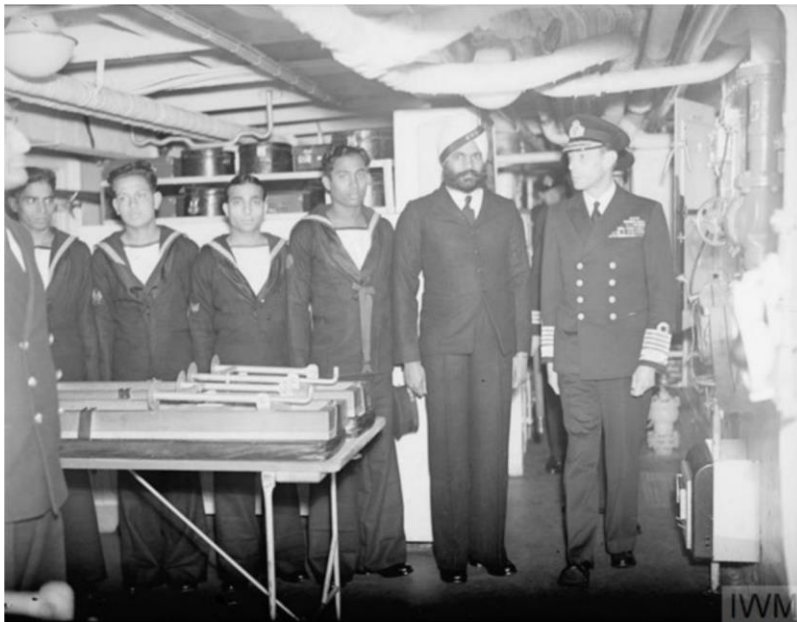
Aden to Bombay arriving on the 14th to join the Eastern Fleet.

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June saw Godavari commission on the 22. She then completed her acceptance trials and sailed from Cowes Roads with a westbound convoy as an additional escort on 14th July. She detached at Lundy Island and headed north for Scapa Flow, sinking floating mines off Milford Haven and Cape Wrath en route. She arrived at Scapa on the 17th July to work up and spent most of July and August there. As well as exercises as that on 7th August with several other escorts and the submarine Stubborn she received a number of distinguished visitors.

On 5th August A. V. Alexander, First Lord of the Admiralty and Sir Bruce Fraser, Cin-C Home Fleet inspected the ship. Then on 13th August she anchored near the flagship,

HMS Duke of York, to act as AA guardship. Late that afternoon she was visited by King George VI himself— even touring the engine room - and by the C-in-C Home Fleet and she briefly flew the Royal Standard.



She was the only ship in the fleet apart from the flagship to do so. Next day she led the fleet out to sea — the Guide of the Fleet - as the King sailed - the first time for several hundred years that a monarch had sailed with the battle fleet in wartime.

Later in the month on the 23rd August Godavari and HMCS Huron exercised at Scapa working with the submarine Tantivy which was undertaking the Commanding Officers

Qualifying Course. That evening she sailed for Greenock, arriving next day to boiler clean.

Then on the 1st September she sailed for Londonderry and joined Western Approaches Command.

By September, Godavari was ready for service. On 16th September she sailed with the

Canadian C2 Escort Group to join the escort of ON 202, but at 0100 next day detached to join the escort of OS 55KM as it sailed from Liverpool with 82 merchantmen. When the convoy split in two on the 28th with sections for Gibraltar and Freetown, Godavari joined KMS 027G for Gibraltar and arrived there the next day with 56 merchantmen. Although there was no major action, she did open fire on a German reconnaissance plane.

On 26th August Kistna was commissioned into the RIN on the Clyde. On September 3rd she arrived at Scapa to work up. At Scapa she then had further exercises on 17th, 18th, 20th, 22nd and 28th September, including with the submarine Tuna on the 22nd. On 12th October Kistna then sailed from Scapa with HMS Magpie for Londonderry, arriving next day, where she underwent repairs for defects.

