



A devastating war between China and the United States leaves India as the world's preeminent power. (AI-generated image by Michael Lopez, *Military Review*)

The Great Indo-Pacific War

The Rise of India

McLeod Wood

Chapter One: 24 Kilometers Southeast of Hong Kong, South China Sea, 11 November 2048

Vulnerability is not measured solely in physical terms.

—Sun Tzu

The sun belted down rays of brilliant light, which intensified as they reflected off the calm blue ocean.

Field Marshal Taara Heet squinted her eyes and felt the warmth radiate from the sun. She sat at an elaborately set table, which was positioned on the deck of Indian Naval Vessel (INV) *Bengal*, a Class II nuclear submersible mothership. Taara and her staff had been preparing for this day for over six weeks. Just as Gen. Douglas MacArthur had in 1945, Taara was about to accept the surrender of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and formalize the end of hostilities between their allies and those of United States of America. The war, known as the "Great Indo-Pacific War," had been raging since July 2044—it was time to end the carnage.

Taara could feel her hands becoming clammy and wondered whether it was due to her impending meeting with Adm. Dang Shai, the PRC's Southern Theater commander, and Adm. Robert Buttress, the U.S. Indo-Pacific commander. These two gentlemen were relatively new commanders, only about three months in the seat each. Taara assumed that both nations were replacing commanders in a last-ditch effort to find advantage over their adversaries; both nations were shells of their former selves, and advantage was hard to come by. In contrast, she had been appointed the supreme commander of Pacific operations since India entered the war in April 2047. India's entry into the war, on the side of the U.S. and its allies, had turned the tide of the battle. Knowing this, she chalked up her clammy hands to the heat of the sun rather than anxiety.

Taara looked at the table and noticed that there was only one silver pen in front of her. By flicking her head up, she motioned to a nearby sailor and said, "Find my aide please, and get them to bring two more pens—I don't want this meeting to be stalled by only having one godd***ed pen."

The startled sailor disappeared quickly in case he found himself with more tasks.

As the sailor retreated out of view, Taara looked at her watch and saw that there was fifteen minutes until the other two commanders were due to arrive in their motor launches and board INV *Bengal*. Knowing that she had a bit of time up her sleeve, she considered how the world had come to this point, the unexpected style of warfare that the war had produced, and how India had been propelled from a nation that many had overlooked to be the new world superpower in terms of military might, industrial capacity, and economic potential.

Taara sat back in her chair and stared out across the calm blue water of the South China Sea. It was odd to think that this area had been the epicenter of the war and yet it was so calm now. The water about two hundred meters from the *Bengal* began to bubble as two tether-fighters emerged from the ocean and transitioned into flight mode to take up their close air patrol routes. She knew there would be another two patrolling underwater and marvelled at the technology that had allowed crossdomain vehicles like these to exist. Lost in thought, she considered the chain of events that had brought everyone to this point. Oddly, the similarities between this war and The Great War of 1914–1918 were uncanny. Taara remembered how this war had started when a Taiwanese radical named Chai-Hao was able to infiltrate the National People's Congress in July 2044.

Chai-Hao, meaning one with great objective in his life, was able to fire a chemical dart that was concealed in his suit sleeve and kill Xi Jinping. Xi had elevated himself from president to the protector of the People's Republic of China in 2033 on his eightieth birthday. Despite no longer holding the office of president, he still controlled the direction and actions of the PRC. His assassination gave the PRC *casus belli* to finally launch a military operation for the reunification of Taiwan. Taara remembered how she felt when reading the news

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of Xi's assassination—she still felt her chest tighten, as it did back then, when considering the potential for destruction that a war between the PRC and Taiwan would bring. However, this feeling paled in insignificance, she recalled, when she had read that the United States had declared war on China to protect Taiwan. The U.S. had long intimated that it would protect Taiwan, but without a formal defense agreement, it was largely speculative as to what might happen. No need for speculation anymore, thought Taara, the U.S. had moved quickly to defend Taiwan.

Taara was rocking on her chair now; she knew some of the sailors and officers up on the conning tower were watching her. She wondered what they were thinking about and whether they understood the significance of what was about to happen onboard the *Bengal*. She also wondered if they too noticed the rhyming of history with when World War I ended and how World War II ended in the Pacific. These patterns and rhymes in history brought her back to her memories. She recalled that in Quetta, at the Indian Defense Service Staff College, they were taught that conflicts often progressed through differing periods that could be observed in other wars as patterns.

A brave naval lieutenant approached the field marshal.

"Ma'am, sorry for the interruption as you seem deep in thought. The crew up on the conning tower were wondering what you were doing out here on your own and if you needed anything?"

