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# Amphibious Operations: Do We Need a Hard Reset?

Sarabjeet S Parmar

## Abstract

*Mankind has been landing troops by sea-going vessels on foreign shores since time immemorial. In 1200 BCE, to attack Troy, the Greeks had to make a shore landing, as did the Persians prior to the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE. Both the world wars saw several amphibious landings, the most prominent ones being Gallipoli in 1915 and Normandy in 1944. During World War 2 the Pacific Theatre witnessed many amphibious operations. Over time the complexity of amphibious operations increased with technologically enhanced land power, and the advent of maritime and air power, all of which necessitated a high degree of joint planning and flexibility of execution. This article will analyse amphibious operations in the contemporary context and examine if there is a need for a hard reset.*

## Introduction

Amphibious operations were essentially used, and later doctrinally and strategically designed, for landing armies on foreign shores and carrying

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the conflict onto the territories of the adversary, either sovereign or occupied. Well before the term came into vogue, mankind had been landing troops on foreign shores since time immemorial. In 1200 BCE, the Greeks landed an army to attack Troy, as did the Persians prior to the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE. As a part of combined operations, World War I saw landings at Gallipoli in 1915, while the Second World War

saw several amphibious operations—as we now understand them—in the Mediterranean and the Pacific theatres, and the famous 1944 Normandy landings. These operations brought home the complexity and requirement for joint planning and as Captain Lidell Hart is known to have commented in 1939, “A landing on a foreign coast in the face of hostile troops has always been one of the most difficult operations of war.” However, “with more than 70 per cent of the Earth covered in water, amphibious forces use waterways as manoeuvre space, giving them a level of flexibility, speed, and survivability often unmatched by land forces.”<sup>1</sup> Over time with the advent of technology, the complexity of amphibious operations increased further which necessitated a high degree of joint planning and more importantly, flexibility of execution. “There are a number of historical examples where individuals have forecasted the demise of amphibious operations due to technological changes.”<sup>2</sup> However, the armed forces of many maritime nations, who posit amphibious operations as an essential element of both hard and soft power, developed the requisite capacity and capability and produced and evolved doctrines and related strategies. This article will analyse amphibious operations in the

contemporary context and examine if there is a need for a hard reset in the Indian context.

### **Doctrines, Strategies, and Capability**

The Seven Years Anglo-French War, fought from 1756 to 1763, has been long marked by historians as the war that brought about evolutionary leaps in operational art, and through revolutionary methods introduced amphibious operations as a distinct military theory.<sup>3</sup> Around the mid to late 18th century four principles emerged which have guided amphibious operations for centuries:<sup>4</sup>

- Amphibious operations are not meant to win wars on their own and are a larger national-strategic framework.
- To be effective, amphibious operations should target the Centre of Gravity (CoG) both physically and mentally.
- To be successful amphibious operations require sufficient mass.
- Even if the above criteria are met the success of an amphibious operation would depend on how well the planners, commanders and troops are equipped, trained, and practiced.

Nations that understand the necessity of amphibious operations and the use of amphibious assets as part of soft power can be placed under three broad categories:

- Island nations like the United Kingdom (UK).
- Nations which have islands like India.
- Nations who engage and operate in areas with numerous islands and have understandings or alliances that ensure the protection of sovereignty like the United States of America (USA).

However, in today's contemporary world the size of defence budgets, the number of suitable assets and troops available, and the current deployment and prioritisation of operations are impacting the

maintenance and preparedness of amphibious-related assets, and hence amphibious operations. Nonetheless militaries the world over continue to develop and update doctrines and strategies that include these operations as a part of conflict, and soft power operations, as mentioned earlier. As short case studies, this section will examine doctrines, strategies, and capabilities of the UK, USA, and China.