On 28th October Kistna joined 40th Escort Group on completion of her post work up defects at Londonderry for deployment at Greenock for the escort of the OS Series of outward bound convoys and the inward bound SL series on the UK-West Africa route. At this point in the war two convoys sailed together from the UK, splitting into two when close to Gibraltar, with the

KMS section going to Gibraltar, while the OS convoy continued to Freetown in Sierra Leone. That day she joined OS57/KMS31, an eighty ship convoy from Liverpool. She fired on a German spotter plane at extreme range but saw no other action. She arrived at Gibraltar on the 10th with convoy KMS 31 after the convoy split on the 9th. On 13th November she then sailed from Gibraltar with the UK bound MKS30 of over sixty ships which joined SL139 on the 16th.

A major U-boat attack then developed after the convoy was spotted by a German reconnaissance aircraft on the 16th and Wolfpack Schill was promptly ordered to deploy and launch an attack on the convoy. The Schill patrol group, which had been deployed in this area since mid-October, was organized into three patrol lines west of Portugal, where they had successfully attacked SL 138/MKS 28 and also but with no success the southbound OS

57/KMS 31.

While German aircraft searched for any sign of approaching convoys the U-boats deployed in three lines. The first, Schill I, of seven U-boats, was the southernmost, running in a line to the west of Lisbon. The next was Schill 2, often U-boats, aligned west of Cape Finisterre, while the third, Schill 3, of twelve U-boats, was 170 miles north of this, roughly along the 45th parallel.

The ensuing attacks mounted over several days were repelled by the escorts, including Kistna. It was on the 17 November that Peter Mathai died during this battle, but no details exist of how this happened. HMS Chanticleer was hit by a torpedo from U 515 and sustained major damage. She was able to remain afloat and went to the Azores where she was found beyond economic repair for further service. A straggler, ss Marsa was sunk and ss Delius damaged by German aircraft with HS233 glider bombs. U 333 captained by Peter Cremer was badly damaged in a collision with HMS Exe. The Kriegsmarine finally called off the attack before the third patrol line was reached and the convoy continued its voyage without further incident, docking at Liverpool on 26 November 1943. The Kriegsmarine concluded that it had suffered a major defeat.

On completion of her trials in October 1943 and after storing Cauvery took passage to Scapa Flow on 30th October for a shakedown period with ships of Home Fleet. Several days were spent on A/S exercises with the submarine Spiteful and various escorts followed by two more days with the

submarine Taku and one with Telemachus on 3rd December. She was also deployed for local convoy escort. On 30 November Cauvery left Scapa at noon to rendezvous with ss Amsterdam and ss Prague (both 4200 ton London and North Eastern Railway ships built as passenger and freight ferries) off Aberdeen at 1700 and escorted them to Lerwick. She arrived back in Scapa on 2nd December. On 6 December Cauvery sailed for Tobermory for the standard two week work up in preparation for escort duty in the Indian Ocean.

Then on 16 December Cauvery and Kistna joined the escort of OS62 which had sailed from Liverpool the previous day. U-boats were very active in the area at that time, but bad weather allowed the convoy to pass on without suffering attack. The aircraft carrier HMS Striker detached on 28th December to join SL 143 as it moved towards Liverpool through the U-boat area. She was escorted by Cauvery and Kistna, which then rejoined OS 62.

On 2nd January the convoy split into Gibraltar and Freetown sections and the two sloops formed part of the escort for KMS 36, arriving at Gibraltar the next day. Kistna stayed with the ships destined for Alexandria, stopping at various ports along the North African coast. She arrived on 13th January at Port Said then took passage for Aden, sailing on in the escort of convoy AB30, which she joined on 7th February and finally arrived in Bombay on 15th February to join the Eastern Fleet.