Taara smiled wryly. "I'm okay, thanks. I was just considering the differing periods of this war and if there are patterns to them. Tell me, have you observed any distinct periods in this war?"

Lt. Nissar thought for a moment. "Well, ma'am, you have put me on the spot. But if I had to guess, I'd say there have been three periods that might be considered a pattern. I think we can safely say that the first twelve months of the war were horrific. It was attritional warfare that saw both the U.S. and the PRC use their strength in physical assets to secure the first island chain. This resulted in large numbers of personnel and equipment pushed into this relatively small geographic area. Essentially all that happened was the whittling down of major assets through precision strikes and island fighting. Both sides lost tremendous amounts of personnel and equipment." He paused for a moment to draw breath. "I think the second period of note

probably runs from mid-2045 to mid-2047 and finishes with our entry into the war. I would argue that this was a period of strategic stalemate. Neither side was able to gain dominance over the first island chain and switched to conducting widespread cyber strikes in each other's homeland. This was supposed to have two impacts. First, deny them the ability to mobilize their economies by disrupting all facets of their operations and, second, to try and break their citizens' will to fight."

Taara was smiling. This lieutenant had his head screwed on. She looked at his nametag. "Lieutenant Nissar, please continue," she said.

The lieutenant had not expected to talk for this long or to be asked to continue. He had heard that Field Marshal Heet was incredibly driven, demanded excellence from her staff and subordinate commanders, and was very good at understanding people. In this moment he started to understand what was happening. The field marshal had been pondering the periods and patterns of this war. She was using him as a sounding board to see if her opinions matched those of a lieutenant. He assumed that as he was asked to continue because the field marshal either agreed with him, or found his viewpoint interesting.

"Sorry, ma'am," said Lt. Nissar. "Where were we? Oh, yes. The use of cyberattacks to destroy the economies, and their ability to mobilize for war, had much wider impacts than what was initially considered. No one foresaw the total devastation that unrestricted cyberwarfare would have. Shutting down power grids, opening dams, and interrupting primary food production caused absolute chaos and untold civilian casualties. The U.S. and PRC economies became shadows of themselves, I've heard it reported that they are now lucky to be operating at 20 percent of their prewar capacity. And this, combined with the devaluation of the dollar and the yuan, will have them both struggling to rebuild for decades."

"This is interesting, Lt. Nissar. You seem to have been paying attention despite the chaos around you." Taara looked at her watch; she had five minutes left before the admirals arrived. "Please go on, lieutenant."

"Yes, ma'am. Well, the last period of the war I would call strategic breakthrough. Without being on my high horse, the breakthrough started when we entered the war. I know that we had been producing food, resources, and equipment for the United States before

(AI-generated image by Michael Lopez, *Military Review*)

our kinetic involvement. But our weight in terms of population, industrial capacity, and military might has swayed the war to our favour and to its conclusion. It's no surprise to me that with the U.S. and the PRC essentially crippling each other's economies and military forces, we have risen to become the brokers of this peace treaty and the world's new superpower." As Lt. Nissar finished talking, he looked at the field marshal and noticed that she seemed to be scowling.

Taara was thinking about Nissar's last words. That India was now the world's superpower. She wondered what this meant for India's future. Is it positive? Does it ensure eventual conflict with another rising power? Are we ready for this responsibility? She broke her thought and realized that Nissar was standing motionless and appeared

worried. She immediately understood that her body language was visibly impacting the lieutenant. "Lieutenant Nissar, your words have helped me clarify the periods and patterns of this war, its ebbs, and flows, and it has left me profoundly thinking about our future. You are a capable young officer, please maintain this level of observation throughout your career. It will undoubtedly help you."

Taara glanced at her watch again and said, "Dismissed, lieutenant, thank you."

It was time. The motor launches touched up alongside and tied onto *INV Bengal*.

Field Marshal Heet greeted both Adm. Shai and Adm. Buttress cordially. Both had somber expressions on their faces and appeared to be shells of what Taara thought they would have looked like four years ago.

Most likely, this was due to their engagement in hostilities for four years, knowing that their worlds would never be the same, and that they had been unable to win against their opponent for which they had been preparing since the turn of the century. She motioned them toward their chairs and shining silver pens. “Gentlemen ...,” said Field Marshal Heet, “it is time that we make history by signing these documents, end the war, and start the long process of rebuilding our world.”

Chapter Two: Altitude 12,000 Meters, Somewhere over Luzon, Philippines, October 2047

Courage, above all things, is the first quality of a warrior.

