

Indian Navy - projecting a force beyond borders

The Indian Navy's 'proactive' move against Somali pirates in the strategic Gulf of Aden marks a significant step in New Delhi's aspirations of projecting its force beyond its borders and translating its growing economic and military strength into political clout, says officials and analysts.

Indian Navy's widely appreciated combat move has come at a time when the International Maritime Bureau termed the situation in the important sea lane that controls a lot of the world's energy levels 'out of control' and major military nations expressed helplessness.

'Navies are the best tools to showcase a nation's might and to send a message globally. Indian Navy has been keen to take more responsibility in the Gulf of Aden to boost its credentials as a maritime force to reckon with in the region,' a senior navy official told IANS, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Indian Navy's INS Tabar Tuesday sank a pirate vessel in a retaliatory fire while patrolling the piracy-infested Gulf of Aden, about 1,800 miles/2,880 km from its home port of Mumbai.

'The incident has clearly underscored the point that the Indian Navy has capability to project force beyond its border. We have to take a proactive role in security of the Gulf of Aden as it controls access to the Suez Canal and is a vital route for energy supply to India,' the official added.

The opinion has been echoed by military experts.

'The robust response by INS Tabar off the Gulf of Aden has reiterated the credibility of the Indian Navy in strategic water ways. This is a reflection of India's transborder military capability and its ability to maintain a naval 'presence' to deal with any low intensity maritime challenges that may arise,' former Director of Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) C. Uday Bhaskar told IANS.

This is the second time the 55,000-strong Indian Navy, the fifth largest naval force in the world, is playing a significant role in the region. In 1992, as part of the United Nation's multinational force under 'Operation Restore Hope', it has constantly undertaken surveillance and patrolling off civil war-ravaged Somalia coast.

Suggesting a paradigm shift in the power projection of the Indian Navy from a regional force guarding its 5514 km coastline, the Indian Navy is now assuming greater role to place itself as a global force.

In pursuit of its goal the Indian Navy is acquiring the bigger symbols of potent maritime force - aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines.

In the next decade Indian Navy will commission Russian built Admiral Gorshkov, renamed INS Vikramaditya, and two indigenous aircraft carriers. The navy will also be completing its nuclear triad with the acquisition of nuclear submarines - one Russian built Akula and three constructed within the country under its ambitious Advanced Technology Vessel project.

The Indian Navy, which was quick to respond to President Gayoom's request in the wake of an

apprehension of a coup in Maldives in 1988, has come of age.

When tsunami struck in December 2004, although India suffered over 15,000 deaths and vast destruction, the Indian Navy was the first navy to rush aid to the Maldives as well as to Sri Lanka and Indonesia which were the worst hit.

About 1,000 Indian relief personnel and five naval ships were sent to Trincomalee, Galle and Colombo ports in Sri Lanka, with medical teams and immediate relief material.

'The fact that India could deploy its navy within 24 hours of the tsunami created ripples in the world, including in Washington,' pointed out Bhaskar.

Since then the Indian Navy has been gradually increasing the scope of its operations. During the Israel-Lebanon conflict in 2006 the Indian Navy sent warships to evacuate 2,280 persons, including 700 Indians.

In May this year, as Cyclone Nargis battered neighbouring Myanmar leaving thousands dead, the Indian Navy was the first to send relief supplies.

'Power projection today every nation is doing,' Lt.Gen (retd.) Raj Kadyan, a strategic expert, told IANS. 'India is now in a position to project its power and earn goodwill, though this event is not related to any entry into the Security Council yet, its part of a larger scheme of things.'

Ritu Sharma (© IANS / India eNews)