**United Kingdom.** UK's joint doctrine, *UK Maritime Power*, places and explains amphibious-related aspects under Chapters 3 and 4 that look at the foundations and employment of maritime power, respectively.<sup>5</sup> Four main issues that emerge from the doctrine are as follows:<sup>6</sup>

- Under maritime power projection, amphibious forces as part of an encompassing maritime task group, will enhance maritime manoeuvre and be used to project force ashore.
- The amphibious force can operate independently or with allies and partners and will comprise specialist amphibious ships, the landing force (LF), and a tailored air group.
- Amphibious ships will be from the Royal Navy (RN), the Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA), and when required chartered from the merchant navy.
- The Royal Marines (RMs) are the main land component of amphibious operations. They are specialised in amphibious operations, are fully integrated with the RN's amphibious ships, and can operate without support from the host nation. The LF will also include elements of the British Army.

As a maritime island power, the UK fully understands the need for amphibious capability and maintains a core capability of two RN amphibious ships (Landing Platform Dock-LPD), three RFA amphibious ships (Landing Ship Dock-LSD), and an LF of one RM brigade and two amphibious squadrons.<sup>7</sup> To meet the increasing challenges and risks the UK is transforming its amphibious forces and has been looking at investing

40 million GBP to modernise the RM element of its LF, and 50 million GBP to modernise one RFA amphibious ship.<sup>8</sup> Although this force would be supported and augmented by other elements, the modernisation and numbers would still limit the envelope of amphibious operations in both operational areas and the scope of attainable objectives. The Integrated Review Refresh 2023 states that “The most pressing national security and foreign policy priority in the short-to-medium term is to address the threat posed by Russia to European security”,<sup>9</sup> hence this could raise the budgetary priority of land-centric military capability, which could impact the amphibious capability.

**United States of America.** From World War II onwards, the USA probably had the most experience in amphibious operations. The US amphibious doctrine has evolved considerably from the 1938 Landing Operations Doctrine, which paved the way for the transformation of the US military into an amphibious assault force. Over time the doctrines indicated four types of amphibious operations—Assault, Raid, Demonstration and Withdrawal. These hard power aspects had also been adopted by other nations. The soft power aspect, which was added subsequently, was changed in the 2014 Joint Publication 3-02 from “amphibious support to other operations” to “amphibious forces support to crisis response and other operations”.<sup>10</sup> This has been carried forward to the 2019 doctrine validated on January 21, 2021 and the relevant paragraph under **AF (Amphibious Force) Support to Crisis Response and Other Operations** reads as follows:<sup>11</sup>

*“AFs routinely conduct amphibious operations in response to crises and in support of other operations such as security cooperation, foreign humanitarian assistance (FHA, which includes disaster relief), non-combatant evacuation operations (NEOs), peace operations, sea control, or recovery operations. These operations contribute to conflict prevention and crisis mitigation.”*

**Given the different geographical areas in which the US will engage in strategic competition with both nations, the US amphibious element could be of more value against China.**

The US 2022 National Security Strategy under global priorities looks at “Out-Competing China and Constraining Russia”, and places China as “the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it.”<sup>12</sup>

Given the different geographical areas in which the US will engage in strategic competition with both nations, the US amphibious element could be of more value against China. This would mainly be due to the number of islands and defence treaty alliances the US has with nations in the Indo-Pacific, especially the South and East China Seas. Details of amphibious operational and related aspects have been covered in the US Marine Corp’s second edition of the *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations* dated May 2023, which indicates the importance of amphibious operations in the US<sup>13</sup> duly supported by the amphibious assets held by the US military, specifically under the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM).<sup>14</sup>

**China.** It can be assumed that China’s amphibious capability is focused on Taiwan, and the islands and reefs of the South and East China Seas. This is evident from the Chinese National Defence University 2020 publication titled, *The Science of Military Strategy*, which states the following under *Amphibious Combat Capability*:<sup>15</sup>

*“Amphibious operations, also known as landing operations, refer to the ability to project marines and special forces on a campaign scale to implement amphibious operations across seas and landings (islands and reefs) [...] amphibious landing operations capabilities mainly include large-scale weapon delivery capabilities, reconnaissance and early*

*warning capabilities, coordinated command capabilities of various arms, and deep strike capabilities against targets.”*

**It is evident that China places amphibious operations as a high-priority integrated joint operation to be conducted and supported by various arms of the PLA.**

