The Indian Navy’s Role and Impact in Operation Sindoor: Historical Precedents and Future Imperatives

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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 tri-service 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 re-evaluating 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.