

# The Final Reckoning ?

On Navy Day 2017, Admiral Arun Prakash writes on

India's Resurgent Maritime Power



Indian Navy flagship INS Vikramaditya sails alongside USS Nimitz and JS Izumo at the head of a tri-lateral naval formation in the Bay of Bengal (photo: US Navy/MC3 Cole Schroeder)

**A**s the nation contemplated the long drawn out Sino-Indian confrontation at Doklam, in neighbouring Bhutan, and China's strategic moves in the Indian Ocean region (IOR), a new consensus appeared to be emerging amongst analysts. Most seemed to be of the view that while the Indian army and IAF may be able to hold out against a PLA land-offensive, and even give the aggressor an occasional 'bloody nose' (so ardently sought by TV anchors), the final reckoning with China would be in the Indian Ocean.

## Why on Navy Day?

There is a general assumption that India possesses adequate 'maritime power' to deal with the PLA-Navy in home waters and opinion favours the opening of a 'maritime front' to capitalise on this putative advantage. One is not aware if this discourse is based on empirical data, war-gaming or mere speculation, but Navy Day 2017 seems to be a good juncture to take stock of India's 'maritime power', and apply our minds to future challenges.

Traditionally, Navy Day is celebrated annually, on 4 December, to mark free India's first naval victory in the 1971 War, and to remind our fellow-citizens of their forgotten maritime heritage. The Bangladesh War marked an important milestone in the navy's post-independence history. Still smarting from the ignominy of inaction in 1965, the navy's leadership ensured that it had an important role to play in the coming conflict. The Service was truly blooded as it saw the bold employment of the full range of maritime

capabilities; including missile-warfare, carrier operations, submarine and anti-submarine warfare, amphibious operations, shore-bombardment, special operations, and mine counter-measures.

On 4 December 1971 daring raids by missile-boats on Karachi harbour sank Pakistani warships, set ablaze fuel tanks, bottled up the enemy fleet and virtually shut down the port. This was a role that Soviet tacticians had never envisaged for these small 400-ton craft. In eastern waters, as we gathered wreckage of the

ill-fated Pak submarine *Ghazi*, the aircraft carrier *Vikrant* and her escorts, blockaded East Pakistani ports, attacked airfields and interdicted shipping, thus tightening the noose around General Niazi and his murderous hordes, who eventually surrendered on 16 December 1971.

## India's Maritime Tradition

While celebrating the successful storming of the Pakistani naval bastion, Navy Day is also an occasion, for the nation, to remind its citizens – especially the youth – of our

glorious maritime heritage and of the forgotten seagoing exploits of ancient Indian mariners. Sardar KM Panikkar, Indian diplomat and historian debunks many Western myths in his 1945 monograph, when he proclaims, "Millenniums before Columbus sailed the Atlantic and Magellan crossed the Pacific, the Indian Ocean had become an active thoroughfare of commercial and cultural traffic."

Panikkar refers to the powerful navies maintained by the Andhra, Pallava, Pandya and Chola dynasties in our Eastern waters to offer convincing evidence that intrepid Indian seafarers sustained maritime trade and cultural links with SE Asia for centuries. However, maritime intercourse was not confined only to our eastern waters, and extensive trading and cultural links existed with Africa and the Middle East, whose signs are still in evidence.

In the 11th century AD, a hundred-year maritime conflict between the Sumatra-based Sri Vijaya and South Indian Chola dynasties weakened both Empires and heralded the end of Hindu sea power. So, when Vasco da Gama arrived off Calicut in 1498, there was no Indian ruler who could muster a naval force to oppose their small, armed caravels. A few decades later, the British East India Company made its appearance on Indian shores to be followed by the Dutch, Portuguese and French. Thus, Indians, despite being heirs to an ancient maritime tradition, were colonised, enslaved and exploited by foreign maritime powers, because of their 'sea blindness'.

In this dismal historical sequence, we must cherish the memory of a few naval heroes, who left a mark on the country's maritime stage. Amongst these are the resolute and visionary Samuthari Rajas (or Zamorins) of Calicut, who waged a 90-year long naval campaign against the Portuguese, led by Captains of the Kunjali Marakkar clan. A century later, the Maratha admiral, Kanhoji Angre's fleet of ghurabs and gallibats ceaselessly harried British, Dutch and Portuguese shipping, scoring many victories against their individual and collective forces.

While India's Mughal rulers were bereft of any maritime awareness, the British who succeeded them, deliberately kept their Indian subjects away from the sea, focusing instead of a large army to keep order at home, and in overseas possessions.