It had been discovered that Godavari's stern was flexing in heavy seas and this required

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additional stiffening. Accordingly, she spent 1-11th December 1943 in Devonport Dockyard under repair. On the 17th she sailed to join the escort of convoy OS 62. When Godavari joined the escort on 22nd December it was the only occasion in which three of the sloops worked together — albeit briefly. Almost as soon as she sailed on 17 December, she was immediately diverted to search for a blockade runner. This proved fruitless and the search was abandoned

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on the 19, allowing her to join the convoy as a rear escort on the 22 just after 2200 hours on a storm-tossed pitch dark night.



s.s. Manchester Progress

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Almost immediately she was damaged in a collision with the convoy merchant ship s.s.

Manchester Progress. C.P.O. Mahade of Godavari gives a very atmospheric account of the incident and the panic amongst the crew who thought they had been torpedoed. She was slowly escorted back to the UK at four knots by the corvette HMS Clover, arriving at Londonderry on 29th December for temporary repair before moving to Devonport for full repair. The New

Year was welcomed in with great relief and religious services for Muslims, Hindus, Protestants and Catholics.

1944

On 6th January Cauvery sailed from Gibraltar with the 46 ship convoy SL 144 from Gibraltar for Liverpool, detaching on the 12 before arriving back in the UK.

By 24th February 1944 Godavari had completed her repairs at Devonport and was then assigned to join the Eastern Fleet at Trincomalee. On 4th March she conducted A/S exercises with a group of escorts and motor launches off Portsmouth with the submarine United. Godavari sailed from the Clyde on 14th March with convoy KMF29B, a small convoy of three American troopships and six escorts which arrived at Oran on 22nd March without incident. Next day Godavari joined convoy UGS 35 and escorted it to Port Said arriving on 31st March. Finally, on 19th April Godavari joined the escort of AB38 for a convoy from Aden to Bombay at Port Said. On the 25th Godavari arrived at Bombay and joined the Royal Indian Navy for convoy defence in the Indian Ocean.

In February 1944 Cauvery was nominated for service in the Indian Ocean with the Eastern Fleet. On 3rd March she sailed as part of the escort for military convoy KMS29A. This was to be the last Atlantic convoy escorted by an RIN sloop and it was a major one although it consisted of only five ships with an escort of two cruisers, two sloops and eight frigates. Some nine Fleet Air Arm Squadrons were transported in the escort carriers HMS Atheling and HMS

Begum, the aircraft transports HMS Athene and HMS Engadine and the troopship ss Strathnaver which carried pilots and ground crew for service in Ceylon and India. After two quiet weeks the convoy arrived at Port Said on 17 March. Cauvery moved on through the Suez Canal next day for Port Tewfik and then Aden, arriving on 27th March. Next day she sailed in the escort of convoy AJ2 arriving in Colombo on 4th April.

Conclusion

And so ended the journey home of the six sloops. Three of them, Cauvery, Godavari and Kistna were all awarded the Battle of the Atlantic battle honour. Their participation had been small but effective and should not be forgotten or ignored. It was certainly admired at the time, In the question session after Commodore Hall's 1944 lecture, Admiral Sir Howard Kelly remarked that "there was a strong reciprocal feeling of gratitude in the Navy for the valuable work done by the Royal Indian Navy... [and for] services which have lightened the burden of the Royal Navy... King George VI's visit to Godavari in Scapa Flow was also seen at the time as a considerable and valued honour.

Apart from their British officers the stories of the Indian seamen are completely invisible. And yet they fought the Bismarck, attacked U-boats and Luftwaffe bombers, escorted troopships and even met the King. But these stories have simply been forgotten. Although it can only be surmised, it may also be that the large scale naval mutiny in India in 1947, was seen as a disgrace by the naval establishment. But this does not explain why some 75 years on, this service in the Atlantic has gone unrecorded. The importance of the service was real but perhaps more importantly symbolic. It

symbolised the unity of the British Empire and the way in which the ships of the navies of the Empire were trained to common standards and shared common values. The transformation of the Empire into the Commonwealth in the second half of the twentieth century meant that these shared values changed and mutated. But whatever the reasons, the service of these brave men deserves to be both better known and better remembered.