—Carl von Clausewitz

“Intercept in ninety seconds,” said an automated voice.

Two Indian tether-fighters raced across the sky without making a single noise. Their nuclear saltwater propulsion systems, first theorized in the 1990s by Dr. Robert Zubrin, had them scooting above the Philippines at a speed just over Mach 5. These tether-fighters were new, only employed by the Indians thus far, and were having a disproportionate effect on the PLA.

Indian nuclear technology had taken great strides during the 2020s. While other nations had debated the necessity of converting to nuclear power to tackle human induced climate change, the Indian government had no option. With their population exceeding 1.3 billion in 2023, preserving their environment through the conversion to nuclear power and associated technologies was wholeheartedly embraced. But a cross over into military advances in miniaturized nuclear propulsion systems only truly took off at the beginning of the 2040s. With the Great Indo-Pacific War kicking off in 2044, the Indian Armed Forces secretly introduced the experimental technology into service. By mid-2047, when India entered the war, the new tether-fighters made their debut.

Capt. Atiksh Khan, callsign “Venator” but known as “Ven,” looked out from his tether-fighter’s control pod. He could see Luzon, the northernmost island of the Philippines, rapidly passing beneath him. He could also see from his helmet-mounted display that his wingman

was in position just to his rear on the lower left side. “Good,” he said to himself.

The automated voice returned, “Intercept in fifteen seconds.”

Ven instinctively activated his weapons suite and heard the hum of all his tethered drones come alive. Ninety-eight drones formed a living part of his tether-fighter. They were his method of attack, his means to defend himself, and a way to extend his already vast sensor suites across hundreds of kilometers. The drones were attached all over the tether-fighter. When shown to people for the first time, their immediate reactions were to liken the way the drones attached as if it was scale-mail armor from medieval times; it looked like the scales of a fish. The drones formed an integral part of a tether-fighter. When attached to the control pod, they effectively reduced heat transfer at high speeds and altitudes. When activated, the drones disconnected and took up 360-degree positions around the tether-fighter. With the drones in position, the fighter looked like a spider in the center of a 3D web—hence, the name tether-fighter. The drones were equipped with a range of miniature missiles and carried explosive charges onboard. With these means, they could either fire missiles or use themselves as suicide devices to destroy threats. The sheer number of drones simply overwhelmed enemy systems.

Ven, looking through his helmet-mounted display, was able to track the PLA launched hypersonic missile that was targeting a U.S. naval repair facility in Rabaul, Papua New Guinea. Ven increased the pressure on his push-to-talk radio, “Moupin, prepare to engage.” Ven knew that as soon as his drones “popped,” his radar cross-section would immediately give away their position. This was one of the downsides to the tether-fighter. The intelligence officer aboard the INV *Assam* had warned them that once they had engaged, they could expect to be targeted by anti-air lasers and PLAAF fighters—if they could intercept.

“Engage!” Ven ordered. Ten tether-drones dropped from each of the aircraft. To an onlooker it might have seemed odd that ten of those drones immediately zoomed off and took up what appeared to be a type of minefield formation. The other ten drones raced off toward the hypersonic missile.

Ven and his wingman, Moupin, watched their drones close with the hypersonic missile and

commence firing their short-range anti-air missiles. The missiles struck only a fraction of a second before the ten drones also used their onboard explosives to detonate against the hypersonic missile. It broke apart into pieces. “Scratch one,” reported Ven on his radio. But as the fragments emerged from the initial blast cloud so too did several smaller secondary PLA hypersonic missiles. The remaining ten drones in their minefield formation had been positioned exactly for this. The drones autonomously engaged and initiated self-destruct sequences to destroy the secondary missiles. Ven made an additional report, “All secondary devices destroyed, defensive pattern Delta successful.”

Ven heard Moupin’s distressed voice spark on the radio, “Laser detection warning, northeast, fifty kilometers.” Anti-air lasers were incredibly dangerous. While they needed huge amounts of power to allow for their detection, if they locked onto an aircraft, they could effectively cut it in half. And no one wanted to be cut in half.

Ven quickly rolled his tether-fighter over, so he was inverted and pulled hard on his control column. He began a rapid dive down toward the vibrant blue of the Philippine Sea. He could just make out Luzon, a greenish blur, in his peripheral vision. His helmet-mounted display showed that Moupin, the good wingman that he



An Indian tether-fighter banks sharply to observe the effects of its drone strikes against Chinese J40 attack aircraft. Plumes of smoke rise from the wreckage of the destroyed drones and aircraft. (AI-generated image by Michael Lopez, *Military Review*)

was, was right on his tail. Ven and Moupin were in a race to reach sea level before the PLA anti-air laser powered up. Ven and Moupin were about to unleash the true power of their tether-fighters—the characteristic that had made it the most valuable physical asset of the war.

