Warring Navies: India-Pakistan; Indian Navy’s Role in the Indo-Pak Wars, by Ranji Rai and Joseph Chacko

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Asia, the demise of trade liberalization, the erosion of democracy and advance of autocratic rulers, and the doubts the Trump administration has cast on its commitment to alliances, we may find that he was in fact too sanguine.

CHARLES EDEL


Ranji Rai and Joseph Chacko’s book, Warring Navies, is a welcome addition to the scant coverage of the naval history of South Asia. The authors are a retired Indian navy commodore and a defense journalist, respectively, and the book draws heavily on Commodore Rai’s experiences in the navy. The book itself crosses the boundaries between memoirs and popular history, covering the history of the Indian navy’s operations from independence through the end of the Cold War. It also includes several stand-alone essays on various topics related to maritime and regional security by prominent retired Indian military leaders, such as former army chief Ved P. Malik, former navy chief Vishnu Bhagwat, and Lieutenant General C. Satish Nambiar. One of the major strengths of the book is its coverage of the many lesser-known uses of the Indian navy (e.g., the liberation of Goa in 1961 and the interventions in the Maldives, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka in the 1980s). It is particularly useful for both Indian and non-Indian readers to be aware of these past actions today, as both India and its international partners debate India’s role as a security provider in the Indian Ocean region.

The book is pitched toward a general audience interested in military and naval affairs in South Asia. The prose is engaging and humorous, which makes the book a quick read. For example, the title for the chapter on the 1965 war—in which the Indian navy was not particularly active—is “The Navy Does Sweet Fanny Adams in 1965.” One of the more interesting aspects of this book is its use of various Indian, Pakistani, and American autobiographies and memoirs to interject vignettes from people involved in the conflicts, ranging from Indian naval officers to Pakistani leaders and even to Henry Kissinger. These provide insight into the perspectives of participants in the events. The book’s main strength is that it gives an insider’s view on the challenges of joint operations for the Indian military. There are some excellent examples, ranging from air force and naval aviation in the 1965 war to amphibious operations in 1971 and smaller operations in the 1980s.

A couple of minor points detract from the book. Given that it is a popular history based on personal observations and the memoirs of participants, some of the general history of the conflicts does reflect older interpretations and narratives that are now debatable. The book is not academically sourced and does not have citations, so the reader is left wondering whether the book would have been improved if the authors had engaged more with the work of recent historians, such as Srinath Raghavan’s excellent work on the 1971 war, or even the classic histories of the Indian navy done by Admirals Singh and Hiranandani. Similarly, the book could
have given greater attention to formatting and editing to improve its structure and eliminate typographical errors that distract the reader. In particular, the intersection of long quotations from other authors sometimes confuses the narrative; perhaps some of these longer passages could have been placed in an appendix so the authors’ narrative would not be interrupted. Last, some of the additional essays by other authors do not seem to fit within the theme of the book. However, these shortcomings need to be taken in context, given the nature of the book and its intended audience. Readers should keep in mind that the work is intended to be neither a definitive history nor an academic book, so they should not expect it to engage with the academic literature or offer extensive footnoting. But for its intended audience and modest ambitions, it does succeed in bringing a valuable perspective with a great deal of personal experience to the reader in an approachable and readable format. It will be of use to readers who want more anecdotal details of the history of naval operations and the naval cultures of India and Pakistan, and those who want a short overview of the naval aspects of the conflicts in question.

PATRICK BRATTON


More than forty years after the last U.S. combat troops departed Vietnam in 1973, the conflict looms large in American popular culture and memory. Vivid depictions of guerrilla warfare, antiwar protests, and psychologically troubled veterans proliferate in print and film. This was not always the case, however. Silence followed in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War as veterans and civilians alike grappled to forge meaning from the long, costly intervention and ultimate American defeat. The arrival of veteran-authored memoirs in the late 1970s and the 1980s reignited popular interest in the war and inspired numerous others to follow suit. In subsequent decades, the gritty authenticity of these best-selling narratives, written by “those who were there,” profoundly shaped American collective memory and historical discourses about the war. John A. Wood’s Vietnam Narratives and the Collective Memory of the Vietnam War aims to expose myriad misconceptions that have developed as a result. Undertaking a comprehensive analysis of the best-known Vietnam veteran memoirs, Wood delineates the accuracies, omissions, and miscues inherent in the genre to ascertain its overall influence on American understanding of the war. His methodology centers on the collective analysis of fifty-eight Vietnam veteran memoirs and oral histories published between 1967 and 2005. He supplements this primary set of texts with films, newspapers, U.S. government studies, historical scholarship, and personal accounts from Vietnamese civilians, African Americans, women veterans, and other less prominent authors. Wood’s primary argument is that veteran narratives are subject to the properties and limitations of memory. Based on personal recollection usually written long after the events in question, memoirs necessarily provide a fragmentary and biased perspective.