On November 26, 2020, during a press conference, the Chinese Ministry of National Defence (MND) spokesperson announced the issuance of the *Guidelines on Joint Operations of the People’s Liberation Army (Trial)*. He also stated that “being the capstone of the combat doctrines system in the new era, *the guidelines* has a leading, overarching and fundamental standing, forms an integral part of the reform of military policies and institutions”.<sup>16</sup>

It is evident that China places amphibious operations as a high-priority integrated joint operation to be conducted and supported by various arms of the PLA. China has added 17 large amphibious ships (LHA/LPD) since 2005.<sup>17</sup> The PLA is building naval amphibious and support assets, conducting regular amphibious exercises, and has allocated force levels to the theatre commands, specifically the Northern, Eastern, and Southern theatres to accordingly support the Chinese amphibious posture in the South and East China Seas.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Indian Context**

In the Indian context, the credible use of amphibious assets falls under both hard and soft power. While amphibious operations fall under hard power, operations like NEO, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) including Pandemic relief operations would fall under the purview of soft power.

**Hard Power Aspects.** With respect to hard power the Indian military has participated in several amphibious operations and exercises

and hence has experienced joint planning and operations. During World War I the Indian Army participated in the 1915 landings at Gallipoli. This was followed by amphibious operations that led to the reoccupation of Berbera in the Gulf of Aden later in 1941. This amphibious operation was the first combined operation conducted by the Indian Army and the Royal Indian Navy (RIN).<sup>19</sup> After independence three major hard power amphibious landings were carried out—in 1947, 1961, and 1971. These are covered in the subsequent paragraphs.

Post-independence in 1947, the Indian Armed Forces carried out amphibious operations off Junagadh, a princely state whose ruler was looking at acceding to Pakistan despite having no border with it. To ensure stability and peace the Indian Army was landed by the RIN in the first post-independence amphibious operation, called Exercise Peace, in three phases on October 5, October 17 and November 1, 1947.<sup>20</sup>

In 1961 during the liberation of Goa operations, amphibious operations were ruled out for four reasons.<sup>21</sup> These were good planning decisions because:

- At that time the IN did not have adequate assault landing craft for such an operation.
- The Indian Army had not been trained for amphibious operations.
- Due to strategic considerations for pressure from the Western countries, time was too short to conduct any kind of training.
- Lastly, it was felt that an inland approach was possible against a weaker enemy's land border, hence amphibious operations would not offer any imperative tactical advantage.

During the Goa operations, the capture of Anjadip Island was considered a primary task for the Naval Task Force as the Portuguese operations had originated from this island. The landings were conducted by the Indian Navy as “it was, however, assumed that there would be little or no resistance from the Portuguese personnel stationed on the island



and hence Naval landing parties as opposed to trained Army commandos were considered adequate for the task.”<sup>22</sup>

**The use of amphibious assets in a non-combat role by India has been increasing.**

In the 1971 war against Pakistan, the main area considered for amphibious operations was the eastern theatre and the Eastern Naval Command catered for both diversionary and actual amphibious landings.<sup>23</sup> The landings called Operation Beaver were initially scheduled on December 12, 1971 but were finally conducted on December 15, 1971 at Reju Creek. The landings at Reju Creek were partially successful and due to difficulties experienced, the landing was shifted to Cox Bazaar overnight. This delay and shifting to Cox Bazaar were due to a variety of reasons that pointed to a lack of detailed joint planning.<sup>24</sup>

**Soft Power Aspects.** The use of amphibious assets in a non-combat role by India has been increasing. This use of amphibious assets, especially the larger ships, are considered more appropriate mainly for soft power operations angle due to three main reasons:

- There is adequate space available onboard, and the troop accommodation spaces can be used to carry people and stores required for HADR (including pandemic situations) and NEO.
- This space also provides the inherent flexibility of these assets being converted to hospital ships.

The deployment of military assets to address HADR and NEO has gained prominence, and the Indian military is increasingly being utilised for such operations, both nationally and internationally. Such operations fall under the purview of the Benign Role of the Indian Navy and nationally are placed under the ambit of ‘Aid to Civil Authorities’ and internationally as part of defence diplomacy. Internationally, such deployments since the 2004 Tsunami have added heft to India’s contemporary claim to being the Preferred Security Partner and First Responder.