At Mach 5, Ven knew it would take approximately seven seconds to reach sea level. He hoped that was quick enough. Ven was glued to the altitude read out on his helmet-mounted display. 3,000 m—2,500 m—2,000 m. As it hit 2,000 meters, he throttled back the nuclear saltwater engine and pulled hard on the control column so that he could skim along the top of the waves at sea level. At this speed, even in his pressurized suit, he was fighting against 9.8 g of force as he came out of the dive. As the nose of his



Deepak Singh, Indian minister of commerce and industry, holds a face-to-face meeting with his department heads and senior leaders to discuss India's new postwar status as a world superpower. Hard-copy documents on the table are indicative of how the Indian government reduced technological hardware across their society to preserve resources for the war effort. (AI-generated image by Michael Lopez, *Military Review*)

tether-fighter came up he felt the pressure ease. He saw that his air speed was now down well under Mach 1 and within acceptable limits to commence submersion. As he pushed forward on his control column, an explosion erupted behind him. Ven didn't have time to assess what it was. His tether-fighter submerged beneath the white capped waves of the Philippine Sea.

It was dark underwater. At 300 m, it was very dark. "Moupin, you still with me buddy?" said Ven.

"Only just!" replied Moupin. "Several of my tether-drones activated just as I submerged. My defense panel says that they interrupted a laser strike. God, I love how smart these things are. Those PLA lads probably think they've scored a kill."

"I'm glad you're still with me, Moupin; I was worried. Make speed 300 km/hr, and we will set a course for the INV *Assam*. It shouldn't take us more than three hours to get back; they were just off the coast of

Samar Island when we left," said Ven. The tether-fighters were fast underwater, obviously not as fast as they were in the air. Ven thought about how the tether-fighter's ability to transition from the air domain to the maritime domain completely overhauled how the Indian Armed Forces fought.

Ven thought about the three things that allowed the tether-fighter to achieve dominance in both domains. First, the nuclear saltwater engine drastically reduced the space required on conventional air and maritime vehicles for fuel. Essentially, a hundred-kilogram engine gave the fighter a range only limited by the pilot's endurance, gave the tether-fighter unbelievable speed, and a hundred year half-life. Ven heard a loud "ping" and the automated voice said, "Identified—two PLAAF J40s, southwest, 100 km, INV *Assam* directs destruction."

"I heard it," said Moupin in a somewhat abrasive voice. "Intercept course plotted, I have us breaking

surface in Sector Alpha-2, suggest standard attack pattern before submerging again in Sector Alpha-3.”

From within his control pod, Ven smiled. Moupin was rough around the edges. After all, that’s how he got his callsign—Moupin—which was a type of wild pig. But he was a damn good pilot and a good tactical planner. “Confirmed, prepare for attack,” said Ven.

Ven and Moupin emerged from the water in Sector Alpha-2. They could both see the two PLAAF J40s ahead and above them. Both pilots pushed their throttles forward and matched the speed of the J40s climbing beneath them. Ven felt sorry for the PLAAF pilots. The J40s did not yet have omnidirectional radar. They were blind to attacks from below them.

Ven and Moupin entered attack range. Under their standard attack pattern, twenty drones emerged from and took up position around their respective fighter. The PLAAF fighters were still unaware of their impending doom as the drones launched their barrage of air-to-air missiles. As the missiles sparked into life and homed in on the J40s, their active defense measures sprang into life. Flares, with their bright radiance, popped across the sky. A directional short-range electromagnetic pulse had disabled several missiles, which were now falling back to earth. And the J40 pilots, attempting furiously to avoid being shot down, were banking hard to the east with white contrails forming furiously off their wingtips. It was all in vain.

Here, observed Ven, was the second triumph of the tether-fighter—their semiautonomous drones. The drones had fired the missile for two reasons. To activate the defensive measures of the J40s and to overwhelm the onboard human-machine team. It worked. With the J40s’ defensive measures exhausted, multiple missiles struck both airframes, bursting into yellow and blue flames with violent intensity. Ven noted how the surviving drones kept pace with the J40s in case their missiles were unsuccessful, and the drone could then decide, autonomously, whether it needed to sacrifice itself by physically colliding with its target.

This was “tethered warfare.” It was new. It was deadly, and the Indians had embraced it. The tethered warfare concept combined the advantages of autonomous systems with human-in-the-loop operations to give the Indian Armed Forces a decided advantage over their enemies. But it had its shortcomings. It required enormous numbers of superconductors and microchips.