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[The Indian Navy's Role and Impact in Operation Sindoor: Historical Precedents and Future Imperatives](#)

May 30, 2025



The employment of the Indian Navy since its baptism under fire in 1971 has followed a well-laid-out doctrine and strategy, evolving in response to advancements in technology—of one's own and that of adversaries. Since 1971, the Indian Navy has been mobilized and deployed in full force on two occasions—Operation Talwar in 1999 and Operation Parakram in 2002. While the Indian Navy did not see any action due to Pakistan's non-confrontational approach in the maritime domain, these deployments definitely "influenced events on land". Influencing events on land is an important part of the [Indian Maritime doctrine](#) and its unclassified 2015 strategy document, "[Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy](#)", where it is an objective of the military role in the Indian Navy's "Strategy for Conflict".

The success of the actions in 1971, along with the deployments in 1999 and 2002, have established a template that—with appropriate changes based on political directives, the prevailing security scenario, and available technology and assets—can frame strategic-level planning and offer multiple operational-level deployment options.

This was clearly evident during the Operation Sindoor triservice briefing, where the Director General Naval Operation highlighted that the Indian Navy had maintained continuous surveillance and was ready to deliver requisite firepower when ordered. This surveillance likely extended across the entire Makran Coast of Pakistan, which features significant maritime infrastructure—mainly ports running west to east: Jiwani, Gwadar, Pasni, Ormara, Karachi, and Port Qasim—as well as critical energy and connectivity assets. Such surveillance monitors ships and aircraft movements, essentially from the Pakistan Navy and Air Force, as well as Pakistani maritime and coastal shipping. This, in turn, provides a high level of maritime domain awareness (MDA) and targeting information for conducting maritime strikes against both maritime and land targets.

While Karachi was viewed as the main target by many media outlets and analysts, and rightfully so, there are other targets that add to the degradation of Pakistan's military and economic capabilities. As per reports, 36 Indian naval ships, including the Carrier Battle Group, were deployed. Hence, the firepower available, in terms of both ship- and air-launched missiles, would have imposed a significant toll along the Makran Coast.

The effectiveness of MDA and the operational reach were enabled by networked operations within the Navy and through joint coordination with the Army and Air Force—both of which are categorised as "Operational Enablers" in the "[Strategy for Conflict](#)". This strategy also places the delivery of firepower under "Force Projection" against designated legal targets, thereby conforming to the additional operational principles of "Application of Force" and "Strategic Effect".

Major operations and employment of the India Navy are centered on "Sea Control". The number of ships at sea, especially the Carrier Battle Group, supported by land-based maritime reconnaissance aircraft (such as P8Is and HALE UAVs), would have enabled the requisite degree of sea control. This was, of course, made easier by the absence of the Pakistan Navy in the areas of deployment.

The conduct of firing exercises in late April by both navies is a routine measure during times of high tension, signaling intent to use firepower when required, while also honing crew skills and procedures. That the exercises were conducted beyond each other's maritime zones indicates restraint on both sides. Such an exercise is possibly a first for Pakistan, suggesting the Pakistan Navy's active involvement in overall planning. In contrast, the Indian Navy carried out several such exercises in 1999 and 2002 to demonstrate its intent. While the actual areas of Indian Navy operations may never be publicly known, it is reasonable to assume that deployed ships and submarines operated around designated attack points— potentially within Pakistan's maritime zones, depending on

onboard equipment and missile ranges. Consequently, the Indian Naval force established [a de facto blockade](#), confining Pakistan Navy units to their harbors, proving the template and associated operational plans. It is important to note that a blockade is an act of war; thus, its imposition would be a deliberate and hence considered decision.

Future imperatives

Policy shift on terrorism

First, is the [change in policy](#) against terrorism that “any attack on Indian soil will be considered as an act of war”.

This could result in the India Navy being brought into action earlier than before—with maritime strikes on designated targets at sea, along the coast, and potentially inland.

This would expand the area of operations for both India and Pakistan, and the resultant escalation could expand into a full-fledged conflict. This policy shift would require reevaluating and shortening the Navy’s response time, including the operationalisation of forward operating bases and logistical chains.

