

FROM BUSINESS STANDARD

SUNDAY JAN 31, 2010

China and India at sea - Growth vs Decline

by Premvir Das

(At a time when China's maritime power is growing rapidly, the Indian Navy's share of defence allocation has fallen to less than what it was in 2001.)

A recent assessment of Chinese naval power by US Intelligence was, inadvertently, put on the Net and, therefore, accessed by many. Actually, there is nothing very revealing in the data. There are many Chinese Navy (PLAN) watchers, including many in our own country, who have pretty up-to-date information on its capabilities and shipbuilding plans. The American document lists PLAN holdings as nine nuclear submarines (three of them with nuclear weapons of long range), 53 conventional diesel-powered submarines, 74 destroyers/frigates and nearly the same number of amphibious ships and coastal patrol boats equipped with missiles.

Allowing for the fact that this inventory includes quite a few platforms of doubtful quality and effectiveness given their age, a more realistic order of combat would be in the region of seven nuclear submarines (three with nuclear weapons), about 30-odd diesel submarines and 45 destroyers/frigates. If one looks at the longer term, say 2020, with PLAN ship and submarine acquisition plans as known today, as also phasing out of existing vessels, their force level might comprise two aircraft carriers, 40-45 diesel submarines and about 55 destroyers/frigates; the numbers might be a little more or less, but not by much. Budgetary support to maritime power has been increasing every year as growth of a strong PLAN is a key element of China's military modernisation.

Faced with this picture, India's own story is remarkable. The Navy's share of the defence allocation, which progressively rose from 10 per cent in 1974 to 13 per cent in 1986 and to nearly 19 per cent in 2007, has dropped sharply over the last three years, to 17 per cent in 2008, 15 per cent in 2009 and now to 14.5 per cent in the year ending on 31st March 2010, less than what its share was nine years ago, in

2001. This, when the political leadership has constantly been harping on the theme of safeguarding the country's burgeoning interests at sea and on the importance of the Indian Ocean in India's security. This is accompanied by under-utilisation of funds provided, in part due to delayed delivery of ships, e.g., Gorshkov (Vikramaditya), but largely by delays in approval and finalisation of major acquisition projects, both indigenously and from abroad. Clearly, decision making in the Ministry of Defence is now very fragile, both in speed and quality. Any discerning observer can see that the country's maritime power is not just stagnating but is on a steep decline.

As far as aircraft carriers go, of which the Navy needs three, the old Viraat cannot last more than five years. With Vikramaditya expected to come by 2012, there will be two such ships and if the new Vikrant (under construction at Cochin Shipyard, and due to be launched in the first quarter of 2011) is delivered by 2015, there will be two aircraft carriers in 2020, a level we had until 1997. The picture regarding destroyers/frigates — the major ocean-capable ships — is unhappy. There are 14 today and nine more in the pipeline, three being acquired from Russia and six under different stages of construction at Mazagon Docks (MDL) in Mumbai; the first of the MDL ships could come this year and if the remaining five are delivered in the next 10 years, the figure could reach 23 by 2020. From this must be deleted all ships built earlier than 1990, which would either be scrapped or become irrelevant for the work required to be done; there are 10 of these, so the effective remaining numbers of such ships will be a mere 13.

Approval has been accorded for building six more frigates, three each at MDL and Garden Reach Shipyard (GRSE), though selection of a suitable foreign shipyard as collaborator is nowhere in sight. The question of MDL delivering even one of these in the next 10 years is absolutely laughable for all those who have closely monitored the performance of this yard over the years. GRSE has not built such a ship for 10 years. Allowing for the fact that facilities and skills will have to be re-established and, of course, for the deal to be finalised, which itself might take quite some time, not more than one and at the most two ships might come from here by 2020 — this in the most optimistic scenario. In short, the Navy will have somewhere between 14 and 15 destroyers/frigates by 2020, just where it stands today.

The picture in diesel submarines is even more dismal. By 2020, all boats built before 1990 would be gone, leaving us with just four. Six Scorpene submarines are on order, two through import and the other

four to be built at MDL. The imported ones are sure to come in the next three to five years; the others are a question mark, as all work at MDL is at a stop, awaiting revised price approvals. Allowing that all four come, the force level of diesel submarines will be no more than 10, much fewer than the numbers operational today. As for nuclear submarines, Arihant, launched by the Prime Minister some months ago, should be operational by 2014 or so. In short, do not even think of where the PLAN will be in 2020. Our own Navy will be short of even its present levels.

Are there any ways in which we can rectify this sad situation? Yes, even if they will not undo the great damage that has been done in the last three years by the dismal performance of a Ministry of Defence completely out of sync with strategic compulsions of national security. For one, place orders now for a follow-on Arihant and a repeat Vikrant. Both can be delivered by 2020, as their building does not come in the way of either MDL or GRSE. This will take the numbers of nuclear submarines to two and of aircraft carriers to three. Second, convert the six-frigate order (three each) on MDL/GRSE into two each and order two from the foreign shipyard, which itself must be done very speedily. If this is done, the Navy will have 17 such ships by 2020 — ironically, the number it had in 1971. Third, place orders for six more diesel submarines, three to be built at a new yard (Hindustan Shipyard in Visakhapatnam has just been taken over as a defence undertaking) and three directly from the collaborating yard. If this is processed with urgency, there is a good possibility of four being available, taking the total to 14 — what we have today.

But all this can be done only if the system works with a sense of urgency and with its feet on the ground, overruling exaggerated and over-optimistic projections by MDL/GRSE, when both know full well that their claims are fanciful. The same can be said of the civil bureaucracy involved in this decision. There is no accountability and the 'dramatis personae' would have gone long before the first steel plate is cut in either yard. It is time for the Minister to take fresh stock; his immediate and decisive intervention is essential. This is no time to take stock of China's growing maritime power. It is time to come to grips with the worsening state of our own.

The author is a former Commander-in-Chief of the Eastern Naval Command. He has also served as Director-General, Defence Planning Staff