Since the beginning of the war, there had been a global shortage. Drastic measures had been taken in India to resolve this issue—industry and society had been restructured.

Moupin’s voice sparked on the radio, “Splash two, confirm?”

Ven replied, “Splash two, confirmed.”

“Prepared to submerge in Sector Alpha-3,” said Moupin. Both tether-fighters banked to their right and descended toward the ocean.

As Ven was descending toward the white capped waves of the ocean he thought about the final triumph of his tether-fighter. Its crossdomain capability. As a boy he knew of submersible cars, or flying cars, but never had he heard of a plane able to transition into a submersible vehicle. Yet, as nuclear energy technology advanced through the 2030s, it gave rise to a propulsion system that could process both air and water. The nuclear saltwater propulsion systems were truly revolutionary. Ven understood the significance of it. It allowed India to cover huge distances, target threats in the air and under the water, and all from the same vehicle. While opponents had to invest in the technology and production chains for multiple vehicles, India could focus on one—the tether-fighter. This provided efficiencies across industry, research, training, and military employment. Ven had also heard rumors that the government were trying to enhance the tether-fighter so that it could also transition into space.

“The final frontier,” Ven whispered with a smile. His tether-fighter disappeared beneath the waves on a course for INV Assam.

Chapter Three: An Address to the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, New Delhi, India, March 2048

A strong economy is the source of national strength.

—Yoshihide Suga

The grandfather clock at the end of the ornately decorated conference room chimed.

The room was enormous, nearly fifty meters long and at least twenty meters wide. It was decorated in an elaborate late-nineteenth-century manner. In the center of the room was a monstrously long conference table with forty chairs positioned around it. Seated in

the center, the position of power, was the minister of Commerce and Industry, the Right Honourable Deepak Singh. Around him were departmental heads and senior leaders from the respective portfolios of commerce and industry.

Standing behind the table were a multitude of servers. Finely dressed in white, they stood beside plinths with jugs of water, pots of piping hot tea, and small plates of savory treats. Oddly, even though this was a major meeting for the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, there were no technical devices to be seen. Only pens and paper.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” bellowed Minister Singh’s chief of staff, “the time is now two o’clock, let us commence this extraordinary meeting, sir.” He nodded to Minister Singh and resumed his seat.

“Thank you, Harandi.” Minister Singh continued, “It is with great pleasure that I have called this extraordinary meeting and can address you personally. We, the Indian people, are succeeding in our endeavors to bring the PLA to heel. We are seeing the dividends of our investment into the concept of swadeshi, which was first championed back in 1857! It’s unlikely that even Prime Minister Narendra Modi, when he introduced the swadeshi policy and the self-sufficiency of India back in 2021, would have envisioned it becoming this powerful! But it has, and it is our self-sufficiency that has steeled us from the disastrous impacts of the early years of this war.” He paused for a moment, thinking about how truly disastrous the first years of the war had been for the people of China and the United States. Their industries and economies ravaged by cyberattacks, the complete loss of power in some regions, mass internal migrations, civilian casualties, complete disorder, and confusion—it was the definition of chaos.

Minister Singh regained himself and continued, “The concept of swadeshi has served us well. Our forebears had the prudence to commence, and gradually



INV Bengal, one of India’s class II nuclear submersible motherships, breaks the water’s surface off the coast of Hong Kong. (AI-generated image by Michael Lopez, *Military Review*)

increase, the domestic production of superconductors and microchips following the American announcements to do likewise back in the early 2020s. But what nobody expected was the unbelievable drain on stockholdings for these items as the war commenced. As the U.S. and the PLA engaged each other ferociously across the first and second island chains, their supply chains and industry could not keep pace. Production of superconductors and microchips just could not meet demand when missiles were used in the tens of thousands each day, when highly advanced platforms each containing hundreds or thousands of chips were destroyed by the minute, and while also trying to balance supply to a domestic market hooked on technology. Both nations ran critically short and entered a period of stalemate as they tried to recover. But what did we do?” He looked across the room to see if he had their attention. He did—good.

“We adapted early. Even before our involvement in the war, this group of fine people found the answer. We decided to transition industry and society toward total war production for superconductors and microchips.

This meant drastically reducing production for the domestic market and reserving it for the military market. We were lucky though. We had the population base to fall back on. In fact, our often-ignored caste system gave us an unforeseen advantage as we started to employ humans again rather than using the highly digitized and autonomous systems we had become accustomed to. But reducing our usage of superconductors and microchips in the domestic market came at a cost. Families were restricted to one device while businesses were directed to reduce computer usage by 90 percent. We bought back anything with chips in them to reuse and we collectively started the great transition back to pen and paper. It was necessary.” The room was nodding along as Minister Singh spoke. It was undeniable that, despite the heartache the policy had created across the country, it provided the material to make war and supply the allies.