Failure of deterrence and the role of compellence

As deterrence has failed to contain terrorist attacks from Pakistan, [compellence](#) may become the preferred strategy. Doctrinally, the Indian Navy recognizes compellence as a concept related to the use-of-force and hence includes it under the military role in its “Strategy for Conflict”. Incorporating actions that support compellence into operational plans is therefore straightforward. In the context of Op Sindoor, it has been stated that “the carrier group [acted as a force](#) for compellence”. The Carrier Battle Group and other deployed ships, supported by adequate logistics, can act as effective instruments of compellence. ***The nuclear dimension***

Since the above two factors have the potential for escalation, the nuclear factor may come into play earlier than expected. While the actual use of nuclear weapons—especially on land—remains debatable, the maritime domain presents a different arena, especially where tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) are concerned. The existing naval asymmetry could encourage Pakistan to raise the TNW flag at sea with a higher use criterion, especially [against the Carrier Battle Group](#). Though it is unclear whether Pakistan possesses TNWs for use at sea, land-based missiles could, in the meantime, serve as substitutes. [India’s nuclear doctrine](#) calls for retaliation with nuclear weapons in the event of a major attack on Indian territory and Indian forces anywhere. The same extends to attacks by biological or chemical weapons. This may impact [conventional operations under the nuclear shadow](#), and therefore India could look at enhancing operations in a more intense manner, while managing escalation to pre-empt raising of the nuclear flag.

Additionally, international sentiment must be accounted for, as maritime conflict in the region would impact global trade—especially shipping through the Strait of Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb. Any restrictions on international shipping, whether due to blockades or military operations, would need to be formally communicated through exclusion zones or navigational area warnings, as outlined in the Indian Maritime Doctrine.

A future conflict with Pakistan, triggered by a terrorist attack, will require a re-calibration of operational plans—particularly in terms of intensity and design—so as to enable early conflict termination on terms favorable to India.

India's Expanding Naval Presence in the Indo-Pacific Nishant Rajeev SYNOPSIS From the late 2010s, the Indian Navy has adopted an assertive and proactive posture in the maritime domain. It has steadily expanded its engagement with the South China Sea's littoral states. India realises that, while its options on the continental frontier are limited, the maritime domain provides India opportunities to apply pressure on China. COMMENTARY During the Ladakh standoff between India and China in 2020, the Indian Army and Air Force repositioned rapidly to meet the threat from China along their disputed border. The Indian Army "rebalanced" several formations from the western theatre to the eastern theatre to bolster its forces against the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Similarly, the Indian Air Force activated several forward operating bases to increase its presence in the eastern theatre. While these strategic measures garnered tremendous coverage in both the local and international media, India's actions in the maritime frontier were somewhat overlooked. The Indian Navy was active throughout the standoff to challenge and pressure China in the Indian Ocean Region. It stepped up deployments of its warships and submarines especially around the strategic Strait of Malacca. It carried out exercises with the US Navy and Japanese Navy shortly after the Galwan Valley clashes in June 2020. These measures highlight India's growing recognition of the importance of the maritime theatre in the India-China competition. Apart from bolstering bilateral relations with other regional maritime partners, India has recognised that the maritime domain provides scope to expand its options against China. India is slowly shedding its traditional reticence and adopting a more proactive approach to the maritime domain, moving even beyond the Indian Ocean region.