## Doctrines, Strategies, and Capability

India is a continental nation with a long coastline and numerous islands and needs to balance the capability of addressing a diverse range of land and maritime threats and challenges. On the maritime front, the security and safety of the coastline and islands, and the essentiality of ensuring adequate deterrent value and a full conflict spectrum coverage requires amphibious assets and the capability to conduct amphibious operations. There are five doctrines and one strategy document that cover amphibious operations based on their inherent operational philosophies, mainly in the context of hard power. These are covered in the subsequent paragraphs.

The second edition of the Joint Doctrine Indian Armed Forces (JDIAF) published in April 2017 by the Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff (HQIDS) can be considered the joint capstone document where amphibious operations need more elaboration. It is understood that the first joint doctrine on amphibious operations, published in 2008, is under review, and is no longer available in the open domain. The new doctrine should amalgamate all inputs from the three Services and their doctrines and strategies in force, as this would be the guiding document for the theatre commanders, as and when the theatre commands are raised. The JDIAF devotes a paragraph to Amphibious Operations and states that:<sup>25</sup>

- These operations are conducted by all Services in an integrated manner to enable the army to land ashore from a sea approach in order to project power inland.
- These operations are carried out to capture territory which may be of the enemy's or own, which is occupied by the enemy. They may also be carried out to creep forward through island territory to reach the enemy's centre of gravity from the sea to deliver him a knockout blow, to deny a logistics hub to the enemy or just to pose a threat to the enemy to deter him from prosecuting operations elsewhere.

While the Indian Army (IA) Land Warfare Doctrine 2018 places amphibious capability as an imperative for force projection operations,<sup>26</sup> the cover page states that the doctrine is to be read in conjunction with JDIAF 2017.

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For example, under NWNP Air Strategy the following can be considered as main supportive elements—Information Dominance and Shaping Operations. Under Wartime Air Strategy most of the tenets may be used depending on the planning requirements of the amphibious operation, especially Favourable Air Situation and Coordinated Air Operations.<sup>27</sup>

- The *Indian Maritime Doctrine, National Strategic Publication 1.1*, updated in 2015 (IMD NSP 1.1) and the unclassified strategy document, *Indian Maritime Security Strategy: Ensuring Secure Seas, National Strategic Publication 1.2*, published in 2015 (IMSS 2015) both cover amphibious operations in some detail. IMD NSP 1.1 places amphibious operations as a method to directly influence land battles by projecting military power ashore from the sea.<sup>28</sup> IMSS 2015 looks at the standard four types of amphibious operations<sup>29</sup> mentioned earlier and states that “Such operations will remain valid and valuable in the Indian context, due to the coastal terrain in our primary areas of interest and our many islands [and] the IN will operate in close cooperation with the IA and IAF and will be prepared to undertake them as required for both defensive and offensive purposes”.<sup>30</sup>

- It also states that as a “force projection operation, it will be conducted to prosecute further combat operations ashore, capture or recapture territories, obtain a site for an advance naval or air base, deny the use of an area or facilities like a port to the enemy, or to show presence” and that such an operation “will target the enemy’s Centre of Gravity (CoG) or critical vulnerabilities”.<sup>31</sup>

Given the area of operations, which have extended into the Indo-Pacific, the present strength of 17 amphibious ships<sup>32</sup> has limited carrying capacity and is hence considered inadequate to meet both hard power and soft power operations.

## **Conclusion**

Presently, it is opined that there is no requirement for a hard reset. While hard power amphibious operations planning would consider all aspects, the advent of technology in the areas of surveillance and tracking, and the ability to bring firepower to bear on the amphibious force from longer ranges would require our amphibious operations to undergo a change. These would vary depending upon the nation and the adversary concerned. However, some aspects that merit attention are as follows:

- Though the soft power usage of amphibious assets is not linked to amphibious operations in both these capstone documents of the IN, the assets have been used extensively for such operations, especially HADR and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the addition of soft power aspects as a fifth type of amphibious operation could be added to the joint doctrine under review as well as the army and naval doctrine and strategy documents.
- There is a need to increase the number of amphibious assets with large carrying capacities with stand-off beaching capability. These would add value to both hard and soft power amphibious operations.

## Notes

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