Minister Singh spoke powerfully, “We recognized the threat and were willing to change our lifestyles to ensure survival. It was difficult to convince a population not yet at war that these measures were necessary.” He thought to himself about the dissatisfaction this policy had created. People were not used to living without technology. It started many riots. It wasn’t until the public understood how destructive the first clashes between the U.S. and PLA were, that opinion started to change.

“One of the odd benefits of restructuring our society and industry was that we made it more resilient—some in the U.S. have even called our system antifragile. When we did enter the war, our domestic industry and population was less susceptible to cyberattacks or to detection across the electronic spectrum from space-based capabilities. There are some advantages to doing things with pen and paper, my friends!” Minister Singh paused momentarily to let the slightly forced laughs recede.

Once the room quieted down, he continued. “We have been able to prioritize production of essential goods for the war effort. Our focus on the tether-fighters, their underwater companion the nuclear submersible mothership, and exports to our allies has delivered visible success. It is my great pleasure to announce to you all that the prime minister expects the war to be concluded within the next six months!” This time, there was genuine applause from those seated at the table. Even the servers had poorly concealed smiles on their faces. The mood in the room lifted.

“Even with this good news,” Minister Singh continued, “we must remain focused on our industrial capacity and prosecute this war to its conclusion. Our production of tether-drones, for all our military services, must continue unabated. We know how vulnerable the U.S. and PLA superconductor and microchip factories were and we must continue to protect our domestic production of these goods. Our position in the world will likely depend on it!” This was the key point of his address. Minister Singh knew that India’s control over the production of microchips and superconductors would herald in his nation as the new superpower. These tiny items were the key to everything. The reconstruction of global economies, especially in the Indo-Pacific region, and the gradual readjustment of production back toward domestic goods would ensure demand for these products and provide India competitive advantage for decades to come.

“We must be positioned to reapportion the supply of goods back to the domestic and international markets once the war is concluded. To do that, our fate within this ministry is linked to that of the Ministry of Defense. India is geographically positioned to control the flow of global trade as it moves along our shores and through the Strait of Malacca, the Gulf of Hormuz, and the Red Sea. Control of these routes is imperative for us to get our goods into the international market. But it is also imperative that we ensure that defense industry can sustain our tethered-warfare approach to modern conflict. Without control of our sea lines of communication, our position in the world will be jeopardized.” He knew he wasn’t wrong; every major power through history had been a seafaring nation. Minister Singh could sense the room was becoming apprehensive with his more pensive words.

“Let’s not forget, my fellow compatriots, that our ministry already ensures we have the means to do this. It is our production of tethered-warfare platforms such as the tether-fighter and the nuclear submersible mothership that has not only given us the edge over the PLA but will ensure our ascension as the world’s newest superpower.” Minister Singh now prepared himself for the closure of his address.

Minister Singh held his arms out wide and said, “It is because of you all, your tireless efforts, and your

devotion to our nation, that we are experiencing such success. While we have not worn uniforms and will unlikely receive honor and awards for what we've done, you can rest assured that your actions have directly contributed to India's rise. Years from now, you will sit at home with your family and proudly tell them of what you contributed to the war and how it ensured their future success. But it's not quite over yet. We must finish what we started, keep our focus on the concept of swadeshi, and ensure our plans are well laid. This, I leave, in all your capable hands. Thank you."

The conference room erupted in applause. Even though the address was one internal to the ministry, it struck a deep chord with all those present. If what the minister said was true, India was about to emerge from the war as the world's next global superpower.

Chapter Four: Captain's Cabin, INV Bengal, Somewhere Southeast of Singapore, November 2048

Command of the sea, therefore, means nothing but the control of maritime communications, whether for commercial or military purposes.

—Julian Corbet

An intercom speaker buzzed. The captain pushed the speaker button and said, "Captain, send."

"Officer of the watch, sir," a voice responded. "It is 0300, and all compartments are reporting ready to get underway."

The INV Bengal was scheduled to detach from three other Class II Nuclear Submersible Motherships at 0315. The motherships were an ingenious amalgamation of ideas. They combined nuclear ballistic submarine technology from the early twenty-first century, the operating concept of a landing dock, and the new tethered-warfare platforms. Individually, each ship could receive and deploy tether-fighters and other devices. But where the motherships truly excelled was that they could be connected to form a forward-deployable underwater base that could sustain itself, and its onboard force, nearly indefinitely. The motherships, first launched in 2038, had proven to be highly valuable, and the Indian Navy now had twelve vessels at sea.