The Indian Navy's Engagement Beyond the Indian Ocean The Indian Navy's doctrines have long recognised the importance of the maritime domain for India's economic progress. The first maritime strategy document was promulgated at a time when Indian policymakers were articulating the conception of India's extended neighbourhood. Despite this, India remained cautious in engaging the South China Sea's littoral states or even operating in the wider region. The Indian Navy did frequently deploy to the South China Sea region and then on to the NorthWestern Pacific Ocean. Such deployments took place at least once a year. It has also had a long history of conducting Coordinated Patrols with Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Myanmar in and around the Strait of Malacca and the Andaman Sea. It conducted an annual exercise, Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX), with the Republic of Singapore Navy as well. However, much of its naval diplomacy with the South China Sea's littoral states was limited to port calls. In the early 2010s, India refrained from conducting exercises in the South China Sea. When exercises did occur, they were usually in the form of multilateral naval exercises. This position began to gradually change in the mid- to late-2010s. In 2017, the Indian Navy launched its Mission Based Deployments operational posture. The posture called for the navy to increase "its presence and visibility" across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The Indian Navy's ships, aircraft, and submarines have since been deploying to critical choke points around the IOR and maintained a presence at all the "ingress and egress routes of the IOR". The Indian Navy's engagement with the littoral states of the South China Sea has also undergone an evolution. It began exercises with Vietnam in the South China Sea in 2018. Such exercises have taken place at regular intervals in 2019, 2021, 2023, and 2024. In 2020, the Indian Navy provided relief materials to Vietnam after the country was affected by floods. While departing the country, the Indian naval vessel, INS Kiltan also conducted a "passage exercise" in the South China Sea. More recently, the Indian Navy has begun exercising with the Philippine Navy in the West Philippine Sea. Although the exact details of the exercise are scarce, the first known exercise was conducted in 2021. Two more iterations of these "Maritime Partnership Exercises" have been conducted since then in the same region in 2023 and 2024. With Malaysia, the Indian Navy has conducted three iterations of the "Samudra Laksamana" exercise series in 2019, 2022, and 2024. While the 2024 edition was conducted off the Indian Eastern Seaboard, the first two editions were held in the vicinity of the South China Sea near the Malaysian port of Kota Kinabalu. Apart from this bilateral engagement,

India has also begun engaging extra-regional powers in and around the South China Sea region, namely its Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) partners. The Malabar exercises between the Quad navies were conducted in the Philippine Sea in 2016, 2018, and in 2022 (after the inclusion of Australia). Previously, the Indian Navy joined the US Navy, the Japanese Navy, and the Philippine Navy in conducting a “group sail” exercise in the South China Sea in May 2019. Later that year, the US Navy replenishment ship conducted an at-sea replenishment of an Indian anti-submarine warfare corvette INS Kiltan in the waters of the South China Sea. India joined its Quad partners — Japan, Australia, and the United States — for the 26th iteration of the Malabar naval exercises in 2022.

Source: Indian Navy, GODL-India, via Wikimedia Commons. The China Factor in India's Engagement

The recent activities the Indian Navy is undertaking highlight its shifting position over the years. The Indian Navy has adopted a much more assertive position in the region, partly driven by its own rise and expanding national interests, but also with an eye on China. On the continental frontier, India is constrained. The material balance of power has shifted in the PLA's favour as three decades of strong economic growth have fuelled its military rise. Any escalatory moves along the disputed Line of Actual Control can spark a military conflict. However, the naval domain provides India opportunities. It not only retains an advantage in the IOR but can also partner with a long list of states apprehensive of China's behaviour. An Indian presence in the South China Sea further challenges Chinese attempts to dominate the region, at least normatively, if not materially. Other regional powers like the United States and Australia are already engaged in such activities, and a coordinated Indian presence can augment such efforts. Ultimately, it complicates China's ability to act freely in the region and hands India an avenue to apply pressure on China. This position also adds credibility to India's increasing readiness to confront China and potentially play a role in a regional conflict. The message from India is that it is prepared to contribute to a deterrence effort to prevent China's military dominance of the region. While India is unlikely to engage militarily, it can assist in other ways. A former Indian Naval Chief has suggested that India could take over some of the US Navy's responsibilities in parts of the Indian Ocean Region, provided that both navies develop better interoperability. This would allow the United States to commit its forces in a theatre of conflict. It can also provide logistics support and conduct escort operations for US naval vessels in the Indian Ocean Region. None of this suggests that the Indian Navy can readily challenge the PLA in the South China Sea. Given the pace of Chinese naval development, the Indian Navy has a daunting task of maintaining its superiority in the IOR itself. However, the Indian Navy's increasing presence in the South China Sea gives India more leverage as it confronts China across the Indo-Pacific.