

Admiral Arun Prakash rues India's missed maritime opportunities



The Yulin Naval and Underground Base is shaping up to be the most strategically important military base in the South China Sea. (photo: Google Earth/ the diplomat.com)

Seven decades ago, Indian historian-diplomat, KM Panikkar presciently observed, “That China intends to embark on a policy of large scale naval expansion is clear enough... with her bases extending as far south as Hainan, China will be in an advantageous position...”

No one paid attention to Panikkar, because, just weeks before independence, India was busy with the 1947 Asian Relations Conference, where Nehru articulated his grand vision of India’s role in emerging Asia – an idealistic dream, in

which a ‘non-violent’ India would be an exemplar by eschewing the use of force. China’s realist founders, on the other hand, had set two basic objectives for the newborn Communist nation; that China would attain ‘great power’ status via the nuclear-weapon route; and that it would brook no rival for leadership of Asia. The quarter century that elapsed between Deng Xiaoping’s plea to his countrymen to “hide your capabilities, bide your time and never take the lead” ‘Chairman-forever’ Xi Jinping’s authoritative declaration of his

“dream of national rejuvenation”, has seen China’s economic heft and coercive military power take a quantum jump.

Panikkar’s prophecy came true in 2000, when China started construction of its southern-most naval base at Yulin, on Hainan Island. Built at colossal cost, Yulin’s tunnel-complexes house China’s submarine nuclear-deterrent, while its piers will accommodate aircraft-carrier strike-groups. This is a maritime hub created for the PLA Navy (PLAN) to exercise sea-control and power-projection,