The INVs Bengal, Gujarat, Punjab, and Bihar formed the makeshift base that controlled the

southern maritime approach to the South China Sea. At 300 meters below sea level, they were an invisible blocking force that could control the subsurface, surface and air zones under their purview. From the outside, the four motherships looked as if they were in a diamond formation, with each vessel at one of the points. They were connected by pressurized compartments that allowed for the passage of personnel, small equipment, and communication cables. This type of setup had proved to be remarkably effective. It allowed for forward operations that came with ballistic and nuclear missiles and long-range communications, it was mobile and survivable, and most importantly, it supported the control of the sea lines of communication. When the boats were connected in this diamond formation, they were capable of moving, albeit very slowly, as a single entity.

The captain lent closer toward the intercom, "Acknowledged, I'll make my way to the control room now."

Capt. Rushi Kamal was tall, not just in comparison to most submariners but just because he was tall. Standing at 195 cm, he towered over nearly all his crew and just about everyone he met. His height had been an advantage to him while growing up and while at the Academy. He had been a fast bowler, and a pretty good one. He had turned down an offer with the Indian Premier League cricket team, the Kochi Tuskers Kerala, when training at the Indian Naval Academy—Ezhimala. He was focused on becoming a submariner.

The captain rose from his chair, buttoned his tunic, and fastened his belt around his waist. He exited his cabin and walked along the gangway toward the control room.

The control room was a hive of activity; the captain could hear it as he approached. As the captain ducked his head and moved through the hatch to enter the control room, the officer of the watch saw him and yelled, "Attention on deck!"

"As you were," replied the captain.

As the captain took up his position in the center of the control room, he turned to the officer of the watch and said, "I have the con," to which the reply came, "Aye sir, you have the con."

The captain looked around at his crew. Most of them had been with him since he took command of the INV Bengal back in January. They were disciplined,

well trained, and motivated. He guessed that is why his boat had been chosen for this mission.

As the mission crossed his mind, the officer of the watch called out again, "Attention on deck."

This caught the captain off guard. He wasn't used to having someone else of higher rank than he on the boat. He regained himself, braced up into the position of attention, and said, "Ma'am, welcome to the control room. I didn't expect to see you out of your cabin for a while yet."

Field Marshal Heet smiled and looked at the captain. "Come on Rushi, you should know better than that. As supreme commander of Pacific operations, I don't get to be in one of our motherships, on an actual mission, that often! Do you mind if I observe the start to our journey?" she said.

"Of course not, ma'am," replied the captain. "Please stand here with me and we will get ready to take her out." The captain now prepared himself to detach from the other motherships and set off on their mission. He would've been lying if he had said he wasn't excited about it.

"All stations report," said the captain. The station officers began to report in, rhythmically.

"Sonar green, no enemy contacts, sir."

"Weapons green, sir."

"Engines green, sir."

"Communication green, sir."

"Ship controls green, sir."

"Navigation green, sir."

"Very well," said the captain, "Ship controls, sound detachment, and retract the causeway."

"Aye, sir," replied the sailor.

At that moment the field marshal thought how eerie it was to hear nothing other than these sailors' voices. There was no engine sound, no metallic clanking, or retraction noise from the causeway. Just silence.

"Causeway retracted, sir," said the ship controls sailor.

It was time to move this behemoth, thought the captain. He had always loved the procedures that led to getting his boat underway. It was a cathartic process, he mused.

He began, "Nav, set course 0355 mils magnetic, 18 km/h," he turned toward the ship controls, "make depth 100 meters."

The reply came in unison—"Aye, sir, 0355 mils magnetic, 18 km/h, at 100 meters."

As the field marshal looked around the control room, she was amazed with just how many dials, screens, levers, and buttons there were. She thought about how important it had been for India to prioritize military production over domestic production even before it had entered the war. She knew that there would have been no way for the Indian Armed Forces to field such advanced technology without denying the public access to items that held microchips or superconductors. The field marshal could see the dial that indicated the boat's speed increase.

"Weapons," called the captain. "Prepare to launch two flights of tether-fighters. Standard deployment. One for the close underwater patrol and one for the close air patrol. I also want one on ready alert 5."

"Aye, sir, one flight each for CUP and CAP with an additional on ready alert 5," replied the weapons officer.

The field marshal was a bit puzzled. She didn't know why the captain was launching the tether-fighters. To her it seemed a bit of overkill considering that there was a total cease-fire between all belligerents. It had been in effect for twenty-four hours now and was scheduled to last until midnight on the 11th of November. "Captain, do we need to launch fighters?" she asked.

The captain didn't like anyone questioning him in front of his crew or, for that matter, on his boat. But, he reasoned, she is a field marshal and the supreme commander, she has the right to ask. "Ma'am, I am a little more cautious than others in this regard. I know there is a cease-fire in effect, but I don't fully trust that it has been passed to all of our enemies. You know, as I do, that satellite communications are still in a shambles. The interspace strikes to deny the U.S. and PLA access to their communications satellites were disastrous. Low-earth orbit is absolutely littered with their short-sighted decisions to destroy each other's assets. We can only rely on satellite communications in high-earth orbit. But that said, they are so few up there because of their destruction rate as they try and pass through the littered low-earth orbit. The ones that are up there are so tightly controlled that we use high-frequency radios as a primary means of long-range communications. My assumption is that the enemy is in the same boat, pardon the pun, and may not have been able to confirm the cease-fire to all their units," he looked to see if her facial expressions registered agreement. He thought it did. But

just in case, he added, “Ma’am, you’d probably remember the old stories from after World War II of Japanese soldiers remaining true to their mission well into the 1970s. I don’t want us to fall victim to a hold-out commander or a rogue element of the PLA.”

“I understand, captain, thank you for taking the precaution. I’m not sure it is necessary, but your logic is sound,” said the field marshal.

The weapons officer made a report. “Sir, the hangar is reporting flights one and two ready to deploy with the third on ready alert 5.”

“Thank you. Sound condition one throughout the boat and deploy the flights,” said the captain.

Bells rang from the boat’s intercom and an automated voice said, “Condition one, condition one.” The lights flickered from artificial white to orange. Sailors moved to their stations across the boat. It only took thirty seconds for all compartments to report that condition one was set throughout the boat.

There were four tether-fighters and their pilots about to be released into the water of the South China Sea. Their fighters were already in the flooded tubes that opened out to port and starboard of the boat. In total, there were six tubes on either side of the boat that allowed for the deployment and docking of tether-fighters. The motherships were an amazing piece of military hardware. They were part attack submarine, part nuclear ballistic missile platform, part landing dock, part headquarters, and part of a forward-deployed base when needed.

The port and starboard outer doors on *INV Bengal* opened slowly. As they locked into the open position, the four tether-fighters were released into the water surrounding the boat. They emerged backward, as the tether-fighters didn’t have the capability of docking in reverse. It was much easier to just drive them into the tubes for docking. Each of the tether-fighters engaged their nuclear saltwater propulsion systems. Two fighters took off to commence their close underwater patrol while the other two climbed toward the water’s surface to begin their close air patrol.

“Captain, I can’t help myself. Now that we are underway, and the patrols are out, may I please address the crew?” said the field marshal.

“Of course, ma’am,” Secretly, the captain was hurt. He knew what was about to be said and had hoped that he could announce it to the crew. It was *his* boat, after all. Regardless, he handed the field marshal a handset and flicked a switch on the control panel in front of him. Two short and sharp blasts were heard across the intercoms throughout the boat.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” began the field marshal. “This is Field Marshal Taara Heet speaking. It is my great pleasure to announce to you the mission we are currently on.” Many of the crew had guessed why a field marshal was onboard, but none knew. It was assumed that the recent cease-fire had something to do with it.

She continued, “As you know, a cease-fire was announced and put in place not twenty-four hours ago. What you do not know is why. On behalf of the Indian government and the allied nations, you, and the *INV Bengal*, are transporting me to a meeting point just off the coast of Hong Kong. Here I will have the honor of accepting the surrender of the PRC. This war is about to end!” There was raucous applause and adulation throughout the entire boat. “I thank you for your sacrifice and devotion to duty—we have prevailed.” As the field marshal put down the handset, two short and sharp blasts noted the end of her address across the intercom.

At 18 km/h, the *INV Bengal* would take just under eight days to reach Hong Kong. The boat and its crew settled back into normal routine quickly after the field marshal’s address.

The officer of the watch pushed the intercom to call the captain in his cabin. “Officer of the watch, sir, we are in position twenty-four kilometers southeast of Hong Kong.”

The captain smiled. Today was the day it would end. As it had ended on this day back in World War I, so too would the Great Indo-Pacific War end on the 11th of November. The captain pushed his intercom, “Captain, acknowledged,” he paused and then added, “Well done, Lieutenant Nissar—Lest we forget.” ■